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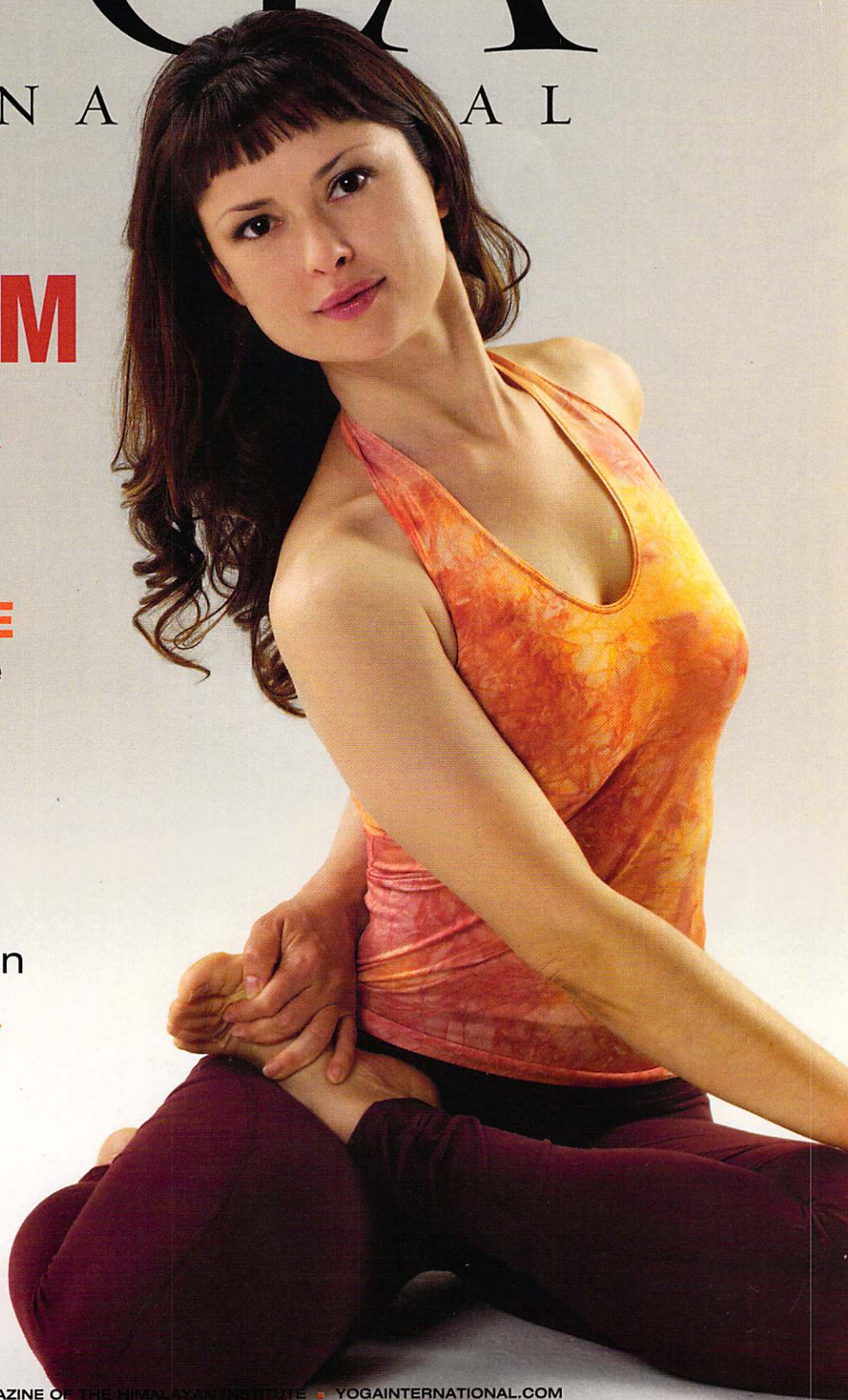
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## Balance Is Bliss

Use your hands like feet and your arms like legs  
to balance in handstand. **By Roger Cole**

**I**f you believe that someday you will balance on your hands, then most likely you will— with just a few days or weeks of concerted effort. But if the very thought of standing upside down fills you with dread, you may need a little longer—a few months, perhaps, or even a few years—but you’ll get there. Balancing in *adho mukha vrikshasana* (handstand) really is a lot easier than you may imagine, and even if you don’t make much progress, just striving toward that goal yields huge payoffs right from the start. But don’t take my word for it. Give it a try!

