

FOOT NOTES



By Rama Jyoti Vernon

My father's pioneer work as a chiropractor and naturopath was either several years ahead of his times or thousands of years behind. "All diseases emanate from the spine," he taught. "Align the body. . .enlighten the self." "If your head aches, adjust the neck. If the neck aches, adjust the shoulders." And to do this, we were told to adjust the base. And where was this? To the chiropractor it was the coccyx. To my mother, a physical therapist fascinated with Zone Therapy (also known as Reflexology), it was the feet. To my yoga teacher Mr. B.K.S. Iyengar, who I was not destined to meet for 33 years, it was: the feet when standing; the spinal base when sitting; the buttocks, shoulders and occiput when lying down. "You all think your brain is only up here," he would say tapping his head. "But what about the brain in your little toe. Even when you stand, the brain must humble itself and descend to the feet."

In yoga, the head which holds the

physical brain is thought to be the seat of ego. The feet, according to the Bible and also the ancient yogis, are symbols of humility and peace. In the Scorpion posture we have a classic example of the feet standing upon the head, as if to subdue the ego. Inverted postures and forward bends can also be considered as humbling the ego, since the feet are brought higher than the head or the head is brought down towards the feet.

"You all want to stand on your head," Mr. Iyengar responded to our effusive requests, "but you have not yet learned how to stand on your feet." He did not read our minds as many of us first thought, rather he observed our mental states by watching the way in which we held, moved or didn't move the body. "Tight toes. . . tight brain. Cling with your toes. . .you cling with your mind." Mr. Iyengar's words slapped the sleeping intelligence of toes into immediate alertness. "A contracted arch means a contracted spine," he would warn when we looked like ballerinas in our backbends. In Zone Therapy, the mid-arch is the site of the spinal reflex. I

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Tadasana:

"Alignment is enlightenment."

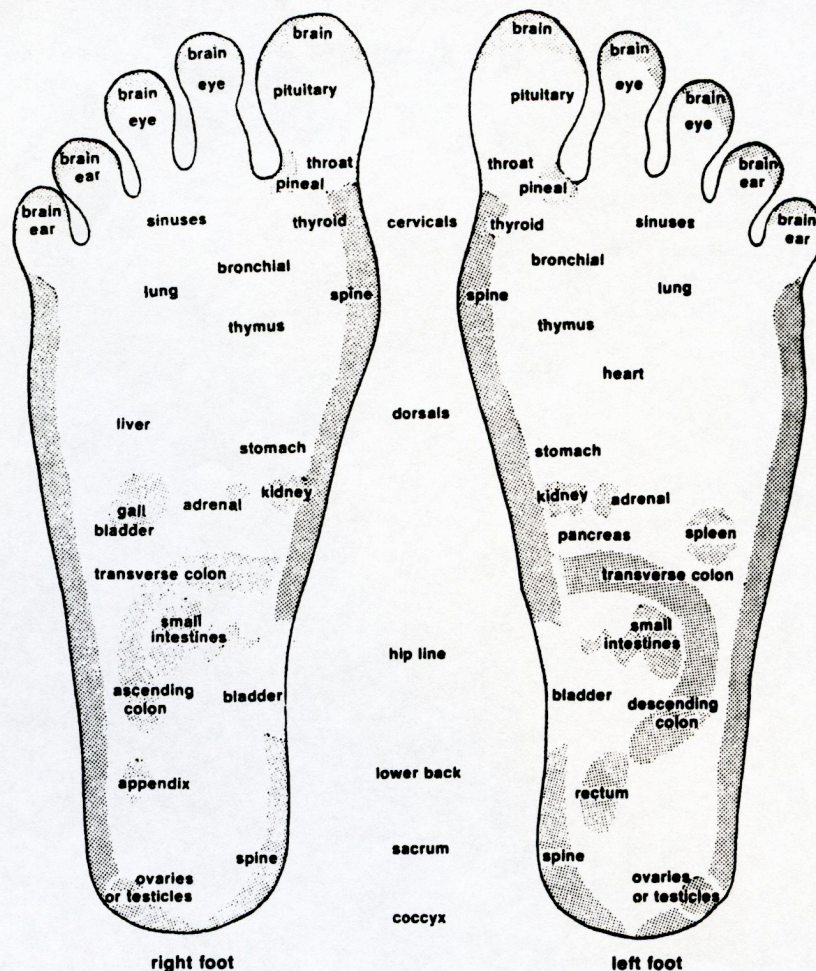
could not help but see parallels between ancient yogic knowledge and the more modern healing aid of Reflexology.

