

THE SACRUM AND YOGA

By Richard Rosen

INTRODUCTION

The Latin word *sacer* means both "holy" and "cursed." It is the ancestor of familiar English words like sacred and sacrifice, as well as the name of a small triangular bone that forms both the back of the pelvis and the base of the spine. Known to anatomists as the *os sacrum*, literally the "holy bone," it was given this appellation, according to one legend, because it was believed to be eternal and so the "seat" of the body's resurrection.

In the esoteric anatomy of Hatha Yoga, the tip of the sacrum physically marks the site of the subtle "root-support wheel," the *muladhara chakra*, revealed to the yogis as they explored and mapped, in *samadhi*, the "universe" of the human body. Here resides the central figure of the yogi's quest, the Kundalini, which means the "Coiled One," so named because she is traditionally portrayed as a serpent curled in sleep. She is the static pole of the "power," or *shakti*, of the Great Goddess, who conceives, nurtures, and then destroys the world. The yogis see the dormant Kundalini as an image of our spiritual blindness--like her, we are "asleep" to our oneness with the soul, distracted by the dreams that occupy our daily lives--and, at the same time, as a potential source of unlimited creativity and wisdom, waiting only for us to rouse her, through our yoga practice, to be released.

This is part of the rich lore handed down to us from countless generations of yogi adventurers, who saw their own body as a microcosmos, a minute replica of the whole of creation, and who then searched its hidden recesses for the ultimate meaning of life. We imagine that our bones and flesh are what really exist, and that accounts about energy "wheels" and slumbering serpents are merely flights of fancy; but just the opposite is true: the sacrum, along with other regions like the navel, heart, throat, and the middle of the forehead, are themselves the outward symbols, "em-body-ing" a deeper reality.

But to penetrate into this unknown territory, we must start with what we can see and touch. In Hatha Yoga this is called the "state of beginning," in which we familiarize ourselves, in the words of

B.K.S. Iyengar, with the "various parts of the body: first look at the foot, then come to the ankle, connect the ankle with the foot, then look at the knee, connect the knee with the ankle, connect the knee with the foot . . ." and so on, until we "bring the vastness and multiplicity of the intelligence from a state of divided concentration into a single concentration" (*The Tree of Yoga*, Boston: Shambhala, 1988, 149-150).

CONTACTING THE SACRUM

If you're not sure where the sacrum is, you're not alone: new students, in the "state of beginning," are often in the dark about significant bones and muscles. But the sacrum isn't hard to find. Stand in Mountain Pose (Tadasana) with your feet a few inches apart and parallel to each other. Use your fingers to palpate--that's a technical term for "dig around in"--all around the buttock muscles (gluteus maximus) that cover the back of your pelvis. The muscles themselves will feel firm with some "give" if you push hard enough, but you should eventually find a flat area between them that's rather hard--because its bone. You've found the sacrum.

If you continue digging for awhile, you'll discover that the sacrum is broad across the top where it acts as a kind of pedestal for the long flexible part of the spine. The top of the sacrum, which is also top of the back of the pelvis, is called (like the bottom leg of a triangle) the base. It then tapers down to a point, called the apex, to which is attached the vestigial tail bone, the coccyx, a Greek word meaning "cuckoo," so called because this little hooked bone reminded some imaginative anatomist of a cuckoo's beak.

WHY IS THE SACRUM IMPORTANT?

I first began focusing on the sacrum to help correct an habitual misalignment of my pelvis in asanas, which over time had resulted in a serious lower back injury. During the last three or four years, I've been able to relieve much of the pain, and I've also found that many of my students with back problems respond favorably to similar work. But you don't need a bum back to profitably integrate consciousness of the sacrum into your practice. There are three ways in which the bone serves as a "seed" in my practice:

1. I read somewhere once that the larger dinosaurs, because their brains were so tiny relative to their mass, had a second "brain" in their tail, to help them control the movements of this extremity. I have no idea, in light of modern research on these animals, if this is still accepted, but I like the notion of a "tail brain" that, in my asana practice, energizes the base of the spine and communicates with the "head brain" about the experience of the entire spine from the "ground up." I'll have more to say about the sacrum as the "root" of action below.

