



# Viparita

INVERTED STAFF POSE

Mount Sturgeon provides a spectacular back drop and inspiration for this asana

“By persistent and sustained practice, anyone and everyone can make the yoga journey and reach the goal of illumination and freedom.” BKS Iyengar.

With this positive statement of encouragement, Mr Iyengar tells us that the goal of yoga is not beyond anyone's reach. Before undertaking any challenge, careful preparation is required, whether we are preparing to climb a mountain, compete in an endurance race, or do a solo walk across the desert. Likewise, an advanced yoga pose requires careful and attentive preparation, beginning with the practice of basic yoga asanas and progressively moving to the more advanced poses as we develop strength, flexibility, and most importantly, a deep understanding of intelligent action.

The Yoga Sutras, written by Patanjali over two thousand years ago, sheds light on the yoga path. The very first sutra states, 'Now yoga begins'. This is not just telling us that a discourse on yoga now begins, but importantly, yoga is about being present and fully committed to its practice with our whole being. Yoga is defined in the second sutra '...as the stilling of the fluctuations of the mind'. The practice of Iyengar Yoga, with its insistence on correct alignment, through developing a true understanding of the foundation

in relationship to the rest of the asana, demands of us to be totally present.

Sutra 1.12: *abhyasa vairagyabhyam tannirodhah* – tells us that this quietness, the ability to remain absolutely alert but totally calm, is achieved only through practice and detachment

“The fluctuations of consciousness, painful or non-painful are to be controlled through repeated yogic practice”, said BKS Iyengar.

Sutra 1.14: *sa tu dirghakala nairantarya satkara asevitah dridhabhumih* – informs us that only through a long, constant, uninterrupted practice is a firm foundation built for the quieting of the fluctuations of the mind (and ultimately for meditation).

Many years ago, during a class, Prashant Iyengar asked us to come out of *Utthitta Trikonasana* (Triangle Pose) and observed, “You do, do, do then come out and have never done.” He was saying that our mind is just set on going further and further into the pose, without reflection or building understanding. Integrated action develops from a long, dedicated, reflective practice and by

experimenting with different props to discover different approaches that enable us to hold the asanas for an extended time, effortlessly and without distraction.

Sutra 11.47: *prayatna saithilya ananta samapattibhyam* – BKS Iyengar translates this as; “Perfection in asana is achieved when the effort to perform it becomes effortless and the infinite being within is reached.” So at this stage, we have moved from the point of focused concentration (*dharana*) to *dhyana* (meditation), a state where our attention is unwavering and focused on the infinite.

*Dwi Pada Viparita Dandasana* (Inverted Staff Pose) and *Eka Pada Viparita Dandasana* (One Leg Inverted Staff Pose) are challenging and advanced back bends. These poses require many years of yoga practice before they should be attempted without support. The minimum prerequisites are a strong and stable *Sirsasana* (Headstand), *Pincha Mayurasana* (Forearm Balance), *Adho Mukha Svanasana* (Downward Facing Dog Pose), *Urdhva Mukha*

# Dandasana

Svanasana (Upward Facing Dog Pose), Ustrasana (Camel Pose), and Urdhva Dhanurasana (Upward Facing Bow Pose). However, they can be safely practiced through a chair, with support for the neck if needed, or for students with very tight thoracic spines.

The use of props, such as a chair can be used to gain a better understanding of many poses. This allows difficult, or seemingly impossible asanas to be practiced without strain, and importantly allows the pose to be held for a longer period of time.

The following set of asanas are not so much set out as a sequence for practicing, though they can be practiced sequentially, but to give students an understanding of how to approach a difficult asana with the use of props. Before attempting these variations, students should already be practicing the standing poses including Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward Facing Dog Pose).

### Contraindications and Cautions

- **High blood pressure:** The pose should only be practiced supported, with support for the head and only under the guidance of a senior teacher
- **Pregnancy:** Dwi Pada Viparita Dandasana (Inverted Staff Pose) may be practiced with chair support and only under the guidance of a senior teacher. More support will be needed in the later stages of pregnancy; this can be achieved by elevating the legs. Eka Pada Viparita Dandasana (One Leg Inverted Staff Pose) must not be practiced, even with support.
- **Shoulder and spinal injuries** may prevent the more advanced and unsupported versions of this pose from being practiced. Seek advice from your teacher before attempting any of the poses below.
- **Eye problems:** Don't practice with eye conditions such as detached retina and glaucoma.

