

Container and Content – a whole body approach to alignment.

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For BWY SE

Alignment is an intriguing concept. It seems to suggest that there is an optimal position for an object or an optimal relationship between objects for a perceived benefit. As yoga practitioners, we know the sensation of clear alignment in our own body when breath flows freely in asana and effort begins to dissolve into the freedom to *just be* in our practice. And, as teachers, we seek to guide students into this experience by sensing and observing their body and offering signposts through instruction. Our teaching points arise frequently from our responses to the musculoskeletal system and the language we use is often structural, as we make reference to bones, joint articulations, and muscle roles and actions. This is the doorway for many students into safe and effective asana practice and the domain in which progress can easily be measured in terms of flexibility, strength and tone.

From somatic modalities such as Integrative Bodywork and Movement Therapy and BodyMind Centering ©, the structures of the musculoskeletal system are described as forming a ‘container’, giving shape and movement to our intentions. They are recognised as the most tangible and easily accessible of the body systems but not the whole story.

“Every body system has its own unique function, expression, and associated quality of consciousness and is interdependent with every other system in the body. In embodied spiritual practice we nurture democracy within the body community as a way of creating balance, harmony and freedom.”¹

Populating the container is the “content” of the body comprising the organs, glands, fluids and vessel systems. The organs in particular provide weight and volume to the body, filling and supporting the container against fatigue and collapse, and giving fullness and buoyancy to our movement and posture. For example, an embodied sense of the heart provides support for the ribs and thoracic spine as well as providing a central support for the arms and hands.

¹ Donna Farhi, *Yoga Mind Body & Spirit*, Henry Holt and Company, 2000

The invitation to bring our awareness to internal structures that we may only know by name or through images in anatomy books is not that unusual, but to look for support and initiation of movement from these structures is more unfamiliar and requires of us a willingness to sense more deeply, to move more slowly and above all to let go of any end-game. It is through this kind of mindful movement enquiry that we can begin to sensitise ourselves to the presence of the organs and their relationships to each other, as well as their role in providing stability and support for the musculoskeletal system. Accompanying this new intimacy with the body is a new interpretation of the concept of alignment as it shifts away from simple structural arrangements and the organisation of lines of force through the body to an exploration into the optimal interaction between more unexpected structures and systems, between container and content, between outer and inner.

When we first listen to a classical piece of music we hear a beginning, middle and end, we hear melody and themes, understand the pace and rhythm, and connect to the overall feeling of the piece. On further listening, we might recognise various instruments and their separate parts and begin to appreciate the relationship between the assorted stringed instruments, or the communication between the brass section and the percussionists. Each player has multiple relationships that when perfectly aligned in the finished piece brings alive the composer's imagination. The more we listen the more acute our listening skills become. This is the way with embodied asana practice, an impeccable attention to the body systems as each asana is orchestrated offers new dimensions of felt-experience not only in each identifiable posture, but also the initiation of movement into and out of, and the transitions between.

Author: Beverley is a yoga practitioner and teacher with more than 25 year's experience. Originally trained in the Iyengar method she later evolved from the form into a more individual journey inspired by teachers like Angela Farmer, Donna Farhi and Judith Hanson Lasater. Her practice and teaching is significantly informed by her studies with Linda Hartley, author of Wisdom of the Body Moving, and her work as a Somatic Movement Therapist.