

DISMANTLING THE ARMOR

by Tias Little

Like the armadillo, we have remnants of an old cloak of armor that cling to our bones and keep the world at bay. This cloak of mail protects against outside forces both real and imaginary, warding off the unwanted and guarding our inner self. In the body, this cloak of armor is the build-up of thickened muscular padding especially around the shoulders, neck, buttocks and legs.

The practice of yoga is to melt the outer armoring, increase range of motion and unburden the load of physical and psychological weight that we carry. This process is often described as “burning karma”, that is to say that through yoga, we melt the shield that builds up around us—shielding that may be due to genetics, cultural pressures, habit, stress and personal history. Through the practice of asana and pranayama, we (slowly and over time) burn off the encrusted shell of our outer defense structure. Today, given the threat of terror that looms over us, threatening our security, our financial stability, our health and freedom, there is even greater calling not to retreat from fear into a protective shell.

The armoring that we end up wearing is quite literally a drag. The exterior hardening that becomes embedded in the body tissues weighs us down restricting our movement. Typically this locking occurs in the large muscle groups of the body-- muscle groups that are designed for gross actions such as lifting, pushing, hauling etc. The pectorals, deltoids, trapezius, gluteals, hamstrings and quadriceps are large, superficial muscles that form this outer armoring. Unfortunately over the past 10-20 years, the image of strength and power, promoted in the weight rooms and work out places, has been a build up of this exterior. Fitness has been equated with a buffed physical exterior, one that

underscores the armoring of the posture of defense. The practice of asana in yoga is the reversal of this outer body pre-occupation, in that yoga teaches a gathering inward and strengthening of the deep internal musculature. In the practice session to follow, our aim will be to cultivate “core” strength while loosening the grip of the outer body.

Typically when starting a yoga practice the student must undergo a trial of unlocking the external armoring en route to becoming more stable in a posture. From overuse in daily activity, the large muscle groups are accustomed to taking the load. It takes time initially for the student to release the grip of the outer musculature and engage the deeper core muscles. In the down dog, for example, students typically overwork the outer muscles of the trapeziums, deltoids, biceps and pectoralis. Consequently they fatigue quickly and have a short life span in the pose. In time, when able to hold the pose longer, students feel lighter, are able to breathe easier and gain greater physiological benefit from the pose.

You may have experienced a muscle shaking or trembling due to fatigue, especially if the posture is being held for what seems to be a never ending stretch of time! Often this is a result of holding in the outer musculature. The outer muscles are designed for quick bursts of energy as in sprinting or leaping. In yoga, the inner muscular sheaths give us endurance and longevity. I define the core musculature as any muscle or group of muscles that attach directly to the spine. The key core muscles in my mind are the piriformis, the ilio-psoas, the quadratus lumborum, the paraspinal muscles and the rhomboids. There is an abundance of reference to “core” body these days, so I think it worthy here, to identify core as the intrinsic muscles that attach to the center scaffolding of the spine.

The defining verse within the collection of yoga sutras attributed to Patanjali for the practice of asana is “sthira sukham asanam”, meaning that the posture, if accomplished, must be stable and comfortable. When the armor of the outer form is clamped on tightly, there will not likely be sukham or ease. Sthira means to be stable and steady. This stability comes from the awareness of how to engage the core musculature. In the succeeding verse defining asana, one frequently overlooked by the power yogis busy grunting away through the practice, the posture is said to be done with a loosening of effort. The verse —“prayatna saithilya ananta samapattibhyam”—implies that by way of relaxed effort, one merges with the infinite potential inside. This relaxation of exertion points to the melting of the outer muscular shell and the “merging with the potential inside” can be defined as gaining access to the support of the inner body.

In the yoga system the body is described as having successive sheaths called koshas that move from the outer to the inner. They are like the concentric rings of a tree whereby the exterior—the protective surface of the bark—is gross, leading to the subtle spongy pith of the trunk’s interior stem. The body periphery is called the annamayakosha (literally the body’s food sheath) which is the gross body. Anna or food is the primary substance that sustains us, akin to the large muscle sheaths of the outer body that serve as the prime movers. The second sheath, the pranamayakosha, literally the “body of breath”, gives elasticity to the body’s interior sleeves. I think of this sheath as relating to the delicate structures of the interior--the lining of the lungs, the fascial tents that hold up the organs and the small muscles and ligaments around the pelvis, spine and cranium. The remaining three koshas point to the refinement of consciousness; however for our purposes here, the first two koshas refer to asana and the relationship of structures superficial to deep.

