

Sole Support

Our feet are often out of sight and out of mind—until they begin to hurt. Here's the good news: Yoga and ayurveda can provide relief by creating a strong foundation that enlivens the body from the ground up.

By DOUG KELLER

In the Vedas, the feet are referred to as “organs of action.” They are the body’s foundation, structured to support its weight and provide a mobile platform in a variety of terrains. Just imagine: if the foundation of a house is weak, the entire structure begins to creak and buckle. In the same way, a weak foundation in your feet creates problems in your legs, knees, hips, back, shoulders, and neck, causing muscle tension, postural imbalances, and fatigue.

According to ayurveda, reflexology, and other ancient healing systems, your feet are mirrors for the rest of the body. If you’re holding tension in your feet right now, you’re probably holding tension in other parts of your body, too. And when your feet are tired, your entire body is tired. This explains, in part, why yoga practitioners devote so much attention to the position, alignment, and distribution of weight through the feet. But beyond their function as the foundation for our posture, our feet also affect the flow of energy through the entire body. Just as a tree draws nourishment from its roots to fortify all its limbs, we can use our feet to draw energy upward from the earth. By lifting up through the muscles of the feet and grounding down through our bones, we can achieve a lively posture that gives us a feeling of rebound from the earth—a sense of lightness, connection, and support.

The key to this rebound resides in the arches of your feet. Without their unique structure and elastic support, which derives from the space under the arches as much as from the bones themselves, our feet would collapse against the earth, and each step would trigger a painful pounding in the joints. Orthopedic

arch supports may help when your feet lack this natural rebound, but even those of us with a good lift in the arches will benefit from renewed attention to this vital area of the body.

A targeted hatha yoga practice offers the perfect opportunity to build strength and alignment in the feet. But you’ll need a focus—something simple and effective—to direct your work with the feet. It won’t take long to discover that the benefits of your efforts extend far beyond relieving

foot pain: they’ll also improve your breathing and circulation, and on a more subtle level, the health of your vital organs and your overall feeling of balance and well-being.

THE KEY TO A LIVELY POSTURE

Ayurveda, yoga’s sister science, recognizes power points in the body called *marmas*. Think of them as power switches that control the flow of energy through the body: just as an appliance needs a fully functioning power switch in order to run properly, our muscles and organs work best when clear pathways of energy are activated. Marma points are our “power switches.”

One key marma point in the foot, the *kurchashira marma*, governs posture and establishes harmony in the muscular system of the foot in particular, and in the body overall. It is located just forward of the heel, beneath the cuboid bone at the high point of the arch. In Chinese medicine, this acupuncture point is known as Bubbling Brook—a name that I like, since it suggests a lively bubbling of energy in the soles of the feet.

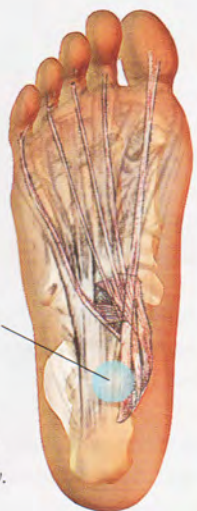
You can find the *kurchashira marma* with a bit of exploratory massage. Using your thumb, probe for a point just forward of the heel where the skin is softer; it is a slightly

Did you know? Each foot houses 26 bones, 33 joints, and over 7,000 nerves.



KURCHASHIRA

MARMA This ayurvedic “power point” governs posture and establishes harmony in the body.



hollow space between two tendons that firm when you lift your toes. You may be surprised to find it is quite tender when palpated with your thumb, particularly if you have weak arches or have been standing on your feet all day. The sharp pain is a sign of tension or fatigue in the *tibialis posterior*, a deep muscle that runs from the sole of the foot through the

Our feet affect the flow of energy through the entire body.

back of the ankle and shin bones. The tug on this muscle is also responsible for a common form of shin splints (pain between the bones of the shins caused by pounding the arches of your feet when you jog, hike, or play sports during which your weight is shifted forward on your toes, straining the soles as the feet are flattened).