In yoga, energy is known as prana: "pra" means to bring forth and "na" means the eternal mystical vibration. According to ancient scriptures, the five major divisions of prana are physiologically responsible for respiration, circulation, digestion, elimination and the overall bodily functions such as growth, repair and decay. These five pranas relate to the endocrine glands, and on a more subtle level to psychic centers known as chakras. The pranas are transmitted through subtle nerve channels known as nadis which relate—speculatively—to the nervous system. Blockages within these channels are believed to result from emotional stress, postural mal-alignment and, according to many yogis, our own self-created karmas. If a restriction of the natural flow of pranic energies within or around the human vehicle occurs, imbalance and eventual disease can occur in various parts of our body. Zone Therapy, like asana and pranayama, is practiced to remove these blockages and to bring about and maintain a balance of energy.

The emphasis Hatha Yoga places on balance shows in a concern for harmony of alignment. The very terms "ha" and "tha" mean sun and moon, and relate to all opposing forces of creation such as positive/negative, male/female, assertive/passive. Physiologically, this corresponds to the alternating currents of the autonomic nervous system, and to the intellectual and instinctual halves of our brain. "To balance your brain," insists Mr. Iyengar, "you must stand equally on both feet." "Press the ball of the little toe and outer heel into the ground," he commands in the most difficult of all poses, Tadasana. This is where we simply—or not so simply—learn to stand on our feet. "Keep the toes uplifted and roll towards the inner arch . . . Keep the height of the arch and equalize pressure across the ball and the circumference of your heels." This is incredible, I thought, as we rolled across the ten longitudinal zones of Reflexology. He's not only bilaterally integrating brain hemispheres, but he's giving us a foot treatment—or better yet, he's teaching us how to give one to ourselves.

Reflexology like other healing methodologies, is not as isolated from yoga as we may at first think. It is a form of detection and correction. If there is pain when pressure is applied to the various zones of the feet or hands, this indicates constriction or imbalance in the corresponding gland or organ. Through compression massage of the nerve endings (which are the size of a pinhead) an electrical impulse is created that moves through the body into the brain. By energizing these nerve endings, congestion in the corresponding area is relieved.

"There are only two things you can do to



All the nerves of the body have their endings in the feet. By working the muscles, tendons and crystal deposits, signals are flashed to the corresponding areas of the body, hastening relaxation and rejuvenation.

the human body," my mother would say, "either stimulate or inhibit it." According to Reflexology practitioners, uneven pressure on the feet, due to faulty posture or ill-fitting shoes, can overstimulate some nerve endings while inhibiting others. This in itself can bring about imbalance.

By paying careful attention to the position of the feet in all yoga postures, aspiring yogis find that shoes no longer wear out unevenly, calluses soften and the space between the toes expands. "Give space to your toes. . . you give space to your mind." Mr. Iyengar demonstrated this masterfully when his little and big toes simultaneously soared to separate corners of the universe. His forehead seemed to broaden with this action. The toes and the their base, according to Reflexologists, contain nerve endings extending to glands and sensory organs within the head. Even the sinuses are believed to benefit from pressure on the base of the toes. Although each toe relates to specific organs within the head, the big toe relates to all glands and organs within the entire head.

According to the *Vashista Samhita*, a Sanskrit text on yoga thought to be written before the 14th Century, there are 18 vital

points within the body. The first one is found in the big toe and the last in the top of the head. Correspondingly, in the light of 20th Century anatomy, we know that the nerves from the pituitary, the master endocrine gland of the body, end in the big toe. The pituitary is located within the center of the head and its nerve endings are found in the center of the big toe.