### Benefits

The benefits of Inverted Staff are numerous. Here are some of the main rewards:

- Stimulates the adrenal, pituitary, thyroid, and pineal glands.
- Improves flexibility of the spine.
- Opens the chest and creates more space for the heart and lungs.
- Increases lung capacity.
- Tones and massages the heart muscles, improving heart function.
- Helps to relieve menstrual pain.
- Treats symptoms of menopause.

## Viparita Dandasana - Inverted Staff Pose

**1.** Place a chair about 60 to 90 cm from the wall, with a three-fold blanket securely fastened to the chair, or alternatively use a folded sticky mat placed lengthways through the chair. A folded or small square of sticky mat can be placed over the secured blanket for extra grip. Notice that belt is taken under the rungs of the chair, which not only keeps the blanket stable and centered, but also stabilises the chair. Sit through the chair and adjust the distance of the chair from the wall so your sitting bones are close to the back edge of the seat with your legs straight and your heels close to the wall



**2.** Holding the sides of the chair, lift and broaden the chest and lower yourself down onto the elbows and back. Gripping the sides of the chair, lift the buttocks up, while moving the chest and head towards the floor until the lower tip of the shoulder blades are close to the front edge of the seat. Draw the shoulder blades towards your lower back and press them firmly into the back ribs, while at the same time pressing the inner edges of the feet into the floor. Move the sacrum toward the knees and the tailbone towards the pubic bone.



**3.** Stretch the legs out straight. Press the inner heels and the mounds of the big toes into the wall, while drawing the inner thighs to the groins and lengthening tailbone away from sacrum. Open and press the inner knees to the floor. Turn the back thighs from inside out, while observing a broadening across the sacrum area. Draw the abdomen towards the chest and open the chest. Take the arms under the seat and hold the back legs of the chair. Be careful not to jam the neck back; rather, support its extension by moving the dorsal spine deeper into the body.



Students with a tight or restricted thoracic spine should use props to support the head so as not to strain the neck. The support under the head is also useful when doing supported Dwi Pada Viparita Dandasana (Inverted Staff Pose) as part of a restorative sequence before pranayama (breathing techniques), or when menstruating and can also be helpful for students who feel nauseous.

Notice that the support of the front edge of the chair is close to the lower edge of the shoulder blades. If the support is too close to the lower back, students often experience lower back pain, and the chest will not be as well opened and the feet may lose their grip with the floor and wall. Conversely, if the support is too close to the upper part of the shoulder blades, restriction may be felt through the neck. One may need to experiment a little with the placement of the spine on the chair to get an even extension through the spine, as well as a balanced action between the arms and legs. For students with shorter torsos and those experiencing pain in the lower back because of tight hip flexors, support under the feet can be helpful. Taller students may find extra support on the chair such as a firm foam pad helpful. Stay in this pose for one to five minutes or to your capacity.

**4.** Stretch the arms overhead. Work to open the chest further while maintaining action through the legs. Care must be taken to ensure that the lower back is not compressed, but extended by moving the thoracic spine deeper into the body, while pressing through the inner feet and straightening the legs. Lift strongly through the inner thighs to the groins, and at the same time, extend the tailbone towards the knees. The chest/breastbone should be opened to the centre of room, away from the abdomen.



If you experience pain or discomfort in the lower back, you may need to readjust the distance of the chair from the wall, so the support of the front edge of chair is closer to the lower shoulder blades rather than in the lumbar spine.

To come out of pose, take the hands back to the sides of the chair just above the seat; bend the knees and pull yourself up while pressing firmly down through the inner edges of the feet. Alternatively, you can bend your knees and then press the hands onto the front legs of the chair just below the seat to push up. This is easier on sensitive backs.

**5.** In this variation, a strap is tied around the thighs above the knees, and then fed between the legs and under the chair rungs. This helps to open the armpit and chest further and moves the thoracic spine inwards, preparing for the next stage. Move the elbows in to help broaden the upper shoulder blades.

Keep the legs firm by pressing through the inner edges of the feet, opening the inner knees to the floor, while strongly lifting the inner thighs from the knees to the groins. Pulling on the belt also compliments the leg action.



## Viparita Dandasana - Inverted Staff Pose cont...

### Going Further

**6.** Take hold of the legs of the chair by walking your hands along the mat to the lower edge of the chair legs. This variation involves a stronger extension of the shoulders and thoracic spine and should not be attempted until the previous variation of holding the belt can be practiced with ease.

An alternative way to get into this variation is to start by lying through the chair with the back of your head resting on the front edge of chair, and then reaching over head to take hold of the chair rung before sliding back through chair to final position shown.