2. The sacrum, though securely attached to the "wings" of the pelvis, does have some independent movement. As you'll experience in the first exercise later on, this movement--technically called nutation or "nodding"--is keyed to the breathing cycle and creates a rhythmic pulse at the base of the spine, which operates like a "pump" for the fluid circulating in the spinal canal and cranium.

By attending to the subtle rocking of the bone as I inhale and exhale in asana, I can tell if the body and the breath are cooperating in the movement, or if there's a measure of resistance in one or the other. If the breath flows freely through the base of the spine, then I experience the harmony of what the yogis call the "food sheath"--the gross body--and the "prana sheath"--the energy body, the outward agent of which is the breath--and my position brings me a step closer to yoga in the true meaning of the word. If, however, the movement is "out of tune" or obstructed altogether, then I can use this feeling as a "tool" to "fine tune" the two sheaths.

3. The base chakra is symbolically the starting point of the spiritual journey, the cave or womb at the foot of the sacred mountain--the spine--that we all must climb, with the grace of the Goddess, to reach the summit of liberation. I'll have more to say about this shortly. By descending my awareness to the "root," I can begin to pacify the persistent distracting chatter of the head brain. Thus the sacrum is my "seed" or prop for meditation that, following Patanjali's advice, is "conducive and pleasing to the steadiness of the mind, to experience a state of serenity" (Yoga Sutra of Patanjali, trans. B.K.S. Iyengar, Pune, India: Shri Dharmavirsingh Mahida, 1987, 34, sutra 1.39).

THE TWO MAIN FUNCTIONS OF THE SACRUM

As I've mentioned, the sacrum "em-bodies" the Muladhara chakra, traditionally drawn as a four-petalled lotus with a downward-pointing triangle at its center. Just as Muladhara is the "root" and "support" of the chakra system, so the two main functions of the sacrum are to "root" and "support" the spine.

To the yogis, the spine is the "staff of Meru," the Meru-danda, the microcosmic equivalent of the mythic mountain at the hub of their universe. The macrocosmos revolves about "golden Meru"--the *axis mundi*, the junction of heaven, earth, and hell--in a grand dance of life, and so for us, the spine is the pivot and touchstone of every action. If all the vertebrae are fully involved and sharing equally in whatever actions we take, then we are poised and graceful and the spine feels nourished. In this way we physically experience one of the defining characteristics of yoga, called *samatva* in the Bhagavad Gita, and which Georg Feuerstein translates as "evenness" or "equanimity." If, however, some of the vertebrae are "stuck" and shift their load to already overburdened neighbors, then the entire spine--and body--suffers and injury is likely.

As the body is "rooted" in the spine, so the spine is "rooted" in the sacrum: ideally, all action springs from this source and ripples up the spine like a wave to the head. When we act from the "root," whether on the physical plane from the "holy bone" or on the spiritual plane from the soul, then we ourselves become "holy," a word related to both "whole" and "healthy." Here is another essential trait of yoga, what the Gita terms "skillful action," action that is effortless, coordinated, and direct, that is not determined by an artificial moral code or selfishness or convenience, but is "right" according to the needs of the presented situation, and that, in the words of Martin Buber, is shaped to a "sign of the eternal" (*Daniel: Dialogues on Realization*, trans. M. Friedman, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965, 95).

Muladhara also "supports" an extensive network of subtle energy "channels" or *nadis*, through which the subtle *prana*, the active pole of the Goddess that feeds the life process, streams through the body. It is, appropriately then, the center of the earth "element," the densest of the five traditional building blocks of the material world: just as Mother Earth supports each of us in our mundane lives, so Muladhara is the starting point and foundation of our spiritual quest.

We can also say that the sacrum is the "earth" that supports the spine. It too is a vital conduit of bodily forces, in particular the downward pressure of the trunk, shoulders and head received from the spine and "grounded" through the pelvis and legs into the Earth; and the return thrust of the planet that initiates and sustains the unique structure and capacities of the human spine. If the sacrum is properly positioned, these two forces--which represent the complementary human aspirations of descent into matter and ascent toward spirit--course smoothly through the spine, and we live a fully "supported" existence. But if the sacrum is misaligned, the spine is cut off from its connection with the ground and the forces in the body stagnate, and we feel "unsupported," physically strained and emotionally listless.

