

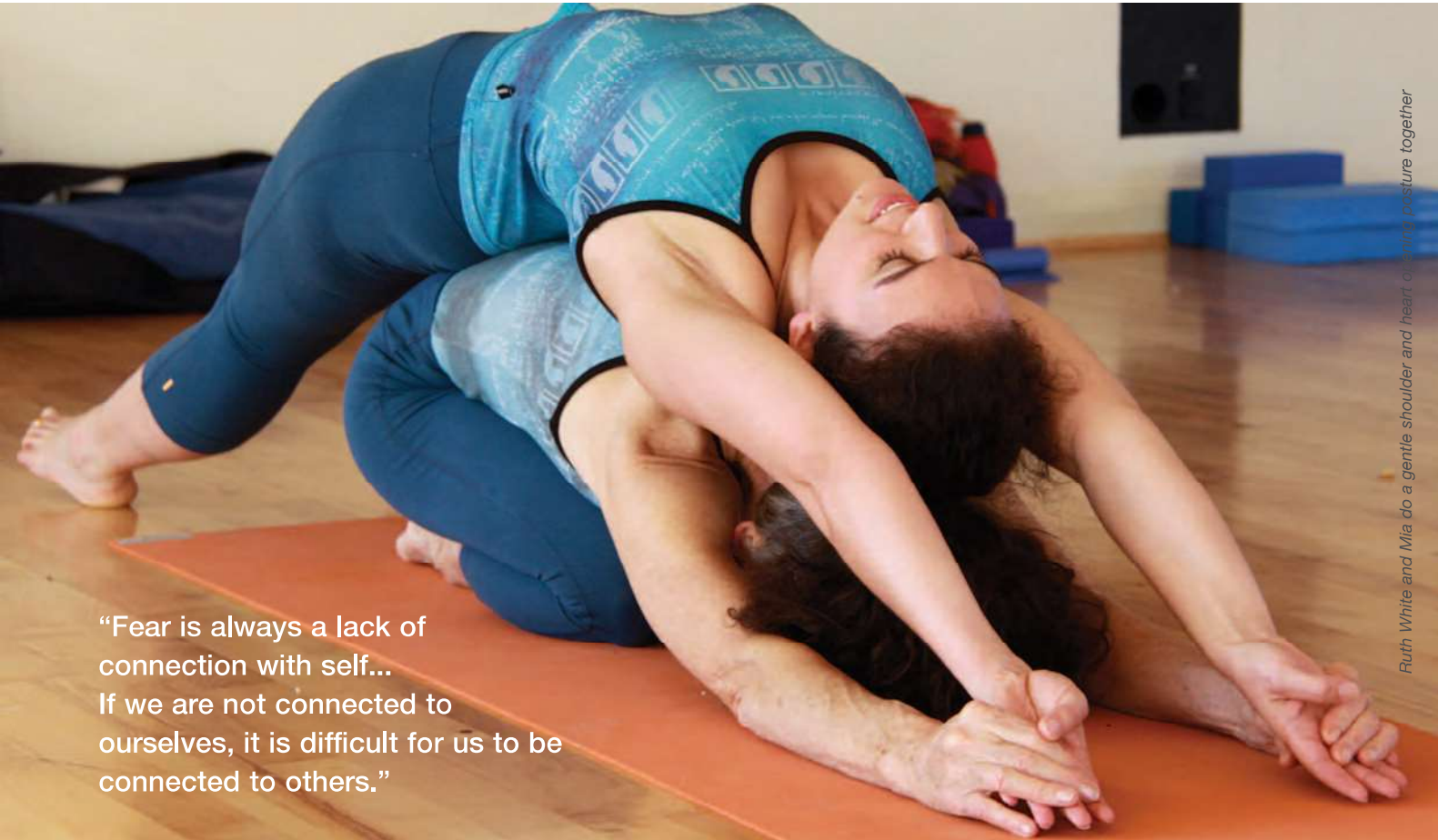
NEW
SERIES

yoga perspectives

part 2 the shoulder

by Mia Forbes Pirie

Exploring the shoulder complex through different perspectives and Yoga traditions



Ruth White and Mia do a gentle shoulder and heart opening posture together

“Fear is always a lack of connection with self... If we are not connected to ourselves, it is difficult for us to be connected to others.”

postures and emotions

Most of us who work hunched over desks - and some who do not - carry a disproportionate share of worries and tension in the shoulders. Tension held in the neck, shoulders and surrounding areas is frequently the source of headaches and migraines which can stop us in our tracks. Shoulders can hold us back in our Yoga practices and in our lives or help us to find balance and freedom. In Yoga, we take our shoulders to the mat and explore them in various ways, unravelling the time-impregnated emotions and vicissitudes of life. Changes made on the mat are also reflected in our day to day lives, helping us to become happier and more balanced people.

