

# The Armpit Chest in Iyengar Yoga

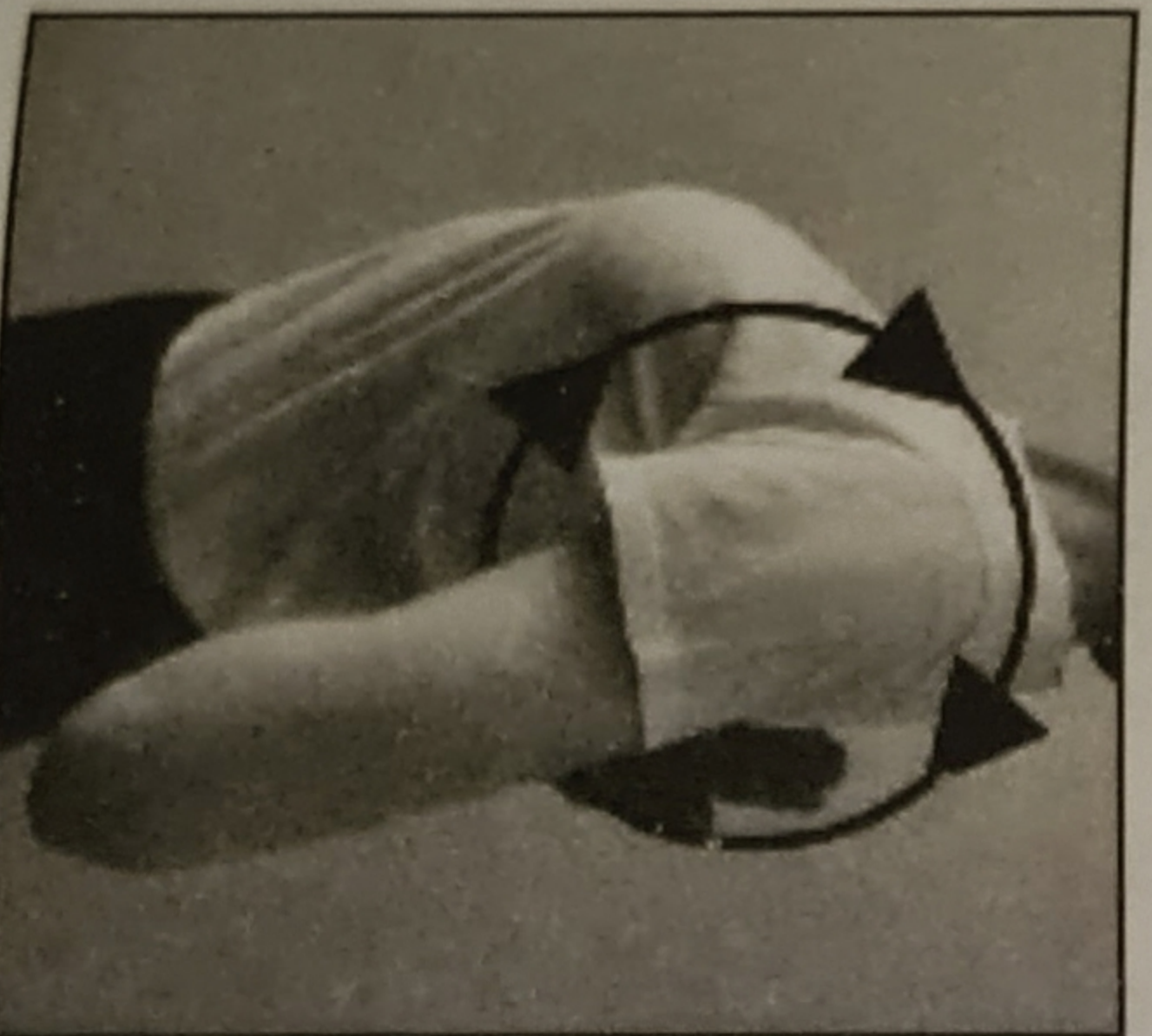
-- Alice Chadwick

## What is the Armpit Chest?

The 'armpit chest' is one of those terms specific to Iyengar Yoga, rich in meaning, helpful in teaching, but perhaps slightly mystifying to those new to the practice. "Open the armpits", we might hear. "Make them tall", "coil the armpit chest". Beginners may experience a moment of uncertainty when told to put their thumbs in their armpits and lift them up. The armpit chest is the region of the upper side chest and includes the side ribs, the intercostal muscles between them and the skin of the side chest. To get space and lift here is one of the great benefits of yoga. Many of our foundational poses work on finding this freedom, while others become quite different (or indeed possible) when this area has opened up.

## Waking up the Armpit Chest

Shoulder-work is one of the ways we learn to access the armpit chest. *Ūrdhva Hastāsana*, *Ūrdhva Baddhānguliyāsana* and *Gomukhāsana*, done at the beginning of a class, all bring immediate openness. We learn a vertical lift, lengthening through the side trunk, expanding the armpits.



*Paśchima Namaskārāsana* is particularly effective because having the hands on the back helps move the dorsal in, assisting the opening of the front chest. A more dynamic 'coiling action' can be learnt here, with the skin of the front armpit moving up, the shoulders back and down and the skin of the back of the shoulder/armpit rolling downwards, creating a circular movement like the turning of a wheel.