Although massaging the *kurchashira marma* with your thumbs releases tension in your feet, the pain is only a symptom of a problem in postural alignment, the effects of which extend far beyond the feet themselves. If you use this marma >>

Doug Keller's yoga journey includes 14 years of practicing in Siddha yoga ashrams, intensive training in the Iyengar and Anusara methods, and nearly a decade of teaching in the United States and abroad. Asana instruction, essays, and other enlightening information is available on his website: DoYoga.com.



A CYCLE OF ENERGY is created by lifting from the *kurchashira marma*; the front of the heel lifts while the back of the heel releases down.

COLLAPSING THE ARCH of the foot weakens core muscles in the leg, pinches the back of the ankle, and shortens the Achilles tendon.

LIFTING FROM THE CORE of the foot grounds the back of the heel and creates a lift through the calf to the back of the knee.

point as a cue, you can realign your whole body and bring more lightness and energy to your being. Here's how.

Place your foot on the floor and run your middle finger under the arch until you locate the *kurchashira marma*. Then draw your toes off the floor to initiate the lift of the arches. Consciously and specifically engage and lift the center of the arch at this marma point. Press upward with your finger to help awaken the arch. If your feet tend to pronate, and especially

if you have a habit of hyperextending your knees, this exercise may be difficult at first. But it's worth the effort, since awareness and lift at this point in the foot will correct the tendency toward hyperextension.

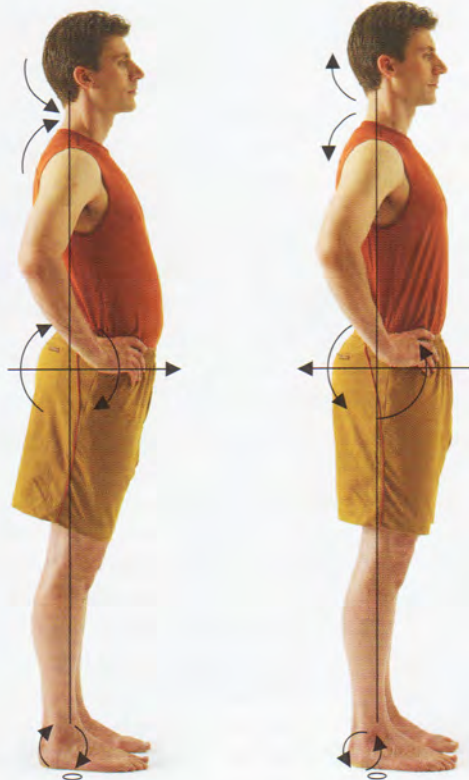
When you begin to lift the arch from this marma point, it creates a cycle or "loop" of energy in the heel: the front of the heel bone lifts up as the arch is raised, while the back of the heel bone descends, lengthening the Achilles tendon. Shoes

that elevate your heels (particularly high heels) usually take your arches in the other direction, dropping the front of the heel bone while jamming the back of the heel bone up into the ankle and shortening the Achilles tendon. Similarly, in asanas such as the triangle pose (*trikonasana*), a drop at the front of the heel leads to pinching at the back of the ankles and hyperextension of the knees. These problems are symptoms of weakness in the core muscles of the leg, a weakness that begins precisely in the center of the arch.

Your sensitivity to the lift or lightness of the arches at the *kurchashira marma* is the single most important tool for centering your everyday posture and releasing tension not only in your feet, but also in your lower back and neck. Let's explore how this works in a few standing balancing postures, which will help you develop that sensitivity and build strength and balance in the feet.

