

JOY: The Journal of Yoga

Spring 2006, Volume 5, Number 2

Self-Massage After Yoga

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Muscle soreness after asana practice may tell you that you've pushed yourself too much the day before or that your sequencing was a little less conscious than it could've been. But even if you are not sure which poses were a tiny bit out of your range or what sequence would've made things better, there is one practice that can really help— self-massage. What I've found over the years is that if I skip self-massage after my asanas, I'm more likely to be sore regardless of which poses I've ventured into that day. Self-massage is a simple, efficient practice that can both minimize muscle aches and actually improve the effect of your asanas.

Massage is a natural complement to yoga. Perhaps you've attended yoga classes which finished with the teacher coming around during shavasana and massaging your head or feet. And perhaps you've noticed how this simple touch deepened your relaxation. But massage after asanas not only helps you relax and stave off subsequent soreness, it also can improve the hormonal, lymphatic, circulatory and energetic benefits of the poses. The coupling of these two health practices is a match made in seventh yoga heaven. While it's not exactly practical to have your massage therapist waiting outside the class, a simple 10-minute self-massage which targets the joints and lymph nodes, is something you can do after your home practice which will maximize the health benefits of your asanas.

The history of self-massage and yoga

The Hatha Yoga Pradipika, the seminal text of practical guidance for yogis, written in the 15th century CE, recommended that the practitioner massage him or herself after performing strenuous pranayama which caused perspiration. “Rub the body with the perspiration from the labour (of pranayama). The body derives firmness and steadiness from this.” The Shiva Samhita offered the same advice, “At first perspiration comes in the body of the yogi; when perspiration appears it should be rubbed in the body, otherwise the basic elements in the body of the yogi are destroyed.”

According to Swami Muktibodhanada, who has translated a version of the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, when a yogi sweats “chemical hormones are released unnecessarily. Therefore the perspiration should be rubbed back into the skin so they are reabsorbed through the pores.”ⁱ

While these texts were referring to the effort exerted from pranayama practice, asana practice can also cause the body to heat up and release perspiration, and since this is the primary practice for many modern yogis, the advice to massage the body after the practice may have similar practical benefits.

The modern yoga master, Pattabhi Jois, advises his students to use self-massage after their asana practice. “The sweat generated by yoga should be gradually dried by rubbing it into the body with the hands, and not by exposing it to the air or by drying it with a towel or cloth.”ⁱⁱ

The benefits of massage and asanas

Self-massage is most beneficial when performed after asanas but before resting in your final shavasana. In this way shavasana helps integrate the effects of asanas as well as those of the self-massage.ⁱⁱⁱ

While there are many different styles of self-massage, the technique outlined here, created by the Indian yoga master P.R. Sarkar (1921-1990), is specific for using after asanas. Sarkar claimed that this self-massage would not only improve the circulation of blood and make the muscles and joints feel better, but it would also help lymphatic flow and provide some very real benefits for meditation practice. He designed this massage specifically to trace the flow of the lymph vessels in order to benefit the function of the lymphatic system.

Sometimes a strong asana practice causes subsequent soreness. There was a time when physiologists believed lactic acid was involved in muscle soreness, but this is no longer considered to be true. Muscles release the lactic acid built up during exercise long before soreness occurs. Several other factors may cause soreness including micro tears in the muscles or connective tissue, muscle spasms, or inflammation. Self-massage immediately after practice may help improve the speed of healing and reduce spasms and inflammation. The rate of self-healing may in fact have something to do with the function of the lymphatic system.^{iv}

Yoga and Lymph

Sarkar as well as other yoga masters have claimed that keeping the lymph system clean and well-functioning is critical for an effective yoga practice and deeper meditation. According to Ayurveda, when the body is functioning well, a rarified form of

lymph becomes ojas, the most important substance for health. Good quality ojas is produced through yogic practices and in turn, a practitioner with high quality ojas can meditate more deeply.^v A clean diet, a healthy lifestyle, pranayama and asanas all help to purify the lymph which in turn gives the yogi a good supply of high quality ojas to take her deeper into her practices.