## Three-dimensional Action

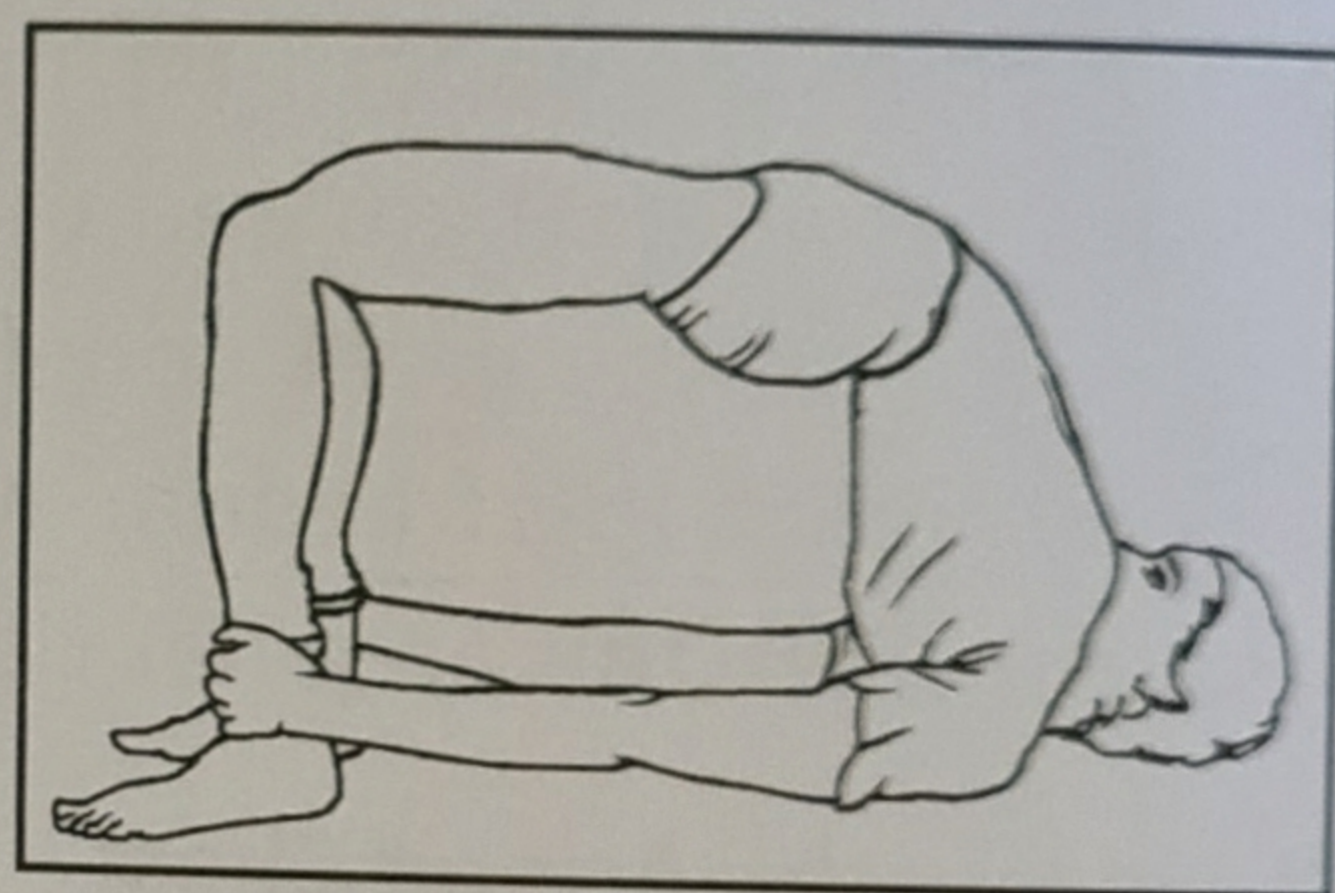
As we advance, we learn that this movement involves the whole circumference

of the torso. To see photos or film of Guruji standing or walking about is to appreciate the dynamic ascension of the full barrel of his chest. Starting low down in the back ribs (they move in), the spine lengthens, the shoulder blades move in and down, the sternum bone moves forward and lifts and the collar bones spread.

We recognise a 'back-chest-to-front-chest' feeling and experience an internal lift from the pelvic floor as the abdomen is drawn in and up.

Coiling the armpit chest is often done without lifting the arms or stretching the armpits bottom-to-top at all.

*Chatush Pādāsana* is instructive here: although the arms stretch to the ankles, partly 'closing' the armpits, the armpit chest must still open and lift. Learning to distinguish the part of the armpit skin that 'belongs to' the arms, from the part that 'belongs to' (and is mobilised by) the back



muscles and shoulder bones is key. Once this has been understood, the full volume of the chest can be activated whatever position the arms take. "Don't let your arms sleep on your armpits" is an instruction Guruji gave (for seated twists), reminding students to retain life and lift even with the arms down.

The armpit chest movement does not happen in isolation – the counterbalancing work in the pelvis and legs is key. In postures with the most intense expression (*Uṣṭrāsana* or *Ūrdhva Dhanurāsana*), the feet, legs, hip bones, tailbone and sacrum together provide the stability which both grounds and releases the coiling of the upper body.