EXERCISES: INTRODUCTION

The yogis believe that there are many hundreds of thousands of asanas, which mirror all the myriad movements of living creatures and the natural world. There are, however, in addition to the neutral position of Mountain Pose and its inverted variations, only three basic directions of movement: forward bend, rotation or twist, and back bend (there's also side bend, but this is not important to us in asana).

In all of these movements, the sacrum--and by extension the entire back of the trunk--should always "widen" horizontally. I divide the bone perpendicularly, and then think of "splitting" the left and right halves, in every asana, away from the midline. The sacrum should also always "lengthen" vertically, as if it is being "drawn down" like a window shade to the floor. Be sure, though, in Mountain, not to "tuck" the tail bone forward to do this, which tends to flatten the lower back: it's important to preserve the natural curves of the spine. Finally--and this is the hardest action for me--the sacrum should feel as if it's pressing into the pelvis. This last action is influenced by the kind of asana that's being worked on and your degree of flexibility: I'll have more to say about this below.

Following are six simple exercises that will help you get a feel for the role of the sacrum in the neutral position and the three directions of movement. Then after working with the exercises, I'll ask you to apply what you've learned to four common standing poses.

Please remember that many of the instructions given here to "spread" the sacrum are not logical, so DON'T THINK about them, JUST FEEL.

FIRST EXERCISE: reclining bent knees--finding the sacrum

This exercise is for newer students in the "state of beginning," who may not as yet have a clear awareness of their sacrum. It will give you a general feel for the sacrum and the way it "nods" in concert with the breathing cycle.

Lie on your back with your knees bent, the heels a few inches away from the buttocks. It might help to tie your knees snugly together with a strap, separating the feet a few inches and turning the toes in. Bring your awareness to the area of the sacrum in the back of the pelvis. Remember that the sacrum has a natural convexity so the entire bone won't be flat on the floor.

Don't be too surprised if, after a while, you notice that the two sides of the sacrum aren't level on the floor: this could mean that your bone is rotated slightly on a vertical axis, but stay calm--it's not uncommon. Let the thighs weigh heavily on the pelvis and let the sacrum and the lower back widen with as much "equanimity" as possible against the floor.

Then experiment with small, slow rocking movements, using the floor like a rolling pin to open the sacrum. Use a side-to-side movement to widen the lower back and sacrum away from the middle of the torso. Use a top-to-bottom movement to lengthen the bone as you alternately stretch and contract the muscles of the lower back.

Next lie still for a few minutes, and focus on the breath. Consciously inhale up the front of the torso from the sacrum to the top of the sternum or breastbone--you'll

feel the base of the sacrum move into the torso and the lower back lift away from the floor. Then, imagining the breath cresting like a wave at the tops of the shoulders, just as consciously exhale down the back of the spine to the base again--and you'll feel the base of the sacrum and the lower back release toward the floor.

SECOND EXERCISE: moving the sacrum into the body--Reclining Bound Angle (Supta Baddha Konasana)

In the neutral positions--Mountain Pose (Tadasana), for example, or Headstand (Shirshasana)--the sacrum should move evenly into the body. Many students tend to push the base of the sacrum into the body, which tips the pelvis forward. Since the sacrum is the base of the spine, this misalignment can have serious consequences not only in the "staff of Meru," but throughout the body. For those of us who mis-use the pelvis in this way, it's important to first bring the sacrum into proper alignment before trying to press it into the body; otherwise, we'll accentuate an already unhealthy situation.

Don't imagine that you'll get the bone to move much; as I've mentioned, the sacrum is firmly fixed to the "wings" of the hips. Rather, generate here an awareness of an energetic movement at the "root-support" that both stabilizes and "en-light-ens" the spine and body. This is the fundamental awareness in any successful asana, which Patanjali describes as "steady and comfortable," and the twentieth-century American yogi Lewis Thompson as "strength without tension."

Lie on your back near a wall with the soles of your feet pressed together and your knees out to the sides. Keeping the balls of the feet and the heels touching, spread your toes against the wall and move your pelvis in toward your heels as close as you comfortably can. If you sense that the stretch in the inner groins will be too much, support the outer thighs on folded blankets. Broaden the sacrum against the floor, and use your hands to roll the outer thighs toward the wall. If you're stiffer--don't try to push the knees back down again. If you have trouble keeping the lower back released, raise your feet on a block a few inches off the floor.