You get immediate benefits from handstand the moment you enter the pose, whether you balance or not. First, you’ll find instant relief from the physical and mental tension that builds up from long hours of sitting or standing. Why? Because turning your body upside down and elongating it reverses many of the wearing effects that gravity and slumped posture impose on your circulation, muscles, and brain. The instant gratification you enjoy makes handstand an excellent posture to put near the beginning of your asana sequence, because it entices you to stop whatever else you are doing and start practicing.

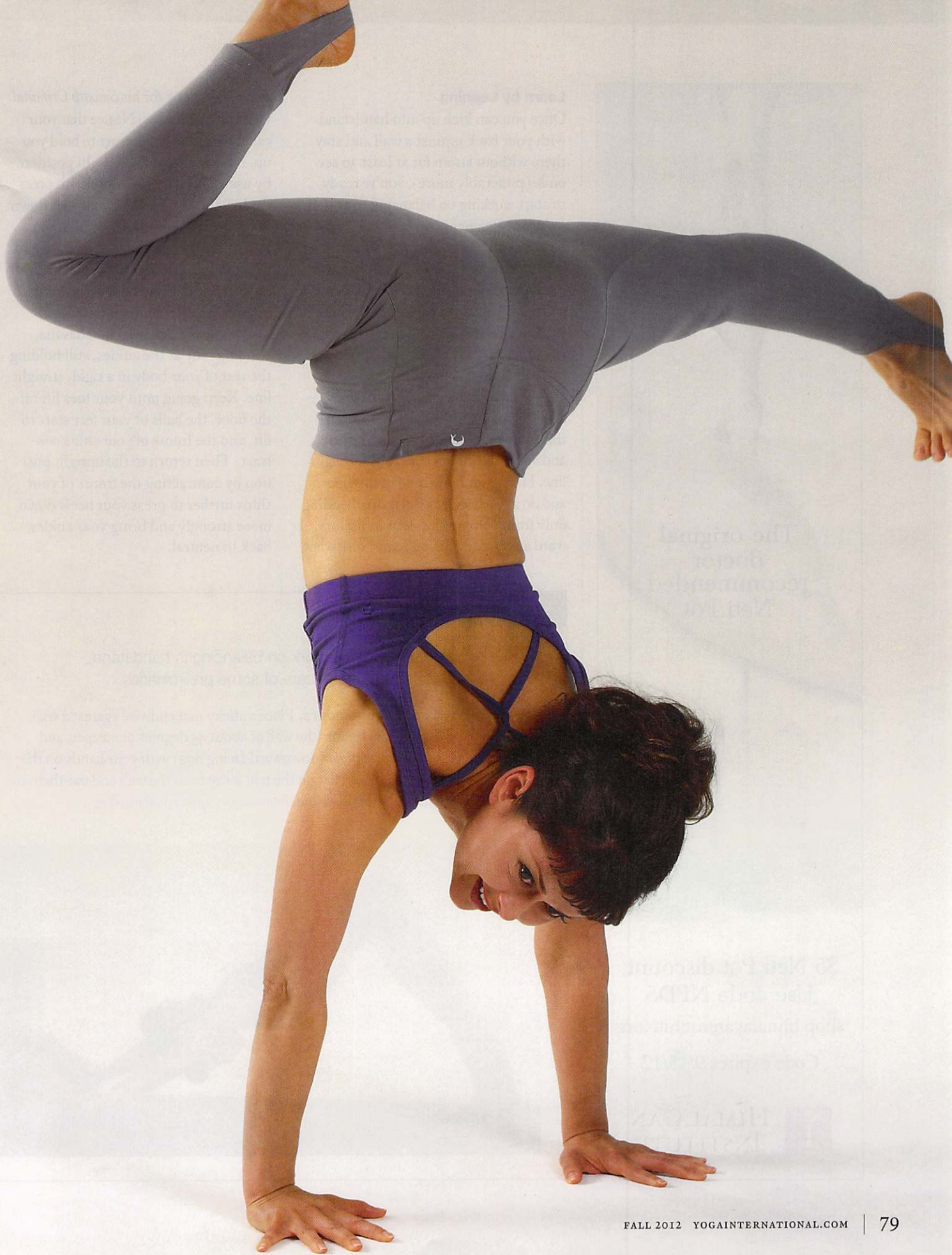
Second, you gain power and focus. *Adho mukha vrikshasana* gives your heart a workout and builds strength in your shoulders and upper arms. The balancing techniques I describe below will make your hands, forearms, and fingers especially strong. Practicing an upside-down balancing pose demands unwavering attention at every moment, which conditions your mind and hones your concentration.

