

Self-Massage After Yoga
here's why you should do it

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Self-massage is a simple, efficient practice that can improve the effects of your asana practice. Teaching self-massage to your Yoga students empowers them to access their own healing abilities.

By Kristine Kaoverii Weber

I've been teaching massage in my Yoga classes for many years, and students consistently comment that doing self-massage at the end of class helps them relax in savasana and keeps them from feeling sore the next day. Self-massage provides a bridge between the active asana practice and the stillness of savasana. Students can take time to integrate some of the teachings from the class while they are absorbing the physical benefits of their practice. Self-massage also creates a relaxing way for students to connect with each other while they are caring for themselves. I notice that the time we take at the end of class for self-massage provides a moment of bonding, in which students are open asking questions or sharing a little about their lives.

The History of Self-Massage and Yoga

The Hatha Yoga Pradipika, a seminal text of practical guidance for Yogis written in the 15th century, recommends that the practitioner massage him or herself after performing strenuous pranayama that causes perspiration. "Rub the body with the perspiration from the labour (of pranayama). The body derives firmness and steadiness from this." [1] The Shiva Samhita, another Sanskrit text, offers the same advice: "At first perspiration comes in the body of the Yogi; when perspiration appears it should be rubbed in the body, otherwise the basic elements in the body of the Yogi are destroyed." [2]

While these texts refer to the effort exerted from pranayama practice, asana practice can also cause the body to heat up and perspire, and since this is the primary practice for many modern Yogis, the advice to massage the body after the practice may have similar practical benefits. Modern Yoga master Pattabhi Jois has advised his students to use self-massage after their asana practice. "The sweat generated by Yoga should be gradually dried by rubbing it into the body with the hands, and not by exposing it to the air or by drying it with a towel or cloth." [3]

The Benefits of Massage and Asana

Self-massage is most beneficial when performed after asana but before resting in final savasana (relaxation pose). In this way, savasana integrates the effects of both asana and self-massage. [4]

While there are many different styles of self-massage, the technique outlined here was created by the Indian Yoga master P.R. Sarkar (1921-1990) specifically for use after asana. He designed this massage to benefit the nervous and lymphatic systems and to compliment the subtle beneficial effects of the asanas. One of Sarkar's main students, Susan Andrews (Avadhutika Ananda Mitra), the Yoga director of the Parque Ecologico Visao Futuro in Brazil, claims that this self-massage benefits the nervous system, harmonizes the pranamaya kosha, relaxes the muscles, benefits the skin, and improves both blood and lymphatic circulation. [5]

Preventing Muscle Soreness

Muscle soreness after asana practice may tell you that you've pushed yourself too much the day before, or that your sequencing was a little less conscious than it could have been. Over the years, I've found that if I skip self-massage after my asana practice, I'm more likely to be sore regardless of which poses I've ventured into that day.

For a long time, physiologists believed lactic acid caused muscle soreness, but this explanation is no longer considered accurate. Several other factors may contribute to soreness including micro-tears in the muscles or connective tissue, muscle spasms, inflammation and enzyme efflux theory. [6] Self-massage immediately after practice may help improve the speed of muscle healing, reduce the possibility of spasms and inflammation, calm the nervous system, and provide psychological benefits. [7]

Massage and Joints

Sarkar designed this massage to target the joints of the body. Any seasoned Yogi knows that the tendons and ligaments of the joints endure tremendous force during asana practice. Self-massage helps them recover and may also help the joints release hyaluronic acid, a major component of cartilage and synovial fluid.

"Hyaluronic acid is produced by fibroblast cells in the connective tissue," says Paul Grilley, a yin Yoga and Yoga anatomy teacher. "One of the benefits of asana practice is the stimulation of connective tissue and the

production of this acid. The best complement to stressing a tissue to stimulate it is to relax a tissue and passively massage it. . . I believe self-massage has always been a natural complement to asana practice.”

