



Happy Feet

Getting familiar with the feet.

How often do you take notice of your feet unless they hurt? Jenni Juokslahti explores the importance of feet as foundations to every asana and how to awaken your feet.

If you are not used to getting regular pedicures or foot massages, it is very likely that you don't have a close relationship with your feet. Most of us tuck the feet into socks and shoes and only notice them in a yoga studio when the teacher reminds us to spread the toes, ground the feet and lift the arches. This might be the first moment of the day that we become aware of the feet. We stand on them every day, but are we familiar with them?

It is good to understand the feet and their functions in order to stand correctly on and off the mat. The feet form the basis and support for the rest of the body. Due to our upright position, the feet, especially the arches, are adapted for weight bearing functions. There are three arches in the foot; the inner, outer, and transverse arches. The lifted structure of the arches as well as the 28 bones and 35 joints of the foot allow great mobility, which is required in shock absorption and in adaptation to uneven surfaces. If the foot has 'give', the shock waves travelling up the legs and spine are minimal. However, if the foot is rigid the shock absorption is not as effective. We can use asana to mobilise the joints in the feet and build strength to create natural arches.

In addition to mobility, the weight bearing functions of the foot include stability. As long as the foot is stable, equal weight distribution is possible. The force transmission is most effective when the axis of the foot is, "...in line with the direction the force of the body weight is being exerted," advises Sydney yoga teacher and physiotherapist Simon Borg-Olivier. The axis of the foot runs from the centre of the heel to the second toe and is roughly in line with the outer edge of the foot. For correct alignment use the outer edges of the feet to align your feet in yoga poses.

Tadasana feet

Mountain Pose (Tadasana) is the base of all the asanas. You can apply Mountain

Pose feet in other standing poses, as well as in non weight bearing standing and seated poses where the foot is in dorsiflexion (foot flexed at the ankle joint to bring the toes towards the shin). Therefore learning Mountain Pose correctly improves your asana practice as a whole.

Feet form the foundation

We can compare a yoga pose to a tree. In asana the feet ground the body to the mat like the roots of a tree. In class, I often see students trying to reach the final position of a pose at the expense of the foundations. This is like trying to keep the tree alive while pulling the roots off the ground. Without solid foundations there is no asana. It is therefore more constructive to focus on the foundations first and then create the pose from the feet upward. In standing poses, this means keeping a solid connection with the mat. If the outer edge of the back foot comes off the floor when you place the hand to the floor in Side Angle Pose (Parsva Konasana), you lose the very foundations and only imitate the shape of the pose. It is more important to come back to the foundations and out of what you think is the final pose. Ground the outer edge of the back foot to the floor and lift the inner arch of the foot. Make sure that weight is distributed evenly on the four corners of the feet as well as equally on both feet. Leave the forearm on the thigh rather than attempt the floor option. Only move to the floor variation when you are able to keep the back foot grounded.

In a yoga class, I pay attention to the colour of the students' feet. The area of pressure is slightly whiter compared to the normal colour of the foot. This is a good indicator of the weight distribution. In standing forward folds, it is fairly common to see white heels in a yoga class and therefore a typical verbal adjustment in a standing forward fold is, 'lean your body weight towards the

balls of the feet'. It is just as important to bear the weight equally on both sides of the foot. If the inner edge of the foot is white in a wide legged stance, it is time to ground the outer edges of the feet firmly to find the foundations again.

Work your feet and realign your asanas

It is important to become aware of the connection between the feet and the mat. As soon as you learn to work your feet, the entire asana changes. The feet don't work in a vacuum. The action of the feet has a domino effect on the joints above. Let's think about flat feet. When the arches of the feet are collapsed, the inner ankle bones appear to bulge. This poor ankle alignment internally rotates the tibia, which in turn alters the alignment of the knee. In Mountain Pose, the knees can seem crossed-eyed as the lower medial corners look in and down due to the internal rotation. The femur follows this rotation, which increases anterior pelvic tilt as well as exacerbates the lumbar lordosis. The

ideal weight distribution from the centre of the heel, to the centre of the ankle to the centre of the knee changes when the foot is unable to support the arch. You can change your leg alignment by working the feet properly.

Downward Facing Dog Pose (Adho Mukha Svanasana) is a good pose to focus on the arches, as you have a clear

that lift up the inner and outer arches. Look at the inner ankles and lift the inner anklebones up. You can do this by squeezing the heels in against the resistance of the mat to externally rotate the shinbone i.e. moving the inner calf muscles in and forward. This spiralling action in the lower leg counteracts the internal rotation of tibia and corrects the knee alignment.

Without solid foundations there is no asana.

view of the feet, ankles, and knees. If you can see the inner arches clearly and if the four corners of the knees point forward, you are most likely working your feet correctly. However, if the natural lift in the inner arch of the foot is minimal to non-existent, and you can see the inner anklebones bulging and knees turning inwards, it is time to correct the pose. Start from the arches. Ground the balls of the feet and heels. Spread the toes wide to activate the same muscles

In non weight bearing feet, such as the lifted leg in Extended Hand to Big Toe Pose (Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana), pay attention to the tendency to invert the foot i.e. to turn the sole of the foot in towards the midline. This is a natural movement that accompanies external rotation of the leg and lengthening of the outer ankle, as the little toe escapes forward. To counteract the unwanted ankle inversion, press the ball of the big toe

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Checklist for footwork

1. Place the big toe bones together. Bring the inner edges of the balls of the feet together and if you can also the knuckles of the big toes.
2. Keep the heels slightly apart. When you leave a small gap between the heels the axis of the feet are parallel. This is ideal for weight distribution and hip alignment. If you use the outer edges of the feet to align the feet parallel, the hips stay neutral, as opposed to external hip rotation that results from aligning the inner edges of the feet parallel.
3. Spread the toes wide. When you start practising Mountain Pose you can use the hands to spread the toes to feel this action internally. Eventually you can simply lift up the toes, spread them wide and

softly place them back onto the mat. This creates a larger surface area for the foundation. Spreading the toes also assists in lifting up the arches of the feet, as the same muscles that spread the toes also support the arches.

