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by **Shameem Akthar**

Can you hit a plateau in your practice?

As a devoted practitioner of the Sivananda Yoga sequence, I can say that you can never hit a plateau with your practice of a set sequence. Most established schools, including new-fangled ones, stick to a sequence. This may, at first glance, seem to be a matter of convenience, but actually, it also elevates yogic discipline to a new high.

Hitting a plateau usually comes to those, and that is a majority of us, whose mind needs constant entertainment. It is usually common to newcomers to yoga. However, as far as challenges go, you can keep upping the ante with just one fixed sequence. How, you may well ask. For example, if you first learn to get into the headstand (sirsasana), that itself is a matter of growth. The next stage in this pose is the control you bring in going up into the pose and coming down from it. This is essentially a matter of muscular strength and nervous co-ordination that is a gift of dedicated practice. Next, you learn to stay up aloft in the pose longer, increasing the duration steadily. Here effort is involved, again ushering in new excitement and learning into your sadhana. Next, you learn to stay up without effort, another area of growth. This growth is not just of the body.

Similarly, let us take the classic seated forward bend or paschimottanasana. I often tell my students that their yoga practice is evidenced here, more than in the challenging poses like sirsasana. Touching your head to the knee is not just a matter of spinal flexibility. Something seems to be required of the mind, to reach deep into this pose. Then, having made contact between head and knee, you prod yourself further by holding the big toe with your index finger, and sinking elbow to ground. Again, you experience the thrill of a new growth in a tried-and-tested pose. Holding the pose longer introduces you to another level of challenge. There is simply no scope for boredom or hitting a plateau with the same set if you choose to grow within it.

Ardha padma sarvangasan (half-shoulder stand)

To do this lie on your back, feet touching from inside, legs together, palms flat on ground beside the body. Inhale. Exhaling, push your palms against the ground and hoist hips off the ground. Weight should rest on elbows. Hips should rest lightly on open hands. Hold for a few seconds, breathing normally. Fold right leg at knee, placing back of right foot against left thigh. Hold the pose for as long as is comfortable. Release the leg; repeat the sequence for the other side. This is not such a difficult practice and may be attempted by those who can comfortably hold the shoulder stand.

Benefits: It is used as therapy in most digestive ailments; relieves bloating or oedema and varicose veins. It is a preventive in neck problems. It tones the entire spine. The pressure on the thyroid boosts metabolism, improving digestion and aiding weight loss



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