Anatomy

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A Functional Approach to Ankle-Loop

Hello and welcome to your foot. In this article, we are going to take a look at some of the possibilities we have as yoga teachers and how we offer instructions related to our feet. Beyond the placement of the feet, as it refers to the foundation of the yoga posture, there are a lot of possibilities for us as teachers to offer to students.

If you are familiar with "Ankle-Loop" and have taught this or suggested this, you may have been treading into the waters of foot and ankle biomechanics. These waters can be deep, so we'll keep to the shallow end of the pool for this article. I will, however, share a couple of resources that may either encourage a small amount of trust or be inspiring.

If you had a chance to read my last article in *Anusara Marga*, you might recall the introduction of the abbreviation "ADL" and what it stands for: "Activities of Daily Living." When we look into something such as function, intention can become a guide as to the type of function we are implying. If a person is talking about stability in the ankle during handstand, that is a very different function than stability in the ankle during a fluid walking exercise or even ankle stability while standing and reaching for an item in the cupboard. For this article, I will reference more than one function. Although there may be a crossover between portions of activities, each function may also be quite unique.

In short, a description of Ankle-Loop could be: the movement or action that elevates or stabilizes the arch of the foot in the lifting direction and moves or supports the position of the ankle towards the backside of the body. I have added the concept of stabilization here because of the idea of "Action versus Movement" that arises in some training.

It is possible that even though no apparent movement would indicate Ankle-Loop has been performed, the lack of collapse in the opposite direction while performing a move that would typically challenge the form of the arch or the position of the ankle may indicate that the action of Ankle-Loop has been in effect.

A technique for performing this loop has often been to spread and raise the toes. When done well, the shape of the arch and the position of the ankle moves or is

stabilized in the directions I have mentioned as Ankle-Loop. For some situations and intentions, this is a very effective way to engage and perform the loop. However, if you have ever walked around your home with wet toenails, freshly painted with the best of polishes, you may have noticed that moving about and performing many daily life activities with this engagement of the foot and ankle can be challenging and possibly even make activities harder to achieve. This method of Ankle-Loop is excellent for strengthening numerous important muscles and works especially well for stabilizing a foot that is not part of the foundation. When a foot is part of the foundation, this drawing away from the floor with the toes is likely to decrease stability in comparison to using a different set of muscles to press down with the tips of the toes, as well as with the mounds of the foot.

It is important here to distinguish between *pressing down* with these parts of the foot in a way that may create a more developed arch producing a shorter footbed and simply trying to *shorten* the foot while raising the arch. There are multiple ways to shorten the footbed and increase the height of the arch, yet not all of them produce the same effect in the ankle or the same rooting effect.

For stability, the rooting action is connected to other stabilizing forces than those of a more rigid ankle. The "Hug-In" to the foot or ankle can help produce a more stable arch or ankle while not creating any extra stability related to the contact with the ground. The term "Ground Reaction Forces" refers to how much energy travels back up from the ground through the body, promoting body position, posture and movement away from the ground. At times, this is arguably more important than a rigid structure, as in stiffening the arch or ankle. This also allows the body to move and transition from position to position and location to location with a mobile body that is not rigid in nature unlike the toe-lifted-wet-toenail-walking that has a more rigid arch and ankle because of the lifting toes.

In an article by Michel, Munro, Lord, Menz, and Steele, (2009), a connection to weak toes, in the action of pressing down, is directly related to an increasing prevalence of falls in the elderly. This is just one of many modern studies relating the lack of action or strength in how a person presses down with their toes is directly related to their stability, especially when moving (walking) or standing more still and reaching (as in gathering something from a shelf). In their article, McKeon, Hertel, Bramble, and Davis (2015) offer a very intriguing concept called "The foot core system." Their label is very interesting, and I think appropriate. They are not the first to emphasize the multiple and unique systems of the feet, but they have packaged their version very well.

As you can see, there are multiple ways to create Ankle-Loop. Given the diverse needs of the structures related to the foot and ankle and how they support the rest of the body above, it is interesting to explore when, how and why we cultivate the movements and the actions of the foot and ankle. In light of the variety of possibilities, you may ask: What is the correct way? The answer will most likely be: what are you doing and what would you like to come of that. In other words, what is the Dharma of the moment for you and how will you work the Karma of the moment?

With Love,
Best of Luck
Adam Ballenger

References:

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