Press the outer edges of the feet into each other and think of widening the distance between the inner knees. Keep the knees light but make the inner groins heavy and drop them to the floor, being sure to hold the length in the lower back. When you feel confident that all this is in place, then imagine that the three sides of the sacrum are moving evenly into the pelvis. Whenever you try this movement, it's important to keep the lower belly soft. I find it helpful to put a support under the bone--either a block or a book or a prop I made specifically for this exercise: a wooden triangle, about an inch thick, that's approximately the same size as my sacrum. I like to "rock and roll" on my support for a minute or two, feeling the three sides of the sacrum moving in various combinations into the pelvis. Then lie for a few minutes more, and continue to imagine that the inner groin are sinking down and the sacrum flying up.

THIRD EXERCISE: widening and lengthening the sacrum for a forward bend--sitting crossed legs (Gomukhasana)

Forward bends, like all the other groups of poses, present different challenges to different kinds of students. A flexible student has the openness in the groins and

hamstrings to move into the forward bend properly--from the hip joints--but often tends to "push" the base of the sacrum up and into the body, shortening the bone and hardening the muscles along the lower back. On the other side of the coin, a stiff student, who is closed in the groins and hamstrings, struggles forward by folding at the waist while the pelvis remains immobilized or, worse, the sitting bones are dragged toward the heels. This in turn will pull the base of the sacrum down and out of the pelvis, narrowing the bone, and over-stretch the lower back muscles.

Ideally, the sacrum is adjusted toward neutral in a forward bend. For the flexible student, this means that the base of the sacrum should release a bit out of the pelvis and the bone itself should lengthen toward the floor. The stiff student--whose spine and torso will stay fairly upright in a sitting forward bend--should work to widen and lift the base of the sacrum up and into the pelvis. This simple sitting position will help you to experience what such a neutral position is like, which you can then apply, in whatever way is appropriate for you, in a forward bend.

Stiff beginners should first bring the left heel beside the right hip, with the outer left leg on the floor, and then bring the right leg over the left, making sure that the right ankle is outside the left knee. Don't be too alarmed if your right knee sticks way up, but be sure not to force the knee toward the floor. If you feel any strain in the inner knee of the top leg, raise that knee even higher until the sensation stops. If you're having trouble getting both buttocks on the floor, sit up on a folded blanket.

More experienced students can bring their legs into the position used for Cow Face Pose (Gomukhasana). It's not necessary to bring the knees into line, but moving the knees toward each other helps to give the feeling of widening the sacrum.

For the first few minutes, use your thumbs to palpate the buttock muscles: most beginners will experience the upper borders of these muscles as quite hard and unyielding. If you can find the inner borders of the buttocks, you'll also be able to trace the "legs" of the sacral triangle. Then put the base of your palms on the tops of the buttocks with your fingers pointing down and your thumbs on the front hip points. Without physically moving the hands, use them to "drag" the skin and flesh of the buttocks away from the sacrum as you press the hip points together. You should feel a very pleasant horizontal stretch across the back of the pelvis as you "widen" the sacrum.

Now maintain the width, and "lengthen" the sacrum by pressing the upper buttocks, again without physically moving the hands, toward the floor. Remember that we want to lengthen the lower back and sacrum, but not flatten the natural curves of the spine, which should always be preserved in whatever asana we perform. So to resist the tendency to sink the lower back, keep the pubic bone at the front of the pelvis moving toward the floor.

Now if you've gotten this far and still feeling fairly comfortable, try leaning forward--from the hips, not the waist--elongating the belly along the inner right thigh. As you move into a forward bend, see if you can continue to expand the sacrum.

FOURTH EXERCISE: the sacrum in a twist--reclining twist

I use this simple reclining pose to experience the movement of the sacrum in a twist. A number of standing poses involve a twist to a lesser or greater degree (e.g. Triangle, Revolved Triangle).

In the twists, most beginners tend to turn from somewhere in the middle of their backs, an "uneven" movement that entirely excludes the lower back and the sacrum. More flexible and more experienced students move from the root, but tend, as in the forward bends, to push the sacrum up and in to the body.

All twists originate in the sacrum and spiral up the spine to the head, which should always receive the action and never lead it. When we twist to the right, for example, the action starts in the left side of the sacrum, which moves into the pelvis a little deeper than the right.

