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whatever happened to the prana?

by alison clare steingold

energetics, the dangers of the alignment police, and the gymnastics routine formerly known as yoga

When I told a yogini comrade I was writing an article about whatever happened to prana, she turned to me and said, "Prana? You mean, like, the brand?"

That's what happened to prana.

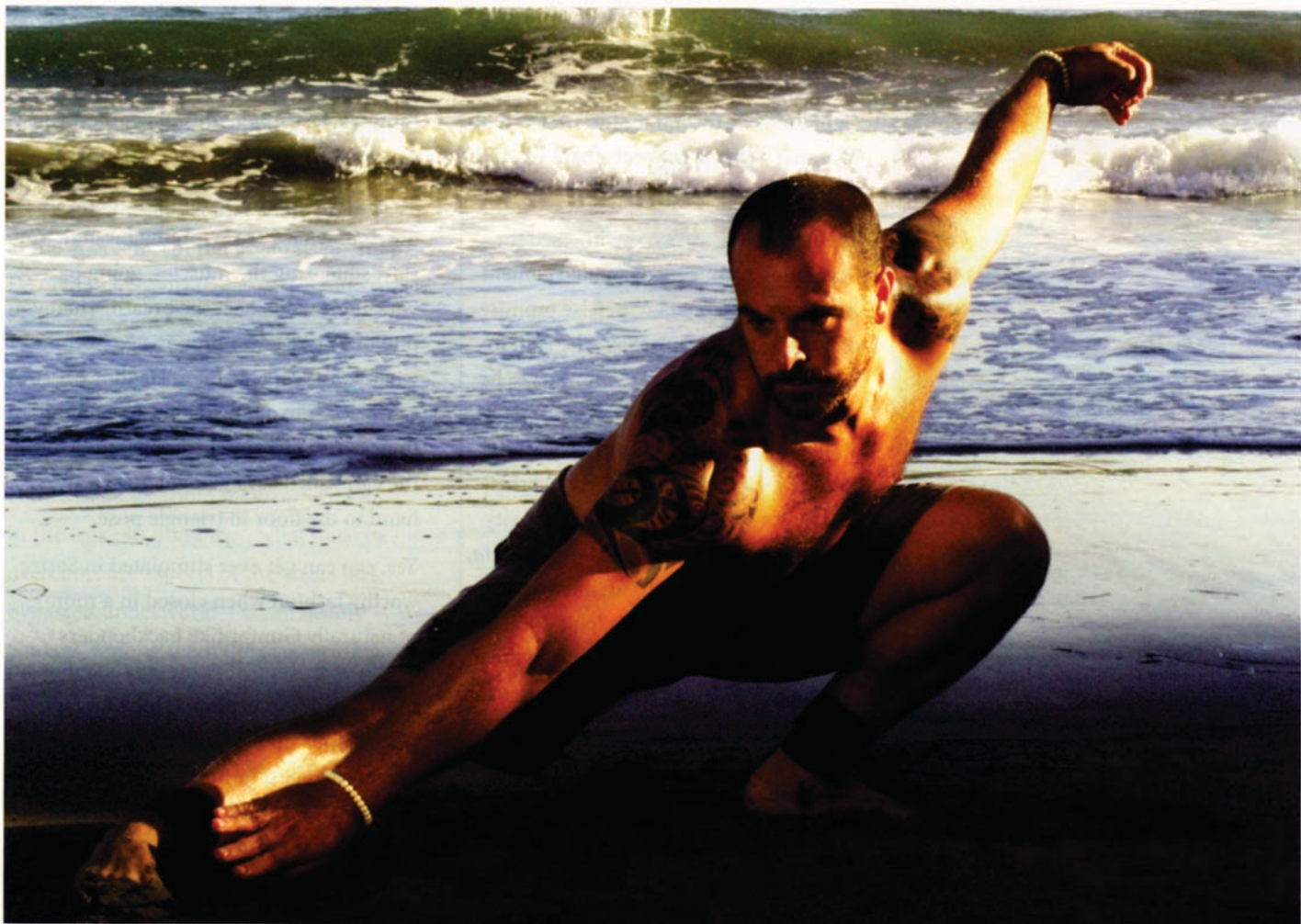
"People throw the word around without knowing how to understand it," says Matt Schwartz from across a Formica table. "They'll say that if you're breathing, you've got prana; the *praaahnnna* is flowing," he mocks in treacly yogavoice. "Sorry. It's just not like that."