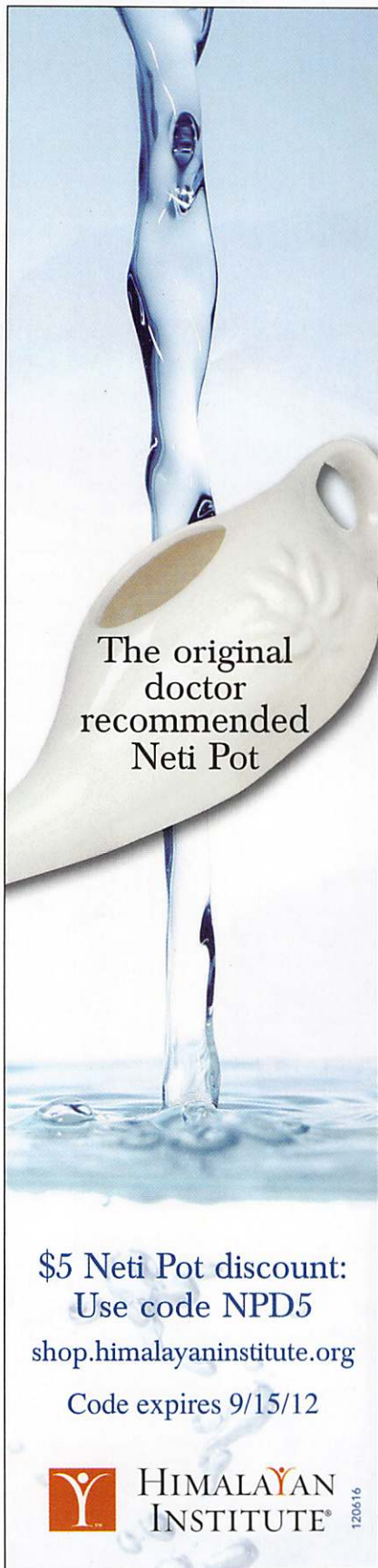
Third, you get to have fun. The act of kicking up into handstand is inherently playful, a game that presents you with a series of engaging challenges, and rewards you with one success after another as you attain higher levels of skill. The pose gives you something to look forward to each time you try it, providing additional incentive to get up and practice.

And last but not least, a playful yet challenging pose like *adho mukha vrikshasana* can’t help but boost your mood and increase your self-esteem. When you first develop enough strength to support your body weight with your arms, you’ll feel empowered. When you kick up into the posture all by yourself, you’ll experience a wave of exhilaration that can last for days. When you manage to balance, however briefly, you’ll move from surprise to absolute delight and amazement that you did it. And when you finally learn to balance for extended periods, you’ll feel a sense of enduring joy and confidence.

And yes, you *can* balance—once you’ve gotten a few prerequisites out of the way (see “Be Prepared” on page 80). You’ll need to make sure that your wrists and shoulders are healthy and flexible, for instance; you’ll need to build up your muscles and develop the coordination to launch into the pose. But once you’re up, you’re up, and if you align yourself correctly with respect to gravity, you will remain balanced as long as you can hold that position (within certain limits).


Building toward *adho mukha vrikshasana*—and refining the pose once you’re there—requires sustained, dedicated effort (*tapas*), but the psychological insight (*svadhyaya*) and lasting satisfaction (*santosha*) handstand brings makes this effort so worthwhile. >>





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### Learn by Leaning

Once you can kick up into handstand with your back against a wall and stay there without strain for at least 30 seconds (preferably more), you're ready to start working on balancing. But how to begin? Balancing on your hands requires skills that very few of us learned as children. But what we did learn way back then—to use our feet, calves, shins, and knees to correct our balance when we're standing—we can translate to our hands, forearms, and elbows in handstand.