From the western medical perspective, lymph is a clear fluid that exists in the spaces between the cells and the capillaries. Lymph moves out from the blood, picks up dead cells, infectious bacteria and debris and carries them to the lymph organs or nodes where white blood cells attack them and take the waste to the spleen which then breaks it down further, filtering it out of the body through the kidneys. The cleansed lymph flows back into the blood stream at the thoracic inlet just under the clavicle on the left side of the body. In this way, lymph is a fundamental component of the immune system

Recent research has shown that a healthy lymphatic flow is one of the body's primary defense mechanisms against infection.^{vi} But the lymphatic system does not have a pump like the heart, it only moves through the action of the muscles. Both asanas and massage improve this flow – massage, by moving the lymph manually, and asanas by moving the muscles which squeeze the lymph vessels and nodes.

“Not only movement, but also deep breathing during asanas is a major stimulator of lymphatic flow,” said Dr. Steven Landau, a family medicine doctor and Yoga Alliance Board member who himself has been practicing Sarkar's self-massage after asanas for almost 30 years. “Along with the prolonged contraction of various muscles during asanas and inverted poses, breathing helps cleanse the lymph system in a major way.”

Massage as well has long been known to have a beneficial effect on the lymph system. Many studies have shown that it helps promote the flow of lymph. While performing asanas, lymph passes through the endocrine glands helping them distribute hormones throughout the body. Self-massage can further this subtle benefit.

The self-massage that Sarkar introduced targets specific areas of the body which contain a concentration of lymph nodes. It also takes into account the function of the sebaceous glands at the root of each hair follicle. The sebaceous glands secrete hormonal substances during yogic practices which the yogis have traditionally considered beneficial for overall health. These substances possibly act as the body's outermost protective agents of the immune system. It's clear from the advice given in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika and the Shiva Samhita, that the ancient yogis understood that self-massage helps the body reabsorb these vital substances after exertion.^{vii}

“This massage targets the lymphatic organs in a highly specific way, including the nodes behind and in front of the ears, behind and in front of the neck, the axillae [armpits], elbows, groins, peri-aortic region [in the abdomen], and behind the knees,” said Landau. “The effect is to strip them of excess fluid and edema, thus improving flow and relieving stagnation.”

Sarkar designed this massage also to target the joints of the body. Any seasoned yogi knows that the tendons and ligaments of the joints endure tremendous force during asana practice. This self massage helps them recover and may also help the joints release hyaluronic acid.

“Hylauronic acid is produced by fibroblast cells in the connective tissue,” said Paul Grilley, a yin yoga and yoga anatomy teacher. “The greatest mass of connective

tissue surrounds the joints. One of the benefits of asana practice is the stimulation of connective tissue and the production of this acid. The best complement to stressing a tissue to stimulate it is to relax a tissue and passively massage it. This is the Yin and Yang of exercise, much like the contraction and relaxation of the heart.

“I believe self massage has always been a natural complement to asana practice. Even people who exercise in gyms and aerobics classes unconsciously massage and knead their muscles. Yogis who are trying to awaken their bodies should massage not only the muscular Yang layer but also the Yin layer of joint tissues.”

The following self-massage targets both the muscles and the joints.

Directions

Start your self-massage by rubbing your hands together. This activates the circulation as well as the pranic force, or the subtle healing energy, in the hands. Then place your warm palms over your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Next, massage up your forehead, over the top and down the back of your head with your full palms. Repeat this and all of the following strokes three times unless otherwise noted.

Use the tips of your fingers to sweep across your eyebrows from the inside to the outer corners. Next, press your index finger into the inner corner of your eye, below the brow bone, and then sweep it across the eye and the temple to the earlobe and then continue up and around the curve of the ear back to the face.

Gently twist around the inner surface of the ear with your index finger. Using the tips of your fingers, massage from the outer surface of your cheeks towards the nose, then from under the eyes down the cheeks to the jaw.

Place your finger tips above the upper lip and slide from just under your nose to the sides of your mouth. Next place the tips of your thumbs together under your chin and rest your finger tips on your jaw. Massage the jaw all the way to the ear, paying attention to any sensation in the glands under the jaw. Then place your fingertips on either side of your esophagus and massage from the center of the front of the neck to the back.

Raise your left arm and massage the inside of the upper arm down into the armpit. Take a little extra time to massage in the armpit as this area has one of the densest concentrations of lymph nodes. Massage your left shoulder and then twist and squeeze your arm down towards your hands. This twisting action should follow the direction of the hair as this helps to release beneficial secretions, facilitated by the asana practice, from the sebaceous glands. Massage the hand and twist and squeeze each finger. Repeat the whole sequence on the right side.