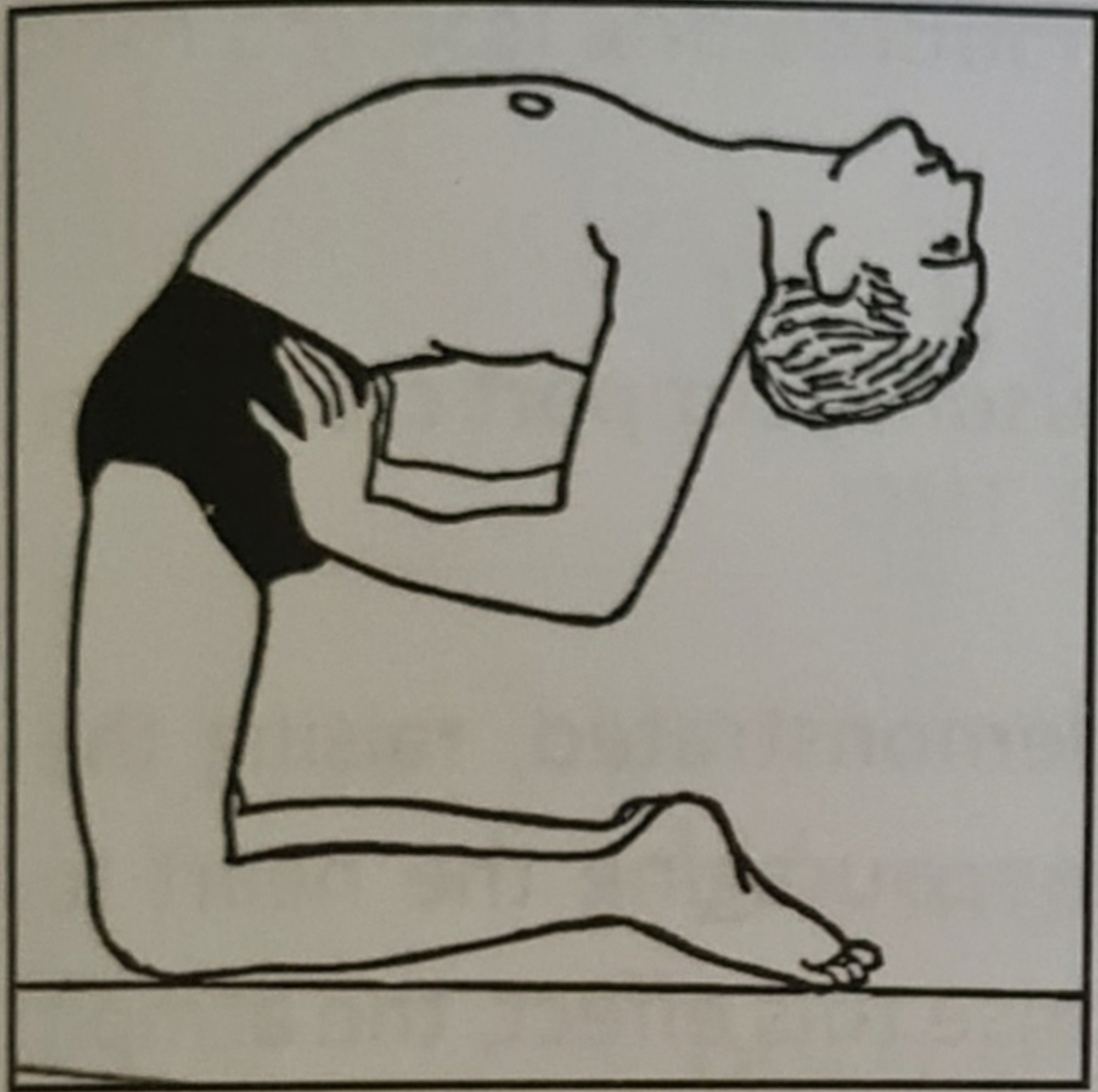
## Benefits of the Armpit Chest Action

### *Improving our Āsana*

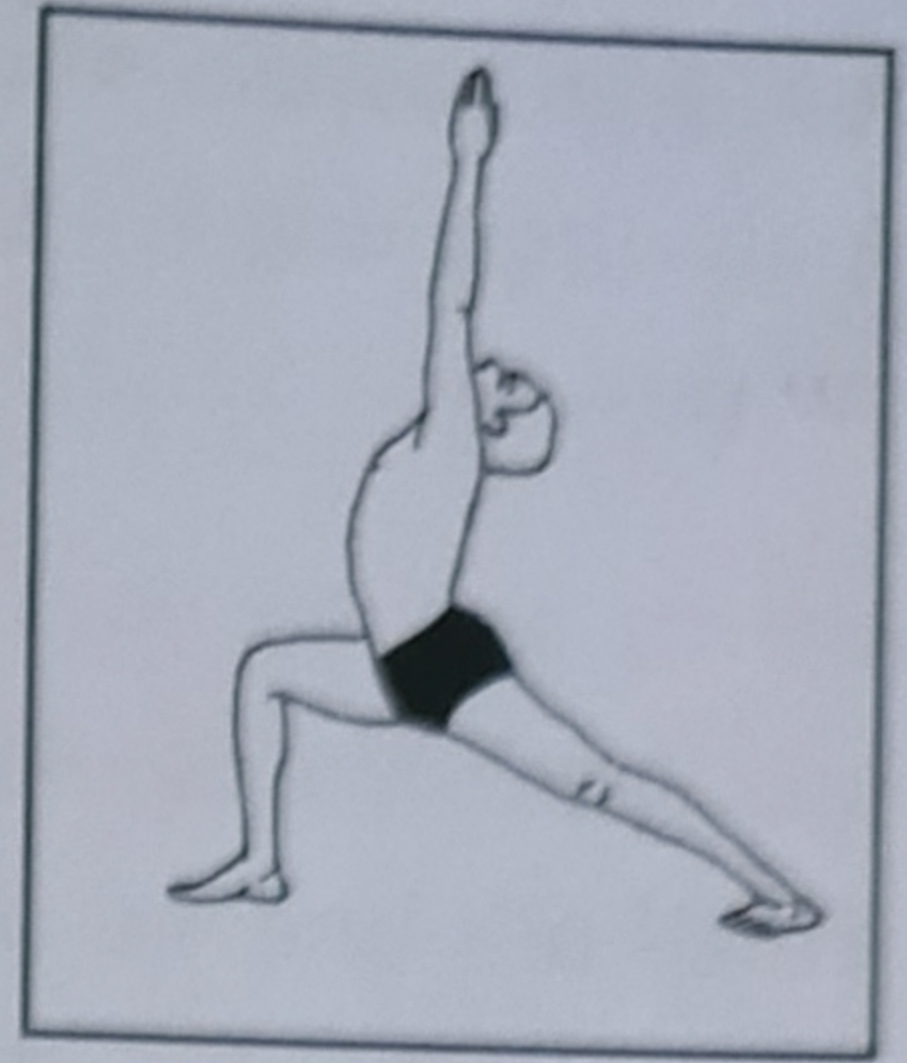
Understanding the armpit chest can improve our yoga, giving us access to sensations and movements which allow our *āsana* to better unfold. The 'back-body-to-front-body' feeling teaches the opening of the chest required in all the standing poses, from *Trikonāsana* and *Ardha Chandrāsana* to