To understand what this means, stand in *tadasana* (mountain pose) so that your ears, shoulders, hips, knees, and ankles line up in a perfectly straight line. Hold your body rigid in this line and do a Michael Jackson move: bending only from your ankles, lean as far forward as you can. (If you're not sure what

this means, look for his *Smooth Criminal* video on YouTube.) Notice that your calf muscles must contract to hold you up. Now return to the upright position by using *only* your calf muscles to press the balls of your feet and your toes down to bring your ankles back to neutral. Remember, when you lean forward and when you return to vertical, you must not bend at the knees, hips, spine, or anywhere else other than the ankles.

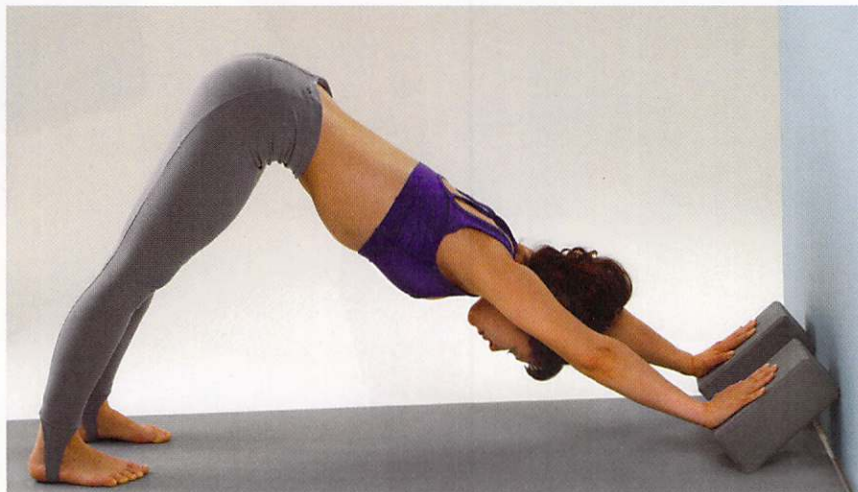
Now lean backward in *tadasana*, bending only at the ankles, still holding the rest of your body in a rigid, straight line. Keep going until your toes lift off the floor, the balls of your feet start to lift, and the fronts of your shins contract. Then return to the upright position by contracting the fronts of your shins further to press your heels down more strongly and bring your ankles back to neutral.

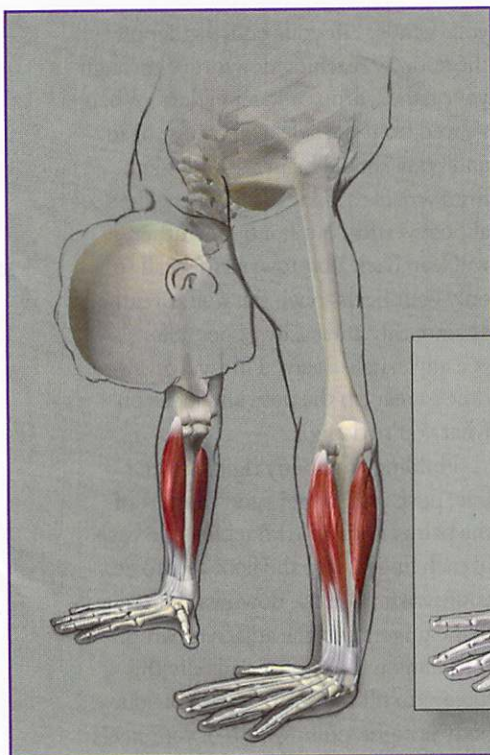
Illustrations: Linda Nye

## Be Prepared

Before you can work on balancing in handstand, you need to take care of some preliminaries.

**Prep your wrists and shoulders.** Place a sticky mat endwise against a wall, lean a pair of yoga blocks against the wall at about 45 degrees or steeper, and practice *adho mukha shvanasana* (downward-facing dog) with your hands on the blocks. Now place the blocks flat on the mat away from the wall and use them to support your hands in *urdhva mukha shvanasana* (upward-facing dog).