A guarded body frequently manifests not as rigidity but as collapse or flaccidity. We are accustomed to think of armoring as a hardened shield, yet the body may assume a posture of resignation as a protective measure. By deflating or collapsing one is insulated from the world, sealing oneself off in a similar manner that the coat of mail insulates one from the outside. Students with fallen arches, “knock-knees”, excessive build up of padding around the hips or belly, and weak/unstable low backs may show signs of a collapsed core body.

People whose bodies show signs of collapse are more of a challenge to work with, for their physique does not appear to have armoring. If there has been trauma or excessive fatigue and the body shuts down in resignation, he or she may be terrified to let go of their collapse and begin to establish support for themselves. In working with these students, I have found that a fast-paced, dynamic yoga practice designed to break through holding patterns to be less effective. It is more effective for them to have support in the postures (for example to do standing poses supported by a wall or with the support of blocks). Also, supported supine poses serve to open the interior and access core support without placing additional stress on the body. For example, the Supine Bound Angle Pose, Supta Baddha Konasana, fosters opening and builds safety and trust through physical support.

Bandhas in the yoga practice are direct means to accessing the core body. The bandhas are internal elevators that harness prana. Because the bandhas activate the core musculature and in turn stimulate the central nervous system, they must be approached cautiously. Yoga texts forewarn beginners from attempting to pull on the reins of the

body's interior soft tissues. Essentially, students must begin to dismantle the body's outer armoring before attempting to activate the body's inner tissues. In my classes, I look to see that students have effectively discharged the build up of holding in their outer body prior to teaching poses that pull upward on the body's interior.

In the practice of Rolfing, taught by the pioneer body worker Ida Rolf, the outer layers of the body must be unraveled so that the interior body has space to expand outward. All too often the inner body is hemmed in by a restrictive outer coating, as we have seen. In the chest area for example, it may be impossible for a student to draw in a full breath when the large outer muscles of the trunk- the latissimus dorsi, the pectoralis and trapezius- are stapled down onto the ribs inhibiting the lungs and respiratory diaphragm. In such a scenario, activating the bandhas at the base of the trunk would unleash the prana, only to be blocked by a rigid outer structure. This would be akin to placing a great hawk in a canary cage, preventing it from opening its wings. In the Rolfing system the Rolfer is irresponsible if he/she unlocks the inner soft tissues without previously freeing up the outer body. So in yoga it is inappropriate to uncork the inner potential without loosening the outer framework of the body. This is why asana precedes pranayama in the classical Ashtanga (Eight –Limbed) Yoga system.

ON THE MAT

In this practice session, aim to release the binding in your outer musculature by actively working “from the inside out”; that is to slide your awareness under the covering of the outer musculature and into the core musculature of the body. Avoid gripping or clenching

in your body. Breathe so that your outer musculature is lifted the way the wind moves outward against a canvas sail. Connect down into the weight of your bones in order to access the inner sleeves of your body's support.

Start sitting in Virasana. This pose literally means Pose of Strength and this is a key position to cultivate interior stability. Set your shins to the floor, aim your feet straight back (avoid letting them cycle in) and draw your calves to the side as you sit. Sit onto a block so that both sitting bones ground evenly. Place your hands palms down on top your thighs, close your eyes and go inward. Take a full in breath and with exhale anchor down into your sitting bones and feel your sitting bones drop into the center of the earth. Wait here for a moment until your prana settles, the way sediment will drop to the bottom of a river in a slow moving place. Then draw up the front of your spine. Aim to lift the soft tissues at the front of your spine, rather than throwing your ribs up and forward. Draw up as is you are zipping up a long zipper. Consequently draw down the back of your spine from the back of your skull to the narrow tip at the end of your tail-bone. Hug your attention close to the spine, to establish core support.

Activate your breath slowly expanding from the inside out as if you were breathing against the inside surface of a latex balloon. Consciously melt any knotting or restriction in your back. Feel steady, unswerving support from within and a permeable, light exterior. Stay from 5-15 minutes.

Upon exiting step back in Downward Facing Dog (Adho Mukha Svanasana). This is a counter pose for Virasana, as it completely opens the back of your knees. Set your feet hip width apart and with arms extended, set the base of your thumb so that it is in line

with your outer collar bone. Typically in this pose the back body either hunches toward the sky or it collapses in sway back toward the floor. Here, lift the front of your body up into your back body to open and spread the wings of your back. Start by lifting the tips of your toes (this is deceptively difficult). This is the beginning of the length of your front body. Make your quadriceps firm and tug on the tendon that crosses your knee cap in order to release your hamstrings and buttocks.

Observe that with exhalation the muscle that attaches to the pubic bone, just below your navel center, rectus abdominus, (the “six pack ab.” muscle frequently worshipped by body builders) draws inward toward the front of your spine. This contacts the front of your spine via the ilio-psoas muscle and allows you to extend your spine away from your legs. Avoid holding the pose by clenching the muscles of your shoulders and back. Insert your breath deep into the back of your body.

