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The author in college in 1980:
unable really, to sit up.



Deborah Wolk in 2008 teaching
methods to gain further extension
at Yoga Union Center for Backcare
& Scoliosis.

Where is this Pain Coming From?

By Deborah Wolk

Scoliosis was not part of my path to yoga: yoga brought me to scoliosis. Yoga also brought me to practice and to teaching—which I love.

When I was in school, I had a drawing teacher that no one but I liked. One day, he made the model get up on the table and pose in the most difficult shape she could muster. We were then asked to get up on our tables and imitate the postures. Then we all sat down and made a quick gesture drawing of the model's pose darkening the areas where we felt tension, and leaving areas where we felt lightness or openness, blank. I continued to draw with this principle in mind and over many years I had made hundreds of drawings of imaginary people created by a mixture of internal sensations both physical and emotional. Looking at these drawings I see every figure echoes my scoliotic pattern: a rounded middle back, a lateral push and drop in the right side of the body, a left leg pulling out to the side, right foot turned out, a left shoulder that lifts and a gaze to the left. These were drawn long before I fell 12 feet from a ladder, or on my ribs in a performance art piece and long before I'd known what scoliosis was: before yoga.

Right away, I loved yoga. The idea of going to a class (or anywhere) alone caused me so much anxiety that it took me months to pick up a schedule, but finally I did and I practiced every day. Within weeks I was practicing headstand and shoulderstand on my East Village apartment's slanted floors. I tried many styles of yoga, always attracted to the personality or strength of a particular teacher. I loved the music in the Jivamukti classes – it was like going out to nightclubs. I loved cruising my fellow students with their

toned bodies and cute outfits in class. My mind felt better, yoga felt necessary, but as I was told “you are not your body” I continued to overlook how yoga made my body feel. I overlooked my teachers’ feedback or lack of it when I addressed pain. I ignored the fact that after years, I had no idea if my poses were “good”. I saw raw beginners (apparently dancers) walk into classes and manage more than I could in a class – all my twists were impossible on one side, certain standing poses made it impossible for me to breathe, I could push up into uhrdva danurasana but my kidneys, especially the left, hurt afterwards. And I got injured, often by teachers: one teacher couldn’t understand why I couldn’t bind one side of my lotus and pulled my knee severely out of alignment. Teachers repeatedly pushed me down in one side of my Hanumanasana and ignored the side where I was far from the ground – and I would limp out of class. My left shoulder was starting to have nerve pain from binding twists. My neck hurt from sarvangasana. My right hip ached and sometimes my pelvis was grinding against my ribs.

Take my classes and I’ll tell you how much I adore my teachers who saved me from this pain by teaching me correct alignment. I’ll name them here, in chronological order: Alison West, [Bobbie Fultz](#), [Genny Kapuler](#), [Karin Stephan](#), [Donald Moyer](#), [Elise Browning Miller](#), [Kevin Gardiner](#). These wonderful people allowed my energy to soar, my mind to feel balanced. They took the mystery away from my physical pain, my difficulties with movement, my problems with perception. I finally saw my pain, my spine and my nervous system for what it was and in the process, much of the pain dissipated.

Like many of my students, I started off knowing I had scoliosis but not knowing what it was, nor how it affected me. When I was eight, my neck became so stiff I wore a collar, didn’t go to school and went to live with my aunt for a few weeks. A couple of years later, my mother and doctor were whispering about my spine and I was given exercises to practice at home; walking with my feet lined up on the floorboards, carrying a book on my head. These interested me for about a week.

Then in my early 30’s I fell. Forever after I experienced pain – I met with a body worker in Germany who spent two appointments drawing my spine by sensing it vertebra by vertebra with his hands. He told me I had scoliosis, described what it was to me a little bit and said that I had had it since birth. Again I ignored my exercises: child’s pose with traction – extending first one arm and then the other. Years later, I met Alison West after I introduced myself, she said, “You have scoliosis! What are you doing for that?” It was a bit of a shock that she could even see it – no one had ever mentioned it before. I was given a towel to rest my lumbar muscles on in savasana. I was assigned a spot to gaze at on the right side of the wall in front of me to keep my head properly rotated. I was forbidden convex forward bending, I had to twist my ribs in handstands, I pressed into my right heel in standing poses and tadasana. I felt better and better. I started figuring out where I was in space and people noticed the difference in my practice, in my body, in the shape and strength of my spine.