Finally, do the backward lean again, but this time, push the limit so you just begin to lose your balance. The instant before you must step back to prevent falling, bend both knees slightly but quickly, and you will find that this catches you and lets you return to vertical without bending at your hips, spine, or neck. Lean to the front and back a few times,

more subtly each time, then stop in the precise upright position and appreciate the effortless balance you have when you neither lean forward nor backward, dwelling at the center.

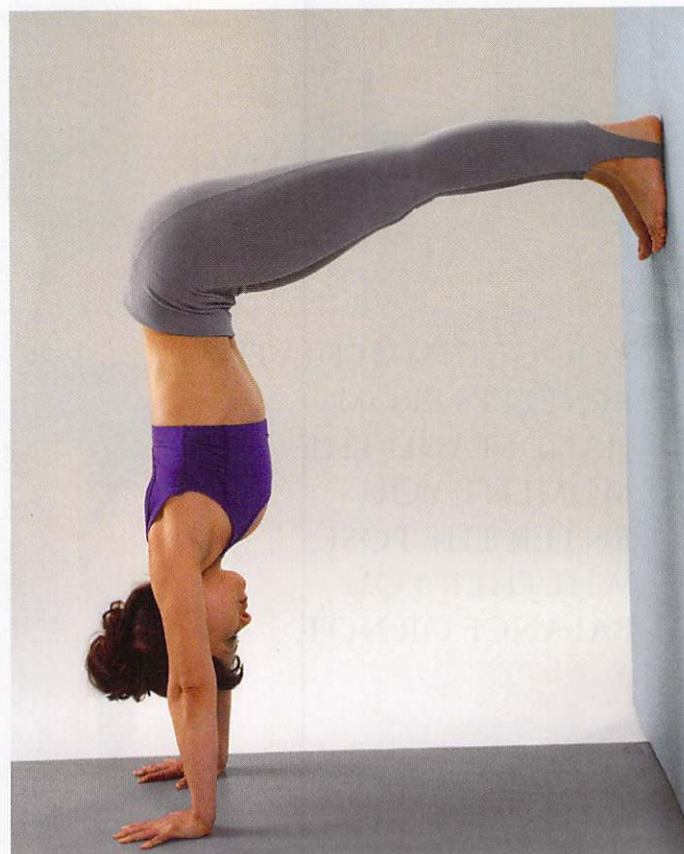
So how does Michael Jackson's *Smooth Criminal* moves help you balance in *adho mukha vrikshasana*? Just as he

presses the balls of his feet and toes down on the forward lean, you will press down on the base of all your fingers—and the fingers themselves. His heel press on the backward lean translates into you pressing the heels of your hands down. You bent your knees to correct your balance standing up; now you'll bend your elbows. The wrist and finger flexor muscles on the palm side of your forearms will act like the calf muscles that pushed your feet and toes downward, while the extensor muscles on the other side of your forearms will act like the shin muscles that lifted your toes and feet upward (see illustration). And just as you bent only at the ankles and preserved the line of the body when you leaned forward and back in *tadasana*, remember to only bend at the wrists and keep the rest of your body in a rigid, straight line in this version of handstand. >>

**Build your strength.** Hold downward dog until you can stay for well over a minute without strain. Then practice half handstand (upside-down L shape, walking the feet up the wall to a height just above the hips), and increase your hold time there to at least 30 seconds, preferably more. In half handstand, practice pressing your fingers and the part of your palm at the base of your fingers strongly into the floor to strengthen your hands and forearms for the same action in full handstand.

**Learn your lines.** Develop an internal sense of what it feels like to have your body and legs in a straight line and balanced on their bones. How? Practice *tadasana* with your arms overhead, first with your back against a wall, then step away.

**Practice kicking up.** Get your hips up over your hands *before* either of your feet get up there. If your feet reach the wall before your hips are high enough, you'll fall back down. Place your fingertips 4 to 8 inches from the wall, look down between—or in front of—your hands. Step one foot forward and then push that foot down to swing your back leg up. Just before the back leg reaches the *tadasana* line with the back hip, tighten the front hip muscles (hip flexors) so the momentum of the leg pulls both hips along with it, lifting them high up, then forward toward the wall.



