

D. is a female in her early 30s. She had been building her career in academia in Japan for years, until one day she couldn't take it anymore. She was disillusioned with her career, found it extremely stressful, and felt that it affected her health. She moved back to the USA and became a bike mechanic. Now she was working at a bike shop, spending most of her day on her feet.

PROBLEM

Here is how D. described her problem in her own words in her email to me: "The biggest issue that I have been facing is my lower back and hips. They seem perpetually locked in a forward tilt and despite stretching faithfully, I can't seem to make any progress with them. In the last few months it's actually gotten worse, to the point that walking or standing for long periods hurts my lower back and it feels like I cannot straighten it out until I sit down. I'm very frustrated because I feel crippled and locked in a cage of my own body's making. I have tried your sacrum, hip flexor and AB/ADductor practices from the body map with limited success. Often I feel looser during the practice, but I cannot find any indication of a lasting effect. Probably there are just too many other factors in my life contributing to my hip tightness that I'm just incapable of pinpointing it on my own."

INVESTIGATION

The main problem that D. identified was that whatever effect she got from her yoga practice wouldn't last. During our Skype session we did a simple exploration of her movement patterns. She seemed to have good body awareness, was very purposeful in her movements, and had good form in most yoga poses. She had an exaggerated lumbar curve and a lot of mobility in her lumbar spine. She was confused about how to "properly position her pelvis" and kept experimenting with different arrangements. She seemed to get some relief in her hips and back with movement. We talked about her body positioning at work and she admitted that she was in a habit of supporting her weight on one leg when she stood at the counter. She also shared that she frequently felt tension in her upper back and neck at work.

STAND-OUT FACTOR

As we continued to talk throughout the session, I started to get a feeling that there was something else going on. As our conversation progressed beyond her physical body, she shared some experiences from her past. It became clear that she carried a huge emotional weight from her past job, was struggling daily with her finances, was deeply disturbed by the future of this planet, and was wrestling with the idea of having children because of her uncertainties about the future. As we continued to talk, it felt as if a long-held avalanche came down when she shared her experiences and her fears. It became clear to me that she had been carrying a huge emotional weight on her shoulders without any outlet to release it. I gave her the space to pour it all out.

HYPOTHESIS

I got a sense that her emotional load was literally weighing her down and "settling" in her lower back. My goal was to help her release some of that weight in our session, and then encourage her to continue that work on her own by working with Apana Vayu.

COURSE OF ACTION

D. asked me for a short practice that she could do in the middle of her day at work. We put together a 10-minute practice that she could do in the limited space she had. The practice was meant to accomplish the following goals:

- To get her off her feet for a little bit and use that time to loosen up her neck and shoulders,
- To press her feet into the ground for the purpose of releasing her unwanted energy downwards,
- To stretch the sides of her torso to facilitate deeper breathing and release tension in quadratus lumborum,
- To stretch her hips and encourage equal weight-bearing through both feet,
- To warm up and stretch her back with the forward bend.

Here is the practice that I gave her:

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| 1 | | <p>Begin seated in a chair with both feet firmly planted.</p> <p>A. Start with hands on the opposite shoulders. IN: Bring your arms wide apart and lift the chin a bit. EX: Bring your hands back to the opposite shoulders and tuck the chin in. /4x</p> <p>B. Keep your elbows bent and arms out at your sides. IN: Raise your arms connecting your fingertips over your head and look at them (elbows stay bent). EX: Bring the elbows toward your waist, look down. /4x</p> <p>C. Place your palms and elbows together in front of you, chin tucked in. IN: Raise the arms up a bit, expanding the upper back. EX: Lower them down. /4x</p> |
| 2 | | <p>Begin standing with your feet wide apart, feet planted, arms out. EX: Bend sideways to your left. IN: Sweep your right arm over the head, looking up while pressing your right foot firmly into the ground. EX: Move the top arm down toward the hip, look down to your left. Repeat 4x, then switch sides.</p> |
| 3 | | <p>Begin in a standing forward bend with feet wide apart. Make sure that the weight is even between both feet. IN: Bend the knees and pull them out to the sides as you lift the chest up. EX: Move back down, extending the legs and pressing your feet down. Repeat a few times, then bend down and stay there for several breaths. /Repeat 4x, stay for 4 breaths. Optional: Keep your hands on the chair instead of the legs.</p> |

In my email follow-up after our session I included the following suggestion: "I think it would be very important for you to figure out how to transfer the weight of your body through your legs into the ground when you stand. Currently, it is possible that the weight of your upper body is resting on your lower back instead. You can experiment with that when you are standing at work. Tip your pelvis very slightly forward and back and notice if you are supported by your back or by your legs. Then focus on anchoring down through your feet, as if you were releasing the weight of your body down into the ground. It's subtle, but I think it would be a useful exercise for you."

RESPONSE

Few weeks later I got the following response: "I've been wanting to write to you for several weeks now. Back in the fall we did a private session together in the hopes that you could help me sort out my low back pain and chronically tight hips. You gave me a short workout to do while at work to relieve tension, but what really did the trick was the image you gave me in an e-mail a few days afterwards.

You told me to try pressing my feet into the floor to take the weight off of my lower back and like magic my pain went away! I've tried physical therapy, stretching, weight lifting and all kinds of "tighten this or that muscle group" strategies to relieve my pain and get my posture back in order and none of them had any effect, but that one little image of press my feet into the floor has helped me to take the weight off my back, re-engage my right hamstring (which has been cheating in its duties for years), and level my pelvis (which is twisted on at least two axes, but I couldn't tell you which).

I still have to remind myself to press my feet and lift up my spine multiple times in a day, but it seems like every so many days I'll discover a new muscle group that had been carrying tension that I can suddenly release, or a new joint that had been twisted that I can finally straighten."