**7.** The use of a block under the sacrum makes it a little easier to hold the legs of the chair, as it requires less extension (backward bending) of the thoracic spine and put less strain on the shoulder joints. It can also help with discomfort in the lower back.

Alternatively, with tighter shoulders, you may find it useful to turn the chair around. In this variation, not as much extension is required of the shoulder joint.



**8.** Start with the chair closer to the wall by about 10 cm. Sitting in the chair, hold the side rungs and take the head towards the floor. Continue to slide down until your head touches the floor, and the hands are placed as in a three-point headstand. Be sure to take the head back and lift the dorsal spine.

Interlock the fingers behind the head as in Salamba Sirsasana (Supported Headstand). Press the inner wrist firmly to the floor, while rotating the triceps to the front, keeping elbows in line with shoulders. Now raise the feet to the wall, level with the seat. Press the inner feet firmly into the wall to straighten the legs and further open the chest, while maintaining action through the arms and wrists.

Students with stiffer shoulders and upper back, who are unable to press the elbows to the floor, are advised to work with the previous poses to increase flexibility in the shoulders and dorsal spine.

The following variations on the next page are for more advanced students and require a special chair as shown. Make sure you have secured the chair well with the strap. First, place the chair against the wall. Holding the back seat as shown, with your head and dorsal spine firm against the seat, press the elbows and upper forearms to the floor and lift the shoulder blades away from the floor. Kick up into Sirsasana (Headstand), one leg at a time. Build confidence and understanding before moving the chair away from the wall. For added stability, you may find it useful to fold the front end of your mat over the back of the chair to support the elbows and the crown of the head. You can also experiment with the extra support of a folded blanket under the head and forearms to change the fulcrum point in the back bending positions.



## Viparita Dandasana - Inverted Staff Pose cont...

**9.** Move the chair about 50 to 60 cm from the wall. Kick up one leg at a time so both feet press to the wall. Extend one leg to the floor. You can build extra height for the feet if you are not flexible enough to reach floor. You can even use another chair with its back to the wall and learn to take the feet to the seat before taking the feet to the floor. Take the other foot to the floor (or your extra support). Firmly press through the inner heels and rotate the back of the thighs from the inside to the outside to broaden sacrum. Hold the back of the seat and lift the shoulder blades away from the floor. The use of the chair helps to keep the lift of the dorsal spine, opens the chest, and puts very little weight on the neck.

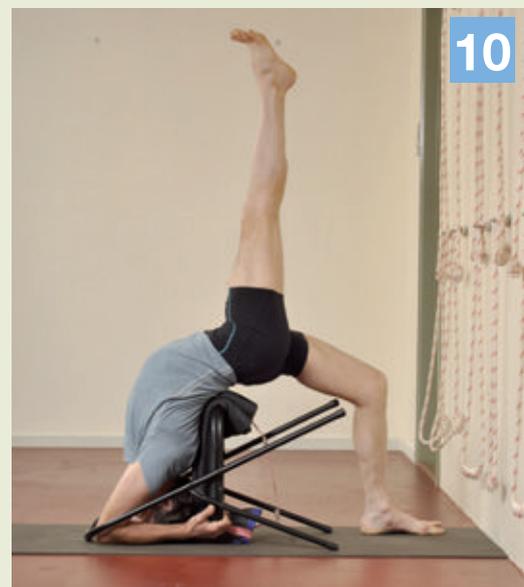


**10.** To move into Eka Pada Viparita Dandasana (One Leg Inverted Staff Pose), bring the feet together and extend the right leg straight up to the ceiling. Press through the inner feet of both legs. The support of the chair also helps to maintain stability. Repeat with the other leg. To come out, walk the legs back up the wall and then take the feet back to the floor and rest with the head down for a few breaths in Virasana (Hero's Pose).

Finish your practice with some cooling asanas such as Salamba Sarvangasana (Shoulderstand), Halasana (Plough Pose), Viparita Karani ( Inverted Lake Pose), and Savasana (Relaxation Pose). Ardha Halasana (Half Plough Pose) supported over a bench is particularly helpful if there is some stiffness in the back. Some gentle twists are also helpful before and after these backbends.

Once confidence, understanding, flexibility and strength have been built in previous poses you may be ready to try the full pose without support of the chair.

As explained at the beginning of this article you must already have a well-established Sirsasana and have accomplished a level of competency in Urdhva Dhanurasana. What you have learned through the supported variations you can now bring to unsupported pose. (At the beginning you can use a wall for support for either the feet as shown or the elbows to get a more secure grip).



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