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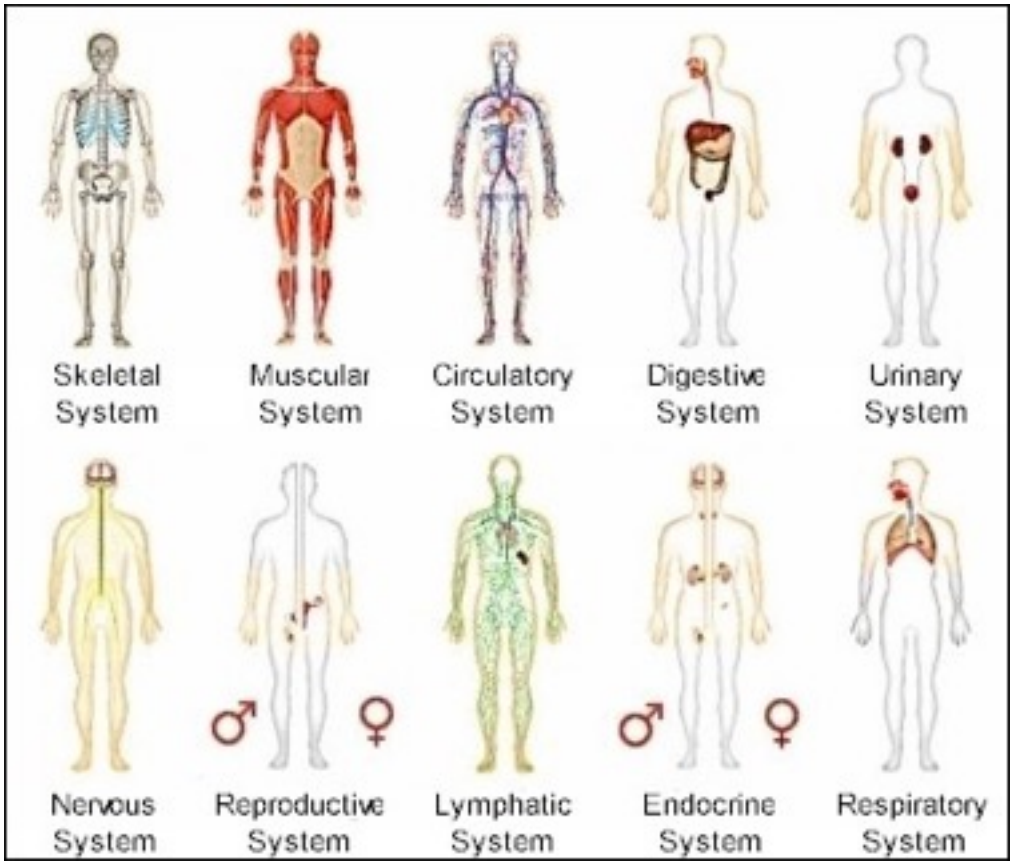
TOPIC OF THE MONTH
May 2013

INSIDE OUT POSTURING

10 Systems of the



Ashtanga yoga works more on the inside than the outside, this is one of the reasons it is a very misunderstood practice. Our minds get ahold of the physical side of the practice -- since this is the most tangible, we then turn the practice into grunt work or into musculo-skeletal exercise only. Although the muscles and bones are important to keep healthy, ashtanga yoga works much deeper on all the systems of the body. This is why we do some of the "funky" things we do, like stick our heel in our gut, catch our big toes, and jump back . . .

When you take your practice inside and do your practice from the inside out -- working with your organs, your nervous system, your endocrine system, and most importantly your breathing system and patterns of your attention or consciousness, you get the inner experience. This is much deeper and satisfying, you are not limited to what your muscles and bones can or can't do.