4. Distribute the body weight evenly. Equal weight distribution is an important part of the foundation. In standing poses the body weight should be placed evenly on the four corners of the foot; the inner and outer heel, mound of the big toe and mound of the little toe.
5. Apply Foot Lock (Pada Bandha) to rebound the energy and lift the arches. Firm grounding rebounds energy upward and lifts the three arches of the foot. When describing grounding the feet, Cairns yoga

teacher Nicky uses a bouncing ball as an analogy. "The stronger you throw the ball down, the higher it bounces up. In yoga poses, the more you push down into the foundations, the lighter the pose will feel, because the exact amount of energy you put into it is coming back up." Grounding and rebounding happens organically using Foot Lock. There are several things to do to create the Foot Lock : spread the toes, contract the foot inwards for more lift, firmly ground the mound of the big toe and squeeze the heel in towards the midline. The foot should look wider around the ball of the foot and higher around the middle of the foot. The inner arch especially is pronounced in Foot Lock.

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forward and pull the outer edge of the foot back towards you. This action realigns the entire leg; the distance between each toe and hip becomes equal and the four corners of the knee point up.

The same principles apply to seated forward folds. The position of the feet indicates what happens in the knees and hips. You might have noticed in Seated Forward Fold (Paschimottanasana) that if you don't work your feet correctly, there is a tendency for the feet to flop out with the soles of the feet turning in towards each other. Focus on the feet to set the domino effect in motion to realign the ankles, knees and hips. Dorsiflex the feet and bring the big toe bones to touch as you roll the thighs in. Activate the evertor muscles (those that turn the sole of the foot outward) in the outer ankle and outer calf to bring the inner anklebones to touch to counteract the unwanted inversion. This action brings all the 10 toes in one straight

line. Also the four corners of the knees look up and the hips are back in correct alignment.

Exercises to stretch and strengthen

It is important to stabilise and mobilise the feet to keep them healthy. These following asanas will awaken the feet, create strength, and stretch the muscles of the foot.

Upward Facing Dog Pose to Downward Facing Dog Pose.

These poses by themselves are good for feet, but combined they are great. Use the poses in a vinyasa to strengthen and stretch the muscles in the feet. Roll over the toes from Upward Facing Dog Pose to Downward Facing Dog Pose and back. This rolling action mobilises the forefoot, mid foot and ankle joints. When you start practising this transition, you can look towards the feet to make sure you stay in alignment. When you

roll over the toes, keep the axis of the feet parallel i.e. keep the centre of the heel directly above the second toe. If the feet are stiff or if the outer ankle is loose, there is a tendency to let the heels drop out to the sides, which overstretches the outer ankle. If you find it challenging to move the heels over the toes, bring your awareness to the hips. By lifting the hips higher using the muscles in the hips, legs and abdomen, the feet become lighter, which makes it easier to roll over. Repeat 10 times.

Vajrasana with toes tucked under

After warming up the feet using the previous transition, mobilise and stretch them further in this variation of Thunderbolt Pose. Practising this pose regularly will mobilise the forefoot joints and lengthen the muscles and connective tissue in the soles of the feet. If your feet are rigid, this pose is designed for you. Tuck the toes under as far forward as possible. If only the tips of the toes touch the floor use the hands to pull the toes forward. Press the balls of the feet firmly down and ground the bases of the toes. If your feet are stiff due to osteoarthritis, this pose can feel uncomfortable, but the work is rewarding when you create

more mobility, which leads to decreased pain. Stay in the pose for a minimum of five minutes.

Hero Pose (Virasana)

Kneel up from Hero Pose and spread the feet so the inner ankles are as wide as the outer hips, which allows you to sit between the feet. If you cannot sit between the heels comfortably, place a yoga block under the sitting bones. Ground the top of the foot, pressing firmly through all the toes, which is the same action as in Upward Facing Dog Pose. This pose stretches the front ankle and creates stronger muscles to build natural arches. Make sure the pose doesn't feel uncomfortable in the knees. If it does, place another block under the buttocks. The majority of us have more external rotation in the hips and limited internal rotation. This tendency makes Virasana more challenging, which is another motivation to practise the pose regularly as it opens the hips in a new direction. Sit in Virasana for a minimum of five minutes.

Stay grounded on and off the mat

Grounding the feet creates a stable asana, which leads to lightness and ease in the pose through rebounding energy. Working the feet properly allows for both sthira (stable) and sukha (comfortable), two qualities that Patanjali used to describe asana. Using effort to create a stable asana makes the asana effortless.

However, as yoga is a holistic body-mind-spirit practice, the benefits of solid foundations in asana practice extend beyond the mat. Focusing on foundations makes the asana practice grounding, which naturally helps us stay grounded in our day to day life. In this modern world where time management is worshipped, most of us have busy minds that pull us from one direction to another, and we end up spending a lot of time in our heads. This increased mental activity may weaken our grounding, as the mind is allowed to wander. With a grounding yoga practice, we connect to the earth and to our physical body,

which in turn helps bring our busy mind into the present moment. When we are able to stay fully present, the mind doesn't react to all the highs and lows of the rollercoaster ride that is our life. Therefore, solid foundations provide the grounding and stillness of mind that is essential in the path of yoga.

References

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