

THE ROOT OF THE NECK

By Richard Rosen

INTRODUCTION

I work with lots of different themes in my asana classes, and one of my students' favorites is what I call the "root of the neck." You won't find this root in any anatomy book, because it doesn't actually exist, at least not physically like a muscle or a bone. The root of the neck, like the roots of the arms and legs, is totally imaginary or, you might say, energetic. You may wonder how something that isn't really "real" can be of any practical use. But it's been demonstrated repeatedly, in many different fields of study, that our imagination has enormous therapeutic and transformative potential that can be tapped by just about anyone.

What makes this theme so popular is that it gives my students a chance to work on the problematic relationship we all have with our head. You might not realize that you even *have* such a relationship, but you do, and for most of us it's rocky at best. We in the West are decidedly head-brain oriented; ironically though, most of us don't know what to do with our heads, how to hold and move them, not only in an asana class, but also in our daily lives.

Look around next time you venture out to the mall, movies, or grocery store, anywhere crowds of people congregate. You don't need to be an exquisitely trained yoga teacher to recognize that most of the heads around you don't seem to be screwed on quite right to the rest of their bodies. We're collectively suffering from what's popularly called "forward head," one of several major symptoms of the related afflictions of habitual poor posture and unrelenting stress.

The ideal upright head is physically "neutral," perched lightly atop the atlas, the aptly named first cervical vertebra, jauntily supported by the underlying column of bones with a minimum of muscular effort in the back of the neck (nape) and shoulders. But along with this bare-bones support, the head is also sustained energetically by the root of the neck. You might suppose this root is located just where the base of the neck joins the top of the shoulders; in fact, it's further down in the spine, at the lower tips of the shoulder blades (technically called the inferior angle of the scapulas), behind the heart (where you'll also find the roots of the arms). A neutral head then, through this root, is anchored deep in the upper back, and all of its movements, whether forward (into flexion), backward (into extension), turning, or side-bending, are initiated from and flow out of this source (because of space limitations, we'll confine ourselves to extension/flexion and skip rotation, which is considerably trickier to describe and realize from the neck root).

A forward head, by contrast, hangs rootlessly as a heavy side-load off the front spine, creating all sorts of havoc with the muscles of the nape and shoulders as they struggle to keep its weight upright, and disrupting the originally sinuous curves of the spine. This leads to a mixed bag of bothersome aches and pains in the head, neck and back, not to mention mobility and breathing limitations. And, if you care about such things, a forward head simply looks ungainly.

Young children are usually cited as innocent examples of our utopian head, leaving us oldsters to ponder how we ever managed to end up as such slouches. But since we've "all been there, done that," it's comforting to know that somewhere, deep

inside our body, the memory of this harmonious alignment of head and spine yet survives and can be recovered.

What makes matters worse in an asana class is that students try to move a forward head around, often as they're contorted into some other-worldly shape, which adds to the already high level of stress in the neck and shoulders. They don't realize that such a head shouldn't be moved at all in an asana until it's first rooted and neutralized (unless at the end of the movement the head is supported by a wall or other prop to protect the neck). For the successful practice of yoga—and not only asana, but also pranayama and meditation—as well as for a happy and healthy everyday life, it's crucial to cultivate the root of the neck.

It isn't hard to get a feel for both a rootless forward head and its rooted paragon. To do this it's preferable to pair up with a yoga friend, so that you can both see and be seen, and talk to one another about what you're seeing. Have your friend sit "normally" (ask her not to be on her best sitting behavior) in a comfortable position, and then sit yourself to one side so that you can observe her in profile.

First look at the center of her shoulder joint. If you're not quite sure where that is, have your friend slowly swing her arm back and forth a few times, like a pendulum. The center of the joint is right where the pivot point of this swinging motion seems to be. Then look for your friend's ear hole and measure where this hole is situated relative to the center of the joint. For a lot of people the hole will be to a lesser or greater extent *ahead* of the joint. If it is (and there's no guarantee that it will be, so you may need to look at another friend), you may notice some of the classic signs that accompany a forward head: the relative shortness of the nape, the uplifted and forward-rounding shoulders (which collapses the heart and upper lungs), and the Wicked-Witch-of-the-West, slightly up-tilted chin.

