

Getting to Know the Neighborhood

By Maureen McHugh

One of the appeals of yoga is its large number of interesting and inventive poses, called asanas. While a typical illustrated yoga book for home practice shows 30 asanas, a master practitioner in New York, Dharma Mitra, has photographed himself in 908 positions. He has printed these on a wall chart that measures 6 feet by 4 feet. I came upon this chart one afternoon in the ladies changing room at the Sun & Moon Yoga Studio in Arlington, Virginia. As my eyes passed from one photo to the next, I felt a mounting exhilaration. The sense of discovery and invention was amazing. “What,” I asked myself, “can the *Feldenkrais Method*®, which also loves inventiveness and versatility, add to this mix?”

The question was relevant because I was at Sun & Moon to teach my own 2 hour workshop combining the *Feldenkrais Method* and Yoga. It was about to start, and of course, I did have a plan.

The *Feldenkrais Method* can take the Yogi into the world of the small. I think of this as being analogous to a traveler who has a definite destination but wants more than to just arrive at the specific place. She also wants to get to know the neighborhood that surrounds her destination. She knows from prior journeys that when she makes this effort of knowing, her trip gains depth and intimacy.

As a *Feldenkrais*® practitioner, I like to take a single yoga pose, identify its components, and explore each in detail. Even over a workshop of two hours, I never feel that we come to the end of discovery. But at the end of the session, the class, and I, will have a deeper appreciation of the gifts of the asana. We will usually feel greater flexibility, stronger groundedness, more energy, and a quieter mind.

I have been teaching workshops on the *Feldenkrais Method* and yoga in Northern Virginia since January 2001. This Spring I am teaching two, both on Vriksha-asana, Tree Pose. I will share with you how I look at this pose.

Standing Well. Tree Pose is a standing position, and so the first level of search is for an open torso, rooted standing, and easily upright head.

- An Open Torso. I begin on the floor with gentle movements that call attention to the torso. For most of us, this is an area of ourselves that we do not know well. We usually think of the ribs as fixed in place, following the phrase the “rib cage.” But, actually, the ribs are designed to move. So I lead the students through movements that invite the ribs to expand and contract in one way, and then in another way, and then in a third way. Most of the people attending my workshops are working-age Washingtonians who sit all day and carry a lot of responsibility. People are stressed, and there is a tendency to hunch. Hunching is not a “bad action” in itself. The problem comes when you do it all the time, and cannot do otherwise. The gentle rib movements show the body that it has other choices.

Next I introduce the ribs to its neighbors, the pelvis and head. We explore the kinetic chains that travel from the ribs downward and upward. We sense how a twisting movement, for instance, feels when the each body part connects smoothly to the next, and how the same movement feels when there are interruptions in the chain. Some of these movements are performed on the back, some on the side, and some on the stomach. After this, we rest on the back. Many people notice that they contact the floor more fully, that they feel a new energy inside, and that they feel longer.

- Improved Contact through the Feet. Next we stand and explore some movements of shifting weight. We explore the different regions of the foot. We bend in the knees and hip joints. We gently

challenge balance. In the old days, when people walked more on open ground, all our joints were naturally stimulated by the irregularities of the earth. But since the advent of sidewalk, we have to provide special opportunities to reintroduce variability.

- **Easier Carriage of the Head.** In order to bring greater awareness to the head and its relationship to standing, we sit and take gentle, rocking movements of the head. For instance, we move the chin softly left and right as though it were at the base of a lightly moving pendulum. As a result, often the breath spontaneously deepens. I then increase the challenge: I ask the students to maintain the head motion and add an equally gentle arm movement, for example, raising and lowering the arms. Or I suggest that they shift the way from one sitting bone to the other. Doing this is a type of effort, not of muscular force, but of attention. Very often it leads to a more balanced head position and easing of neck pain.
- **Raising and Rotating One Leg.** Returning to standing, we take the movement of raising, bending and rotating one leg so its foot can take a place near the top of the inner thigh of the standing leg. Then we do the same with the other leg. We observe how the balance is on each leg, how high the unweighted leg can come and the overall sense of ease or difficulty. Then we return to the ground. We take movements that highlight the linkages between the leg and the spine. Although the leg has an identity as a separate part, to function well, it needs good partnerships with the center of the body. When we return to standing, many people find it easier to raise and place the unweighted leg.
- **Raising the Arms.** As we did with the leg, we raise the arms while standing and then return to lying on the floor. Nobody complains about lying down again! We explore the passage of the arms from near the side to overhead. We observe how coordinated movements in the ribs make it easier to elongate the arms.
- **Return to Simple Standing.** We stand in a simple way, and observe the sensation of doing so. When we release our habitual ways of standing and moving, we are likely to find that we feel more grounded and more easily upright. This is because we have returned to the design of the species, which is that our bones have the primary responsibility of holding us upright, not our muscles.

While standing we take the movements of raising and lowering the arms and the leg. We look for the sense of the aligned skeleton—all the bones stacked up—as the basis for maintaining balance. We also explore different pathways of raising and lowering the arms. When the balance can survive variety in arm movements, it is indeed well rooted!

Closing. In the last few minutes of the workshop we sit together in a circle, reflect, and share. Then we return to standing, collect our belongings, say good-bye and turn toward the door. Now comes the next search: how to carry the new state onward, into life.

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5436 N. Albina Ave, Portland, OR 97217 | 800-775-2118 (toll free)

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