"Your feet are the barometer of the body," my mother would say, pointing out that in patients whose arches were falling there was simultaneously prolapse of the colon and vital organs. "The outline of your feet conforms to the contours of your body. If you want to know what shape your head is in," she teased, "look at your big toes." I remember once as a child, seeing her walk into the treatment room, take hold of a new patient's feet and, without looking, accurately describe the shape of the woman's body when she began to massage her client's foot, beginning with the center of the big toe, it was so tender that the woman nearly hit the ceiling. My mother asked if she suffered from migraine headaches. "I sure do," the woman squealed. Just as the head is obviously a major focal point in the human body, so too

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"Zone Therapists believe that we cannot give ourselves an adequate foot treatment because to reach the feet we have to bend the knees."

is the big toe in the practice of Reflexology. Most treatments begin at this point.

The importance of the big toe must have been recognized centuries ago, since the founding fathers of yoga named a posture after it. Padangusthasana ("pad" means foot, "anga" means part, "gustha" means big toe) is popularly known as the Big Toe Pose. Starting from the basic standing position, Tadasana, and moving into a standing forward bend, the thumb and index finger are wrapped around the neck of the big toe. The thumb and forefinger pull up while the base of the toe is pushed down. If pressure is equal in both actions, an amazing vitality is created, lengthening the vertebral column as well as the hamstrings. It is important in this pose, according to Mr. Iyengar, not to compress the neck. In Zone Therapy, the neck reflex is found in the neck of the big toe.

A foot treatment is a systematic affair. It begins with the big toe and then continues with the rest of the foot. We find the same in yoga, where the Big Toe Pose precedes Pada Hastasana (pada=foot, hasta=stand), the "Hand to Foot" pose. Zone Therapists believe that we cannot give ourselves an adequate foot treatment, because to reach the feet we have to bend the knees. When the knee bends, the electrical impulses between feet and head are supposedly changed, and the treatment is not effective. Through yoga postures, however, we can lengthen the hamstrings so that the knees don't have to bend. Instead of bringing feet to hands, the hands can be brought to the feet. In the "Hand to Foot" pose, the ball of the foot stands literally on the ball of the hand. Reflexes in this area correspond to chest, lungs, thyroid, heart and liver. Some Reflexologists recommend stretching onto the balls

of the feet each day to stimulate nerve endings.

"Rise onto the balls of your feet," Mr. Iyengar directed us in Tadasana, not knowing that he was asking us to step on our chests. "Press the roots, not the tips of your toes into the floor." The toes were the brain. He asked the impossible. It was difficult to unkink these parts that for years had been curling with fears, uncertainties, and expectations. We were toppling like trees in a hurricane. "Why are your hands so tense? I did not ask you to tense your hands!" In trying to balance on the balls of our feet, our hands were doing exactly what our feet, toes and, no doubt, our brains were doing—gripping. As we relaxed the palms and fingers, we noticed that the feet and toes did the same. As the feet softened, so too would the hands.

In Zone Therapy, hand compression massage is not considered as effective as massage to the feet, but the therapeutic zones in the feet and hands are the same. In postures where the weight is on the hands (such as Handstand, Elbow Balance and Downward Facing Dog), Mr. Iyengar stresses that the weight should be equally distributed upon the palms and fingers as it would be upon the feet and toes when standing.

In forward bending postures the hands either hold the ankles, the soles of the feet, or one hand clasps the alternate wrist. The

