

Two Layers of Stretch

When working a joint, you must decide on whether to work muscle or bone. You can strengthen the muscles that stabilize the joint or stretch the ligaments to increase range of motion.

By Paul Grilley

Depending on our purpose, we can analyze parts of the body into many different layers. For a discussion of joint movement, however, two are enough: the two layers of a joint are muscle and bone. Muscle includes muscle and tendon, while bone includes bone and the ligaments. Yogis should train themselves to feel the differences between the muscle and ligament sensations.

The Neck

The neck is one of the most mobile and accessible of the joints, so we will start our exploration here. When you have learned to discriminate the sensations of muscle and ligament in the neck, it will be easier to feel these differences in the lower spine, as well as in other joints of the body. The following neck stretches are an effective way to start this process.

Drop your chin to your chest and relax. This is a passive, or Yin, stretch for the muscles and ligaments of the back of the neck. The muscles of the neck are on the left and right sides of the centerline. The ligaments we are concerned with are on the centerline. You can learn to feel the difference by comparing the sensations on each side of the neck with the sensations in the center.

Move the head to the right while it is still dropped forward. This movement stretches the muscles on the left side of the neck, making it easier to discriminate them. Moving the head to the left stretches the muscles on the right side of the neck. Bringing the head back to the center should help you distinguish sensations that are neither left nor right, but on the midline. These are the ligaments.

Muscular stretches feel sharper and are easily locatable. Ligament sensations are deeper, duller, and more attached to the bones. This is why Taoists use the expression "stretch your bones" to describe ligament stretches.

This simple exercise should be repeated many times. The distinctions may not be noticeable the first few times, but they become clear with experience. Notice that it is still possible to feel ligament stretches when the head is moved to the left and right. But by exaggerating the stretch on the muscles, it is easier to feel the difference between the two tissues.

Yin Stresses

Once you have learned to feel the difference between muscle and bone, the next step is to determine how much leverage to use when stretching them. Passively dropping the chin to the chest is a gentle Yin approach. A more aggressive effort would be to contract the muscles of the neck to depress the chin deeper toward the chest. The most aggressive stretch would be to use the hands to gently push on the back of the head. This is the deepest possible stretch for the neck while seated.

Yang Stresses

All three of the above stretches are Yin. The muscles of the front of the neck are used in the second variation and the muscles of the arms in the third variation. But in each variation, the muscles of the back of the neck are relaxed. This allows the neck to round forward and stretch the joints. However, if you contract the muscles of the back of the neck while doing any of these exercises, you are resisting the forward bend and preventing the stretch. This is a Yang approach. This principle can be demonstrated as follows.