

ARTICLES: Mountain Monk ---- ENKU (Submitted by Alison Lawson)

At the Independent Yoga Network festival earlier in the year I went to a workshop to learn about Enku a 17th century Buddhist monk, sculptor and poet!!

The workshop was ran by Julian Daizan Skinner and he told us about the amazing life of this Buddhist who some may have heard of. Daizan a Zen Buddhist had been asked to tell Enku's story and poetry to all who would listen and he and a friend have written a book with Enku's poems and their translations called "In Heaven's River" with photographs of Enku's carvings. Daizan told the group how at one of his meditation classes he asked the group how they could help the children of Japan who had been orphaned following the 2011 tsunami and the book was the result of this. All of the proceeds go to Aid For Japan.

Daizan told us of the life of Enku who was orphaned himself at the age of 7 when his mother drowned following a flood. It is believed Enku's family was poor and their trade had been wood carving. Enku was taken in by the monastery and became a monk. His journey of enlightenment appears to be quite a solitary one who often took to pilgrimages to Mount Hakusan, in fact it was on this route whilst meditating under a waterfall that a vision of the Hakusan God came to him and announced "Here lives Shaka" now depicted as his moment of enlightenment.

Enku had vowed to make 120,000 buddha statues and it is believed he did, some can still be found on the routes he took for his spiritual growth. Most of them seemed to have been made in a cave dwelling where his carving may be seen as a form of meditation. He also was a healer but Daizan informed us he was a mountain ascetic. It is thought that whilst living in the cave he would exchange Buddha statues for food. Although he was also known as a healer and so may have exchanged remedies for meals.

Enku is believed to have run out of food whilst in his cave and was too weak to make the journey down the mountain so with a prayer he placed a Buddha statue into the stream where it was found by a villager who brought him food which saved his life.

All the photographs of Enku's Buddhas have a serene look about them, the gentle smile brings a sense of contentment and they sometimes show the Buddha using Mudras.

Waga haha no

For my mother's life

Ono chi ni kawaru
Vesa nareya
Nori no katachiwa
Yorotsuyo o hen

This monk's robe substitutes
May the Dharma form
Continue
Ten thousand generations

It was really Enku's poems that Daizan wanted to share with us. The poems are 5 lines long and we were asked to choose one and think of the emotion it stirred in us. Then change one or two of the words in the original poem to try and capture the emotion. After this we were asked to flip this on its head and basically convey the opposite emotion but again only change one or two words! As someone who struggles with poetry this was quite a challenge yet I found it quite an easy exercise (probably because I'm over-emotional!)

The whole workshop was incredibly interesting and contagious in that I had to tell my friends and family about Enku and hopefully now some more people will want to find out a bit more about this fascinating, creative person whose statues and poems live on almost 4 centuries after he was born.

Tsukurioku
Kami no Mikage no
Madoka naru
Ukiyo o terasu
Kagami nerikeri

I made
These gentle
Divine figures
To be mirrors, giving light
To this suffering world

In Heaven's River Poems and Carvings of Mountain-Monk Enku
Translated by Julian Daizan Skinner and Sumiko Hayashi. Images by Alex Kofuu Reinke Horikitsune

The IYN Summer Festival is held at Gaunts House, a large country house set in the idyllic, rolling Dorset countryside, this is a weather-proof festival! Come and lay back and relax, meet new people, share practice and build community. Tickets prices include delicious veggie food, refreshments, comfy accommodation or camping, workshops & childcare (day tickets also available). If you missed it this summer – look out for next year's festival ...



Pranayama (Gordon Smith, Founder Member)

Prana is very subtle, as it is the vital air or life breath that energises and sustains all living things. Yama is restraint (from yam = “to restrain”). Breath restraint is a form of Self-control and a means of energy assimilation. It is used by some in the forceful sense, but more effective if used in co-operation with the life force integral to each breath.

There are rhythms in life, times of rest and times of activity, periods of wakefulness and hibernation. To be active both day and night drains our natural resources, hence the need to recharge our batteries and take on energy in the form of food or packaged prana. All the foods that we eat have at one time been living entities and still retain the characteristics of the life forms, whether Tamasic (heavy and inertic), that is sleep inducing. Rajistic (spicy and volatile), or Sattvic (pure and unadulterated). There is no part of the body in isolation from the rest, therefore the heavy and coarse in nature, will often find their breathing to be heavy and laboured. The volatile and nervously energetic, quick and often agitated, while the peaceful will be calm and measured with a breath conducive to long life.