## Virabhadrasana I.

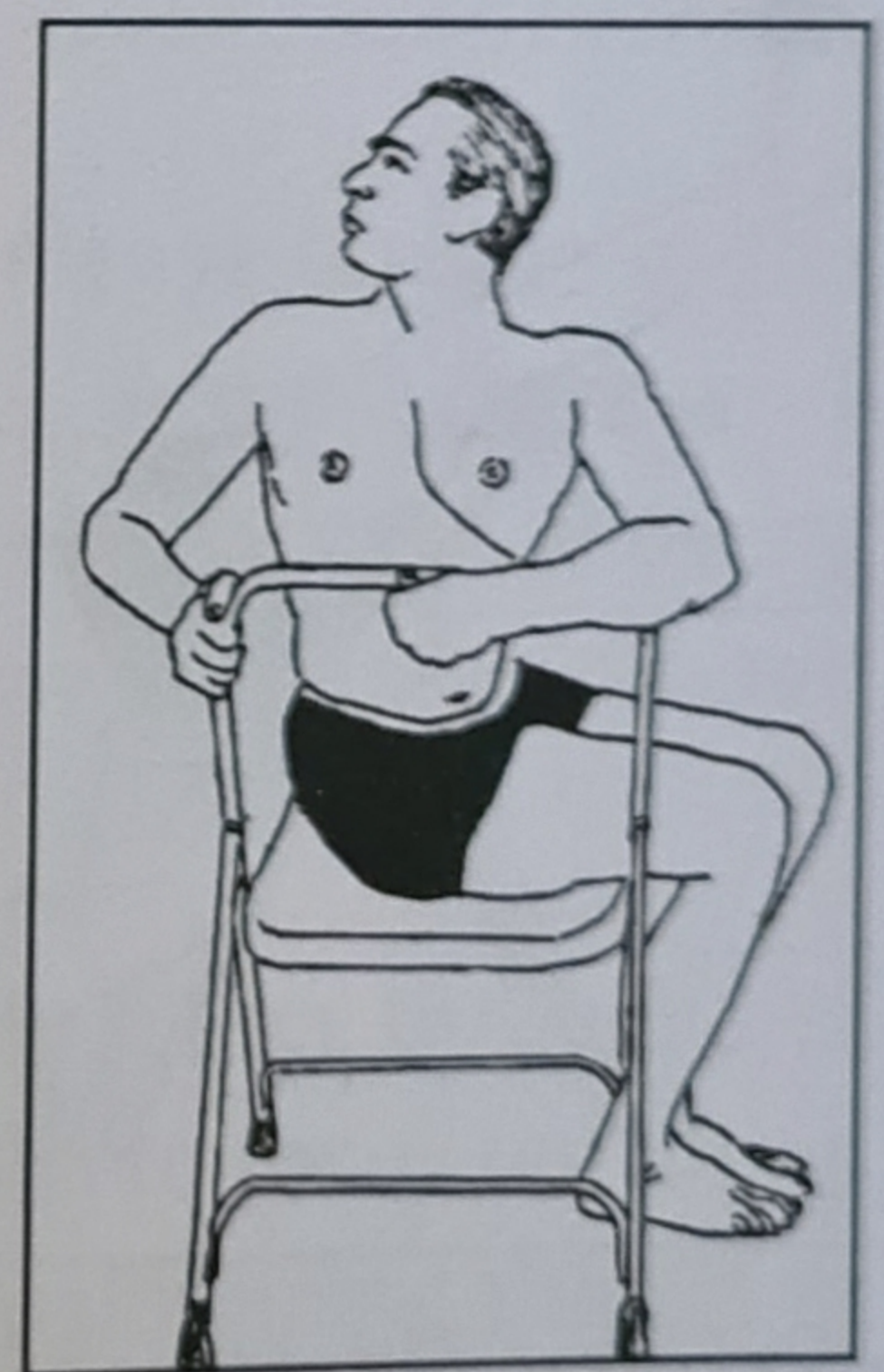
“Be sharp in the armpits” is a typical instruction of Iyengar Yoga teachers for *Virabhadrasana 3* and the coiling action powerfully charges all the *Virabhadrasanas*, bringing their shape and energy into focus.



