

Balancing the Hip Joints to Find Openness and Stability

Many people, perhaps most of us, have an acquired asymmetry in their hips: one leg turns out more readily; the other more readily turns in. So, for instance, if you sit, or recline, in Baddha Konasana, it is likely that one knee will be higher than the other. This reflects the fact the high-knee leg – let’s assume for these purposes that it is the right leg – is somewhat internally rotated, as compared with the left leg. Otherwise stated, this posture brings out that the left leg tends to externally rotate more easily than the right.

Building on this somewhat common knowledge, Rodney Yee recently offered a diagnosis of a problem that affects the development of our asana practice, as well as a simple way to address this problem. The presence of this rather commonplace imbalance means that (for those of us who have it) most of the time there is some binding in the hip joints, although this is a different binding in the two hips. Moreover, in our practice we frequently increase these bindings as we ask our legs (the heads of our femurs) to rotate in the hip sockets or when we seek to revolve our hips in one way or another around the heads of the femurs. This increased binding or congestion – and how the body reacts to it – impedes our progress. For example, in Uttanasana (standing forward bend) what we take to be the restriction of tight hamstrings may quite likely be (in significant part) not muscle tightness but the effect of a lack of fluidity of movement in the hip sockets. This is the diagnosis.

Rodney’s remedy is to seek to counteract the imbalance in the hip joints in our practice, to learn how as we come into poses to slightly counter rotate the head of the femurs against their normal tendency (turn them “against the grain”). This sounds like it would be complicated. But it is easier to understand in practice than in words. Here is my take on developing this idea.

You first need to identify your imbalance, to learn which leg tends to turn out more, relative to the other. So sit in Baddha Konasana and look at your knees. If it is not immediately apparent which knee is higher, then lean back a bit, or come to something of a reclining Baddha Konasana and look again. The more you lean back the more evident it will be which is the

higher knee. It may be helpful to have a partner observe you, sitting back some distance from your feet. Or you can try sitting before a mirror, if one is available. The leg with the higher knee is the one (as compared with the other) that likes more to turn in than to turn out. (If there is no noticeable difference for you in how your legs turn in and out in this pose, feel pleased and know that there is still a version of the balancing trick we will develop that will be available to you.)

Having identified the higher knee, take a small stone and hold it in the palm of the hand that is on the same side as that knee. Note, an imaginary stone will work just fine.

Now to begin to get a sense of the action we shall be looking for, stand in Tadasana, feet about hip width apart, and somewhat bend your knees. Keeping the legs (femurs) parallel to each other, begin to slightly bend the knees somewhat more and simultaneously shift them back and forth, first to one side and then to the other. Do this several times. Imagine that you are skiing (or doing what you imagine skiing involves). You can make fairly wide swings left and right to begin with, but do not be so vigorous that you put pressure on your knees. And then begin to reduce the gross physical movements and to focus more on what is going on with the hips. Begin to diminish your side-to-side shifts so that they become more about an adjustment in the hips; so that you begin to feel more of a shifting, a reorienting of the position of the heads of the femurs in the hip sockets. As the minimizing of the gross movements continues, the shifting begins to occur primarily just in the hips themselves and the legs now swing back and forth hardly at all.

As you play with this minimization or interiorizing of the hip-shifting action, see if you can incorporate the breath: have the “bend-and-shift” occur just on the exhalation.

(For those few whose hips seem to be pretty well balanced, experiment with these same ideas, first on one side and then the other. See if this turns up any asymmetries.)

Now for the final piece of preparation, remembering which hand holds the stone you are going to initiate the shift to one side only, the side that has the legs pointing (if only slightly) *to* (not away from) the stone-in-hand side. We might call this “skiing to the stone.” This means that when

we initiate the triggering action the hips will shift to the opposite side. (On our prior assumption, that is the left side.) This action reorients the heads of the femurs so as to sit in their hip socks in a manner that counters their normal tendency (“against the grain”).

The feeling we are after is that we jiggle (not wiggle) the hips so that they shift quickly in the “right” direction and then “bounce back” a bit in a manner that produces reverberations that you may feel all the way up to the head and neck. We want what we might call the “Jell-O effect.” You poke or shake some Jell-O and it keeps on wobbling for a while of its own accord. So here you initiate a movement and that induces a reverberation that flows up towards the head. (If this is not making sense in your body, try it in Savasana: lying down, toss the hips to one side (“shake the Jell-O”) and feel the reverberations rippling through your body.)

Now we are ready to begin to discover the magic, what I call “the drop.” (Although sometimes it is more of a settling than a drop, depending on the particular posture you are in.) And what is this “drop” that the hip jiggling (not wiggling) is supposed to induce? One way to begin to get a sense of this is using a ballet bar to come down into a squat. (If you don’t have one of these handy, you can open a door and hold onto the doorknobs, one in each hand.) This tends to work best if squatting with your heels on the floor is somewhat difficult for you but not impossible. Holding the ballet bar (or the doorknobs) with both hands, and standing not too far away, you are going to bend your knees to begin lowering down towards a squat. And then about mid-way down in your descent, “ski to the stone” – you jiggle the hips away from the stone hand and see if you can feel a release in the hips that seems to just drop you right you right into your squat. Play with this. You are looking for a feeling of release that seems to arrive just out of the blue and enables you to drop down, almost fall, into your squat. If, however, you don’t *feel* this, no problem; *imagining* it, as you actually drop into your squat, may be just as good for our purposes. As a result of this exercise you may find that you land in a somewhat deeper and more stable squatting position.