emotional perspectives

“Shoulders reflect burden”, says teacher Aadil Palkivala. “They often become tight under the weight of emotions related to stress, tension, anxiety, sadness, and trepidation. Without exception, these are all emotions rooted in fear, which is a lack of connection with self – always. When we are connected with ourselves, the potential for fear does not exist, much less fear itself. Faith is the opposite of fear. When we feel fear, we must go inside ourselves and find the connection with ourselves by developing faith. Of course, this is not always easy! In order to achieve this faith we need to live our lives working from the spirit”.

Both Sarah Powers and Kino MacGregor explain that the body’s

fight or flight response affects the shoulders. Our lives can become so fraught that we end up living in a constant state of stress. Emotions such as anxiety, fear and worry also affect the digestive organs and kidneys. Messages relayed from the *vagus* nerve pass down to the major organs of the body, triggering the release of hormones such as adrenaline which in turn prompts the stress response. The body goes on high alert in the expectation of an imminent threat. As well as causing digestive problems, tension in our shoulders and headaches, this can also give rise to all kinds of issues including distancing ourselves from other people, resulting in a lack of intimacy. If we are not connected to ourselves, it is difficult for us to be connected to others.

Shoulders often round or hunch forwards protecting our vulnerable hearts, particularly when we feel sad. Ruth White, Iyengar-inspired teacher, explains that we can dissolve these emotions with love. Opening the heart centre can make all sorts of things happen, culminating in a warmth and natural sense of joy which flow through the body. Energy levels rise, and the thyroid gland, which is situated either side of the Adam’s Apple, is stimulated. Opening the heart can change attitude, and posture is very much about attitude.

Practised properly, Yoga helps to relieve tension, by opening and strengthening the shoulders. Three Yoga traditions achieve this in different ways.

asana perspectives

In all styles of Yoga, any arm bearing posture will strengthen the shoulders. The shoulders are also strengthened and made more flexible each time the arms are stretched.

ashtanga vinyasa yoga

The shoulder is constantly being moved and stretched in many different ways in the Ashtanga primary series. Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga opens the shoulder mainly through movement and the heat generated by the practice. Strength comes gradually. *Prasarita Padottanasana C*

which affect the shoulders, they are likely to progress much faster. Alex agreed that many people may incur stiffness in the shoulders and neck from all the Vinyasas. A way to prevent this is to keep the weight back in the heels and flex the feet to the maximum as one practises, for example, *Chaturanga Dandasana* (Plank pose).

Exhaling deeply can also help, as does keeping the head up and looking forward rather than down on the floor, which tends to collapse the shoulders further. The main purpose of the vinyasa is to move energy up and down the spine but, when people do not learn



Mia adjusting Bob Moy in *Prasarita Padottanasana C*



Mia in *Marichasana B*

(wide legged forward bend with hands clasped behind the back), says Kino MacGregor, Florida's leading Ashtanga teacher, is the most beneficial posture for working on the shoulders. This is the place where we begin developing the rotation inside the shoulders which will allow us to bind in postures like *Marichasana A* and *B* and ultimately *Suptakurmasana* (sleeping tortoise pose). It is an important posture to start to work on the rotation of the shoulder so that we begin to have the feeling of extending from the shoulder instead of rooting at the joint. Whenever we move, in terms of flexibility in the practice, we should think about lengthening and extending – so there is always space in the joint capsule and always space in the joint – and we never restrict our range of motion. Ultimately, we want flexibility to be an extension. Another helpful posture is *Parvottanasana*.

I suggested to teachers Hamish Hendry, Kino MacGregor and Alex Medin, (all leading Ashtanga teachers), that it may be difficult for people with very stiff shoulders to release tension without longer holds. Both Kino and Hamish emphasised that Sri K Pattabhi Jois taught that we can stay in any posture in the Ashtanga series as long as we want. If we want to work on certain areas, it may be advisable to spend longer in postures such as *Prasarita Padottanasana C*. Also, if people with stiff shoulders get help from a teacher in postures

to exhale properly in the postures – probably 95% of all people – that last centring energy of the exhale is never really consolidated. Paul Grilley, Yin Yoga expert, agrees with Hamish Hendry that the shoulder is not the kind of joint which generally needs a Yin practice to open it. Sarah Powers, however, suggests that when healing a shoulder injury, or where there is significant stiffness in the shoulder, certain Yin postures can help, especially injured shoulders. The time taken to complete the poses prevents 're-straining' and stimulates healing in the area, breaking up scar tissues as well as releasing tension.