Ashtanga Yoga works on each system of the body:
Skeletal and muscular system with Sun Salutes and all postures.
Circulatory system with all postures, especially inversions.
Digestive system - Poses such as Navasana are done to improve digestion by strengthening abdominals to help food move through the body.
Urinary System - all poses where we roll on our back are done for the ureter channel -- the channel that goes from the kidneys to the bladder.
Nervous system - back bending and second series cleanses the nervous system
Reproductive System - Mari B&D for women and Janu B for men
Lymphatic system - stimulated by bandhas to move lymph in gut and all poses
Endocrine system - inversions and rest pose
Respiratory System - special breathing system in ashtanga plus supta kurmasana

With this topic I would like us to learn about our inner bodies -- our organs and their functions for starters. Many of us think of our body as 5 limbs -- 2 arms, 2 legs, and a torso -- but the yoga goes deeper, within our torso we need movement to keep the organs functioning properly, we need to bend and twist our torso and move our ribs in many different ways to keep blood circulating . . . bringing in fresh nutrients and removing waste. We will review some of the postures of primary

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series, what organs they affect, where those organs are and what they do. By educating ourselves we can practice smarter -- with intelligence. In this way we will not be tempted to push our bodies into someone else's definition of form, thus reducing our risk of injury and increasing the benefits of yoga. Also, once you understand how a body part works, you can help to maintain it so that it remains healthy.

The power of your Mind

Before we go further, I want to address those of you who are limited by tightness, injury, or pain -- 'limited' meaning you can not physically put your heel in your gut, or balance on your hands with your elbows in your gut . . .

Firstly, it is also comforting to know that it is not just the asana that detoxifies the body, it is the heat, the sequencing, the breathing, the bandhas, the vinyasas, the sun salutes . . . the sweating, the stretching, the rearranging and realigning, and the creating space in your body for the organs to function optimally.

Secondly, your mind is a powerful tool! It can lead us down wrong paths -- or it can enhance anything we are trying to accomplish. **Energy or consciousness effects matter**. There are many studies and articles showing proof that we can harness the power of our mind, studies have shown that when you put your mind into what you are doing it is more effective. I found a study done on mind only exercises for the muscular system http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/14998709). In this study they tested elbow flexion and pinky abduction with what they called "mental contractions" -- Only doing the exercises in the mind without any physical exercise being done; they tested the same exercises being done with real weights, and of course had a control group. The results . . . the "mental contraction" group had a 35% increase in muscle strength, the group who used real weights had a 53% increase in strength and the control group stayed the same -- simply focusing and imagining doing the exercise increased muscle strength! This study concluded "The mental training employed by this study enhances the cortical output signal, which drives the muscles to a higher activation level and increases strength." (Is this a Neuro-Muscular improvement -- improving how our brains and muscles communicate?)

I did some research on using the power of your mind, here is what I found:
To use your mind power, you have to know how to employ it -- the best way to do that is to know what it is you want to do and to think it often;

- The thoughts you think most often are more likely to happen
  - If you put your mental energy into the same thoughts day after day they become stronger -- and eventually affect your attitude and behavior.
- Not every thought turns into reality, a thought not only has to be repeated but **believed** to carry power.
  - Doubts, fears and worries tend to destroy what you build with the power of your mind. It is helpful to clear your mind of negative thoughts and doubts.

Your daily practice is a good place to put your thoughts into the healing of your inner body, in this way every day when you practice you are using the power of your mind to keep your body healthy.

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For those of you who can not press your heel into your liver . . . you can use the power of your mind and receive the benefits.

Which brings me to another topic I want to discuss before we get into our insides . . .
"**Hierarchy of Protection"**
If you have a tightness, it is not always a tightness in the muscles, tendons, or ligaments -- in fact many times it is the body protecting an organ or nerve, or disc, etc. For example; In back therapy, individuals with a bulging disc in their spine experience tightness in the muscles -- the surrounding muscles contract to stabilize the spine from moving in a way to further damage the disc. This protection also happens around our organs and nerves, in people who live a sedentary lifestyle and have poor posture, the organs prolapse and slip out of their place -- thereby losing the protection of the rib cage. Same with many tightnesses in our neck, shoulders, or other places -- for example my own right shoulder experiences a tightness that does not feel like it is tissue tightness, but rather the muscles contracting to protect a nerve -- to push through this tightness would not be wise -- in fact it would be damaging.

