

Asana as intention



Laurel Beversdorf looks at the exploratory dialogue between attitude and alignment

I began doing yoga in college when my acting professor suggested I correct my 'pelvic tilt' to improve my posture. At the time, I had very little perception of my pelvis, let alone that it tilted, but decided to sign up for an ashtanga-vinyasa yoga class at my college's gym to remedy the situation. I was a beginner to yoga with an athletic background that had rendered me physically inflexible. However whatever technical ability I lacked, I made up for with extreme, competitive willfulness. "Oh,

stand on my head? Sure, watch this!" As though engaged in a contentious debate with the instructor and my body, I did a headstand to prove a point. Despite the gap between my abilities and the class's expectations, my attitude - a type of mental inflexibility that would ultimately result in yoga-related injuries - propelled me through that first class.

Later, resting in savasana (corpse pose) waiting patiently for my highly anticipated pelvic revelation, I felt a sense of peace wash over me. That first yoga class flipped off a

switch that had been stuck in the on position for years. After class I walked back to my dorm without a post-workout cigarette for the first time. Instead of being a quick fix for my pelvic alignment the class provided me with a quick fix for my immediate perspective on life.

Pelvic tilt aside, I had something far more basic to learn; there were other ways of navigating my life that were immediately accessible to me if I turned my attention inward to my body and my breath. Looking back, I realise that my competitive approach to yoga, while allowing me to persist through the class and inspiring me to begin a regular practice, eventually fuelled my propensity for injury and stunted my potential for growth. To approach yoga in a healthy way, my attitude needed to shift from one of proving myself to one of exploring myself.

Fast-forward 13 years and I now work full time for YogaWorks as a yoga teacher, teacher trainer and anatomy instructor. I have seen many practitioners approach yoga with a competitive drive similar to my own when I first started and I've seen this attitude lead to injury. Based on what I've learned about my own mental approach, I try to encourage in my students an attitude that honours the process of aligning the poses over accomplishing the poses. I know from experience that this shift in attitude is essential for instilling curiosity for self-awareness as well as for caring for the body's connective tissues.

As we hear more often these days, yoga asana is not a foolproof panacea for pain-free living. Like all other physical activity done from a compromised position, yoga postures can result in repetitive stress injuries to the body's tissues. What's worse, the connective tissues especially vulnerable in yoga, like cartilage, ligaments, tendons and spinal discs receive little to no blood supply and thus heal slowly if at all. Compounding the matter, yoga

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Instead of being a quick fix for my pelvic alignment, yoga provided a fix for my perspective on life



postures often require weight-bearing at a joint's end range rendering these soft tissues even more vulnerable. Dr Kelley Starret, physical therapist, cross-fit coach and the author of *Becoming a Supple Leopard* illuminates the insidious nature of soft tissue injuries with a vivid analogy: "The problem is that the body will always be able to generate force, even in poor positions. This is not unlike being able to temporarily get away with driving your car with no oil in the engine or with a flat tire. Sure, you can do it; it just gets expensive." For example, we can get away with suboptimal form in warrior two and not line the front knee up with the second toe. It might be years before the felt evidence of that suboptimal form makes itself known to us as »



Above: YogaWorks teacher trainer Laurel Beversdorf.