FINDING YOUR CENTER

Stand in mountain pose (*tadasana*) with your feet a comfortable hip distance apart, and your hands on your hips. Bend your knees slightly to avoid locking or hyperextending them. Lift your toes to energize your arches. Concentrate on bringing the lift from the front of the heels right up through the core of your legs and center of your body. The four corners of your feet—the big and little toe mounds, the inner and outer heels—are firmly and equally rooted in the earth, while the center of the arch is light, drawing up energy just as a tree draws nourishment from the earth. Feel how your hips automatically want to



POOR ALIGNMENT *Collapsing the center of the arches tilts the hips forward and creates heaviness in the bowl of the pelvis while compressing the lower back and neck.*

PROPER ALIGNMENT *Lifting from the kurchashira marma through the core of the legs lengthens the tailbone down and releases tension in the lower back and neck.*

Did you know?

The average American takes 8,000 to 10,000 steps a day, bringing a force equal to several hundred tons to bear on the feet, and spanning several miles.

—American Podiatric Medical Association

shift backward, creating better alignment over the foundation you've established in your feet.

As the front of your heel bone ascends and the back of your heel bone descends with this subtle lift at the kurchashira marma, you'll feel your tailbone lengthen downward, and your lower abdomen will lift and engage, creating a feeling of lightness and lift at the core of the pelvis, just in front of your sacrum. This releases tension in your lower back. You're also likely to feel a release at the back of your neck, as your head begins to float effortlessly on top of the spine.

Now for comparison, relax your feet and let the kurchashira marma at the front of your heels collapse. Do it slowly so you can feel the resulting chain reaction. Your hips will shift forward in space, bringing a feeling of heaviness or collapse in the bowl of your pelvis. Your lower back will tighten slightly, and you may feel a compressed sensation in your lumbar spine, as well as a subtle gripping of the muscles at the back of your neck, right

around the bones at the base of your head.

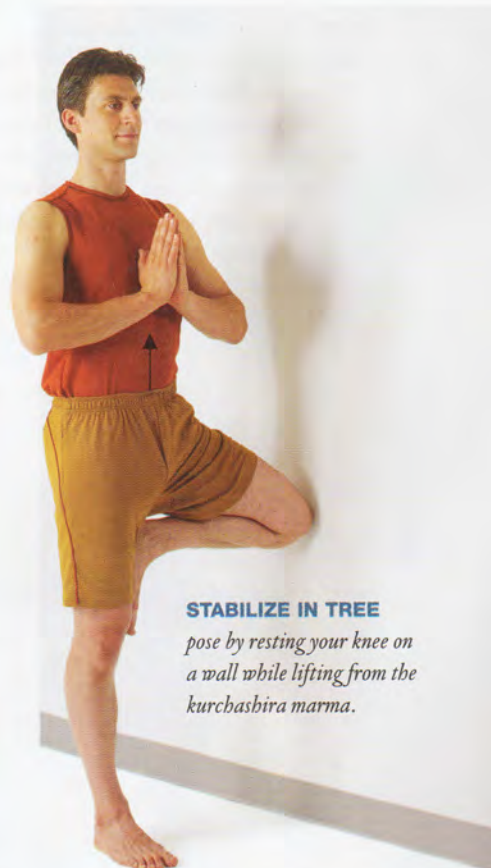
By allowing this collapse in the feet, you've lost your center. Thus the postural muscles of your back body—the soles of your feet, calves, hamstrings, lower and upper back muscles, and neck—grab and tighten to maintain your posture as your front body (especially at your belly, chest, and thighs) slumps.

The starting point in each case was the kurchashira marma. Reinitiate a gentle lift at this marma to find the center in your posture again. Experiment to see how much lift from the kurchashira marma is enough: too much is almost as bad as too little. With too little "voltage" from this "switch," your posture shuts down; with too much, your muscles tense with overstimulation. Find the quiet, sweet spot in between—a posture that is relaxed yet awake. Finding this center from the roots of your posture and drawing it upward is the single most important (and simplest) thing you can do to energize your entire body and relieve chronic tension and pain in your postural muscles.