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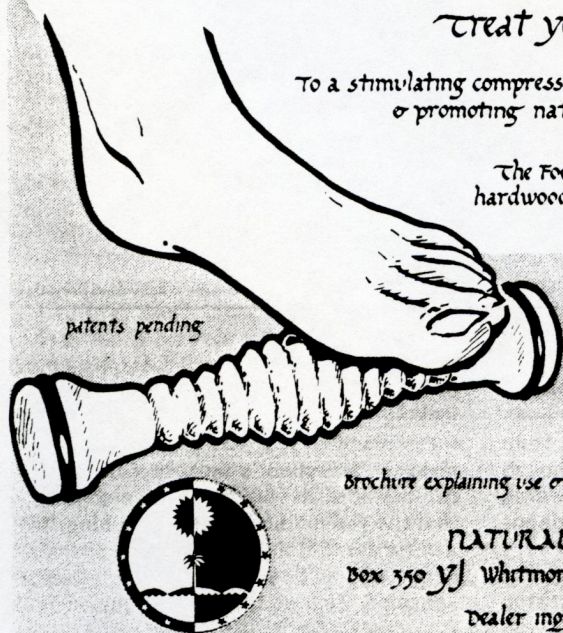
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connection of hands and feet has special significance in yoga. Esoterically, it completes the circuits of energy that flow through fingers and soles, and through right and left sides. Exoterically, with the pressure of the hands on the ankles or feet, resistance is created, giving space to joints and spinal vertebrae. This pressure also promotes a healthy transfer of circulation from the arteries to the veins in the bottoms of the feet. According to Reflexology, compression massage—or even

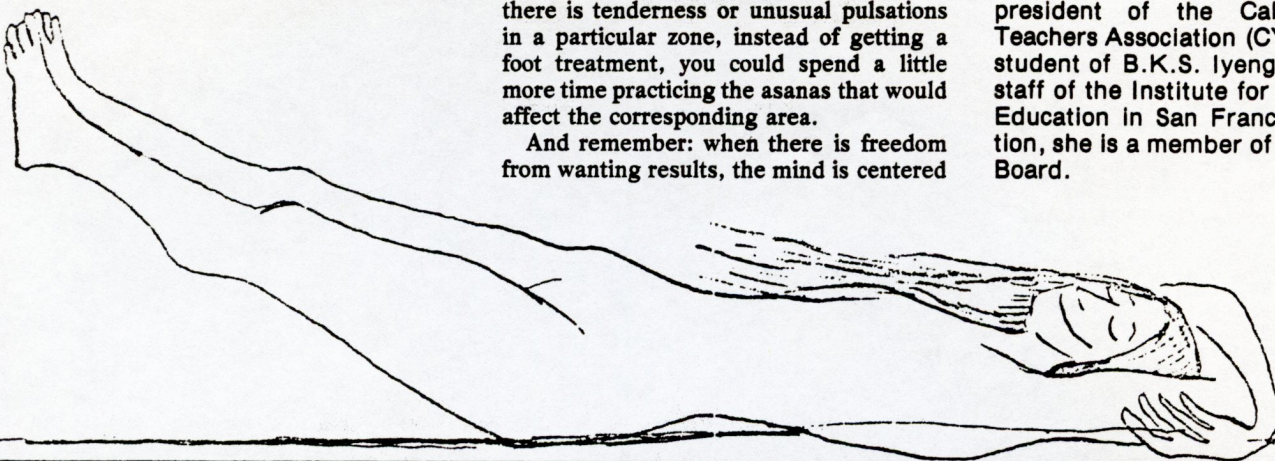
placing the hands on the feet—helps the blood on its upward journey to the heart and brain.

Even without the application of pressure, we may at times feel pulsations or tenderness in the various zones of our feet: in the ankles before the menstrual cycle, or in the central arch after an emotionally trying day. For those already practicing yoga, knowledge of the various zones can be helpful, not so much as a corrective but as a form of speculative self-diagnosis. If there is tenderness or unusual pulsations in a particular zone, instead of getting a foot treatment, you could spend a little more time practicing the asanas that would affect the corresponding area.

And remember: when there is freedom from wanting results, the mind is centered

in the present. Weight equally balanced on the feet indicates a brain that has found its balance, and a mind that has found the moment. "Balance by stretching the skin of your soles equally, both vertically and horizontally." Mr. Iyengar's own feet seemed to spiral into infinity, as he echoed the universal call of Reflexology and yoga: "If you give space to your sole, you will give space to your soul." ☆

Rama Jyoti Vernon is a former president of the California Yoga Teachers Association (CYTA). She is a student of B.K.S. Iyengar and on the staff of the Institute for Yoga Teacher Education in San Francisco. In addition, she is a member of YJ's Editorial Board.



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