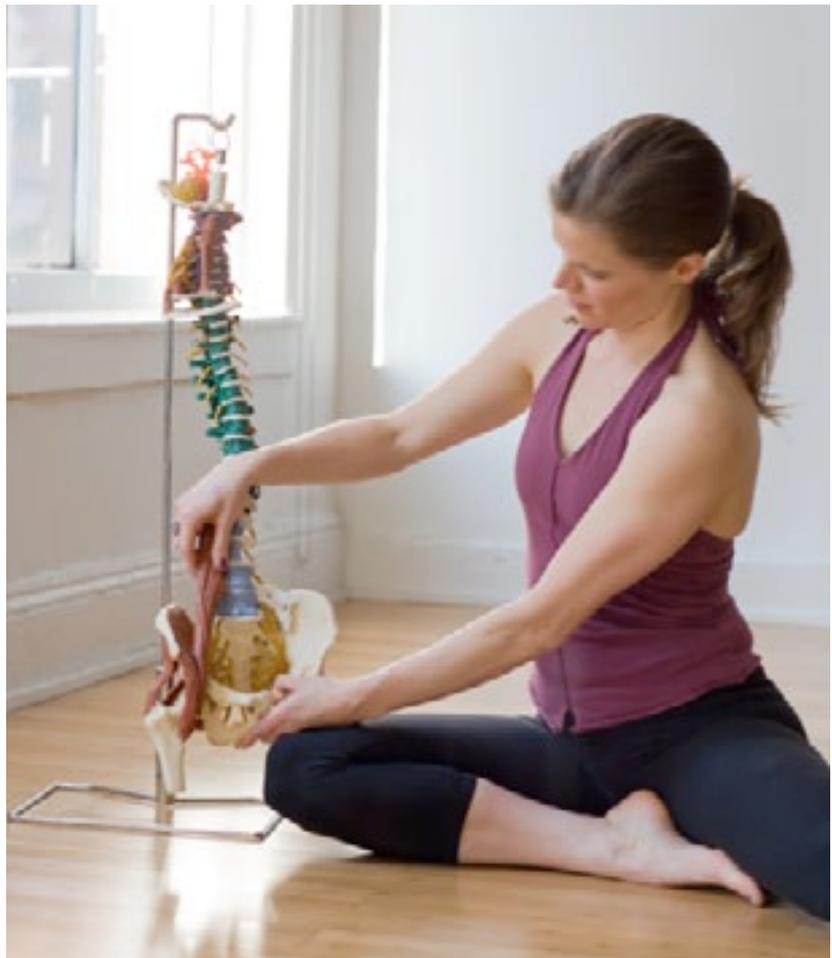
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knee pain. In this scenario, knee pain is not an effective indicator that we are approaching warrior two with faulty technique because by the time we feel it, the damage is already done. Instead, we must learn to sense of our knee's position and make the adjustments needed to align it optimally. This proprioception is a conversation between the nervous system and the muscles; a conversation that becomes more intelligent when a mindset focused on completing the pose is supplanted by a mindset curious about aligning the body.

It was a willingness to engage in this sort of exploratory dialogue with my body that finally brought me full circle to the original reason I tried yoga. Working with my teaching mentor, Jenny Arthur, I began to understand my pelvis and how it tilted. Jenny's classes, rich in accessibly taught alignment, informed me that I habitually held my pelvis in a forwardly tilted position, anterior tilt. This imbalance had been causing me chronic lower back pain because it deepened my lower back curve. I had pain in mundane movements like sitting and standing, not to mention all backbends, which further deepened this curve causing more pain.

With Jenny guiding me to pause, listen and pay attention to process, I became interested in the conversation between my pelvis and my lower spine. With a practice focused on understanding this relationship, I gained access to the muscles that posteriorly tilt my pelvis and re-organised my posture to lengthen my lower back.

Empowered with this new body awareness, I progressed toward a freer embodiment of backbends on my mat and movement in my life. Perhaps more significantly though, Jenny's approach modelled in practice what Joel Kramer describes in theory in his article 'Yoga as Self-



Transformation': "Instead of using the body to 'get' the posture, you use the posture to open the body." To apply this theory in my own practice, I had to be willing to let go of what I did habitually and what I knew to be right. I had to become willing to explore the gaps in my self-perception and knowledge.

My first yoga class gave me, in the short-term, exactly what I needed – a shift in perspective past my insecurities. It led me to the beginnings of moment-by-moment awareness.

As a casual practitioner, this was enough. However, as I began to pursue yoga more intensely, I realised my willful competitiveness was preventing me from progressing physically and putting me at risk of injury. I needed not only a deeper awareness of sound biomechanics in

the poses, but also the courage to allow yoga to change me. Attention to alignment provided and continues to provide the launch pad for exploring both. ✨

TRAIN WITH LAUREL BEVERSDORF

Laurel Beversdorf will be conducting a YogaWorks 200-hour teacher training programme with Thomas Taubman and Liz Terry at Zen Yoga Dubai Media City from March 1 to 13 and April 27 to May 9. The programme costs AED14,500. **For information, contact Liz Terry on 050 376 6984, satyafloowyoga@yahoo.com or www.satyafloowyoga.com**