Now let’s look for the true magic. The place I will have us look for it is in Uttanasana. (You may have already experienced this in coming to a squat, although a more definitive test might be sitting down without using the hands.) So bend over to Uttanasana, feet hip width apart, with your hands on a block (even if they could easily reach the floor) so that you are

high enough that your legs fully straighten without any strain of the hamstrings. This is your “get ready” position. To “go” you are going to jiggle (not wiggle) your hips – same direction as before; the action can become quite subtle – into what may now be a somewhat familiar feeling of reverberation and then – and this is the proof of the pudding – see if when you do this you experience an actual “drop” which deepens your Uttanasana. (For those with balanced hips, play with jiggling (not wiggling) one way, and then coming back and jiggling the other way.) It is magic when it happens. You fall more deeply into to a forward bend with no (or next to no) additional “stretch” of the hamstrings. This spilling down is all coming from a realignment of the bones of the hip joints and the resulting release that this brings.

This is what we are looking for. And the really cool thing is that once you find it, it is portable; you will be able to take it into other poses. In what follows I simply wish to set out an assortment of examples of poses in which this shift (to a greater or lesser degree) can be found to work its magic. All the examples are ones I’ve recently had success with in experimenting with myself. The groupings of the examples – and to some extent the arrangement of examples within groups – is intended to be suggestive of what shifting against the grain is like in particular instances. Occasionally I offer a few comments. In each instance (in my experience) effecting the counter-balancing action, the increasingly subtle jiggle in the hips, achieves not only a deepening of the pose, but also, if you take only what is given, the pose acquires a greater ease and steadiness. One or another of these consequences may be more or less manifest in particular a pose. As a general matter, look for the release in your exhalation, sometimes more towards the end of the exhalation.

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A. Symmetric Forward Bends.

Uttanasana (standing forward bend).

Paradigmatic example of what the hip shift can produce. On an inhale, release groins (drop pubis); on the exhale, release buttock flesh (tailbone) towards the floor – and then, as the exhale completes, shift the hips (“shake the Jell-O”) and drop; pause, then shift the hips and drop again; pause, then perhaps there may be a small third drop to be released.

Paschimottanasana (seated forward bend).

Prasarita Padottanasana (standing wide angle forward bend).

Adho Mukha Svanasana (down-facing dog).

Balāsana (child’s pose).

Baddha Konāsana (cobbler’s forward bend).

Shifting the right heel into a receding left heel may (on our prior assumption about your asymmetry) be enough to drop the right knee even with the left, or an added jiggle of the hip may be necessary (or helpful) for this; but additionally the hip shift works wonders (employed several times) to come into the forward bend, moving the forehead towards the floor.

B. Asymmetric Forward Bends.

Siddhasana (seated, knees wide, heels aligned forward bend).

Finding the release becomes trickier when the legs are asymmetrically positioned. In Siddhasana, for instance, if the right leg is in front of the left, then it is more externally rotated than the left. And vice versa. Generally speaking, in these asymmetric poses when (on our working assumption) the right leg is more turned out (or less turned in) relative to the left, then the forward bend will come more easily – and the hip shift will be felt to be more effective – than in the reverse situation where the left leg is more turned out relative to the right.

This phenomenon shows up even more markedly when the forward bend takes on a deeper twist as (for instance) if in Siddhasana we turn to take the forward bend over the front knee.

In these asymmetric forward bends sometimes one leg is straight (and either in front or in back) and (typically) the other

is bent (and either in external or internal rotation). Because of these different positioning of the legs, each of these poses and each of the two sides of each pose needs to be investigated individually.

Keep in mind that the hip shift always goes to the same side, the left side (away from the stone) on the assumption we have made here.

Parsvottanasa (pyramid pose).

Janu Sirsasana (one-legged forward bend).

Krounchasana (heron).

I find the hip jiggle particularly noteworthy here, perhaps especially so if the bent leg is left in Baddha Konasana rather than (as is traditional) taken into Virasana (half hero pose).

C. Symmetric Backbends.

Utkatasana (powerful pose). (See **E.** also.)

Urdva Mukha Svanasana (upward-facing dog).

Ustrasana (camel).

Supta Virasana (reclining hero pose).

Baby Drop Backs (at wall).

D. Asymmetric Backbends.

Ardha Bhekasana (half frog pose).

Natarajasana (pose of the dancer).

Eka Pada Rajakapotasana (one-legged king pigeon pose, holding the back foot with a strap).

E. Settling the Hips.

Utkatasana (powerful pose).

Paradigmatic of the shift that drops into a spaciousness and evenness of the hips and creates a stability and lightness in the pose. (Double listed with backbends.)

Squat.

Bhujapidasana (elephant trunk pose).

Padmasana (lotus).

F. Twists.

Bharadvajasana (Bharadvaj's pose).

First draw the legs back to the left side of the body. Now (on our continuing assumption) both legs lie somewhat against their grain: the right leg is turned out and the left leg turned in. Test the twist here. Then come to the other side and test the twist there. On the second side the legs lie in conformity with their natural inclination. And so we might guess that the twist would be easier on this side. However, for most (I venture) the opposite is true. So now come back to the first side, legs to the left. To initiate the shift that deepens the twist, take the right heel away from the right knee and, at the same time, take left heel towards the left knee. (This mimics the action we used in Baddha Konasana to lower the high knee.) Lift and turn. (It's a little trickier to find or describe the corresponding action on the other side. Just remember, it is also a shifting to the right, on our assumption.)

Something rather similar works well in a Virasana twist.

Jathara Parivartanasana (belly turning pose).

Initiate shift as legs approach parallel to the floor.

Yoganidrasana (ankles crossed behind head pose).

Interesting to play with, but someone else will have to tell me whether if you can cross your ankles behind your head with some ease, doing the hip shift here balances the pose something like it does in taking a squat.