But I never set out to teach yoga. Days after a teacher training with Alison West which I had taken to “deepen my practice”, I went to [Zen Mountain Monastery](#) to learn Tea Ceremony. I was practicing yoga in a hallway and a group of my fellow meditators began following my lead. Their poses looked horrible!! They were all emphasizing their own patterns in their poses. To put an end to it I began to teach – there in the hallway. People made requests. Their backs hurt from meditating. When we were finished they felt better – they had a different idea about yoga. I had a different idea about teaching.

I could see. As long as I knew the pose I could see with my eyes or by touching with my hands, what was happening in the body. I could see what stuck out, what moved in – that’s what I was being taught by Alison, by Bobbie, by Genny. That I needed to move in the convexities, what “humped”, and fill in the concavities, what “caved in” in the body, with breath. Where people leaned I gave them directions toward upright. It seemed most people with injuries, with asymmetries, like me, had no idea what their bodies were doing, where they were in space. Some of these people were in pain and when I explained to them where they were, what to move, they felt better. I taught the way Alison, Bobbie and Genny taught me with props, walls, mirrors, chairs, hard surfaces, straight lines and rope traction. For years, this is all I taught. My first formal class was a chair yoga class for the elderly. The students all dropped out after one year because I worked them too hard; I was too exact. But I developed followings elsewhere – I told

people I had scoliosis and I could help them with theirs. I found the techniques I used for scoliosis, also helped people with other back problems: herniations, kyphosis, low back and shoulder pain. I had experienced many of the same injuries and pain and shared whatever I knew.

One day, Genny Kapuler showed me how to draw the outer calf to the inner calf; I had been practicing this idea as drawing the outer lower leg to the inner – I thought she meant the inner calf was the inside of the lower leg. As I watched, 2 separate muscles were clearly delineated on her outer calf; one on top of the other and as she drew the one on top toward the one on the bottom, it took my breath away. It was at this point, that I understood that learning anatomy, sensing it, would give me so much control of the body that I could change the use of my muscles and change the shape of my bones. At this point, I had already changed the shape of my spine dramatically and reduced my lateral curve mostly from traction – hanging in downward dog on the ropes every day. Studying sensory anatomy with Genny, where you learn anatomy from internal sensing, allowed me to see even more. Karin Stephan showed me how all unbalanced use of the body comes from diagonal asymmetries symmetrically pulling left and right from the crown of the head to the feet. Elise showed me the 4 most common forms of medically diagnosed scoliosis and these patterns followed Karin's theory. The more I saw, the more difficult the cases that came to me: children with curves long past the benchmark for surgery, students with Muscular Dystrophy, Multiple Sclerosis, childhood Polio sufferers with scoliosis over 100 degrees. Somehow, seeing the body this way, using these same principles seemed to help just about everyone.

Of course I have received further training. Years of workshops with Senior Iyengar teachers, 8 years apprenticeship with Genny Kapuler, teacher trainings in therapeutics, Elise Miller's scoliosis teacher training, a [trip to Pune to study with the Iyengars](#). But each has only further honed my eye. I teach to what I see. I see where the tension is and I look to relieve that tension.

In 2003 I started teaching the second weekly Yoga & Scoliosis class in the country (inspired by [Alice Plato's](#) long-running class at [IYILA](#)). This class grew into my collaboration with Alison West to create the [Yoga Union Center for Backcare and Scoliosis](#), which opened its doors in April 2007. I am so, so happy that I have created an environment where people with limitations can come and learn yoga from superbly trained and understanding teachers. When back conditions are demystified, and injuries begin to heal, then everyone can practice this amazing form, which is so liberating especially for those of us with asymmetry and chronic pain.