

## Magic Touch

Through bodywork you can experience pure pleasure, a still mind, and a deeper yoga practice.

By Hillari Dowdle



Wheel Pose first brought Stacey Rosenberg face-to-face with her body's limitations back in the late 1990s. She was a serious yoga student then, with a good five years of practice and a Sivananda teacher training under her belt. Still, every time she pushed up into Urdhva Dhanurasana, she experienced resistance in her lower back and pain in her knees. Thinking more practice was the answer, she practiced more. Still, she says, "no matter how hard I tried, I could never go very far into it."

Finally one day she wandered into an alignment-focused class. "The teacher looked at my pose and said, 'Your quads are rock hard,'" Rosenberg remembers. In other fields of physical endeavor, that would be a compliment. But here her tight, muscular thighs were limiting her ability to extend through her legs and straining her knees and lower back. "The teacher said, 'Have you thought about having some myofascial release work done? It would help.'"

That recommendation led Rosenberg on a bodywork journey that has included myofascial release, Rolfing, craniosacral therapy, and Thai Yoga Massage. Now a certified Anusara teacher in the Bay Area, Rosenberg, 37, says she can thank bodywork for transforming her life and her practice.

"I am a strong advocate for bodywork, and I often recommend it to my students," she says. "We all come onto the mat with our habits, physical patterns, and emotional traumas. Life has happened to us, and that's beautiful. But it also brings a lot of misalignment, and sometimes it brings pain."

## Off the Mat, Onto the Table

Many yoga students come into the practice thinking that yoga is the perfect holistic system for addressing their aches and pains. Practice makes perfect, in other words—a Western notion that, in combination with an Eastern discipline, can yield some very unrealistic expectations for a pain-free, well-balanced, highly functioning body.

"We are very fond of perpetuating the myth that yoga is a complete system. We like to say that it's all you need, but that's simply not true," says yoga therapist Leslie Kaminoff, who is the author of *Yoga Anatomy* and founder of The Breathing Project, a yoga studio that's based in Manhattan. "It needs to be supplemented to maintain balance."

One way to do this, Kaminoff believes, is with bodywork. "A bodyworker can reach areas of your body on a mechanical level that you yourself don't have leverage on," he says. "You will only ever have so much space between yourself and the floor. Generally, massage or myofascial work takes place on a table, which means the bodyworker can drop [your] limbs below the supporting surface." And that makes a really big difference, he says, in range of motion.

That leverage can also make a profound difference when it comes to accessing the fascia, the connective tissue that surrounds, permeates, and connects our body's muscles and bones. "People think that muscles move our bones around, but really the bones and muscles exist in one big fascial net," explains Tom Myers, the author of *Anatomy Trains*, who pioneered the Kinesis Myofascial Integration (KMI) bodywork style. "Very often what's going on with the hip is connected to what's going on with the neck."

Getting more movement in this connective tissue through yoga, as Rosenberg found, can be difficult; in yoga, you're working from the inside out. "But a skilled bodyworker can look from the outside and see not only the pattern but what the pattern is doing in the body," Myers says. That makes it easier for bodyworkers to access the fascia and loosen scar tissue and adhesions as well as relieve the tightness and imbalance that can come from repetitive movements.

Beginners, however, may not want to turn to bodywork as an answer to every difficulty they encounter on the mat, Kaminoff notes. "If you're a beginner who's never had a private yoga lesson or a yoga therapy session, do that first. You can make breakthroughs it would take years to get in a class setting," he says. "But also know that there is a range of limitations that might be neuromuscular or due to the nature of the fascia. And with those things, bodywork can really help."

## **Sacred Space**

There's something else: In a world where people rush just to make it to work and yoga class and home again, the massage table has taken on the aura of a sacred space. "Most people are surprised by how still you are on the table," says John LeMunyon, a neuromuscular therapist and meditation instructor in Birmingham, Alabama. "People's natural breath rhythms begin to emerge. I've begun to think that what people are really paying for is a safe place to be quiet and be directed through an experience of their own bodies."

His clients, often yogis, have undergone huge breakthroughs, he says, enabled mostly by the calm and quiet. "I recently had a woman who could never release her leg towards the floor when sitting in Sukhasana," he says. "When I had her on the table, I was able to pick her leg up and move it around and show her its full range of motion. I showed her how to let her thighbones rotate at the pelvis, and she was able to receive that information on the massage table in a way she never quite could in my yoga class. The next week in class, she released her thigh toward the floor and said, 'Oh my God.' She did the work; I just showed her something she hadn't been able to see before."

Learning to receive is a skill all yogis need to cultivate, says Devarshi Steven Hartman, the director of professional training for the Kripalu Center in Stockbridge,

Massachusetts, who's been teaching yoga and bodywork for more than 25 years. He's seen yoga trends come and go but feels that some people aren't getting the full benefits of the practice. "We are seeing more and more people who come into classes, do the asana, then get up and walk out before Savasana," he says. "We don't know how to be receptive. Deep tissue work, especially, will demand that you learn to work with the breath and receive. That translates into benefits off the table."

## Getting Unstuck

Such was the case for Carrie Gaynor. She was a skier, hiker, and runner with an aggressive Ashtanga and Iyengar Yoga practice and a full-time job as a registered nurse when she first found her way to bodywork. It was an injury that brought her to the table: a skiing accident that led to a blown anterior cruciate ligament and torn menisci. After undergoing surgery in the late '90s, along with a painfully slow recovery, Gaynor began to explore many forms of bodywork.

From each she learned something important, she says. "From the soft, deep, subtle work, I learned to do my asana without powering through everything. I began to learn where to make effort and where to relax," she says. "From more breath-centered bodywork, I was able to unlock some emotional blocks and see life much more clearly. In my Rolfing sessions I felt the pranic channels begin to clear and open. I was a yogi, so I knew what it was, and I was amazed that this could happen on the massage table. I thought that these openings were specific to yoga, but it turns out skilled bodyworkers can assist in removing energy blocks, too."

As her mind and body began to clear, Gaynor decided to make some big life changes: She left her job, pursued training as a KMI structural bodyworker, and began to study yoga more deeply with teachers Leslie Kaminoff, Esther Myers, and Kali Ray. Today, Gaynor is a yoga therapist and instructor, KMI practitioner and trainer, and co-director of the Absolute Yoga and Wellness Institute in Rochester, New York.

No one *needs* bodywork to do yoga; the practice always meets us where we are. However, as Gaynor points out, bodywork can help us by creating freedom in those stuck spots that we just can't get to ourselves. "There are wonderful things we do in yoga: self-trust in our internal experience, and self-study," she says. "But deep, long-standing areas of fascial restriction create places in the body where awareness literally has nowhere to dwell. You can't see them or often even know that they're there. You might just experience these restrictions as 'Why can't I do backbends?'"

As for Rosenberg, her Wheel Pose is now deep, beautiful, and pain free—a *true* credit to her practice. "The highest purpose of yoga isn't to do the perfect backbend but to awaken to our true nature as divine, blissful beings," she says. "Because of the journey I've taken to work through the pain in my body, I have become stronger, more flexible."

She adds, "I tell my students, 'You have to be an active participant in your own unfolding.' Don't stop doing yoga. But if you are meeting a place of resistance or pain, why not do everything else you can to address it too?"

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