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## THE BEAUTY IN BEING BAREFOOT

It is common knowledge that imperfectly fitted shoes can cause debilitating conditions of the feet, but research now indicates that even well fitted shoes can cause biomechanical problems. Apparently these state-of-the-art structures support our feet so well that important musculature of the feet and lower limbs weaken over time. Statistics taken from 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries indicate that the shod population present with far more ankle and lower leg injuries than the unshod (poorer) population.

The evidence is stacking up.... improved proprioception<sup>1</sup> means improved



biomechanics, and just in case you were wondering, thongs (flip-flops) haven't done well in the research findings either..

Podiatrists advise children to go barefoot (within safe bounds) as much as possible to allow foot musculature to develop.

If this isn't enough to throw your shoes (and social convention) to the wind, then hearken to this: 70% of the body's terminal nerve endings are in the feet and hands. Clearly with 26 bones, 33 joints and 200,000 sensory nerve endings in the sole of each foot, perhaps we were not meant to slap slabs of stiff, thick leather on our (naturally) perfectly designed support structures.....but we did, and apparently - for the most part - to keep up appearances<sup>2</sup>.



In today's 'evolved' social construct there is not much opportunity for experiencing the joys and benefits of being barefoot. In truth, going barefoot in any city or even some 'burbs' on a daily basis would be tantamount to suggesting you have either hit on very hard times, or that you require some tight padding on your upper extremities as well....

<sup>1</sup> Proprioceptors are found in muscles, tendon and joints and are the sensory feedback mechanisms for motor control and posture.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout history there is a common thread of shoes and particularly the quality of shoes which marks the status of an individual. A visual statement of separation and elevation as it were, providing a way of communicating that the wearer is refined and cultured and most importantly solvent. Only the poorest of peasants went barefoot. Most of you will be familiar with the old term 'well heeled'.

Jokes aside, it is true that shoes provide important protection from external threats, especially in our asphalt/concrete world (i.e. hygiene factors, broken glass etc), as well as safe cushioning for the joints in our 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Which leads me to another subject... how do you safely work the feet barefoot, and in particular dance/run barefoot? If you are simply walking, then the normal heel strike is applicable, but Elemental Egyptian Dance students will be pleased to know that most all our training/dancing is done in the manner recommended in the latest findings.

That is to say, barefoot whilst striking the ground from ball/midfoot to heel, which allows biofeedback before full body weight is realised and provides opportunity to strengthen the soft tissue structures of the foot. From the dancer/runners perspective it also offers increased efficiency of energy in movement and the opportunity for swift and powerful multi directional shifts.

Being barefoot also offers improved balance due to the enhanced proprioceptive feedback and gives the entire body the opportunity to structurally align and strengthen as nature always intended, eliminating the possibility of bunions, hammertoe, corns, sprains, shin splints, iliotibial band syndrome, and peri-patellar pain, and even lower back problems – the list goes on....



There is one more barefoot benefit I have been asking my students to draw on for years - and that is to become aware of the energy beneath us, to use the earth to create energetic flow and integration,....this can only be truly experienced barefoot. It may sound new age and esoteric, but in fact it is now being suggested that when barefoot, electrons from the earth<sup>3</sup>, may be absorbed by our bodies which in turn could provide protection from free radicals. This hypothesis notwithstanding, anybody who has spent more than a day barefoot will tell you there is something incredibly energising, invigorating and grounding about being barefoot - particularly in the natural environment. <sup>4</sup>

It is also worth mentioning the extraordinary abilities of the native Tarahumara Indians<sup>5</sup> of the Sierra Tarahumara (Copper Canyon) region in Mexico North America. The Tarahumara have been recorded running up to 435 miles in rocky, mountainous terrain without stopping. This feat is

<sup>3</sup> the tiny particles that circle the nucleus of an atom

<sup>4</sup> (Girls - for those of you who love high heels and what they do for your silhouette - I heartily commiserate.... I have a lovely collection of shoes that would make Imelda Marcos proud, but it has to be a pretty formal occasion for a pair to get an airing these days)

<sup>5</sup> Native inhabitants of the Sierra Tarahumara (Copper Canyon) region in Mexico, North America.

even more exceptional when you learn that the only foot 'protection' the Tarahumara use in this unforgiving landscape are the thinnest leather strap 'sandals' which they wind onto their feet before the journey<sup>6</sup>. Their running style is mid-foot to heel - and they run like the wind....<sup>7</sup>

Yoga, another of the most beneficial activities we can do for health and well-being, could not be effective in any kind of footwear. Attaining the balance and the energetic internal work required for alignment and restoration of our bodies, both physical and metaphysical, requires the immediate feedback only being barefoot can provide. When we are on the mat working the standing asanas (postures), we are using correct placement of our feet to strengthen and align our bodies as nature intended. The first standing asana taught in Yoga is Tadasana... In his book 'Yoga - the Path to Holistic Health' B.K.S. Iyengar writes that Tadasana... 'teaches you the art of standing correctly and increases your awareness of your body'.