BUILDING STRENGTH: TREE POSE

The muscles in the feet and legs that activate the kurchashira marma tend to be underused and in need of exercise. But these deep core muscles are not easy to access: you can't work them the way you work your abdominals, quadriceps, or biceps. Nevertheless, they get a good workout through hatha yoga, particularly in balancing poses such as the tree pose (*vrikshasana*). The imagery of rooting, lifting, and opening in the tree pose is especially suitable for energizing the deep core muscles.

It can be challenging to balance in this pose while simultaneously trying to find your center, so the wall can be a useful prop. To begin, stand with your feet parallel to the wall, at a distance that allows you to rest your turned-out and lifted knee against the wall for support. Place your left foot toward the back of the right inner thigh, so that it presses into the adductor magnus (the long inner thigh muscle running back toward the sit bone). The bent knee should be a bit forward of your hips, ensuring that your hips are >>



STABILIZE IN TREE

pose by resting your knee on a wall while lifting from the kurchashira marma.

squared and perpendicular to the wall. If you have locked the knee of your standing leg, bend it slightly and lift the toes just enough to draw energy up through the front of the leg while your hips shift back, bringing greater weight to your heel. The hip points—the bony “points” of the hip bones that you can feel when you put your hands on the front of your

the crown of your head by drawing the top of your throat—just beneath your jaw—back and up. This opens the space at the root of your palate while releasing any tension at the back of your neck. Your whole being becomes steady and supple, like the tree for which this pose is named. As your body gradually opens, your standing foot will be hard at work,

white-knuckled from gripping the floor when you’re in ardha chandrasana? If so, try this: when bending your right knee to move forward into the pose, pause for a moment to lift your toes and thus the arch. This adjustment will shift your weight back into your right heel and allow you to find the kurchashira marma. Come into the pose while keeping the lift

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hips—may tip forward slightly, increasing the arch in your back, which is fine.

As your hips move into better alignment over your standing foot, find the center of your balance at the kurchashira marma while keeping the four corners of your standing foot grounded. Balance your weight between your big toe mound and outer heel, and use your little toe to help steady your balance. Draw energy upward like roots drawing nutrients from the earth; once you find this energetic connection and lift, the whole pose will stabilize—and then blossom.

Continue the lift up through the torso by toning your lower belly and drawing the muscles just above the pubic bone in and up. Feel the relationship between that lift and the lift in the arch of your foot. As the lower belly engages, your tailbone descends, and the hip of your bent leg will open. Likewise, your chest will lift up from your sternum, and your shoulders will relax and broaden. Allow your neck to lengthen upward through

finding and enlisting the muscles it needs to support this steadiness. When you’re ready to come out of the pose, repeat on the other side.

HALF-MOON POSE

Like the tree pose, the half-moon pose (*ardha chandrasana*) also energizes your arches, and it connects that strength to the alignment of the knees, hips, and lower back. Unfortunately, we often don’t experience these benefits because we habitually shift our weight forward onto our toes and lock the knee of the standing leg. A simple test will show you if you have this tendency: are your toes

at the center of the right arch. You can then use your toes to help with the balance, but they won’t need to grip. When you make the kurchashira marma the center of your balance and draw energy up through the right leg, you will resist locking the knee and pinching in the muscles between the bones in the hip crease. Be sure to complete your expansion in the pose by extending from the pit of your abdomen out through both legs.

The kurchashira marma is a vital energy switch you can activate in all of the standing poses, as well as in your off-the-mat posture. It will bring energy, alignment, and vitality to both your feet and the rest of your body, and will help you tune into that quiet center of awareness deep within. +



HALF-MOON PREP

As you bend your right knee and move forward into the pose, lift the toes of your right foot to activate your arch and shift your weight back onto your heel.

HALF-MOON POSE

Maintain the lift from the center of your right arch through the core of your right leg. Then extend from the abdomen out through both legs.