Lie on your back and draw your knees up into your chest. With an exhalation, and keeping the knees up, roll completely to the left, so that the whole left side of your body is on the floor. Put your left hand on the middle of the right thigh and press the legs to the floor (if resting your legs on the floor in this twist causes discomfort in your back or neck, it's best to elevate the legs on as much height as you need to feel comfortable).

Now bring your right hand to the lower spine above the sacrum and feel the line of "knobs"--these are the bony protuberances of the vertebrae that serve as attachments for spinal muscles. For many beginners, the lower back rounds convexly and these bones poke well out, overstretching the muscles along the spine. Draw the sitting bones away from the backs of the knees, and lengthen the distance between the pubis and navel. Then, starting as high on the back as you can reach, work the thumb along the line of knobs toward the sacrum, pushing them down and in, shaping a smooth concavity in the lower back.

Once you reach the sacrum, spread your palm wide against the bone, fingers pointing to the apex, and re-create the feeling of width and length. Then press the thumb into the left side of the sacrum and, with an exhalation, twist the torso the right. See if you can get a feel for the root of the twist in the sacrum. Then with an exhalation, extend the right arm straight to the side and "feed" the right side of the sacrum into the fingertips.

FIFTH EXERCISE: preparation for lunge--Reclining Half Hero (Supta Ardha Virasana)

This exercise is both a preparation for the lunge which follows, and an effective way to further contact the sacrum. It can cause strain in the knee and lower back, so if you're not familiar with this position and have a teacher available, it might be best to get her/his guidance before giving it a try.

Start by sitting with the legs extended in Staff Pose (Dandasana). Lean onto the left buttock and draw the right leg back into Half Hero, making sure there's a little space between the inner right heel and the outer right hip, and that the toes are pointing straight back. If your right knee wants to come off the floor, prop it up on a folded blanket; if it wants to slide off to the right, put a block between the right knee and the left thigh and squeeze.

Stiffer students can lean back on their hands, lengthening the apex of the sacrum toward the left heel and twisting slightly side-to-side to widen the base. More flexible students can come down onto their forearms. Then bend the straight leg and press the foot into the floor, lifting the buttocks slightly up. Use the hands now to widen and lengthen the sacrum, making sure that the apex moves toward the bent knee and the base releases toward the floor.

Give yourself a comfortable stretch in the right thigh and groin. Move the front ribs into the body and soften the belly. Widen the base of the sacrum into the hips and think of the outer hips lifting up toward the ceiling.

SIXTH EXERCISE: the sacrum in a backbend--lunge

Many beginners, especially if they are dealing with lower back problems, are particularly wary of back bends--and rightfully so. If performed without attention to correct alignment, back bends can make a bad situation worse. On the other hand, back bends can be very beneficial to students with lower back pain. To get the most out of a back bend, the pelvis must be positioned to maximize the length of the lower spine and the front groins.

Come to a wall for a lunge. Put the toes of your right foot against the wall and align right knee over the ankle so that the shin is about parallel to the wall. Put your left knee on the floor directly below the left hip--you may want to pad this knee with a folded blanket. Bring your hands onto the wall about shoulder height.

Now begin to slowly slide the left knee away from the wall (keeping the right knee over the ankle) until you can feel a comfortable stretch in the front of the left thigh and groin. Notice if you feel any compression in the lower back. If you do, check if the base of the sacrum is moving in to the body, and if the bone feels narrow. Broaden the sacrum--use the hands if necessary--and emphasize the length of the bone by moving the base out of the body and drawing the apex down to the floor.

In your back bends, then, be sure that the pivot of the action is the apex of the sacrum and not the base. Keep the lower front ribs moving down and into the body and the belly soft.

CONCLUSION

The universe, the yogis say, is *lila*, the joyous "play" of the Goddess, and the movements of the natural world and all the creatures that inhabit it are Her asanas and pranayama. In the words of James Carse, our world is an "infinite game," with no winners or losers, whose only purpose is to continue for as long as possible and to "keep everyone in play" (*Finite and Infinite Games*, New York: Ballantine, 1986, 8). So our practice in general, and our search for the "holy bone" in particular, should reflect this endless sacred sport, expressing the bliss that the yogis have divined at the "root" of our existence.