Now place your hands on your back as if you were going to do cow's head pose and massage up the spine with one hand and down with the other. Switch arm position and repeat. Place the fingers between the ribs at the top of your chest and massage in toward the heart. Next place our hands on your waist, fingertips facing forwards, and massage the abdomen from the center to the sides, from top to bottom. Coordinate your strokes with an exhale so that as you begin breathing out, you press into your abdomen and you finish the stroke at the end of the exhale. Now turn your thumbs forward and fingers backward and massage your lower back from the spine, to the sides.

Encircle your hands around the front groin of the left leg and, using your thumbs, massage into the lymph glands here in the groin area. Massage down the left thigh, both quadriceps and hamstrings. Then place one hand on top of the knee and the other

underneath. Massage the joint – behind the knee is another area with many lymph nodes. Next, massage down the calf and shin with both hands. Massage the ankle joint. Massage the foot by pressing your knuckles into the sole and rolling from the toes down to the heel. Then, using your thumbs, massage any sensitive areas with a circular motion. Twist and squeeze each toe and then press your fingers into the juncture between the toes and foot. Slap the sole of your foot from the toes to the heel. Repeat the leg massage on the left side.

After you finish your massage, lie down for shavasana and enjoy the effects.

Self-Massage is Self-Care

As a massage therapist and a yoga instructor, teaching self-massage has been a way to empower my students by allowing them to access their own healing ability. I've been teaching this massage in my yoga classes for many years and students consistently comment that doing self-massage at the end of class helps them relax more in shavasana and keeps them from feeling sore the next day.

I also notice that the time we take at the end of class for self-massage is a sort of bonding, relaxing climax, between the active asana practice and the stillness of shavasana, where people feel open to ask questions or share a little about their lives. They can take time to integrate some of the teachings from the class while they are absorbing the physical benefits of their practice. Self-massage creates a relaxing way for students to connect while they are caring for themselves.

ⁱ Muktibodhananda, Swami. Hatha Yoga Pradipika, (2:13, p177) Bihar, India, Bihar School of Yoga, 1993.
Chapter 2, verse 3

Rub the body with the perspiration from the labour (or Pranayama) The body derives firmness and steadiness from this.

“When the body is unclean, impurities are excreted through the pores of the skin in the form of perspiration. When the body has been purified, only water, salt and hormones are excreted through the skin. When the body becomes hot to do pranayam, excess water may be lost. The Shiva Samhita states, “When the body perspires, rub it well, otherwise the yogi loses his dhatu.”

There are seven dhatu known as sapta dhatu: blood, fat, flesh, bone, marrow, skin, semen/ova. To maintain these, certain chemical hormones are produced and when they cannot be stored they are expelled from the system. If there is perspiration due to pranayama, chemical hormones are released unnecessarily. Therefore, the perspiration should be rubbed back into the skin so they are reabsorbed through the pores. This also helps to rebalance the system and tone the nerves and muscles.”

"At first perspiration comes in the body of the yogi; when perspiration appears it should be rubbed in the body, otherwise the basic elements in the body of the yogi are destroyed." (Shiva Samhita 3, 48 49.)

ii Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, *Yoga Mala* p. 26, North Point Press 2002.

iii Sarkar, P.R., *Carya' carya III*, 4th ed., 1992, Kolkata, Ananda Marga Publications, 1992.

iv 2 <http://www.amtamassage.org/infocenter/research.html>, 1990.

Mortimer, P.S., Simmonds, R., Rezvani, M., et.al. The Measurement of Skin Lymph Flow by Isotope Clearance — Reliability, Reproducibility, Injection Dynamics, and the Effect of Massage. *J. Invest. Derm.* 95: 766-682; 1990.

^yhttp://www.tattvasherbs.com/herbfinder/herb_display.php?name=english_names&herb=Ashwagandha, 2005.

vi <http://www.healthy.net/asp/templates/article.asp?PageType=Article&ID=993>, 1996

The Lymph by Roger Jahnke O.M.D., 1996

“Excellent recent research has clearly delineated, localized and quantified the development of specific antibody forming cells in lymph nodes. In addition, it has been found that there are neurotransmitter receptor sites on lymphocytes where they actually interface with neurotransmitters. This demonstrates an important link between neurochemistry and immunity through the medium of the lymph system.”

vii Muktibodhananda, Swami. *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, (2:13, p177) Bihar, India, Bihar School of Yoga, 1993.