



part 4 nurturing the knee

Exploring the knee through different perspectives and Yoga traditions by Mia Forbes Pirie

NEW
SERIES

“Love provides the bridge between the body and the spirit” says Maharaj, author of the modern spiritual classic I AM THAT.

How, you may ask, is that relevant to knee injuries? It can become frustrating when the body will not do what the mind wants it to. Sometimes, people take that frustration out on their bodies – pushing and straining to achieve a posture, which often results in injuries or undesirable tension. More often, people’s intention is to help the body: thinking they are doing something ‘good’ by trying to direct their bodies with their minds. Unfortunately this generally results in unwanted tension. It can be hard to un-learn habits which have developed over a lifetime, and yet that is one of the reasons why many people practise Yoga.

In Yoga, the process is key. There will always be more postures and ‘achievements’ can often be short-lived. The only real achievement in Yoga is coming home to ourselves. As Aadil Palkhivala (Purna, Iyengar-asana Yoga) told me, “Postures should bring you closer to the spirit, not feed the ego.” He also emphasised the importance of developing intuition and said that “injuries are generally a reminder that you are not in tune with the spirit. Injuries occur by definition because of lack of connection with the spirit but, practically because of lack of awareness.”

Hamish Hendry (Ashtanga Yoga) also underlines the importance of awareness and moving the knee and foot in the correct way (as shown in the June issue of Y&H) – not pulling too hard, not trying to make it do anything it does not want to do. In other words, not rushing!

Love is the link between the body and the spirit and Yoga is intended to develop that loving link. If your practice takes you away from this connection, it is time to rethink.

A Question of Effort

Injuries are always an opportunity to get to know ourselves better. They, as well as injury prevention, are an opening to bring more love, awareness and connection into our practices. The best way to do that is moment by moment, focussing on the process of practice, not the external fruits of a given posture.

The importance of process is beautifully explained by David Gorman: People think they are doing this ‘efforting’ (eg pulling forwards in a forward bend to get a stronger stretch in the hamstrings which may involve tightening the shoulders) to get further, to a better place. Generally, they have no real awareness of the means they use: effort and strain whereas the opposite is their goal.

“Practice doesn’t make perfect – it makes permanent”, says Gorman, “you get good at what you practise. If you tighten and strain to get somewhere, you are, in fact, shortening and pressuring yourself, even if your intent is to lengthen and open yourself. The system responds to what you are actually doing, not what you think you are trying to achieve. People working in this way are working against themselves – they think they are constantly lengthening when, in fact, they are constantly shortening. They are not aware of the means they are using, not aware of the process. They want freedom and wholeness, but do not use that as their moment-to-moment process and then wonder why they never seem to get there. The system focuses on a person’s intention and what they do.” Having a clear intention, listening to the body and trusting the body to achieve that intention will bring far greater results, in terms of opening and increased range, but also in terms of self-love and growing the spirit instead of the ego.



Full or half lotus may not be appropriate or necessary for you now. Take your time. Gently supporting the knee protects it and allows the leg and hip muscles to relax further.

an obsession with lotus?

The Lotus posture is a beautiful and balanced posture. Some say that it is also a strongly energetically cleansing posture. That may be true. To some degree, that is the whole purpose of the posture and most Yoga postures. As Ruth White says, people can be a little proud in the West, wanting to get into Lotus and advanced sitting postures, which people in the East are brought up doing. Our ligaments develop differently over the years and due to different lifestyles. What is possible is different for each person - forcing to get into the posture can be very damaging to the knees, as well as the spirit.

According to Paul Grilley (Yin Yoga), sometimes physical factors, such as bone on bone interaction prevent people from doing postures such as the Lotus fully. It is important for people to know what they can – and cannot – change, otherwise they misdirect their effort. Recognising a physical restriction can be more of an emotional and mental process. Paul has seen people struggle to defy what, to him is obviously a physical limitation because they equate physical limitation to some sort of spiritual deficit. The idea that a spiritual problem is limiting the body can be a huge burden to carry. If and when people come to accept spirituality is not linked to range of motion, that is a great emotional and mental release to them.

