

Why Alignment Matters

One often hears yoga teachers debating the finer points of alignment in postures, or encouraging their students to correct their alignment. Stacking of joints, lines of energy, lengthening the spine, all of these phrases are common to yoga classes across the country. We could get into a discussion of what defines good alignment, or how to get better alignment in postures – but I think a more interesting question is “why does alignment matter?”

Before getting into why alignment matters, I think it would be wise to define what exactly I mean by alignment. Teachers who concern themselves primarily with alignment are generally looking for the relationship of bones, joints, and muscles as they interact to produce yoga postures. For example, students in mountain pose (*tadasana*) often under-utilize the muscles of the upper back and over-utilize the muscles of the upper chest producing a slouching posture. Teachers will encourage students to “open their chest” which requires more action in the upper back and therefore produces better alignment in the pose. From a functional perspective, this adjustment in mountain pose makes sense because opening the chest improves the breathing and generally enhances the mood of the student. But here is the rub – if the instruction to “open the chest” is given to a student without the structural problem mentioned above (ie. A student with already functional posture) it will produce excessively tight muscles in the upper back and create new structural imbalances. Like continuing to prescribe a medication well after a medical condition has been treated, yoga teachers can actually create problems by adhering to rules of alignment rather than applying their knowledge of postures to students on a case-by-case basis.

Alignment is important. If you do triangle pose (*trikonasana*) without good alignment of the shin and thigh you are likely to hyper-extend and possibly damage your knees. There are countless other examples of how poor alignment can lead to yoga injuries and there is no doubt that good alignment prevents injuries. However, in a case where no injury is being prevented – what is the point of being properly “aligned” in a pose? If a student is perfectly comfortable in triangle and at no risk for injury, why would a teacher continue to make adjustments on the pose? Why does alignment matter?

Different teachers will give you different reasons for doing poses different ways - to get the “energy” flowing, to make the pose more efficient, effective, or energetic, or even just because it is the “right” way to do the pose. Proper alignment in any given pose is certainly not a given. Consult five different teachers and you will get five different alignments. So the question we should be asking is not “what alignment is the best?” but rather “what does the alignment accomplish?”

On a surface level, one can align triangle to accomplish particular results. A wider stance will give a bigger stretch for the legs and help you get your hand closer to the floor, for example. However, rather than results-based, case-by-case assessment of alignment issues, more often than not teachers of yoga instruct on the basis of getting students closer to a gold-standard of alignment. Some teachers will use Iyengar’s poses in *Light on Yoga*, some use their teacher’s poses, and some even use their own poses – but regardless of the source this teaching method misses the mark in terms of being genuinely helpful for students. There is no perfect pose because the poses do not exist as entities independent of a human body in which they are performed. Every pose is entirely dependant on the body in which that pose is performed as well as the context in which the pose is performed. For example, somebody who is over 6 feet tall and weighs 220 pounds will not perform postures like somebody under 5 feet tall and

weighing 80 pounds. Not only that but somebody who just woke up on a cold January morning will perform postures much differently than somebody who just went for a walk on a warm July evening. The “perfect” pose is the pose that best suits the needs of the person doing the pose at that moment.

Alignment is important – but not alignment for alignment’s sake. Alignment is a tool that we use to produce particular results. But it is the results that we value, not the tool. Spending our time trying to “get it right” in postures is confusing the ends and the means of the practice. Alignment is like a prescription medication – you use it to address a particular need and then stop taking it. Because one person’s condition was improved by taking a medication, there is no justifiable reason for that person to recommend that medication to anybody else. In the same way, you may well have had a powerful experience or resolved a postural issue as a result of aligning a pose a particular way, but we should not assume that the alignment will be beneficial for anybody else. Yoga is, after all, a path of personal discovery and unfolding.