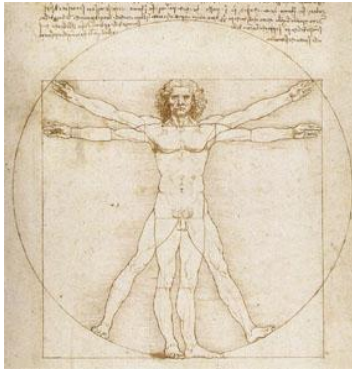


Aunty Pat Anjali's Problem Page

Size Matters!

Every Body is not the same and should not be treated the same when it comes to the practice of yoga asana. A great teacher may have found the ideal way of practicing a certain asana to fit their body, but that way may not fit yours. If you have size 10 feet, would you wear size 6 shoes, just because those shoes are a perfect fit for your teacher? If you did wear those shoes, day after day the result would be compression and damage to the foot initially and then to the rest of the body as you tried to compensate.

Most yoga teachers are very aware of the needs of students with particular ailments and adapt and modify asanas for them. They will also look after the beginner carefully in a mixed ability class. However, one aspect of difference is often ignored and that aspect is **Proportion**, particularly the relative size of limbs and trunk.



We do not have all the same proportions. The relative length of our trunk and limbs, particularly arms makes a tremendous difference when it comes to practising asana

We can observe differences in proportion of trunk and arm length by looking at Dandasana



A person with relatively long arms and a short back will have their hands flat on the floor with their elbows bend when sitting in Dandasana.



A person with short arms and a long back will not be able to have the heels on their hands on the floor in Dandasana
In this picture Anne's hands are two inches off the floor

The reason for this preamble is that question of the month concerns certain backbending asanas:

Dear Aunty Pat

I always get a headache immediately after practicing Dhanurasana (the bow) and Ustrasana(the camel). Can you help?

This is a fairly common problem which seems to effect about 5-10% of yoga students. I have this problem myself and have spent many years trying to fathom out the cause. The headache does not occur in other backbending asanas such as Bhujangasana (cobra) or Salabhasana (locust). I have asked many very experienced teachers and medical practitioners to explain. Various reasons have been suggested including compression of the neck, compression of the lumbar spine, and stimulation of the sympathetic nervous system due to stretching the sympathetic ganglia adjacent to the thoracic spine. I have been able to rule out compression of the neck by careful practice, and in my view if the reason was sympathetic stimulation, then this would occur in the other backbending postures. That leaves compression of the lumbar as a possible culprit .Let's explore why this could possibly happen.

A person who has a relatively long trunk and short limbs simply cannot avoid compressing the lumbar spine when they try to reach for their feet and ankles in Ustrasana or Dhanurasana . Dhanurasana and ustrasana are effectively the same posture from different bases. Another similar body movement is Dwi Pada Pitham (bridge) variation holding the ankles.



Notice the distance between the hand and the feet in Dwi Pada Pitham (the Bridge)



If we ask the student with relatively short arms to take hold of the feet or ankles the knees will be compromised and probably the whole posture will be out of alignment



Struggling to reach for the feet in Dhanurasana anteverts the pelvis and compresses the lumbar

It is very difficult for yoga teachers to appreciate the effects of body proportion when they have a completely different proportion. It's always instructive to try on someone else's shoes. A simple experiment that a class of diploma course students did was to practice Dhanurasana with the beginning distance of hands to feet that the person with the long back and short arms has. A partner held the feet away from the buttocks to emulate this. All students who tried this realised the compression forces that occur in the lumbar spine no matter how hard they tried to "lengthen the lumbar" when reaching for the feet.

So to modify to avoid compression we simply need to effectively lengthen the arms– for Dhanurasana and Dwi Pada Pitham a belt around the ankles suffices, for Ustrasana use bricks beside the feet. I do not recommend the common practice of turning the toes under to lift the heels as this increases the forces through the knee joint and also often anteverts the pelvis.



Using a belt around the ankles to effectively "lengthen" the arms.

Differences in proportion do not only affect backbending postures but many other postures as well. For example the effects of proportion will show up in: squatting -relative length of femur to tibia; Baddhakonasana (cobbler) -relative length of femur to tibia; Sirsasana (head stand)-relative length of humerus to head and neck; the ability to "jump through" in Astanga Vinyasa yoga -relative length of arms to trunk; supporting the back with the hands in Dwi Pad Pitham (Bridge) -relative length of arms to trunk.

Aunty Pat would love to hear your problems! If you have any problem to do with any aspect of yoga please email Pat directly patanjali42@aol.com.