I'm sitting over brisket sandwiches with yoga teacher and doctor of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Matt Schwartz. He's the sole instructor in Los Angeles—one of but nine in the US—with permission from Aussie-based Shandor Remete to teach the forms of Shadow Yoga.

Dynamically bridging the gaps among the sacred arts of the East, the school doesn't just cull its graceful *karanas* (movements) and *asanas* from ancient hatha and Shivaite texts. The humble evolution of Remete's 50 years of

erudite practice looks to straight-from-the-horse's-mouth writings of Krishnamacharya, Shaolin fighting, ancient Vedic astrology, and Southern India's commingling pool of arts: from Kalaripayattu martial training and the classical dance of Karthakali to Ayurveda and Marmasthana (the study of the 108 vital *marmas*, or joints in the body, loosely parallel to acupuncture points).

"The experience of prana is the experience of opening channels," Schwartz says between bites of coleslaw.



Of those 72,000 energy currents (*nadis*) traversing the subtle body, ancient texts suggest but 13 to heed. And hatha tradition implores that no student see the inside of an asana room without clearing so many energetic obstacles first. That's accomplished with cleansing *kriyas*—*uddiyana bandha* and *navli* among them; and learning all about the vital marma points, the 10 *vayus* (winds) that govern the *nadis*—basically studying the microcosm, then macrocosm. “Only after understanding the organic body [internal organs], and the marmas...vayus...nadis...like as [Natha philosopher] Goraksha says, until you understand all that, you're not doing 'yoga.'”

That's a pretty daunting lifetime homework assignment.

He pauses. “It's the stars, the planets, different times of the day—the seasons, the elements...” And that trusting, instinct-

based intelligence, Schwartz concludes, builds pranic awareness. The opposite, he smiles, is “a waste of energy.”

“Krishnamacharya says that overworking any one area is the path to imbalance,” he continues, humbly differentiating his words from the guru as I bite into a pickle spear. “That's when energy gets stuck. So when you pump your muscles, or make a backbend out of every pose, or worse—do a three-hour “advanced” asana practice—you breed more imbalance.”

Schwartz's path, like Remete, has drawn from a wide variety of longtime relationships with various martial arts, tai chi, medical qi-gong, and the Korean Sun-do. During his decade with Remete, he has earned a degree in biomechanics and kinesiology, and later, a masters in TCM/acupuncture and credentials as a yoga therapist. He's happy to riff on both Ayurveda and the alchemical body as he

understands it, not to mention the more esoteric hidden meridians of Taoism.

Here's an inarguably philosophical guy; but, like his teacher, he regards trendy urban asceticism as Kryptonite for the spiritual seeker. Remete is known to kick back with an espresso and a croissant after a workshop. Well, the bhogic guy talking shop across from me challenges his students to hold squats for minutes, but he also watches Sunday football and, apparently, fancies Jewish rye.

For prana to pierce the surface—“to uncover the intelligence in the sinews, tendons, ligaments and bones,” Schwartz says—requires softening and grounding. With Henckels-sharp wit, he playfully berates yoga's more fashionable side. Apart from the sale of zafus, the more inward facets of yoga/meditation don't exactly jingle with dollar signs. And to let that



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fitness aspect go, the opportunity to arrive at a complete rhythmic dance between breath and movement arises. "There are eight limbs. Why are we stuck in the limb of asana? Where's the pratyahara when the teacher's barking alignment?"

The native Angeleno has witnessed the devolution of an already diluted content in classes, supplanted with false promises of flyers half-punning that "The Path to Enlightenment is Sweaty." Nowadays, he says, vinyasa classes "pump handstands and crazy arm balances and backbends. Those unstable freeform dance hybrids? You just get all vata'd out." Frenetic city living can lead to general dis-ease of *vata*, the *dosha* (constitution) of fluttering air. When like attracts like, his logic goes, the practice that nourishes and enables the qi to flow may not necessarily be the one that excites in a Cirque du Soleil kind of way.

"Firmness comes over time from the root up, from the structure of bones and legs. But what's the hurry?" He pauses with a wry smile to crack a joke about weekend workshops to "open your chakras," equating its importance with something like the perceived benefit of, say, chakra panties.