Massage, Lymph, and Skin

From the Western medical perspective, the lymphatic system is a complex system of nodes and vessels that removes excess fluids from the body's tissues, absorbs fatty acids, transports fat and chyle to the circulatory system, and produces immune cells. A healthy lymphatic flow is one of the body's fundamental defense mechanisms against infection. The flow of the lymphatic system is primarily influenced by the action of muscles, by breathing, and by body posture. Asana improves lymphatic flow through muscular contraction and the effects of gravity. “Not only movement, but also deep breathing during asana is a major stimulator of lymphatic flow,” said Dr. Steven Landau, a family medicine doctor and Yoga Alliance Board member who has practiced Sarkar's self-massage after asana for almost 30 years. “Along with the prolonged contraction of various muscles during asanas and inverted poses, breathing helps cleanse the lymph system in a major way.” Massage helps promote the flow of lymph by moving it manually through the tissues. According to Landau, the self-massage introduced by Sarkar targets the lymphatic organs in a highly specific way, including the nodes behind and in front of the ears, behind and in front of the neck, the axillae [armpits], elbows, groins, peri-aortic region [in the abdomen], and behind the knees. “The effect is to strip them of excess fluid and edema, thus improving flow and relieving stagnation.” Since the lymphatic system, like the veins in the circulatory system, contains a system of one-way valves, squeezing the lymph nodes from the core to the periphery, as is done in Sarkar's self-massage, aids the flow of lymph back into the circulatory system. Sarkar and other Yoga masters have claimed that keeping the lymph system clean and well-functioning is critical for an effective Yoga practice and deeper meditation. According to Ayurveda, ojas, a highly specialized tissue often referred to as “life force,” is created out of the seven dhatus, the most subtle of which is lymph. Good quality ojas is produced through Yogic practices. Likewise, a practitioner with high quality ojas can meditate more deeply. A clean diet, a healthy lifestyle, pranayama, and asana all help to purify the lymph, which in turn gives the Yogi a good supply of high quality ojas to take her deeper into her practices. [8]

Self-Massage is Self-Care

When we've been injured, are sore, or are feeling emotionally uncomfortable, we instinctually place our hands on our own bodies to soothe ourselves. The healing energy of our own hands is our most basic and perhaps most profound healing tool. Everyone needs to be touched and cared for. Self-massage provides a simple, non-threatening way for Yoga students to care for themselves, reaffirm their self-worth and celebrate their being.

Directions

Start your self-massage by rubbing your hands together. This activates the circulation as well as the pranic force, or the subtle healing energy, in the hands. Then place your warm palms over your eyes and take a few deep breaths.

Next massage up your forehead, over the top and down the back of your head with your full palms. Repeat this and all of the following strokes three times unless otherwise noted.

Use the tips of your fingers to sweep across your eyebrows from the inside to the outer corners. Next, press your index finger into the inner corner of your eye, below the brow bone, and then sweep it across the eye and the temple to the earlobe and then continue up and around the curve of the ear back to the face.

Gently twist around the inner surface of the ear with your index finger. Using the tips of your fingers, massage from the outer surface of your cheeks towards the nose, then from under the eyes down the cheeks to the jaw.

Place your finger tips above the upper lip and slide from just under your nose to the sides of your mouth. Next place the tips of your thumbs together under your chin and rest your finger tips on your jaw. Massage the jaw all the way to the ear, paying attention to any sensation in the glands under the jaw. Then place your fingertips on either side of your esophagus and massage from the center of the front of the neck to the back.

Raise your left arm and massage the inside of the upper arm down into the armpit. Take a little extra time to massage in the armpit as this area has one of the densest concentrations of lymph nodes. Massage your left shoulder and then twist and squeeze your arm down towards your hands. This twisting action should follow the direction of the hair as this helps to release beneficial secretions, facilitated by the asana practice, from the sebaceous glands.

Massage the hand and twist and squeeze each finger. Repeat the whole sequence on the right side.

Now place your hands on your back as if you were going to do cow's head pose and massage up the spine with one hand and down with the other. Switch arm position and repeat. Place the fingers between the ribs at the top of your chest

and massage in toward the heart. Next place our hands on your waist, fingertips facing forwards, and massage the abdomen from the center to the sides, from top to bottom. Coordinate your strokes with an exhale so that as you begin breathing out, you press into your abdomen and you finish the stroke at the end of the exhale. Now turn your thumbs forward and fingers backward and massage your lower back from the spine, to the sides.

Encircle your hands around the front groin of the left leg and, using your thumbs, massage into the lymph glands here in the groin area.

Massage down the left thigh, both quadriceps and hamstrings. Then place one hand on top of the knee and the other underneath. Massage the joint - behind the knee is another area with many lymph nodes.

Next massage down the calf and shin with both hands. Massage the ankle joint. Massage the foot by pressing your knuckles into the sole and rolling from the toes down to the heel.

Then, using your thumbs, massage any sensitive areas with a circular motion. Twist and squeeze each toe and then press your fingers into the juncture between the toes and foot. Slap the sole of your foot from the toes to the heel. Repeat the leg massage on the left side.

After you finish your massage, lie down for shavasana and enjoy the effects.

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