

EMBRACING LIFE

SUBTLE CONTAINMENT STIMULATES CREATIVITY OF SPIRIT AND FREEDOM OF BODY

by Denise Benitez

When I was an art student at Rhode Island School of Design, my drawing teacher started the first session by giving us an unlimited assignment. “Draw what you like,” she said, “using whatever materials you like.” I, and many of my classmates, floundered under this assignment. How could we possibly choose subject, shape, materials, paper, with such an unlimited palette? Which was exactly her point: limitation stimulates creativity.

Similarly, in our relationships with others, we often find that the commitment of marriage or other vows will keep a couple together in a way that stimulates innovation. It is not so easy to run away at the slightest discomfort or disillusionment when you have made a commitment; therefore, we must go deeper into ourselves and find a creative response to the situation.

Our body is a community of muscle, bone, organs, fluids, energy, magnetism, electricity, imagery, thought. These members of the community are in constant relationship. When we cultivate intention in our practice, we fine tune these interactions.

One of the biggest revelations for me when I first started practicing Anusara yoga was the idea of using my muscles while I stretched, of not just hanging out in poses and waiting for the shift to happen, of creating some sense of limitation and containment around what I was doing. In a love relationship, this “hanging out” would be the equivalent of leaning constantly into the other person and expecting them to do all the heavy lifting; all the introspection, grocery shopping, and house cleaning! In the relationship of our bodies, the practice is to slightly and elegantly draw our muscles onto the bones in a way that creates a sense of physical and emotional stability. This stability, sensed through the nervous system and the energy pathways of the body, allows more joy and release in practice.

Nowadays, the idea of using what we call muscle energy in Anusara yoga while stretching is not news. More and more, yoga teachers of many traditions are encouraging their students to engage some muscle tone while they stretch; physiologically this protects the more vulnerable areas of the muscle, such as tendons, and also allows the nervous system to perceive a sense of protection in the action, which allows the muscles to paradoxically release into a deeper, safer, and more satisfying stretch than hanging on muscles and fascial structures.

The engagement of muscle energy is willful; in other words, we make a decision to work our bodies in a certain way. We use our intelligence, intention, and will to create an action. But what is behind muscle energy? What fuels it psychologically? What makes us willing to get on our yoga mat and participate, instead of just getting on the mat and saying to the universe, “Do me, fix me?”

Right now, as you're sitting here reading this, imagine that all of your muscles have a slight magnetic attraction to your bones. You don't have to overly squeeze or engage your muscles in a binding way. Just feel the natural draw that is already there. You can sense this draw toward your bones and toward the center of your body as a sweet embrace. How does this feel in your heart? There can often be a deep relaxation in the recognition of being held by this naturally occurring magnetic pull. You may sense this as security, sensitivity, love. Henry David Thoreau said, “Dwell as near as possible to the channel in which your life flows, and this is where I believe this awareness draws us, into an actual experience of life inside us.”

So what fuels this willingness to make an effort? I believe that human beings as a species have a drive toward integration and evolution as part of our neural programming. When I make a small effort through my intention and into my muscles to stabilize, embrace, contain, I feel an immediate response of increased spaciousness and calm. Through some mysterious dialogue between my spirit and intention and out my muscles and into my nervous system, I experience a less distracted, more harmonious state of being. Sometimes just from the simple action of lifting my leg muscles, or drawing my shoulder blades onto my back!

My teacher John Friend has said, “The body and its energies are intelligent and you can engage them in dialogue.” One of these avenues of dialogue is through the embrace of our muscles. If you use the metaphor of surfing, you can see that if you just lay down on the board and let the wave do as it will, your surfing experience will not be very engaged or rewarding. You are not participating. Similarly, if you stand rigid on the board, try to tightly control the board, your body, the wave, you will very quickly experience a wipeout.

Occasionally I get on my mat and my fire to practice is quite damped down. I don't really feel like moving, much less using my will to engage my muscles. But I have found that the reward is immediate: I make the slightest effort, drawing my leg muscles up in down dog or hugging the midline in a balance pose, and the Goddess of the Life Force immediately responds; I feel a rush of aliveness, a lift in my mood, an optimism to continue my practice. I have entered the mystery of practice, like entering the pull of a gentle but insistent river that wants to take me on an important journey. And in that river, I am learning to be more and more skillful

about how I navigate--when I pull strong, when I relax, when I trust, when I take the initiative. I wake up, I feel, I'm curious, even about the challenges and discomforts. They, too, have their rewards.

And of course, there are always those times when sickness, injury, or deep fatigue requires a very gentle practice, perhaps restorative poses, pranayama, and meditation. Still, even in a gentle practice, the discipline of "muscle energy" can be sustained by staying clearly with the breath, or having faith and trust in the power of your body and spirit to find its way to the best possible outcome in the situation.

Yoga is a wisdom practice, meant to shake us out of our habitual dullness. The avenue of the body is unlimited in its potential for transformation and growth. You may never "accomplish" that foot behind the head pose, but you will see a lot of sights along the way, strengthen your inner resolve, find resources in yourself that you never knew you had, make friends on the journey, laugh a lot, cry some, get stronger, become more compassionate, and be more fully alive. What more can anyone ask?

I honor so deeply the efforts of each and every yoga student who has ever been in any of my classes, be it for one class or ten years. The practice changes us all, in community, and in our internal world on our mat. From the smallest "muscular" effort, both physically and energetically, we become more alive.