"Go slow," he says. Allow soft breath—not making it sound like the ocean or the teacher's sing-song "Inhale...Exhale"—to determine movement. Perhaps then, that metallic, mechanical compulsion to, say, pull your shoulder blades down your back, might pacify. "And if your knee tracks in front of your ankle," he jibes, "who cares?"

Schwartz's reluctance to teach certain poses stems from his observation that there's surprisingly little understanding of traditional seats like *padmasana* and *svastikasana* in a race for classes to "give it to you for 90 minutes, whether or not you're ready." Two-thirds of his longtime students, he says, aren't equipped for *sirshasana* (headstand): "They don't call it the 'king of poses' for nothing. You can do great damage to the organic body if you

shoulder through. You fry the nervous system." His solution? "Stand still. Work up to standing in horse [stance] for 20 minutes. Learn *mayurasana*... Then you can work the pranayama."

To clarify: "In injury and treatment, so much of what I see is forcing [asana]. You start squeezing the muscles, going past your limit. You cheat the breath. Then you pull out these crazy props to go beyond what you're capable of..." He dips his sandwich into a bowl of jus. "The only injuries in yoga result from greed. It's only the ego which says I've 'got' to get my hand to the floor in triangle pose."

Yes, ego can get over stimulated in Sartre-worthy fashion when closed in a room of naturally Gumbi-like backbenders or the open-hipped Ashtangi touching toe to head in scorpion. (Don't forget that zealous fitness component, either, personified best in June's *Vanity Fair* yogi portfolio editorializing Christy Turlington's "perfect yoga butt.") Schwartz shrugs to what he says refuses to call a spade a spade: "Call it cardio. Or Swedish calisthenics. Don't, though, call it yoga."

What's dying, he figures, is the curiosity to question asana and what's beyond asana. What's missing is the prana: "Can you peel the layers to understand how energy moves? And do it without aggression? Can you sit still for a half-hour...or in horse stance for one minute?"

His shrewd concern extends to those yoga styles overemphasizing parts of the body that, over time, can lead to displaced organs and bloated bellies. Pressing too hard with the big toe—because the "yoga police" say so—can disrupt the energetic meridian between foot and eye. The health of the corresponding liver is then compromised by small-mind desires to mimic *Yoga Journal*'s cover model...or Christy Turlington, for that matter. "Forget about the big toe," he concludes with a sip of iced tea, "Information can't be imposed. My job is to drop clues, that's all."

Those clues? Like metaphysical output of study: "What's interesting in meridians and acupuncture points is seeing where the body is moving or not moving. If the outer part of the leg hurts, for example, it's related to the gallbladder channel. Look at the energetics of the organ itself. Then ask: Do I lack gall? Courage?"

In challenging practitioners to stop resisting the harmony-seeking flow of nature (and to stop stopping, too), his euphemism for dropping alignment comes as a classroom mantra: "Trust in the legs." In those legs, what must be overcome are aspects of the yoga's oft-bypassed underworld—seven deadly chakras, among them the fear residing in the hips (*atala*) and the resentment housed in the thighs (*vitala*). That first step of bone-and joint-strengthening movement—squats, horse stance and dynamic, coordinated *karanas* of Remete's prelude forms—move the prana, enabling elusive asanas, or seats, to come in time. When ready, integral seats like *padmasana* (lotus pose) and *siddhasana* (perfect pose) assist in pulling energy inward, unlocking in the gross body's stillness. More fluid opening of, those pesky shoulders, maybe, falls in line.

And if grounding yoga students and treating patients in this manner is Schwartz's day job, then his ultimate fantasy is a peculiar—albeit charming—one: "It is my goal for no one to show up to my class because they're all practicing at home."

(Guess then he'll have even more time for brisket sandwiches.)

Matt Schwartz and Shandor Remete Shadow Yoga workshop, November 9-11 goldenmonkeyhealing.com; shadowyoga.com.

Alison Clare Steingold is an LA-based freelance writer and editor who covers all things style and substance—from dining to yoga—for publications like C and Los Angeles.

A full-page photograph of a woman with long brown hair tied back, wearing a dark green sleeveless top and bright orange wide-leg pants. She is captured in a dynamic, mid-stride pose, looking back over her shoulder towards the camera. The background is a plain, light color.

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