



Ask a Yoga Therapist

How Can Yoga Therapy Support Students with Foot & Ankle Challenges?



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This column is part of a new, ongoing column where you can submit your or your students' questions about yoga challenges and related health and safety concerns. Submit your questions to askatherapist@yogatherapy.com

Q: We had a variety of inquiries about foot and ankle problems, so this column will offer a perspective on our “soles.” I have lumped them together under three summary questions: Why are feet important in Yoga therapeutics, what roles do feet play in health, and how do limitations there affect an asana practice?

A: The foot and ankle are often overlooked until a problem arises. Tucked way down “there” in the hinterlands of our anna maya kosha (food body) are a key interface for us with the rest of reality. In therapeutics it is presumed there is suffering being experienced and the Yoga Sutras offer important insight into easing and preventing that suffering. Specifically, Sutra II: 3 addresses the kleshas with Avidya being the first and overarching source of suffering. Such forgetting of our true nature as “connected and non-separated” as occurs in Avidya is further described in the remaining four kleshas.

Wait a minute...what does that have to do with my “dogs”? Well, actually almost everything. The feet are our interface with the rest of creation. When maintained in full and balanced contact with the Earth, they tangibly keep us connected or non-separate. Lift a big toe, roll a heel inward and the connection is broken. We've forgotten who we are and become disconnected. (Where are your feet right now as you read this?)

So our foot alignment and contact is a physical mirror that reveals whether we are in Avidya or remembering our reality. If I'm afraid, anxious or withdrawn, how does that reflect in my foot posture? What happens to your standing poses when you misalign your feet? The knee rolls in, the plantar fascia “groans”, the big toe twists, the SI joint gaps, the lumbar facet impinges, the diaphragm gets compressed, the chest either collapses or arches which then affects the alignment of the arms and neck/head. Yikes! So when you strive to drop deeper into Warrior II and the trailing foot lifts the outer edge, suffering begins.

Forgetting or not knowing our feet and where they are makes rising from sitting, balancing, lifting, and walking more difficult. That restricts our freedom and puts our musculoskeletal system at risk for injury, but also decreases our cardiovascular health by inactivity. Limitations in those factors are potentially socially isolating, leading to more suffering and disconnection and so forth. Isn't it amazing the interconnections between how we are on the Earth and how we suffer interface?

Speaking of suffering, the feet and ankles have asked me to mention something on their behalf. Here it is: “We largely only do what the parts north of us (pelvis, trunk, diaphragm, etc.) allow us to do...there

aren't enough muscles in us to overcome what a non-breathing, tight butted, over-striving, slouching owner is doing above us. If we look bad, look up...and not just at the physical body, but especially the remaining bodies of the breath, primitive mind, higher mind and spirit." "Oh, and one more thing...what's with ego and the footwear? Please!?!"

And what if you have limitations with your feet due to changes in sensation, arthritis, surgical pins, genetic deformities, etc.? Return to your first Yama: What can I do as a Yoga practice that is non-harming? Violate that prescription and you are doing something other than Yoga. Modify the asana to accommodate your physical limitation, remembering there is no such thing as the perfect asana.

Here are some positive things anyone can do:

- Stimulate, stimulate those feet...roll things under them, widen those toes (with your hands is far better than rubber spacers!), and get better shoes.
- Look at them during practice frequently...it changes your brain.
- Check in on them all day long: lifting your heels in anticipation as you write that email? Crossing those ankles at the unending staff meeting?
- Use prescribed orthotics during asana practice if necessary.
- Open the hips before standing postures.
- Sense them as you go to sleep, thank them and greet them in the morning before you stand on them...they are you.

In summary, your feet are an important connection AND reflection of the reality you experience moment to moment. Return to them often and deepen your appreciation for this amazing part of you. Each foot is a miracle of 26 bones that can move from fluidity over uneven surfaces to the rigidity to vault your entire body off of the Earth...oh that any 26 of us could cooperate and collaborate like that for a lifetime of 7-8 decades!

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