Iyengar-based yoga

Teacher Ruth White, suggests that we should always start a session by opening and widening the chest using a simple standing stretch with the hands clasped behind the back and/or backarching (as explained in last month's edition of Y&H magazine).

There are two main Iyengar postures which focus on the shoulders: *Garudasana* (Eagle pose) and *Gomukasana* (cow pose). The full pose and a modification are demonstrated below. The same postures as in the Ashtanga Vinyasa primary series are also helpful (*Prasarita Padottanasana C* and *Parsvottanasana*).

Yin Yoga

The traditional Downard Dog posture (*Adho Mukha Svanasana*)

requires open shoulders and can reveal whether people know how to use their shoulders, suggest both Aadil Palkivala (Iyengar) and Kino MacGregor (Ashtanga). Paul Grilley (Yin Yoga) explains that the posture can be adapted to help open the shoulder. In order to perform this modification, which Paul calls the 'Long Dog', simply move the feet backwards, further away from the hands. This puts more pressure on the arms, requiring more strength and also more flexibility in the shoulders, chest, torso and arms. You may want to practise this with your feet against a wall to avoid slipping.

Yin Yoga does not, however, focus significantly on the shoulders and few poses can be found in Yin Yoga books or DVDs. Sarah Powers, Yin and Insight Yoga expert, explains that this is because the yin part of the body is below the navel where energy tends to be more stagnant. We tend to use our upper bodies more than our lower bodies throughout the day. Just in talking

Mia (left) demonstrates Gomukasana arm modification with a belt. Ruth White (right) demonstrates the full posture



Mia demonstrates Downward Dog



Ruth White demonstrates Parsvottanasana, Mia demonstrates the correction, squeezing the hands closer together and easing the thoracic spine forwards to open the heart whilst gently levering the arms at the side to give a stronger stretch.



Mia Demonstrates how to get into Wide-kneed child's pose with twist – using one arm for stability whilst slipping the other arm underneath (part of Sarah Powers' shoulder series)



Mia demonstrates Lying Spinal Twist pose (part of Sarah Powers' shoulder series). Use a block under the knee if you are not comfortable as Yin postures are held for a long time.

Mia demonstrates opening the heart through backarching



and carrying out everyday activities, such as cooking, we move our arms, so there is naturally more circulation. Most of the poses in the yin sequences will target areas between the navel and the knees for that reason and also because many of the poses are geared to help one have a more comfortable sitting posture for meditation which is the purpose of Yoga asanas, as described in the yogic texts.

Sarah has, however, developed a yin series which specifically targets the shoulder. This can be found in her book, 'Insight Yoga'. It includes postures such as quarter Dog pose, wide-kneed Child's pose with twist, laying Spinal Twist with one arm up, Snail pose, Fish pose and Seal pose. These postures are tremendously recuperative after a long stressful day working at a desk and also very healing for shoulder injuries. In fact, Sarah used the series to help heal her own shoulder when it was injured and still uses it if the old injury flares up.

Further details on page 39



Mia Demonstrates Wide-kneed Child's pose with Twist (part of Sarah Powers' shoulder series)



Mia demonstrates Snail Pose (part of Sarah Powers' shoulder series)

Mia and Nina's life questions

Mia and Nina Grunfeld (owner of 'Life Clubs' and author of numerous books as well as the Telegraph's 'Get a Life' series) have come up with a short series of questions to help you through the emotional and off-the-mat issues, which may be preventing the opening and strengthening of your shoulders.

- What are the burdens on you and your shoulders? (worries, pressures, other people's opinions, intrusions, your own negative thoughts?) How would addressing each burden contribute to your well-being?
- When was the last time that you felt that your shoulders were really released and relaxed? What caused them to relax? How could you achieve that again? What would be the first step? If you cannot bring that to mind, visualise an imaginary or real 'safe space' in which you are completely protected from the

outside world. Mentally go to that safe space and feel how your shoulders and heart feel when you are there. Bring that to mind whenever you need it in your own life.

- Are your responsibilities your own or are you burdening yourself with responsibilities and worries which do not really belong to you? Write a list of worries – along the lines of those you thought of for the first question. Divide it into 3 columns (1) those that will go away eventually given time; (2) those that are not your problem; (3) those that are your problem and that you can do something about. Cross out columns 1 and 2, they are not your concern. Look at column 3. If there are things you cannot do something about now but could do something about in the future, write them in your diary. Take a look at those left. Assess how important they really are to your wellbeing. Make a plan of action to tackle the ones that really matter.