How then to heal these areas? First you have the power of your mind . . . In addition we can also use the understanding of prana movement, to create space to allow blood flow and healing to occur:

Prana, which refers to the energy in our body that keeps us alive, when translated literally means "moving always".
Every single little area of our body needs movement of some type to keep the cells healthy, such as blood flow, lymph flow, cellular fluids, waste products, etc. Where movement does not occur in our body, disease sets in.

During your practice breathe space into the sore areas, opening them up to allow blood flow.
And use your rest pose! To allow movement to an area that is being protected, during rest pose put your mind into that area, envision it relaxing and expanding to allow blood flow. You can even lightly massage or hold the area as you breathe deeply, sending the healing power of your breath to the area. During your practice do not push into this tight area -- create space in the area with your breath, try re-aligning yourself slightly differently to enhance blood flow.

The body will then effortlessly and naturally relax and allow movement, flexibility, and healing to occur, despite your best efforts ;) . . . strained hamstrings and/or sprained tendons or ligaments from your practice are signs that you are pushing too much -- and its time to practice smarter.

A word on scar tissue
Scar tissue sometimes forms to protect a joint or injury, and other times a lack of blood flow causes this painful, fibrous tissue to build up (the muscles response to not having adequate blood flow due to a sedentary lifestyle, injury or spasm, is to lay down a protective tissue that does not use blood -- scar tissue). In some cases scar tissue protects an injured joint from movement while it heals, but as healing occurs it is important to remove the scar tissue to allow blood flow. The most effective therapies break down scar tissue and reinstate blood flow.

- The poses and movement -- especially a full range of movement will help to break down scar tissue
- Assists can help to break through scar tissue, however hard assists are counterproductive.

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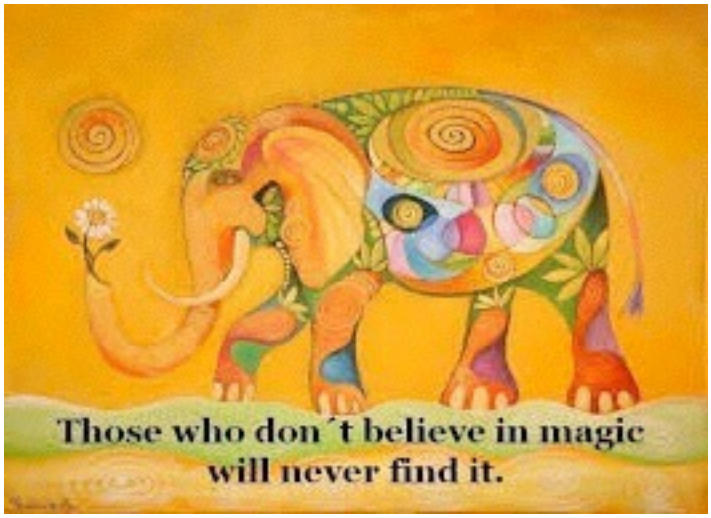
The Purpose of all this research . . . it is interesting and reassuring to see the yogic texts backed by science, not that I need to believe the science to believe the yogic texts, I can feel the goodness in my body. But even with all the research and tests to back up why we do this crazy practice there is still an element of magic. Just like acupuncture . . . science can not explain why it works but it admits there is proven benefit to acupuncture . . . There are many energetics going on the body that we just cannot explain. So enjoy that fact, enjoy the science, and believe in magic ;)



Primary Series Inside Out
Taking a look at our practice from the inside out:

Surya Namaskar
The practice of Sun Salutes requires form, energy, and rhythm.

- They build heat in the body, not only helping to prepare our body for the practice -- it is the heat that helps with the removal of toxins from our organs to the blood where the body can dispose of it.
- Connecting the moving and breathing synchronicity is the most important lesson in the sun salute. Pay attention to match your movement to your breath, at first this may seem challenging (especially in sun salute b) but over time with practice it will become easier. When we synchronize our moving and breathing it is very calming to the mind while energizing to the body, removing stress. The moving and breathing synchronization is what gives us our "meditative mind", where there is more ease and happiness in our lives.
- They alternate forward and backward bending give a profound stretch to the spinal column, keeping it healthy.