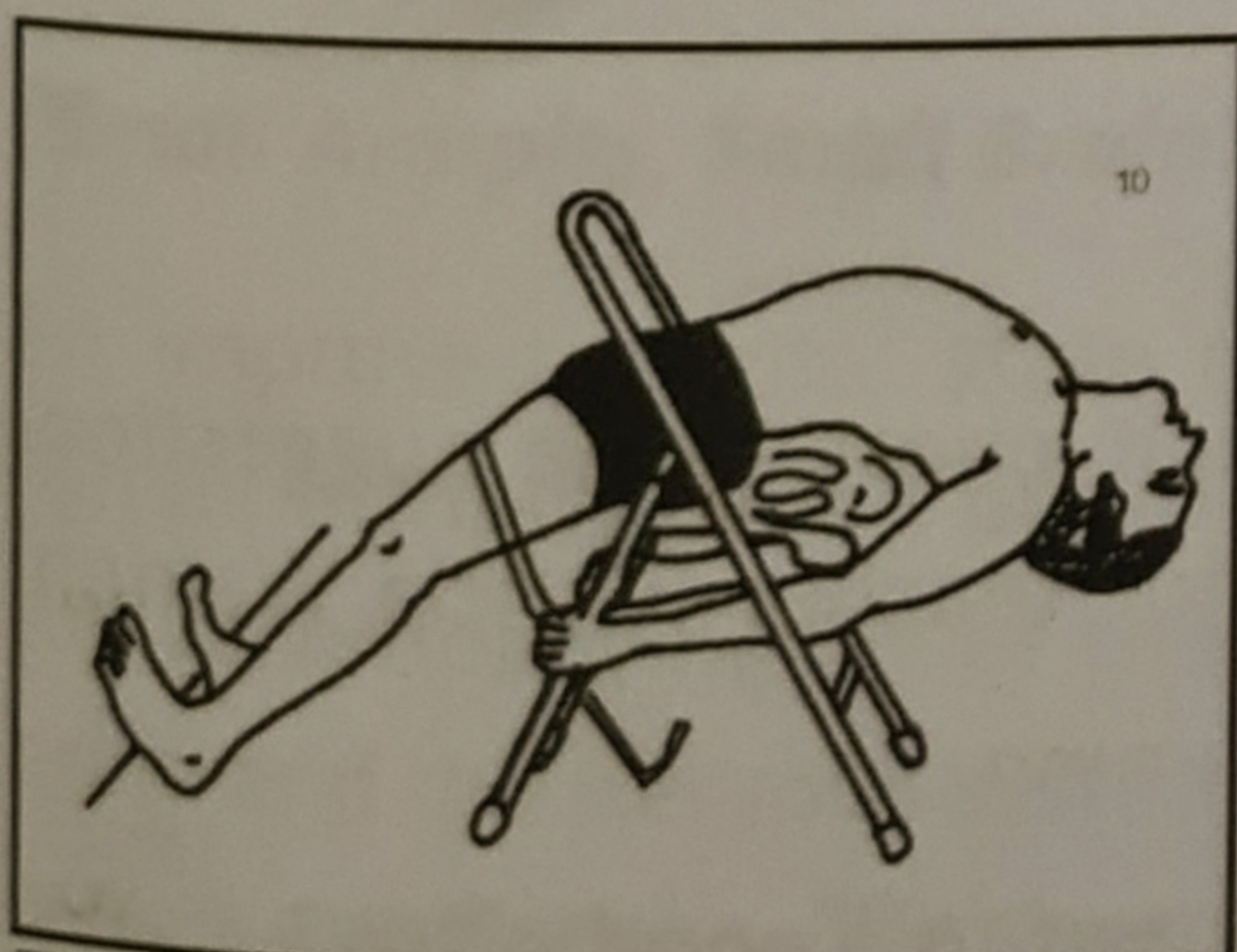
Perhaps most obviously, coiling is central to our backarches – think of the powerful lift and roll required to go into *Uṣṭrasana*, or the great forwards/upwards push of the side chest through the arms in *Urdhva Mukha Śvānāsana*. The armpit chest action helps deliver freedom, lightness and movement to the whole spine (particularly the dorsal) that is necessary in these *āsanas*.