### Off the Wall

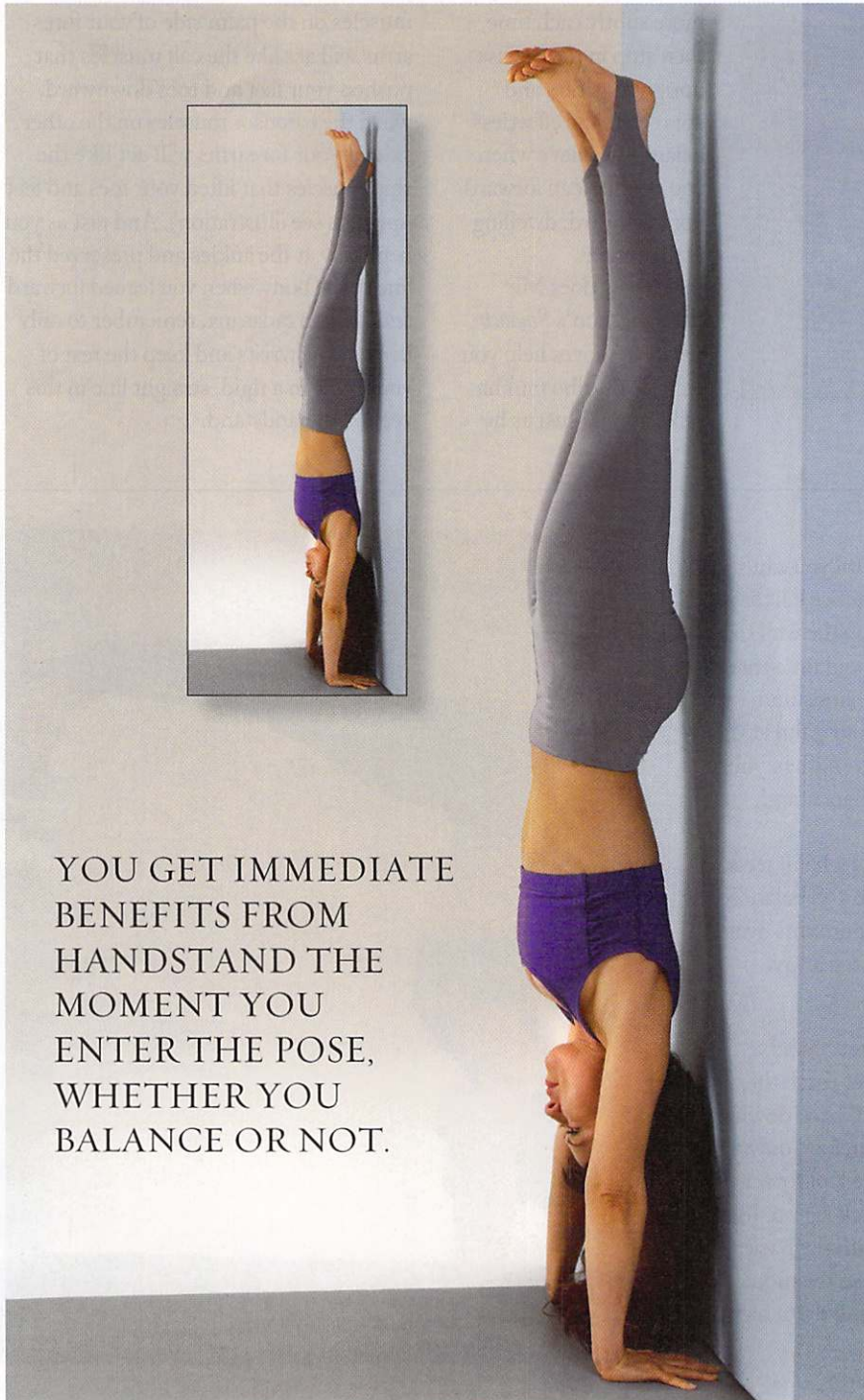
The moment of truth has arrived. Place the tips of your middle fingers against a wall with your palms on the floor and hands shoulder-width apart. Kick up into handstand (you have to kick gently when you are this close to the wall or you will hit it hard, bounce off, and

come right back down). Let your head hang straight down so your ears are between your arms and your eyes are facing forward toward the opposite wall. Absolutely do not touch the back of your head to the wall at any time during the pose or you'll end up using it to correct your balance and you won't learn to use

your hands. Lift your body higher off the floor by reaching downward through your hands, arms, and shoulders. When viewed from the side, your arms, head, and body should be in a straight line from wrists to ankles. The line will be almost vertical but not quite; rather, it will lean back a bit toward the wall so only your heels touch the wall. Breathe as smoothly and easily as possible; especially exhale freely. This will give you time to relax in the pose and focus on what you're doing.

