

## Unwinding

Picture a cat waking up from a nap. If you watch very closely you will see that the cat is not merely stretching out, but going through a series of movements called *pandiculation*: a process of contraction, lengthening, and releasing. This is unwinding. Feel free to try it yourself right now. Invoke a yawn, then notice what movements instinctively go with that yawn. Do you notice a contraction with a lengthening, and then a relaxation at the end?

Myofascial unwinding is a term coined by John Barnes to describe a type of physical movement that comes from a higher intelligence, which he often describes as a “feeling” (rather than a “thinking”) intelligence. I remember the first time I attended John’s unwinding seminar: I had a sort of epiphany where I realized that movement can feel good. I suddenly understood that moving my body didn’t have to hurt to be healthy and that I can enjoy smaller and subtler ranges of movement that spark pleasure, rather than pain.

The movements are intuitive and driven by this feeling intelligence. A good example of this natural type of unwinding is when you first wake up in the morning. Without putting much thought into it, your body goes through a series of movements: stretches, contractions, and releases. I invite you to bring some mindfulness to your morning stretch tomorrow. Make it a point to stay in bed a few minutes longer than normal, and simply unwind.

### Yoga Philosophy

In the yogic system of philosophy and lifestyle, there are 8 limbs. Here in the West, the 4th limb of yoga, Asana, often gets the most attention and is what we usually picture when we hear the word “yoga.” There can be many reasons why we do yoga Asana as a practice – some do it for flexibility or strength, while others use the poses as a method of meditation and a means to achieve mental stability and peace.

Unwinding is movement that arises out of that state of mental calm. You could also think of unwinding as “the step that comes next.” As Asana is used to still the mind and bring about inner peace, then – from within the state of stillness – let a new series of movements flow from beyond the thinking mind.

**Akasha:** In the yoga tradition there is something called *Akasha*, which translates from Sanskrit as “sky” or “ether.” In the context of yoga it refers to a field of energy prior to form – the source from which life flows, and to which it returns. The Akasha contains a nonlinear, formless, and natural intelligence which some call the “organizing principle” or the primordial OM.

This self-organizing principle can be seen throughout nature as fractal patterns; from broccoli to seashells to the human lung, there is order within the chaos of creation. These patterns can also be seen within the fascia of the human body. The fascial system is a nonlinear system, and the connections between fibres are multidimensional and fractaled. If we want to move in such a way to target this amazing living system, it makes sense that our movements need to come from a higher consciousness that is itself nonlinear.

**Koshas:** Yoga philosophy also discusses five different levels of consciousness and intelligence. These are called Koshas and are often described as layers or (when roughly translated) *sheaths*. The denser layers make up the physical body and the lower aspects of the thinking (analyzing) mind. The lighter layers are made up of the energy body, and the higher aspects of the mind like creativity, intuition, and wisdom. Together, these layers support each other and comprise the fullness of a human being.

We can instigate movement from any of the Koshas: from the linear mind (think of a highly technical choreographed dance or gymnastics sequence), or from the breath (think of the cat and cow sequence), and even from the highest level of the Self or soul. In yoga philosophy this level is called the *Anandamaya Kosha*, loosely translated as “bliss body,” and is driven by a higher type of intelligence that is hard to put into words but could be likened to the aforementioned self-organizing principle.

Some individuals may experience anxiety or even fear around this kind of intuitive movement. If you are worried that relinquishing deliberate control will cause you to overreach your boundaries and potentially cause you injury, start off slow and know that you can trust your body. The same intelligence that expands your lungs and digests your food will also know how far you can stretch without harm.

**Tantra:** In the Tantric tradition there is a dance called the *Tandava – or the Dance of Shiva* – where the movements come from an intuitive (felt) sense. Initiates are instructed to begin the process of the dance by sitting and watching incense burn. The intention is to observe how the air currents in the room carry the smoke in unpredictable patterns of movement. After observing the smoke for a while, the initiate is then asked to tune into the energy currents that are active within their body. The next step is to allow their physical body to “become” the smoke as the energy currents carry and move the body through creative and intuitive patterns of movement. This quote on the Tandava by Diarmuid O’Murchu explains it poetically:

*“The dance of Shiva symbolizes the dancing universe itself, expressed in the ceaseless flow of energy going through an infinite variety of patterns that melt into one another”.*

**Organicity:** In the Hakomi tradition there is a principle called *organicity* which is the natural intelligence within the body, or that same self-organizing principle described in *Akasha*. A great analogy to describe organicity is that of a plant in a greenhouse. The greenhouse represents a nourishing environment where our bodies can thrive. It is constructed by eating healthy food, making time for self-care, surrounding ourselves with loving relationships and keeping active by going to the gym, taking a yoga class, or going for a walk in nature.

The plant represents our body’s ability to grow, adapt, and change when we are in a supportive environment. In other words, I don’t know how to create cells, or clot blood, or grow hair. I don’t need to. The intelligence that created my body does that all by itself, and that is the body’s organicity or organizing principle. I can, however, support my body in its thriving and co-create a state of good health.

## Reasons to Unwind

Let's face it. We live in a pretty sedentary culture. Most movement therapists would agree that one of the biggest issue the human body faces these days is not enough varied movements. When we sit all day in one position, then drive home in that position, then sit in front of the tv in the same position again, our fascia becomes conditioned and will shorten and adapt to that position. Then when we do move, it's quite often the same movements repeated again and again which leads to imbalances throughout the body. Some areas become tight while other areas become weak, compromising the biotensegrity of our whole bodily structure.

