Good Yoga Teachers "Read" Bodies Better Than Doctors Do

by Timothy McCall, M.D.

Despite having gone through medical school where I studied human anatomy intensely, did a month-long rotation on the orthopedics service and another month on rheumatology, I had no idea my spine was anything other than normal until I started to attend yoga classes. None of my professors, classmates or primary care physicians noticed anything out of the ordinary either.

But when I started practicing asana a little over 20 years ago, my abnormal spine was obvious to seasoned yoga teachers, sometimes the very first time they laid eyes on me. Mary Lou Weprin, who was filling in for my teacher Donald Moyer at the Yoga Room in Berkeley, California several years ago, was one. "What’s going on with your spine?" she called out from the other side of the room, soon after class had begun. By that time, I knew the answer.

When I was 11 years old, I fell out of a second story window. I’d been diagnosed with a wrist fracture, which healed well. But when my yoga practice had loosened up my back muscles sufficiently — stiff from years of tennis and bike riding, and zero stretching — it became apparent that something else was going on in my spine that was limiting my range of motion. On my first trip to India in 2002, a yoga teacher and therapist who was also a family physician, Dr. S.V. Karandikar, suggested I get an X-ray of my spine.

"For how long you’ve been doing yoga," Dr. Karandikar said as he watched me do a forward bend, "that’s not normal." The X-ray and subsequent MRI and CAT scans revealed that many of my vertebrae were fused together (ankylosing is the term they used), there were compression fractures of T6 and T7 which were fused together, and the ribs in many places were also fused to the spine. In addition, I have scoliosis. All this was likely the result of multiple spinal fractures that had been missed after my fall from the window. My body appears to have fused the bones together to protect me.
That yoga teachers could see what even seasoned physicians could not shocked me. But over time, I came to realize that we physicians aren’t really that well-trained to look at bodies, despite all the focus on anatomy in our education. Part of the problem is that anatomy training is very reductionist. We learned many details about individual muscles, where they originate and attach, what bones they move, etc. but little about the way they actually work together in a living, breathing body. The other reason is that as diagnostic imaging has become increasingly sophisticated in the last few decades, doctors and medical educators have placed less and less value on the ability to perform a detailed clinical exam (with a few notable exceptions like Dr. Abraham Verghese, author of *My Own Country: A Doctor’s Story*).

I’ve been repeatedly amazed over the years watching master yoga teachers like BKS Iyengar, his daughter Geeta, and Donald Moyer, to name a few, work with students. They see so much. The same is true of the Ayurvedic physician, Chandukutty Vaidyar, who I studied with in India from 2006 until his death in early 2017. Without asking any questions (he was still pretending he spoke no English at that point!), Chandukutty detected my spinal condition within seconds the first time we met. "Two bones in one," he once said about my fused compression fractures, without the benefit on having seen any of my films. Since then, I’ve seen a few seasoned bodyworkers also highly skilled at reading bodies.
After years of working with such teachers, and pursuing my own practice intensely, I noticed that my abilities to read bodies was growing. My experience suggests that the more you practice and the more you teach (and the more you study), the better that ability becomes. I only wish I’d had been able to see as clearly in my years of practicing medicine, as it could have benefitted my patients enormously.

All of this, of course, is what medical scientists refer to disparagingly as "anecdotal evidence." The direct experience that yogis value so highly is at the bottom of the totem pole in the world of "evidence-based medicine," but in this case it’s been persuasive to me. As Henry David Thoreau once said, “Some circumstantial evidence is very strong, as when you find a trout in the milk.”

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