For more information on performing the Sun Salutes - http://www.befityoga.com/philosophy-lifestyle/ashtanga-yoga-poses/

Standing Poses
The standing poses focus a little more on the musculo-skeletal system than the seated poses, they begin the opening/stretching process in the body aiding us in getting deeper into the seated postures for better internal cleansing.

- Standing and forward bending are mini inversions, the combination of inversion and forward bending is a powerful means of toning the whole body, as pressure is exerted on all the major endocrine glands –including genitals, adrenals, thymus, thyroid, pineal, and pituitary.
- There are many other little hidden benefits too, including internal benefits--one of the "side effects" of the standing poses is the lateral wall of your heart is stretched and toned and all the major blood vessels are too--keeping them elastic and free flowing.
- Also the standing poses stimulate the femur--the long bone in your thighs--this is good for bone density--especially when you jump your feet apart to prepare for the pose (weight bearing on the

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long axis of the bone is what improves bone density) and just as important, this is also good for your blood--in the long bones of our body is where we produce marrow and red blood cells, the femur being the longest is main center for this production.

Standing poses relieve many symptoms of life; many people live sedentary lives, busy schedules and city living encourage both mental tension and physical rigidity, both of which are counteracted during forward bending relieving tightness and tension, and encouraging blood flow to the head and eyes. At another level, forward bending is associated bowing and humility, an inability to bend forward may indicate a stiff, proud, or stubborn personality. Difficulty bending forward is also associated with fear. Human beings face forward to see the world, dropping into the forward bend to see behind us releases rigidity and fear.

More information on Sun Salutes and Standing Postures: http://www.befityoga.com/philosophy-lifestyle/ashtanga-yoga-poses/

Seated postures are where the real work is done, some postures focus on an organ or nerve or system of the body, some poses counter balance a previous pose and some prepare us to go deeper into the next posture. The postures that get into the organs I call the "core postures".

Dandasana

Dandasana is our transition pose; standing pose work more externally on the body releasing our lower back, hips, and hamstrings allowing us to get a little more flexible for the seated asana. Seated poses are where the most internal cleansing is done. Use your five breaths in dandasana to mentally make the shift from the external to the internal.
For more information on Dandasana:http://www.befityoga.com/philosophy-lifestyle/ashtanga-yoga-poses/ and scroll down to dandasana.

Paschimattanasana

Why would ashtanga yoga make the first seated forward bending posture one of the hardest? For a good reason! Paschimattanasana is where the internal cleansing starts . . . Paschimattanasana presses your abdomen onto your thighs -- it is the pressure of your abdomen pressing on your thighs that begins the "squeezing and soaking" process of the organs , so it is ok to bend your knees when forward bending to get this benefit.

Forward bending postures also relieve tension and induce relaxation.

More information on Paschimattanasana: http://www.befityoga.com/philosophy-lifestyle/ashtanga-yoga-poses/ and scroll down to paschimattanasana.

Purvattanasana

This pose is complementary to Paschimattanasana; counterposing the extreme forwarding bending action required with both legs extended. This pose/counterpose keeps the spine balanced and healthy, stretching one side of the body while strengthening the other and then reversing it. Purvattanasana stretches the entire front of the body while strengthening the back of the body and legs.

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Purvattanasana is a heart opening pose-it requires us to remove the "shield" of rounded shoulders and collapsed chest -- to expose our heart. This can be challenging! Many of us are required to sit at a desk for long periods working over a computer, this position causes us to slump, round our spines and collapse our chest and shoulders leaving us with poor posture. Purvattanasana corrects this, it turns our face upward making us shine ☺

More information on Purvattanasana: http://www.befityoga.com/philosophy-lifestyle/ashtanga-yoga-poses/ and scroll down to purvattanasana.