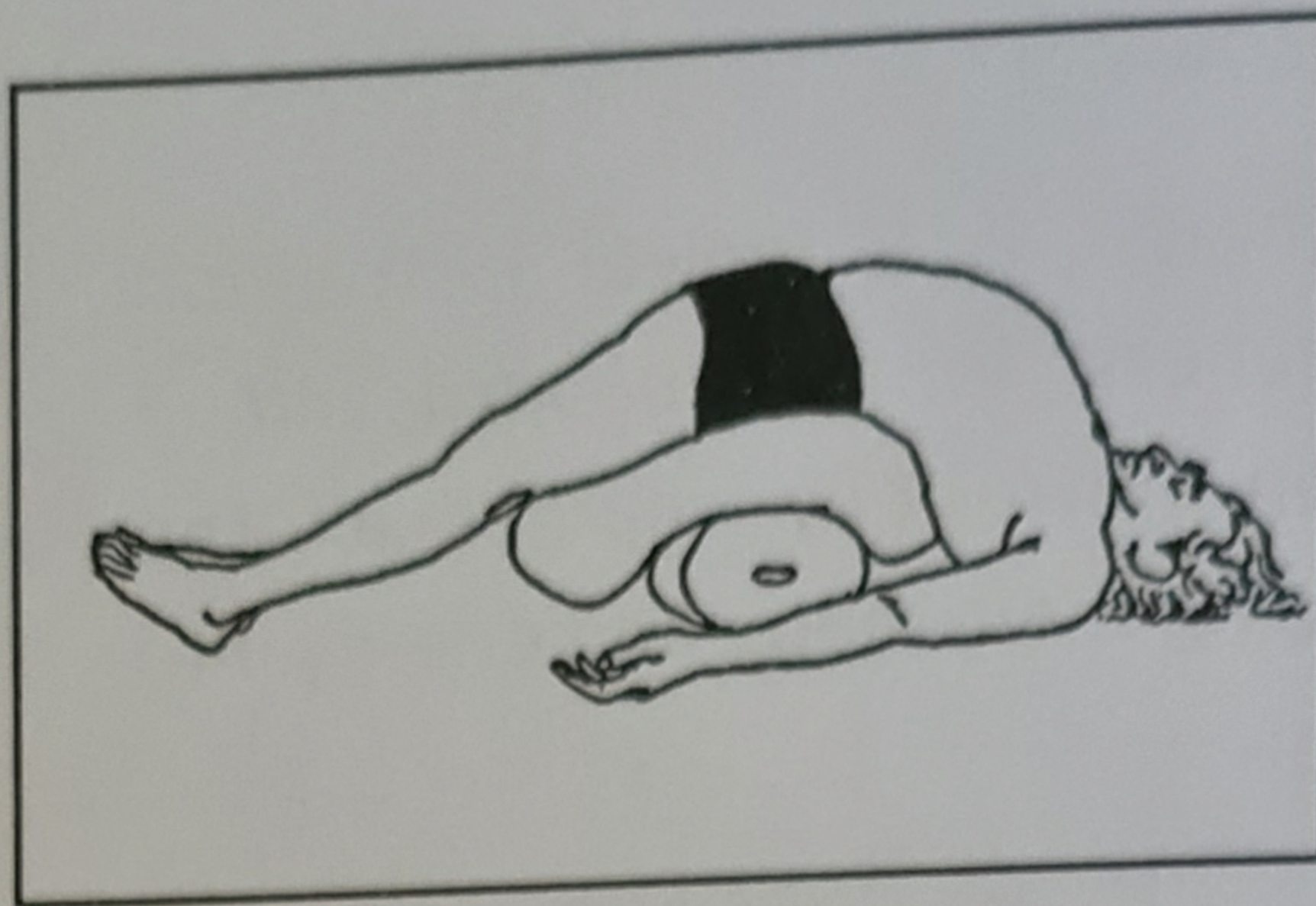
Sensitivity to the armpit chest can also transform our forward extensions (including standing ones, like *Uttānāsana*), lending concavity of the back and a harmonious, three-dimensional flow of the whole torso forwards. In upright twists such as *Bharadvājāsana*, coiling, with an awareness that the sides of the armpit chest must lift equally and the whole barrel of the chest rotate, can help us avoid the common difficulties of collapsing one side of the trunk or burying the sternum. Doing this pose on a chair encourages broadness, as well as a good coiling



lift.



We often use props to boost and sustain the armpit chest action. In chair *Dwi Pada Viparīta Dandāsana*, the edge of the seat connects to the shoulder blades and helps initiate and support the coiling movement