## ANKLE ALIGNMENT



lateral aspect of the foot and ankle

It is not uncommon for people to complain about knee pain. Students will often explain they have 'dodgy' knees, blaming their knee pain on well...their knees! However knee pain is more likely a symptom of problems in the surrounding joints. For example a person with flat feet or fallen arches will find the ankle joints compromised and therefore the knees are at risk.

Alternatively, the problem may be further up the chain with muscular imbalance in the pelvic area being the possible cause of knee issues.

One quick way you might check for ankle alignment is to line up the medial malleolus of each ankle. The medial malleolus is the bumpy bone on the inside of each ankle,<sup>8</sup> - (the boney landmark where the tibia meets the talus)<sup>9</sup>

Stand erect with the feet parallel about hip width apart. If the medial malleoli of the right and left feet are pointing directly toward each other your ankles are in alignment and your arches are absorbing your weight, if however the malleoli are drooping downwards toward the ground then you

<sup>6</sup> Follow this link to actually watch a Tarahumara tie his leather sandal  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o1x1sBwEzmo&feature=player\\_embedded#!](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o1x1sBwEzmo&feature=player_embedded#!)

<sup>7</sup> It should be said that if you are considering trying to run barefoot after reading this article, take particular care of the surface (soft, like grass, earth or sand - not bitumen, concrete. Until you - and your feet - have toughened up, *take it slow*, - you will be surprised at the muscles we don't usually use when in shoes, and you will know exactly where they are the next day....

<sup>8</sup> (you also have lateral malleoli - positioned as the name suggests on the outside of each ankle)

<sup>9</sup> (the tibia (medial) and fibula (lateral) lower leg bones both articulate with the talus - this is often referred to as our true ankle joint), the talus - in turn,- sits atop the calcaneous (our heel bone).

may already complain of knee problems or 'niggles', especially noticeable if you are still quite active.<sup>10</sup>

One way you can strengthen arches (apart from coming to my classes!) is to sit in a chair with a long piece of fabric laid out on the floor in front of you, gradually inch the fabric toward you using your toes to pick up the fabric (scrunch it), lifting it off the ground, and then releasing it. You can also do this effectively with sand at the beach. Repeat until you feel your foot and lower limbs fatigue. Make sure you are evening up with both feet! If you are in any doubt about your alignment seek the advice of a professional.

## ANCIENT SOLES.....



Despite the fastidious pride Ancient Egyptians took in their wardrobes and appearance, (so clearly demonstrated to us through the time portals of Egyptian art and extant papyri), - nearly all Egyptians went barefoot - even on the most formal of occasions. It is interesting that also the elite mostly went barefoot, despite a sandaled foot being a sign of wealth and privilege. One was not permitted to wear sandals in the presence of a superior, so it would follow that in the presence of Pharaoh all appeared barefoot. Sandals became increasingly popular during the New Kingdom, but even so, barefoot still 'ruled' in the land of the pharaohs.

Gold sandals (pictured above) were found on the mummy of Tutankhamen. It is suggested that these beautiful, but rather impractical sandals could have been worn during his life, not just in death. It would seem beauty/image and pain have always been uncomfortable bed fellows...

I did manage to find some evidence of these in the picture below, where you can see a similar style of sandal on Ramesses II. Perhaps elite Egyptians would also have had precious metal sandals crafted for special occasions - but since many special occasions would have involved being in the presence of a higher authority, such sandals would hardly have been worth the expense. However, this argument falls short when you consider that the privileged today spend incredible sums on Jimmy Choo or Manolo Blahniks, only to gather dust in a wardrobe or for a 5 minute hobble up a red carpet. Vanity is a timeless and universal guarantee that some human behaviours will never change. Imagine walking in sandals completely crafted in gold or silver and then trying to maintain any veneer of grace - without wincing! Thankfully, sandals for daily use were made of palm-fibre,

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<sup>10</sup> you can use a pen to ascertain the trajectory and alignment of the two medial malleolus - if still unsure, but s it is a good idea to get someone to position and hold the pen for you!!



papyrus or sometimes leather, (see below). Even these softer versions must have been less comfortable than going barefoot, as the wealthy had a servant with the appellation 'Sandal Bearer'. This servant was charged with carrying the items of torture in the event they were required. In the

cooler months socks were used and worn with the sandals. The socks were crafted with a split between the first and second toe to accommodate the style of sandals used – similar to a style of sock worn in Japan today.



So this weekend treat yourself to some time travel – go to the nearest grassy park, or a clean sandy beach, take off your shoes and revel in the sensation of something between your toes. Let mother earth tickle your arches 'till you run, laugh, jump, shout and roll with the sheer freedom of it all. Then get yourself home before they come to 'escort you back to the present' .....

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King Tut's comfortable sandals

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#### References

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Life in Ancient Egypt  
Daily life of Ancient Egyptians Bob Brier and Hoyt Hobbs  
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'Yoga – the Path to Holistic Health' B.K.S. Iyengar

'Ancient Egypt' Lorna Oakes and Lucia Gahlin

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Dr. Salima Ikram – The American University Cairo



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