First Core posture:
Ardha Baddha Padma Paschimattanasana
This pose starts the challenge of the half lotus and full lotus positions. The lotuses in ashtanga yoga cause quite a dismay for the average American who wears shoes and has toilets and chairs . . . making our hips tight. Lotus positions on individuals with tight hips puts a strain on the knee and needs to be worked into slowly and intelligently. The hips are one of the slowest joints to change or open due to all the musculature surrounding them. Sitting in Baddha Konasana everyday will help to prepare your hips for lotus, as will (of course) daily practice. Also lifestyle habits will open your hips, for example sit on the floor often -- and if you have to sit in a chair, don't sit like a lady or a gentleman . . . sit like a yogi, meaning to sit with one leg up under you, or in half lotus, or crossed legged, etc. When you sit in a chair all day with your feet on the floor it cuts off your circulation disconnecting your upper and lower bodies. Full squats will also keep your hips (and knees) healthy, since we have toilets and we want to keep them . . . make sure you do full squats otherwise; for example, squat down to pet your dog or talk to your child at eye level. Squat down and up to pick things up instead of bending over, etc.

The lotus positions while forward bending are the best organ detoxifiers and cleansers, so you do not want to dismiss them if your body is tight. We use the heel as a tool; directing it toward a specific organ to help "wring" out the organ. In addition, the heel is therapeutic as it carries heat aiding in the removal of the toxins.

The liver and spleen get quite a lot of attention in the Ashtanga practice, as especially the liver serves many major functions in the body; and Pattabhi Jois says: "Once the liver is working correctly the spleen is automatically corrected."

The **LIVER**
The liver is amazing! It is the only organ that can regenerate itself. You can lose up to 75% of your liver and it will still grow back to full function and size.
Interesting to note; Remember Prometheus?
Greek myth of Prometheus -- Prometheus is a Titan and trickster figure who is credited with theft of fire for human use, an act that enabled progress and civilization. He is known for his intelligence, and as a champion of humanity. (Prometheus means "Fore Thinker").
The punishment of Prometheus as a consequence of the theft: Zeus, king of the Olympian gods, sentenced the Titan to eternal torment for his transgression. The immortal Prometheus was bound to a rock, where each day an eagle, the emblem of Zeus, was sent to feed on his liver, which would then grow back to be eaten again the next day. In some stories, Prometheus is freed at last by the hero Heracles (Hercules).

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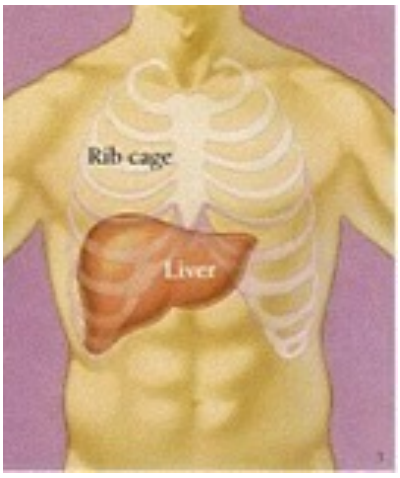
The liver is the largest and one of the most complex organs in the body. The liver performs over 500 vital functions! Some of the most important include:

- The liver's main job is to filter the blood coming from the digestive tract (stomach and intestines) before passing it to the rest of the body, detoxifying chemicals and metabolizing drugs.
- It also controls the management of bile and its diversion to the intestines which helps carry away waste products and toxins from the liver.
- Controlling digestion and metabolism, helping our body metabolize and utilize sugars, fats, and proteins.
- Aids in blood coagulation.

It is one of the major filtering and detoxifying organs in the body.



The liver is a very large 2-lobed organ that sits on the right side of your belly, beneath the diaphragm above your stomach, sitting mostly under your rib cage. **In the liver cleansing postures, as you put your left foot in lotus and forward bend, aim your heel above your navel, just to the left of your right ribs.** I find in the standing version, ardha baddha padmottanasana, I can feel my heel tuck up under my ribs pressing even deeper into my liver than many of the other seated postures. The liver cleansing is why in Ashtanga yoga we always do right leg first in lotus, Pattabhi Jois says "left leg first is of no use".

