



# balancing the body, **BALANCING THE MIND** by Tom Gillette

The beauty of yoga is that by working on your body's posture and physical alignments, you are simultaneously working on the more elusive qualities of mind and emotions. Finding mental balance in our lives is intimately connected with discovering balance in our physical bodies. Balance is all about locating your center. In a yoga practice, you quickly learn that you constantly move in and out of center. You need to train the mind to stay present, to notice the changes in balance as they arise, and to develop the skill of moving back to center. Not only will your practice help to build focus and awareness around emotions, but it will strengthen your feet, ankles, shins, thighs, and core muscles (to name a few examples.)

Physical balance is a huge topic. Here is the bad news: learning all the techniques for finding balance will never be enough. It requires real life actual practice. This is one thing that distinguishes yoga from merely talking about balance. You have to get out there and do the physical practice of balance in a regular and consistent way, even if it is only a few minutes here and there throughout your day.

The first problem is the mind. A wandering mind which lacks focus or a critical mind with a highly judgmental attitude are significant impediments that everyone encounters. The mind derails most beginners before they even start. The voices in your head that say "I am not good enough" "I am too old" "I am not flexible" are poisonous leeches on your life's vitality. Immediately discard this dialogue when it shows up. You are doing your practice. You don't have to be perfect. As a matter of fact, we all are very imperfect beings.

We practice because we are inflexible. Yoga practice will help to develop your range of motion. Everyone is getting old; so what? We practice because we are getting old and practicing will take our bodies and our lives into a healthier future. At Eyes of the World, we strongly emphasize safe practice with a nonjudgmental attitude. If you fall out of a balance, big deal. Everyone falls. Sometimes in class, we might purposely all fall out of a pose together to eliminate the stigma of any one person falling. We laugh, get up and practice again. Once you eliminate the mental fear of falling, you will find your physical posture will improve.

Let me briefly address one aspect of the physical practice of balance: the feet. Most people wear tight and constricting footwear daily which basically weakens the muscles of the foot. Did you ever break your arm or leg and have to wear a cast? When the cast came off, did you find the muscles were severely atrophied and it took a long time to get your strength back? It is the same with shoes. Foot muscles grow weak inside most fashionable foot wear.

The feet are the foundation of the yoga pose. If the foundation is weak, the building crumbles; a good deal of time is devoted to building a strong foundation. It is imperative to get grounded through the feet in a yoga class. In yoga we “wake up your feet.” We practice lifting the toes, spreading them out and grounding down into the earth. You can expect that your feet will be tired and sore when you start a yoga practice because your 20 foot muscles aren’t used to being exercised. You will learn how to move your awareness and your center of gravity down through the “four corners of the foot.” The four corners of the foot are the mound of the big toe, the mound of the little toe, the inner heel and the outer heel.

## TRY THIS

Stand up evenly on both feet. Lift and spread out your toes. Stretch them out from the foot and create a wide base of support. Ground down through the four corners of the foot. Slowly shift your weight onto one foot and right away bad habits will reveal themselves. Do your toes curl? That means your foot is a supinator and you have lost your grounding through the toes and the mound of the big toe.



Now, go back to standing on both feet and spread out the toes. Reestablish your attention by moving your center of gravity into the earth. When you shift onto one foot, does the arch collapse? This means you are a pronator, the inner leg muscles may be weak and your pelvic core muscles may not be giving your body the support it needs.

These are things you can work on. When you work on the body, you simultaneously work on the mind. Get on your mat, begin playing with the muscles of the feet and in time your situation will improve. What you practice gets stronger. What you don't practice gets weaker.

All of the muscles in the foot need to be coordinated for proper body movement and balance during changes of body position. Yoga teachers will emphasize pressure through the mound of the big toe because many people who supinate the foot need to develop this area. Once you press or align one body part you will invariably move another out of balance. Very often yoga alignment actions occur in pairs. If you are pressing down in one place, you will be pressing up somewhere else, creating length through the middle. If you are internally rotating one body part, you will need to externally rotate its opposing part to bring about stability.

Many people come to yoga with flat feet. It is an important problem to address; if left uncorrected it can cause a wide variety of structural and physiological dysfunctions in the body which will only get worse with time. If the foundation is weak, the core will be weak. The first thought a flat footed person may have is “I can't balance, I have flat feet.” Many people have successfully devoted themselves to rebuilding the structure of their feet by strengthening the intrinsic muscles of the foot, and by developing the calf muscles and the anterior tibialis on the front part of the shin. ■

Tom Gillette, Director of Eyes of the World Yoga Center, has practiced yoga and meditation since the 1970s and he has taught yoga since 1988. Tom is a respected teacher and trainer and has led 30 Yoga Teacher Training Certifications. He frequently runs programs at Kripalu. [www.innerhappiness.com](http://www.innerhappiness.com)



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