

## **FLUIDITY AND FORM By Tias Little**

We are blessed to live in a liquid medium. Inside each of us is an oceanic tidal rhythm that sustains us, a rhythm whose pulse animates our being. The fluid inside of us gives the body its characteristic buoyancy and lightness. In the practice of asana, movement within the postures helps propel vital fluid into every nook and cranny of the living tissue.

The body constitute is approximately 75% water and we are essentially what one of my Roling instructors described as “walking water bags”. All the structures in the body--the muscles, joints, organs and brain-- are bathed in fluid. The human body retains the primordial sea water environment, the cosmic waters that the Vedas, the ancient texts of India, depict at the beginning of time. The body’s fluid is saline. Along the fluid channels of the body (referred to in the yoga tradition as nadis), nutrients are carried, just as tidal currents beneath the ocean bear nutrient rich supplies. Precisely because the internal body is fluid it is moveable. Without fluid there is no movement. In turn, by way of moving we remain more fluid. The art of asana is essentially a process of generating the pulse of movement into all the living tissues of the body. The internal watery realm of plasma, blood, lymph, and cranial-sacral fluid give us the potential for mobility and for transformation. In the same way, a tree needs sap for further growth out into its branches and leaves. Without the life giving fluid inside the tree limb, the limb desiccates. In the human body if a tissue does not receive ample life sustaining fluid, it dehydrates. Dehydration in the body causes pain; usually achiness, stiffness, “knots” and trigger points.

### **Health and Hydration**

For health and well-being the practice of hatha yoga is a process of hydration. The innumerable variations of yoga postures and the multiple angles the body assumes in the postures, serve to pump blood and lymph and cellular fluid in and out of the bodily tissues. Each

pose has the effect of tapping into an aquifer. The pose helps pump life sustaining fluid into the capsule of the hip socket, the sacrum and its strong supporting ligaments and the delicate muscles around the throat. This process of hydration serves to keep the body elastic and mobile. When a bodily tissue does not receive ample amount of blood flow, it fixates, hardens and becomes rigid. Without hydration, the body suffers— tissues ache, are painful to touch and are restricted in their range of motion. Dehydrated tissues are similar to pasta that does not get boiled sufficiently. Segments of the pasta adhere together and are toughened. Similarly fibers in a muscle that are not sufficiently articulated, adhere together creating stiffness, immobility and pain. A trip to the massage therapist can relieve such adhesion by micro pressure in a given area to undo the fixation. Massage, like a yoga posture, promotes a flood of blood and lymph into and out of the tissue, so that it regains its elasticity and optimum health.

When a bodily tissue is immobilized due to lack of use or pattern of holding in the body, it loses its range of motion. Due to a restriction, a muscle or joint tugs on adjacent structures triggering a series of restrictions in the body. For example, if the connective tissue and muscles in the upper chest and upper arm are taut, they can pull the scapula forward. When the shoulder blade is torqued forward, the muscles between the scapula and spine grip. These muscles, the rhomboids, are the muscles that bind when the all too familiar pain radiates out from the base of the neck and between the shoulder blades. In this case, postures that open the upper chest and stretch the pectoralis muscles, like setup bandasana (bridge posture), will help relieve the lock down in the rhomboids in the upper back. The loss of range of motion of any given structure can impede the flow of movement throughout the entire body. In a similar way, a log jam in the river can block the current, creating eddies and back flow, stalling the current and affecting its course. The “rivers” in the body, called nadis in Sanskrit, are cleared and opened in the yoga practice, allowing for blood to flow generously throughout the body.

If a muscle tissue or organ tissue in the body is not sufficiently hydrated, it loses its mobility as we have seen. Without fluid, there is fixation. People often lament in the yoga practice, “My hips are so stiff, I will never be able to open”. Elasticity in the pelvis is gained from bathing the muscles (there are many small hip rotator muscles in and around the pelvis) and their tendons in blood, lymph and cellular fluid. I like to think of openings in the yoga postures as baptism, wherein the tissues are immersed in the life blood. The postures are rituals of inner baptism and the openings have cleansing and transforming effects.