And another IMPORTANT factor concerning your liver: DIET!
Since the liver is the organ responsible for removing toxins from the food we eat; the cleaner you eat, the healthier your liver! And I want to point out some of the latest research on this; soda and processed foods are much harder on your liver than alcohol. We are now seeing fatty liver and liver disease in adolescents. This is because High Fructose Corn Syrup (HFCS) (like all fructose) has to go to the liver to be metabolized before it can be used by the body, whereas glucose can get directly to a cell without being metabolized by the liver. Soda and most processed foods contain large amounts of HFCS, when ingested, causes a burden to the liver.
To support the function of your liver eat lots of greens, cruciferous vegetables, cilantro, and bitter herbs such as dandelion. Beets are also very good for your liver and bile.

I say often, don't put anything on your skin unless you can eat it . . . What you put on your skin can end up in your body just the same as putting somthing in your mouth.

Our skin is excellent at providing a protective envelope to protect us from the environment, however, what can get through your pores gets directly into our bloodstream. What enters your mouth gets filtered by the liver, what enters your skin does not.

IN THE EMOTIONAL BODY (The issues are in the tissues!)

Beyond their physiology, all organs have a metaphysical (beyond the physical) dimension. Consider the symbolic and psychological aspects of the heart. We 'speak from the heart', 'give our heart' to others, suffer a 'broken heart', etc.

Symbolically, the liver represents our struggles with anger and frustration. For example, if you suffer from a liver disorder (or even undue tightness or restriction in that area) you perhaps have difficulty

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expressing anger outwardly, instead holding it in (holding it in your liver!), if not detoxed anger will become toxic in us just the like bad foods and chemicals our liver detoxes.

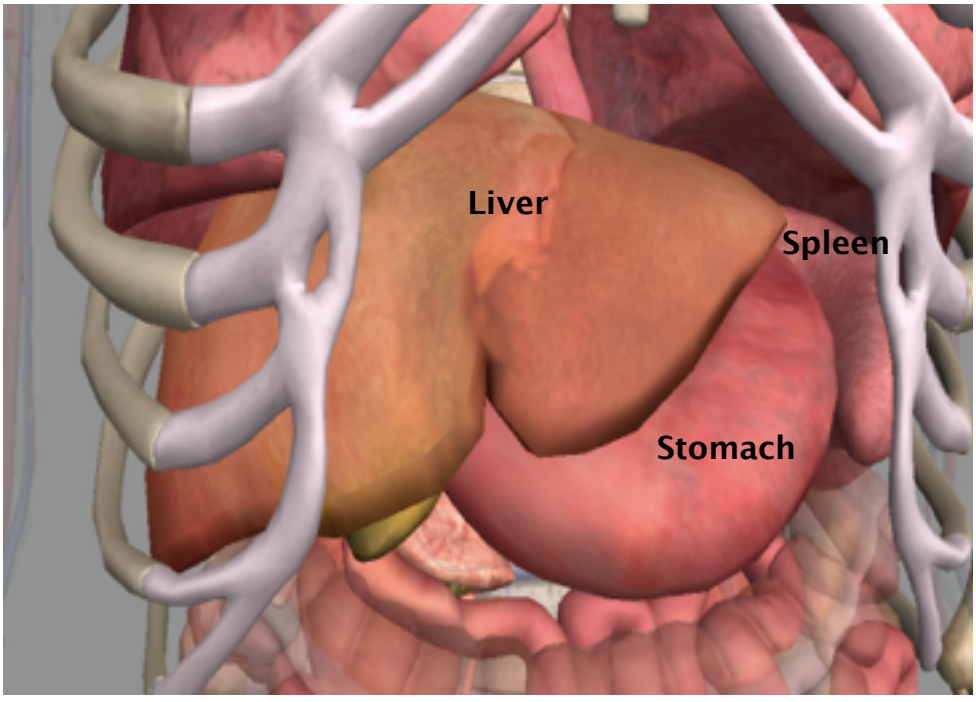
Yet organs also have a positive dimension, for the liver also embodies our innate drive toward 'path and purpose' – the search for meaning to life. Liver = Live, reason for living. Here liver issues might also indicate the need to reflect on one's sense of destiny, of connection with deeper purpose. Sometimes society or our tribe (family) impresses upon us what they think or feel is best for us; so we may do what they say even though it goes against the grain of what we feel we should be doing (getting a "day" job for example). In this case we might experience pain or tightness around the liver.