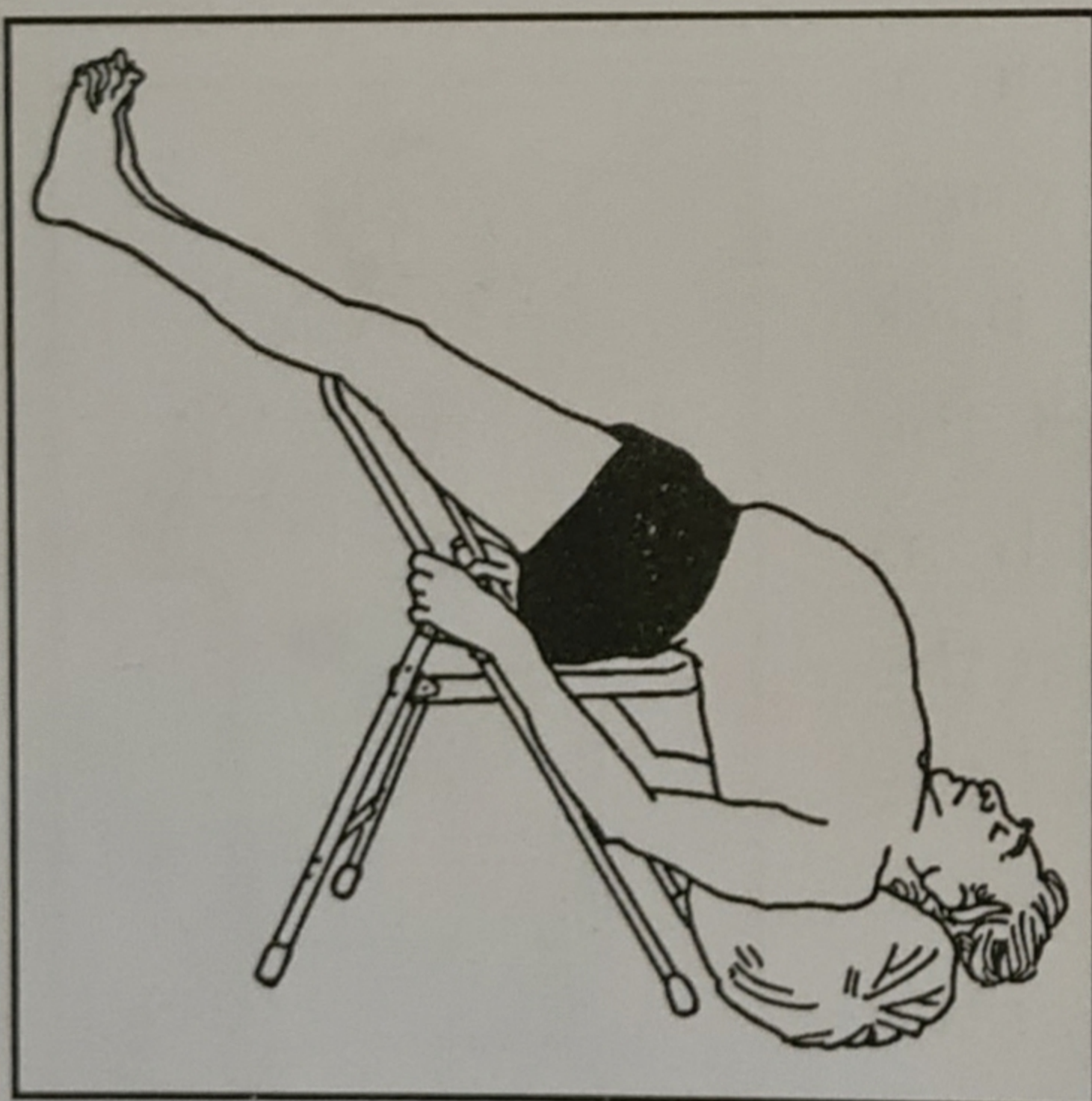


back.

In recuperative poses such as *Setu Bandha Sarvangāsana*, support creates an armpit chest profile with good height and spread.

As a scientist and yoga teacher Roger Cole has demonstrated, raising the heart above the head stimulates the baroreflex, encouraging the heart to slow down and the brain to become quiet. To maximise this effect, the armpit chest must be properly positioned and ‘charged’ – it is, in other words, central

in gaining the pose’s full recuperative benefits.



While all the inversions need the lift and circular dynamism of the armpit chest, the use of support in chair *Sarvangāsana* helps maximise engagement (with the sacrum supported behind the line of the shoulders, the coiling action intensifies). By gripping the chair, access to the back ribs improves, lending additional height to

the torso and delivering the chest towards the chin; with the arms relaxed by the head, the whole area expands.

### ***Lifting depression***

One intriguing comment made about the armpit chest is the suggestion that by lifting it up, we also lift our spirits. Senior teacher Patricia Walden describes her experience:

“I met Guruji when I was around 25, when I was not in a good place – I was

suffering from depression. My first class with him, he made a statement that I'll never forget. We were doing *Tādāsana*, and he said, 'If you open your armpits, you'll never get depressed.'"

The relationship between physical and mental health may be one of the reasons many of us stick with yoga. With the armpit chest activated, our emotional centre simply cannot collapse. We must stand tall and the heart, both physical and emotional, can begin to lift and recover.

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In working the arms to access the armpit chest, we release tension in the neck and shoulders, the area where stress accumulates. Armpit chest work also encourages the development of a bigger, broader chest cavity, allowing us to slow our breath down and avoid the rapid, shallow pattern associated with anxiety. This understanding can be life changing.

For Patricia Walden, practising backbends allowed her to pierce through her darkness and inertia. So, to address depression, we learn to focus on 'lifting the chest, expanding the consciousness of the chest, maintaining the lift in the armpits'.

### ***"Small Armpits, Small Brain!"***

An improved mental state can extend to mental clarity. Guruji often says "Small armpits, small brain!" The idea that by enlarging the armpits (with the accompanying lift of the spine and expansion of the lungs, we give the brain and the nervous system the space and oxygen they require to be alert), makes good sense. "Be sharp in the armpits" is an instruction we have noted.

There is a sense in which by seeking to be big, sharp and awake in the armpit chest we are also searching for clarity and capaciousness in the mind.

The three-dimensionality of the armpit chest is mirrored, then, in its all-encompassing impact on our mental state. It is *citta*, the mind in the round, that is being lit up.

Jayne Orton puts it this way: “When Guruji said ‘small brain’ it means the consciousness or awareness is not fully open and ‘blossoming’ as it can in yoga. Somehow you definitely feel a lightening and opening of the brain when you open the armpits.”

This is amplified by one of Guruji’s most resonant phrases: “Open the eyes of the armpit chest”. In opening wide here in every direction, can we achieve a clearer, fuller, deeper inner vision?

### ***Lymphatic System***

As the pandemic has highlighted, the lymphatic system is of primary importance to our health. Lymph nodes, which activate our immune response and filter out bacteria and viruses, are concentrated in the armpits (with other clusters in the neck and groins). The thymus gland, one of the primary organs of the lymphatic system, also comes within the sphere of the armpit chest (behind the sternum).