From here exit, follow through to sitting and lie on your back. Here we will do three variations of the Staff Pose (Dandasana). This pose is one of the best for cultivating core lift and strength while releasing the bulky muscles of the exterior. Lie on your back with your legs extended vertically upward to ninety degrees. Should you have tight hamstrings support your sacrum with a folded blanket. If you have an unstable low back, bind your thigh bones with a strap. This pose is contraindicated if a woman is pregnant or is on her cycle.

Join your legs firmly together. If you are tight in your abdomen and shoulders, keep your hands by your side (I don't recommend sitting on your hands, for it fails to give you a level base and it typically shortens the chest area). More flexible students extend your arms over your head with your palms facing upward.

As in the Downward Dog make your knees and quads firm. The small of your back should lift off the floor; however, avoid lifting the middle of your back. This pose strengthens your abdominal muscles and the ilio-psoas that attaches to the front of your spine. Release the holding in the big muscle groups that attach to your pelvic girdle and shoulders. Notice the muscles of your upper legs chatter as you fatigue. Persevere, engage close to the bone as you build core postural support.

For the second variation of Staff Pose rock up to sitting and extend your legs straight out on the floor. For those of you with the belt around your thighs and/or the blanket under your pelvis you may maintain the same set-up here. Set your hands by your side and stretch your spine upward. Here the thick muscles at the low back tend to dominate, pulling the spine backward and collapsing the core muscles along the front of your spine. Push out through your heels and fire your toes back toward your navel. Plug your thigh bone into the ground as if they were long paper weights weighing 200 pounds each!

Observe that you are on the center of your sitting bones like in the opening Virasana. Pull in the muscles of your low back (take caution that you don't overdo this if you are rubbery in your spine). Zip up the long zipper along the front of your spine and descend your shoulder blades and the trapezius muscle down your back. Engage the muscles close to the staff of your spine by descending your legs, heels, arms and hands. Supporting the spine like this is similar to the way a young tree is tethered to the ground by support wires. Avoid clenching the large muscle groups in your mid back or shoulders. Breathe so that your body can release its grip.

The final Staff position requires using a wall. Set the Downward Dog Pose so that your heels are touching the base board. Subsequently walk up the wall so that your legs are

parallel to the floor and feet hip width apart. Notice that the arms are not set directly underneath the shoulders, as this places too much load on the rotator cuff of the shoulder. As in the first Staff Pose, make your quadriceps firm and lift your lower belly, so that you are supporting the spine just back of your navel. The key here is to avoid compression in your shoulders and avoid locking the muscles of your outer shoulder.

Practice pinning down the base of your thumb, inner wrist and fore-finger. This grounding of your inner hand will allow you to extend your inner arms up into your inner chest preventing collapse down onto the bulky muscles around your shoulders (the deltoids, and trapezius both middle and upper). Focus on your inhalation as a way of expanding from the inside out and engaging the smaller core muscles inside your chest and around your spine.

OFF THE MAT

One valuable way to avoid the build up of a rigid exterior is to observe the holding or the charge that can burrow into your soft tissues in the course of a day. It is all too common that we clench (in both mind and body!) when under pressure. I believe that a great way to increase flexibility is to reduce the freezing effects that stress has on the body. It is key to stay connected to the feeling tone of your muscles while engaged in activity, just as it is essential that we tune into the feeling of the body while stretching in a yoga pose. Stay aware of your muscle tension while in the heat of relationship strife, coping with familial tension, under the gun of a dead-line at work, or in the face of exhaustion after a long

week. Observe, for instance, the way your outer body clamps down while caught in a conversation that you would rather not be in. Notice the way your hamstrings clench and your buttocks grip. Notice the tightening that creeps into your low back, shoulders and neck. It is all too common for the body to armor in the face of threat, no matter how mild. The key is to constantly track the tone of your muscles and skin and prevent a state of hyper-tension from embedding in your tissues. This is preventative medicine, so that when you take to the sticky mat again you are not hampered by a hardened, compacted and overly charged protective exterior.



Tias Little's background is steeped in both academic study and physical discipline. He began his yoga training in 1984 in the Iyengar system under the guidance of his mother, Susan Little. Tias teaches yoga with a sensitivity and subtlety informed by his anatomical knowledge and keen sense of touch. His teaching is grounded in the structure and precision of alignment from the Iyengar system, while sharing the spaciousness and compassionate wisdom that stems from the Buddhist tradition. Tias has an international reputation and teaches yoga in the United States as well as many countries in Europe, Mexico, Central America, and Asia.
(www.prajnayoga.net)