Because unwinding is a creative and intuitive process, it brings balance to the areas in our body that are underused. When we go through a sequence of unusual movement we tap into places that may be tight, weak, dehydrated, and/or craving stimulation. Imagine that your soft tissues are like a sponge that haven't been squeezed for a long time, and they are dry and brittle. Then imagine how it would be to start to move in such a way as to slowly and carefully squish all the dry sponges and allow the moisture and nutrition to return to them.

**Habit:** Human beings are creatures of habit, and the human body is a habit-making machine. Biomechanically, our bodies will learn a new movement and then store it to the subconscious as quickly as possible for the sake of efficiency. Because of this, even when our movement diet is varied, we end up defaulting to a handful of movement norms which may be taxing certain joints or connective tissues. Think of folding a piece of paper over and over in one place – eventually this spot becomes the paper's area of weakness. In our body this "weak fold" generally manifests as either tendonitis or bursitis, leading to injuries such as "tennis elbow."

Unwinding, however, is a nonlinear and intuitive type of movement which means it is less likely to create a repetitive movement habit. Therefore, each time we unwind, the sequence is unique and the body gets to experience new combinations of loads, forces, and input every time we practice. It is a movement that benefits soft tissues, muscles, connective tissue, and even the brain as it builds new neural pathways.

**Biotensegrity:** *Tensegrity* is a term coined by Buckminster Fuller, referring to the quality of architectural structures that allows them to distribute weight loads in multiple directions. Because "bio" in our case indicates a living body, the term *biotensegrity* thus introduces the concept that human bodies are designed to distribute loads and forces evenly in all directions. According to this principle, an injury caused by overloading the body forces us to "give" at an area of weakness, just as that repeatedly folded paper will tear at its fold. Biotensegrity is also about balance. When we can allow underused parts to regain motor control, and overused areas to become more stable and strong, we bring the tensegrity back into balance and create an overall strength and flexibility to your body as a whole.

## How to Unwind

There are many ways to practice unwinding. The key, however you choose to practice, is for you to connect with your intuition and your feeling intelligence, and allow that to be the

driver of your movements. If you are a yoga teacher, I recommend that you add in some unwinding to your personal routine and then, once you have a firm grasp of the practice, introduce it to your students, too. A mere two minutes at the start of each session can be a great way to increase movement variety within your classes, and will give your students more ways to bring unusual and unpredictable movement into their own practice.

I think of myofascial unwinding as movements on a spectrum. One end of this spectrum includes broader movements such as the pandiculation of your early morning intuitive stretch. The other end includes subtler movements that come from a place of stillness and meditation. These movements are tiny micro-adjustments that you will feel to be corrective and mindful, but which are barely noticeable to the observing eye. Any movement along this spectrum falls under the unwinding umbrella: from large graceful movements that resemble a body floating underwater, to big cat-like stretches, to tiny micro-movements, and sometimes even the uttering of certain sounds or words.

**The yawn:** It's best if you start this while lying down, but you can do it sitting or standing if that's not an option for you. Invoke a yawn and notice the movements that instinctively accompany it. Do this a few times to get more movements going, then turn your focus to the movements themselves and stay with them five to ten minutes longer. Get creative and let your body move or stretch in whatever way feels good. After you have finished with your unwinding, allow yourself to come into a few minutes of stillness or meditation, noticing how it feels to simply be centered and aware of your bodily sensations.

**Tandava:** The Tandava, as mentioned before, is an intuitive movement process led by the spiritual body that mimics the movement of smoke as it rises from burning incense. To perform the Tandava, start seated and let yourself come into a meditative and calm state of being. If you so choose, you can watch an actual stick of incense burn as inspiration. Imagine that this incense is sitting at the base of your spine, and pretend that the smoke is a force that can push your spine in any and all directions. Let the random sway of the smoke (which symbolizes our kundalini energy) be what moves you, and allow your body to sway and move organically. Stay with this for five minutes or more, and then settle back into stillness and notice the results. Usually, this takes the form of balance and calm within your body, but every person and every experience is unique.

**Silence:** Advanced meditators know that in silence and stillness lies our greatest power. I often find that unwinding is itself a form of moving meditation, where I begin with entering stillness and silence and then allow the movements to arise out of that still and silent beingness. The deeper my state of meditation, the lighter the movements feel, as if I am floating through space, weightless and fluid.

**The still point:** Take a moment to focus on the stillness between breaths. In the yoga tradition, the micro-pause between the inhale and the exhale is known as the *still point*. One particular meditation practice focuses on taking time with the breath, finding that still point and learning to abide there, and this is one of my favorite ways to teach and practice unwinding. Once I am established there, I allow the stillness to be the starting point of the subtle movements, seeing if I can stay centered in the silence within as my body is moved by a higher intelligence. These movements, as subtle as they may be, are extremely impactful

when it comes to deepening body awareness, and understanding and trusting the body's natural ability to self-correct.

**Partner practice:** Stand with a partner, facing each other. Place your hands palm to palm with them, fingers facing up, and hold this intention: "I will not lead; I will follow." Should movement occur, with both people adhering to this principle, then both know that the momentum occurring is being sparked from a higher intelligence, or the organicity of the connection between both bodies and energy fields.

**Movement can feel good:** Unwinding is powerful. When so many of us are struggling with chronic pain – from an aching back to debilitating dysfunctions – it shows us that having a body can be a pleasurable experience rather than merely a painful one, and that movement can be an expression of that pleasure.

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