Holding your body rigidly in one line, push your fingers and the part of the palms under the knuckles (the base of each finger) into the floor as if to flex your wrists. Use the downward force of the fingers and the adjacent part of the palm on the floor—and only this force—to tilt the entire length of your body upright, pulling both of your heels off the wall at exactly the same time. If your heels come off one at a time, that means you're tilting yourself away from the wall by pushing with one leg and you won't get the desired effect in your hands. Resist the temptation to push your hips or belly forward to get off the wall; don't let your trunk, hips, or legs bow or flex at all.

If you do this straight-body, hands-only action correctly, the most likely outcome is that you'll pull both heels off the wall so fast and so far that you'll pass right through the point of balance and immediately come down. That's exactly what should happen the first time. Now do the same pose again, but the instant your hand action pulls your heels off the wall, reverse the action by pressing the heels of the hands down into the floor as hard as you can and lift all four fingers as high as you can (they won't lift far, if at all). If you do this soon enough and strongly enough, instead of falling out of the pose, your body will reverse direction and your heels will fall back against the wall. This action requires powerful muscle contraction on the back-of-the-hand side of your forearms (wrist and



YOU GET IMMEDIATE BENEFITS FROM HANDSTAND THE MOMENT YOU ENTER THE POSE, WHETHER YOU BALANCE OR NOT.

finger extensors, see illustration). You'll notice that you can't tilt your body very far away from the wall before you pass the point of recovering your balance with the heels of your hands. When that happens, quickly bend your elbows. Use the least amount of bend necessary to catch your fall, and straighten the elbows again as soon as you can.

Repeat the sequence over and over, using your wrist and finger flexors to pull your heels off the wall and your extensors to return them to the wall. Every once in a while, you may find yourself stuck in the middle, balanced between falling forward and leaning backward. There's a name for that: *adho mukha vrikshasana*, or handstand.

Work several days a week to extend the duration of the pose; as you gain strength and awareness, it will become easier and easier. Refine your corrective actions with your forearms, hands, and elbows until you can stay in the pose with the fewest and smallest corrections possible.

### Learning the Hard Way

There are many ways to align yourself in handstand, of course. So why did I show you the most difficult one first—with your head down and your arms and body in a straight line? Why not learn to balance in an easier variation? Because the straight-line, head-down pose forces you

WHEN YOU MANAGE TO BALANCE, HOWEVER BRIEFLY, YOU'LL MOVE FROM SURPRISE TO ABSOLUTE DELIGHT AND AMAZEMENT THAT YOU DID IT.

to use your hands and forearms to control your balance—when you are lined up this way they are the *only* tools you have available to make adjustments—and you need these foundational skills to balance in any style of handstand. Other versions of handstand allow you to lift your head, arch your back, or bend at the shoulders and hips to make adjustments, so if you start that way you may not learn to use your hands and forearms

as well. Once you have performed sufficient *tapas* in the straight-line position, you will find it much easier to balance in every other handstand variation (see “Variations on a Pose” above).

### Achieving Harmony

When you balance in *adho mukha vrikshasana*, you bring your body physically into a fine-tuned equilibrium with the earth's gravitational field, quite literally

in harmony with one of the fundamental forces of nature. When you become fully absorbed in this experience—your mind and body are in a state of union with the universe—you are truly practicing yoga. ■

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## Variations on a Pose

I've included a couple more versions of handstand you may want to add to your practice.

**1** Place the tips of your middle fingers about 3 or 4 inches away from the wall—just far enough so your head doesn't touch the wall when you bend your neck back—and then lift your head, and face the floor. Put your head in this position before you kick up, and keep it there throughout the pose. It will provide a counterweight that, with subtle up-and-down movements, can help fine-tune your balance. Follow the rest of the instructions I gave for the head-down pose.

**2** An even easier variation: Lift your head, and face the floor. Kick up into handstand and let your back arch a bit while balancing. Allow your hips and shoulders to extend or flex as needed to help correct your balance if it gets too far off to recover using just your hands, forearms, elbows, and head.