Many of our yoga postures cleanse the liver, as you wring out your liver you may feel bouts of anger -- do not repress it, instead identify it for what it is. You do not need to act on in, just openly identify it and let those emotions flow through and out of your body. Your liver may be telling you its time to digest what's going on around you -- open yourself up to your path and purpose and see how fun and fulfilling it is to go with the flow of the Universe :)

And remember, if your external body is not allowing your heel to get close to your liver due to tightness or pain -- keep practicing! And use your mind power! As you are in the posture breathing, direct your thoughts toward the liver, this will not only help your body to relax and "get there" but it will also provide much of the same benefit as if your heel were "there".

THE **SPLEEN**

Learning about our organs and how our body operates gives you power to take control of your own health and healing. A little knowledge and understanding of your body will help you to heal yourself -- or better yet stay healthy and learn how to care for your body inside and out. In addition this will allow you to speak knowledgeably with a doctor and not put yourself in the hands of the corporate medical world . . .



The spleen is also an amazing organ . . .

- it is another purifier of our blood, it is connected to our lymph system and is a key organ in removing toxins and filtering bad bacteria from our blood preventing infections.
- It supports our immune system -- think of it as a big lymph node except it filters our blood instead of our lymph.
- It also collects old red blood cells and recycles them, as well as recycling iron.
- The spleen stores a large amount of blood
- The spleen also plays an

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important role in trauma. When our body is under duress — such as hemorrhaging or not breathing — our spleen contracts and expels large quantities of red blood cells -- and therefore O2 -- into our bloodstream to help oxygenate the cells during the "emergency".

- This also happens during pranayama when you hold your breath, the first breath hold (kumbhaka) is always the hardest -- after the first kumbhaka the spleen contracts and expels red blood cells and O2 into our bloodstream thus making the remaining kumbhakas much easier.

In Ardha Baddha Padma Paschimattanasana, our right heel aims for the spleen, which is tucked behind the stomach, between the 9th and 10th rib (the last two "attached" ribs). It can be difficult to reach since it sits behind the stomach, you will have to put a little pressure on the stomach (another good reason to do practice on an empty stomach). As you forward bend with your right heel in your gut, dorsiflex your foot and tuck your heel in under your ribs.

The many lotus positions in the Ashtanga practice start the internal cleansing of the Liver and Spleen.

- Ardha Baddha Padmottanasana
- Ardha Baddha Padma Paschimattanasana
- Garbha Pindasana
- Pindasana
- Baddha Padmasana
- (Marichyasana B & D also include the half lotus positions, however in these postures we are working more with the colon and less with the liver and spleen.)

For more information on Ardha Baddha Padma Paschimattanasana: http://www.befityoga.com/philosophy-lifestyle/ashtanga-yoga-poses/ and scroll down to ardha baddha padma paschimattanasana.

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has some interesting views on the spleen. Chinese medicine couples the stomach and spleen together putting them both in the digestive process. (Western medicine puts the spleen in the immune system.) The stomach digests food while the spleen digests stimuli and information we take in through our senses.

The spleen in TCM controls the blood. It is responsible for manufacturing blood (as it recycles red blood cells and iron), The spleen also helps in circulation of blood and nutrients (the spleen contracts strongly to pump large amounts of oxygenated blood into your bloodstream — especially during times of trauma), if the spleen is weak we do not get well nourished.