Next have your friend then carefully extend her neck and head, and note what happens. Typically the base of the skull jams down onto the nape, the chin pokes even more sharply upward, hardening the throat, tongue, and soft palette, and the shoulders turtle toward the ears. I'm often reminded, when I see this picture, of a person wincing from a sudden, loud noise.

Finally she should carefully flex her neck and head, lowering (but not forcing) her chin toward her sternum. Now what happens? Usually the habitually tense nape muscles grit their teeth and refuse to elongate, the shoulders curve forward, and the dis-heartened chest sinks away from the chin. Your friend should file all of these head-feelings away for future reference, then change places so that she can give you the forward head test.

Once you understand what a forward head looks and feels like, you can give your friend (and she can give you) a feel for a neutral head. Start by sitting behind her. For a few minutes, press and spread your palms against her shoulder blades, and draw them lightly downward. Remember that the entire machinery of neutralizing the head and then moving it in any direction is triggered from the neck root, and the root itself is galvanized by firming the scapulas into the back torso and descending them toward the tail bone. Just make sure your friend doesn't "help" the action of the scapulas by poking her lower front ribs forward. With the merest hint from your hands at her root, she might already feel a strangely powerful urge to lengthen her neck and lift her head.

Once the set in motion, two imaginary (or energetic) channels fork out of the root.

One streams vertically upward along the front spine and through the brain to the cranial vault. We're sometimes instructed, in order to lengthen the neck and align the head, to pretend we're being *pulled up* from above by a "sky hook" attached to our crown. Here though, I'm encouraging you to lengthen and align your head by *pushing* it up from below.

The second imaginary channel climbs diagonally from the root through the chest and pushes the top of the sternum (the manubrium), just below that small depression at the base of the throat, straight up toward what I call the crook of the throat, where the front of the throat joins the underside of the chin. Always remember that whenever you work with the sternum, it's important to distinguish between the top of the bone and the bottom, the xiphoid. When instructed to "lift your chest," our tendency is to shove the xiphoid forward, protruding the front ribs and squeezing the lower back. Rather, to lift your chest, elevate the manubrium as you release the xiphoid toward your navel.

Return to your friend's side now and we'll try to bring these two imaginary channels to vivid life. Hook the fingertips of one hand underneath the base of her skull, right where it joins the nape. There's a tiny bump there called the occipital protuberance or the inion that's easy to palpate. Lay the fingertips of your other hand on her manubrium. As she continues to press the scapulas against her back, *gently* lift her skull away from the nape and press her manubrium upward toward the throat crook. Have her simultaneously release her nape downward toward her tail bone. Traditional yoga posits a mystical "third eye" on the forehead between the eyebrows; in this exercise I like to imagine there's a fourth eye on the *back* of my head, widening in wonder and delight as I spread the inion and nape apart.

At first, depending on how committed your friend is to a forward head, you might feel some resistance. Don't respond by pulling harder; any show of force will just make the neck muscles contract more stubbornly. Instead apply a kindly but persistent pull to the skull. Eventually the tensed muscles will give up, at least somewhat, and then you'll see, and your friend will experience, a remarkable transformation: her head will seem to float up and back like a balloon, her chest will bloom open, freeing the breath in the heart and upper lungs, and the curves of her spine will gratefully lengthen.

Once brought closer to neutral, tip your friend's head slightly back, then slightly forward. In extension, a neutral head "cascades" back from the neck root, so the upper back and neck describe one graceful arch, the throat crook stays soft and the fourth eye open. In flexion, the manubrium is first boosted from below by the scapulas to provide an inviting resting spot for the chin. Then the nape reaches out of its root, and the chin pivots over the deep throat crook, nestling comfortably down onto the manubrium.

Of course soon after you let go of your friend's head (and she yours) it will likely backslide forward—I hope you weren't expecting miracles. But the foundation has been laid, and you and your friend now have a tantalizing foretaste of head-liberation. What you need to do next is enlighten the root of the neck for yourself, so and learn to neutralize and move your head without any outside assistance.