The yogi, working throughout his life, does so in order to develop a spiritual body, able to survive and continue working for the good of mankind, long after his time on earth. This may seem a rather speculative idea, until one starts on the yoga journey, reads the writings of previously enlightened beings, starts to meditate and develop their own spiritual body.

The breath is not only linked to the demands of the body both physically and emotionally, but also has a subtle dimension that reaches beyond the physical into the world of spirit. Exercise can improve the function and action of the lungs but only meditation on the breath will bring awareness to a level of reality beyond the level of the physical demands of the body.

To tap these transformative levels of life force we have to use the link between breath and emotions, this is done by quietening the breath and reducing surface tensions, the affect not dissimilar to the quietening of ocean waves when the air blowing over its surface loses force and intensity and calm returns.

Calming and quietening the breath is the first and most important exercise, as this is followed by an inner stillness that allows everything to fall into perspective. When not drawn by outside pressures we gradually return to the stillness of the inmost Self and this allows the body to return to its own natural harmonies and resonances.

When we are still, we become more closely attuned to the manifesting life force that enriches and sustains life. It is the breath or bread of life that feeds the higher spiritual centres in the body. We can become more readily aware of the spirit of the breath with a still mind and when consciousness is attuned to the light and life integral to each breath. The earth or material body lacks the refinement to exist on these subtle energy levels alone and depends on the Prana that is manifested in the foods we eat, the more Sattvic the disposition the more refined the food requirements.

Forceful restraint and control of the breath, without taking into account the health and psychological well being of the body, has the power to destroy as well as cure. Patanjali defines yoga as controlling the activities of the mind (chitta). This Chitta and chatter of mind stuff does not mean the mind of the heart, or the intuitive sense that have of what is good for our well being.

Meditative or conscious breathing is a feeling experience in which there is a natural rise and fall of the breath with interspersed pauses for Prana assimilation. The more closely we become attuned with the underlying life force closely interwoven with the breath, the more refreshing and life enhancing the experience, with longer periods of retention, experienced without strain or effort.

These experiences of no mind and transcendent awareness can be a means of chakra re-harmonisation and re-balancing, also of refining energy flow during asana practice where movement is guided by the wisdom that arises from stillness.

MEDITATION CHANGES YOUR BRAIN STRUCTURE:

Research has shown that regular mediation makes physical changes to the brain's structure and function.

The practice of mindfulness and meditation is becoming increasingly popular. The positive effects of are widely known by those who practice regularly, but more and more research is also now being conducted in the area, with interesting results.

More than 100 studies have shown changes in brain wave activity during meditation and researchers have found that areas of the brain linked to emotional regulation are larger in people who have meditated regularly for five years. The evidence for different types of mindfulness is promising and research has grown in recent years.

In 2011 neuroscientists used Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) to map the brains of 16 people (plus 17 control subjects) before and after an eight week course of mindfulness and meditation training. The course comprised 45-minute guided exercises (body scan, yoga and sitting meditation) undertaken at home. The course also taught the participants to be more mindful in daily activities like eating, walking, washing the dishes etc.

MRI images before and after the eight week course were compared with each other and also compared with the control group who had not completed any meditation. Participants reported positive benefits, but the MRI pictures showed an increase in grey matter within areas of the brain involved with learning and memory, emotion regulation, sense of self, and perspective taking. These results were not shown in the control group.

More recently, an overall review of relevant studies revealed compelling evidence that eight areas of the brain were consistently altered in those that meditate regularly. These include areas of meta-awareness (prefrontal cortex), body awareness (sensory and insula cortices), memory consolidation (hippocampus), self and emotion regulation (medial and frontal cortices) and left and right brain communication (corpus callosum).

So, just as exercising muscles increases their size and strength, so exercising your brain has the same effect. As if we needed any more proof to meditate.....

References:

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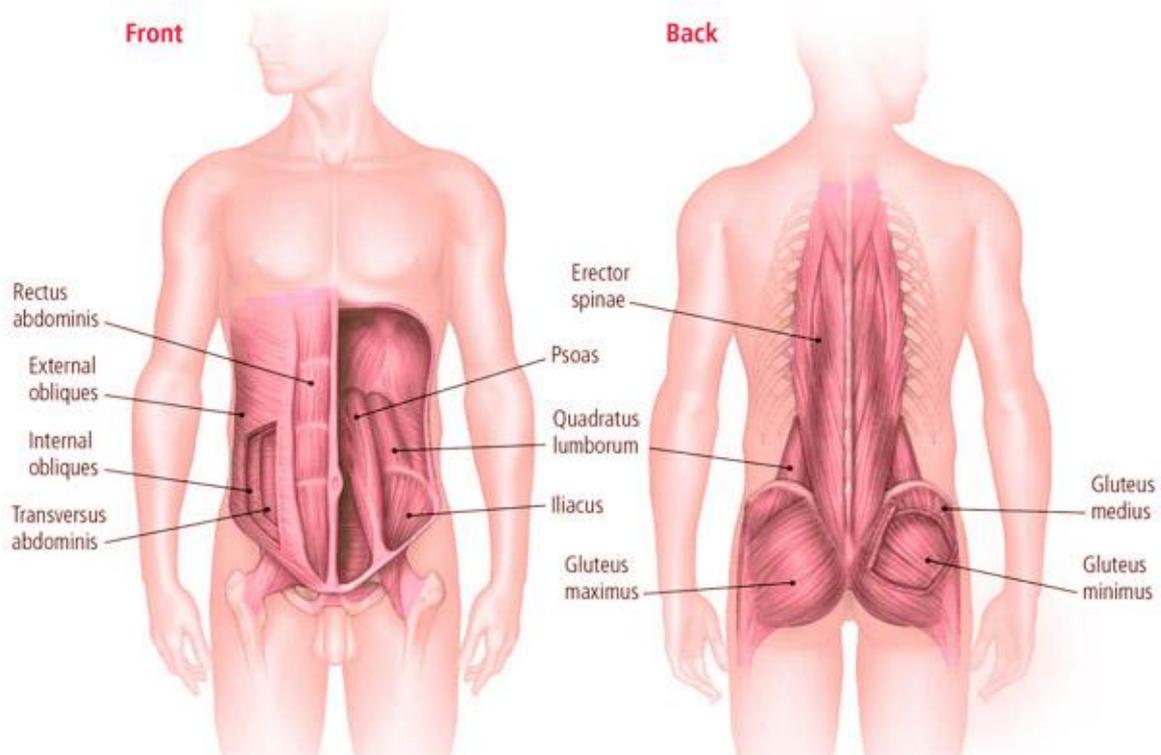
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(Submitted by Gill Smith)

CORE STRENGTH – WHAT IS IT AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT IN YOGA?

The 'core' is a complex series of muscles that are located deep within the abdomen and are active in almost all bodily movements. They comprise three layers of muscles surrounding the spine and pelvis: the rectus abdominis, transverse abdominis, diaphragm, internal and external obliques, erector spinae, multifidus and pelvic floor. Minor core muscles include the latissimus dorsi, gluteals, quadratus lumborum and hip flexors and extensors.



(Image from www.bodybalance4you.wordpress.com/2012/10/26/the-difference-between-abs-core/)

These muscles act to stabilise the body during movement, to transfer force from one area to another and also to initiate movement. Correct function of the core muscles protects the spine and superficial muscles and ligaments from becoming injured through over stretching or contracting too forcefully. These are also the muscles that help protect the abdominal organs, helping prevent hernias and prolapses.

The core muscles are working in ALL our movements, allowing us to carry out our activities with ease and dexterity while maintaining balance and posture. These are key aspects of yoga asana practice, therefore acknowledging the

important role of the core muscles can only strengthen our practice. Correct form in any pose is important to ensure the core is engaged, supporting the body and helping to prevent injury. It is core strength that gives us the physical integration that presents as grace, finesse and power in our asana practice.

So which poses are good for core strength?

Basically any pose can be a core strengthener, but we need to bring *attention* to it. Try to focus and bring tone into the core muscles before moving into any posture. It is also worth noting that the solar plexus (at the 'core' of our body) is our centre of inner power, where all physical energy is distributed from. Teach your students to move from this area, making the core muscles the first they engage, then extending out from that strong and stable starting point. This does not mean holding the breath though! Make sure your students maintain abdominal 'tone' without straining, which will inhibit breathing.

Good poses to strengthen the core include the marjaryasana (cat), tiger, paripurna navasana (boat), utkatasana (chair), garudasana (eagle), plank, vasithasnana (side plank), chaturanga dandasana (staff) but I could go on.....

(Submitted by Gill Smith)

Brahman Exists in All Things

Know that which has form to be unreal
and the formless to be permanent.
Through this spiritual instruction
you will escape the possibility of rebirth.

Just as a mirror exists
within and without
the image reflected in it,
so the Supreme Self exists
inside and outside this body.

Just as the same all-pervading space
is inside and outside a jar,
so the eternal, all-pervasive
Brahman exists in all things.

Astavakra Samhita