If you bruise easily or have bleeding issues, then look to the health of your spleen. TCM says the lips manifest what is happening in your spleen; red, moist vibrant lips indicate a healthy Spleen while pale, dry lips could indicate you need to improve the health of your spleen.

Worry is the emotion of the spleen; excessive worry can weaken your spleen, or a deficient spleen can weaken our mind and our capacity to think clearly.

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A healthy diet of fresh fruits and vegetables, nuts and seeds, fish, seaweed and green tea, is good for all our body, and especially the spleen. Avoiding processed foods and cold foods also benefit the spleen. Other specific foods to boost the health of your spleen:

- Mushrooms are rich in beta-glucan which increases the amount of immune cells in our blood (white blood cells which kill bacteria).
- Omega3s help your spleen cleanse itself of toxins.
- Stay hydrated, your spleen needs water to function effectively.

In the Emotional Body
Since the spleen's job is to battle "invaders" (bacterial invaders); spleen issues may signify 'feeling invaded'. It can range from a more global "bacterial invading" (man's pollution of the earth), to an individual level (feeling betrayed by a friend).

At the positive end of the spectrum, the spleen represents our oneness -- our unity.

Illnesses involving the spleen, like frequent infections, prompt us to check the monkeys in our mind . . . remove the layers (of fear) that are hiding our true nature -- or who we really are. Open and connect with others remembering we share a oneness -- we all have similar struggles.

<u>Tirianga Mukhaekapada Paschimattanasana</u>

This posture does not directly effect an organ, but being a forward bending posture it indirectly effects all the organs in the abdomen. The direct benefits of practicing this posture are more external; the foot position opens up the ankles and can prevent or cure fallen arches and flat feet.

This pose requires internal hip rotation of the leg that is tucked back help to release tight external hip rotators that are common in western societies. If your knee flares to the side in the marichyasana series . . . or if your knees want to bow outward in paschimattanasana . . . these are signs you have tight external hip rotators, this pose will be useful to correct that.

This pose is also a counter balance to the external rotation of the hip joint in the padmasana (lotus) and half lotus posture. These postures initially externally rotate the thigh to someone learning lotus newly, as the hip joint gets more flexible and the lotus position deepens (knees moving closer together and heels rotating upward) the thigh then will start to internally rotate, which seems to be a better position for the knees while in lotus).

The leg position also cures sprains in the knee and ankle, reduces swollen thighs, reduces body fat, and relieves sciatica and hemorrhoids. It helps keep the body symmetrical in that it keeps the thighs in proportion to the rest of the body.

- If your colon is sluggish (meaning you don't go to the bathroom regularly) you have a much higher risk for sciatica, if this is your case see the information on the Marichyasana series, as this series is about the colon. When sciatica is present apana vayu and vyana vayu (there are 5 vayus or winds in the body that each perform a function) are not working properly. Vyana vayu during the night moves around the body and collects waste material generated by the Dhatu (tissue) metabolism. When we eat heavy or animal based foods this process takes all night and terminates by Apana Vayu (the energy of 'down and out' as in giving birth or going to the bathroom) becoming active to remove all the waste that Vyana vayu collected during the night – this should allow an evacuation in the

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morning. Until Apana vayu removes the waste Vyana vayu is still working on removal of wastes and will make the body stiff, aggravating the sciatic nerve.

It is reminded by Pattabhi Jois that these benefits come with consistent practice over a long period of time! In yoga terms this would be called durga kala (very long time) and nairantarya (without break).

For more information on Trianga mukha eka pada paschimattanasana:http://www.befityoga.com/philosophy-lifestyle/ashtanga-yoga-poses/ and scroll down to trianga mukha eka pada paschimattanasana.

TO BE CONTINUED . . .
Next month we will start with exploring the shivani nadi and virya nala . . . two of the nadis we press on with our heel in the Janu Sirsasana series, and how these nadis are connected to the pancreas (pressure on these nadis helps to regulate the release of insulin). This is currently taking many hours of research! But in the process I am learning (again!) that the pancreas is yet another amazing organ . . .

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