### **The Fix**

Fixation in the body may show up as stiffness in the ankles, displacement of the sacrum, fusion of vertebrae, or locking in the jaw (TMJ Syndrome). Throughout the years of a yoga practice, we slowly (painstakingly!) unwind our patterns of holding, and release the “log jams” in our bodies. The release of hardened tissues or restricted joints makes available deeper reserves of energy. The body becomes lighter, less encumbered by physical blocks and people feel better. Fixation in the body can easily become psychological fixation. The body and the mind are a continuum, interwoven down to the most subtle level of cellular tissue and it is common for people to become preoccupied with their physical pain. We have all heard a grandparent, parent or partner repeatedly complain about a stuck shoulder or stiff neck. The mental suffering that a physical block creates can be more draining than the structural blockage itself.

As the process of yoga deepens, more and more time is devoted to untangling the knots of psychological fixation. In the Zen Buddhist tradition this is called “turning the lamp of awareness back onto itself”. The beginning student who bemoans, “My hips are stiff, I will never be able to open them” compounds the physical limitation with a layer of psychological tension. Over years, layers of encrusted habitual mental patterning build up on the surface of attention

like compacted sediment along the internal plumbing of a sink. This hardened accumulation restricts the flow of fluid awareness. Repeated mental stress leads to fear, dullness and lack of faith, lack of courage and poor discrimination. Attention becomes ingrown and one becomes preoccupied by the wavering of an unstable identity. We refer to this ingrown self-preoccupation as ego. Ego as the build up of an identity based on habitual mental patterning.

The art of the entire yoga training is to be free of all kinds of fixation, not only mental and physical fixation, but to be free from cultural, linguistic, economic, and racial or gender fixation. Fixation either physically or psychologically leads to paralysis. A paralysis that incapacitates one to move, to transform and to remain fluid. Paralysis in the yoga tradition is typically referred to as fear, a fear that holds the student captive, confined by the ego constructs of an ingrown body/mind. The Buddha is often depicted with one hand raised in a “no-fear” gesture, serving to help shatter the wall of fear that shuts in a fixated psyche.

### **Prana Bath**

In our lives the breath is the life giving pump that brings in prana, the life force, to be distributed throughout the entire body. Prana is a word that can mean wind, oxygen or atmosphere and the prana we take in through breathing is directly connected to the fluid system. For as breath rushes into the lungs on inhalation, its incoming oxygen is diffused through capillary action into the bloodstream. The oxygenated blood is sent to the heart whereupon it is propelled outward to the entire body. In yoga, breathing is done consciously, with both reverence and. This is the practice of pranayama, the conscious infusion of breath in order to animate the body with prana, the essential life force.

The breath flows in and out in the same way that tidal water gushes in and out of a tidal pool. The incoming tide infuses the pool environs with rich and vital nutrients, thus sustaining the plethora of life in the tidal pool community. The retracting tide—the exhalation—empties the pool, removing waste and stagnation. This repetitive pumping of tidal fluid is the shoreline’s respiration. If you have had the opportunity to explore the life within a vibrant tidal pool, you may recall how exciting it is to witness the abundance of life there. Perhaps you also have felt a deep resonance with the tidal rhythm, aware that this tidal breath force is the rhythm that sustains us.

I often say when I teach in yoga classes “where there is breath, there is blood”. The blood/breath is inseparable. The blood bearing oxygen carries the prana along the inner streams, the arteries or nadis. Delving into a prolonged stretch will bathe the muscle and joint in blood and so students should “breathe into it”. Of course it is not actually the case that you can “breathe into” a hip joint or the shoulder. However the bloodstream carries the nutrients and oxygen, needed to maintain a pliable hip or shoulder.

In a pose there is a fine margin of time between a positive state of hydration and a deleterious state where the muscles begin to clench and retard the movement of fluid. At a certain point during a prolonged hold, all the tissues around the area of extension begin to retract due to fatigue. The intelligence of the muscle fiber and surrounding connective tissue calls out “enough”, the charge on the tissue has reached its potential and it becomes guarded against any further extension. At this point the vital fluid necessary to open is shut off and the pose begins to feel irritated and hard. This is the time to come out. With continued devoted practice, the body tissues become sufficiently supple in order to tolerate longer holds. The significant hydration that

occurs during longer holds in the postures helps to establish the profound feeling of absorption that is key to the meditative state.

By gaining elasticity in the body we aim to increase greater openness and tolerance of mind. I hope that for yoga students, the process of loosening bound tissues will result in greater capacity for tolerance toward difference and change that by unwinding the physical body there may follow an unwinding of prejudice, extreme bias and non-acceptance. However the correlation is not always so. I have encountered flexible people with tendencies toward rigid thinking and stiff people who show great tolerance. It is the aim of the yoga practice to cultivate both an open body and an open mind.



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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.

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