Grilley suggests asking the following questions, which may help to foster acceptance and contribute to greater awareness and physical development, far more than straining to achieve a posture:

- Even if you believe your practice would change your body enough to do a pose such as Lotus, what do you think is going to happen when you do that pose?
- Even if your bones change and you can do Lotus - what do you think you have achieved?

ahimsa

One of the 5 yamas of Yoga is Ahimsa: non-violence. A yama can be described as a restraint and restraint is important in Yoga if people are going to avoid injuring themselves.

The word 'restraint' may evoke the idea of an action. That kind of restraining can, in itself be a form of violence towards the body. It is a delicate balance. In fact, we need to learn to restrain our excesses in order to get closer to our true nature and balance.

Chuck Miller believes that ahimsa or non-violence should be primary in our practices. "The reduction of violence is not only a humane thing to do in terms of being a kinder person to yourself which helps you then learn to be kinder to others but, the process of attempting to continuously reduce violence and reduce aggression also has a simple effect on the mind of developing greater consciousness and developing a greater ability to focus and be concentrated." That consciousness and focus is what allows us to progress both in our practices and in our lives.



Aadil Palkhivala recommends gently but firmly "pumping" the knee with the hand on the thigh to prevent and heal injury (as well as safely opening the hip). Start slowly and build up but STOP if you feel ANY pain.

Knee facts from David Gorman, Alexander Technique and Anatomy expert, explains why the knee is so vulnerable:

1. The knee is located between 2 long bone segments (upper and lower leg) and, hence between the motions and momentum of your heavy torso and the immovable ground. This means that the forces that can be focused on the knee through movement and postures are huge.
2. The knee is also a very complex joint, in fact almost 2 joints in one, with the 2 'knuckles' of the bottom of the femur meeting the 2 upper surfaces of the tibia. It has a pair of loosely-attached cartilage menisci, many internal and external ligaments and a complicated joint capsule, all of which are vulnerable to damage from excess strains in just about any direction
3. It is a remarkably open joint in terms of range of the bones, so it is important to remember that the ligaments are not there to restrict you and get in the way of your Yoga ambitions, but to protect the knee from damage and to serve your movements by guiding its ranges of motion
4. Damage to the knee is not only the result of excess forces in any one moment but also occurs because of accumulated smaller, less extreme forces applied repeatedly. Once damaged, the knee can take a long time to heal, largely because we use the knee so much, even in all our daily activities. It's hard to give it real time off.

some tips on the knee

Last month we described hyperextension and the injuries it can cause. This month, we show the knee hyperextended. Try taking a look in the mirror to see what you do in a forward bend.



Kino MacGregor demonstrates a hyperextended knee

Kino MacGregor demonstrates a straight leg

Mia and David's life questions

Mia and David Gorman (developer of 'LearningMethods' and author of 'The Body Moveable') have come up with a short series of questions to help you through the emotional and off-the-mat issues, which may be leading to your pushing yourself too hard and injuring your knees.

- 1 Who do you want to be? Yourself or someone else? Name 3 things you could do to stop fighting with yourself and get closer to who you really are. Start doing 1 of those things today. List 5 things that you like about yourself just the way you are. If you cannot find 5 things – look for things other people like about you. They do not need to be absolutes and can be as simple as being a good listener, getting up in the morning to do your practice, loving your children, the colour of your hair.
- 2 "You are what you repeatedly do" – examine the way that you practise. Be honest. How loving are you? How much do you strain to achieve? Are you willing to let go of at least a little of that and be more loving towards yourself? Name 1 thing that you could do to make your practice more loving. Write it on a small piece of paper and put it in your Yoga bag or wallet. Put it next to your mat next time you practise, as a reminder.
- 3 Examine your life and your relationships with other people, yourself and with the things that you do. How loving are you? Do you enjoy the process or are you solely focussed on the goal? Name 1 thing you can do to bring more love into your life. Name 1 thing you can do to enjoy the process more. Start today.

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