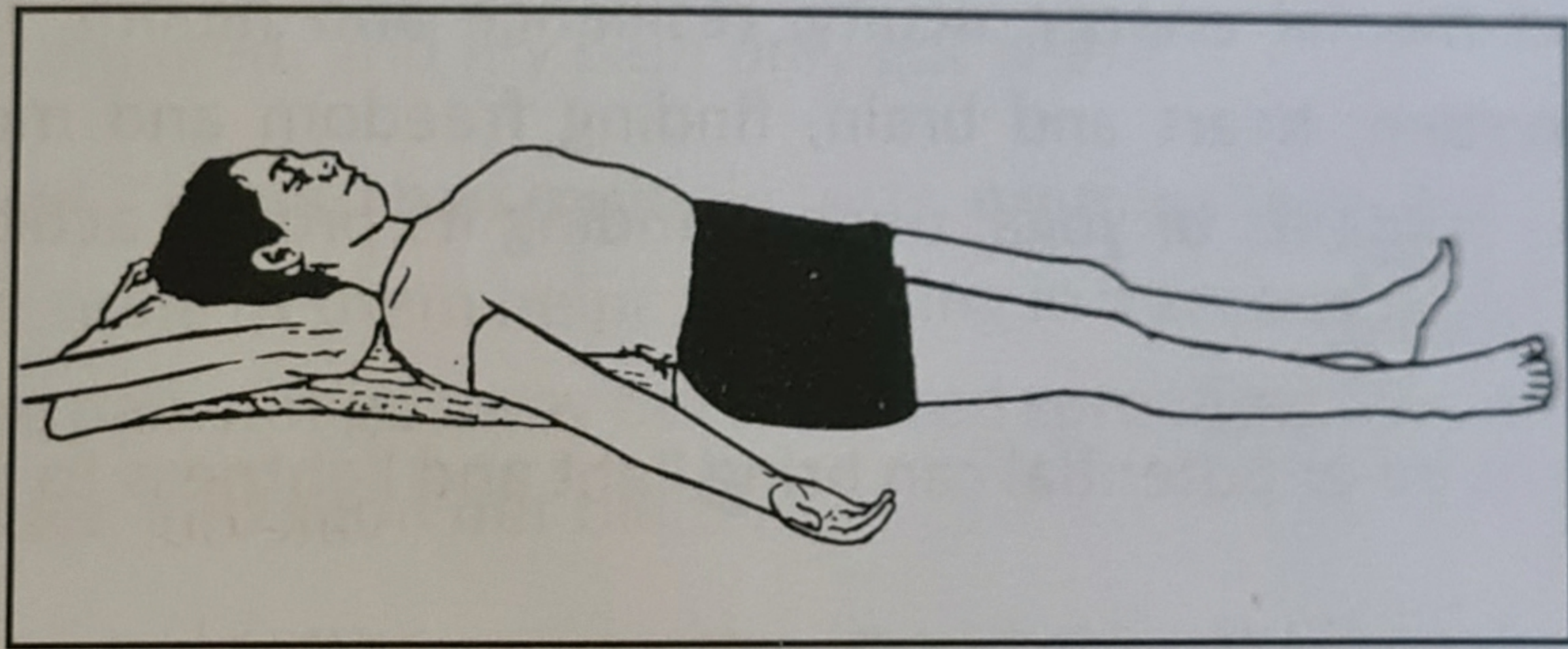
The lymphatic system needs to be actively stimulated to function well. In this sense, restorative poses alone are not enough. The energetic use of the arms in standing poses does, however, stimulate the armpit/lymphatic nexus. We have noted the powerful work required by the *Virabhadrasana*; think too of the vigorous rotation of the ribcage in *Parsvakoṇāsana*. The dynamic sequence of *Surya Namaskār* (sun salutation) also brings the sort of movement that successfully stimulates lymphatic activity. *Viparīta Karaṇi* is a classic for lymphatic drainage, which is helped by the inversion and the opening of the armpit chest.

The internal lift that comes with the armpit chest action gives a boost to other important systems in the body as well. The reproductive and digestive systems, and the muscular organ of the heart, are all lifted, toned and

stimulated by this work.

### ***Storehouse of Prāṇa***

In Iyengar Yoga, the armpits are considered the 'storehouse' of *prāṇa* (lifeforce). If we slump forwards, closing the upper chest and collapsing the side ribs, lung capacity is greatly reduced. In contrast, when we expand the armpit chest – Supta Baddha Koṇāsana on a bolster, for example, arms over the head – we make ample space, increasing both the quantity and the quality of breath available. For this reason, armpit chest-opening poses are done before *prāṇāyāma*; we also use props under the chest in Supine *Prāṇāyāma*.



Here folded blankets create a gentle coiling lift, allowing the ribcage to spread and the capacity of the breath to be explored. With practice, the *prāṇāyāmic* inhalation can be used to engage the armpit chest, consciously moving the side ribs and intercostal muscles. Gradually, we grow sensitive to the touch of the breath on the inner sidewalls of the chest.

In *Śavāsana*, the activation of the armpit chest is of primary importance, providing space for the lungs to recharge the body after practice. It may well be here that the coiling sensation is most fully experienced, particularly by new students.

We hold the sides of the mat (or raise the forearms up and press the elbows down), lifting the front armpit skin up, rolling the shoulders backwards and taking the shoulder blades down the back. The arms are positioned away from the sides of the armpit chest and the upper arms roll out. The limbs grow heavy and the body descends, but a muscle memory of the armpit-

chest action should remain – a certain space and lightness beneath the shoulder blades. With this careful preparation, the lungs can work without obstruction. The new is drawn in, the old expelled; life-giving *prāṇa* can flow.

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The armpit chest is, then, one of our great resources, a powerhouse of physical and mental energy, acuity, resilience and health. For the lungs, lymphatic system, heart and brain, finding freedom and movement here is critical. As students of yoga, understanding its proper action can help us sharpen our *āsana*.

Discovering its inner potential can bring light and lightness to the core of our being.

*Illustration courtesy: Yoga in Action, Preliminary Course and Intermediate Course*

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