

Yoga and Bowen: The Fascial Web

*“The soul of man with all the streams of pure living water seems to dwell in the fascia of his body.”
Andrew Taylor Still*

Have you ever noticed the thin, transparent, cling-film-like substance wrapped around joints of meat? This is fascia - the ubiquitous gooey stuff in our bodies that ties everything together.

Our bodies are enveloped top to toe in fascia. It enfolds every organ, blood vessel, bone, tendon, nerve, muscle, even every single muscle fibre - in a cohesive whole.

Over time fascia ‘sets’ into our characteristic posture: we forge a shape for ourselves as fascia moulds to our habits of use or disuse. Our psychological and emotional self is written in the fascia: past and present, health and disease, injuries and traumas.

If all the fascia in our body were extracted and reassembled, it would exactly represent our form, and our posture! It has been called our ‘*organ of form*’ (Varela & Frank).

*“...through his body man has become the dramatization of his unconscious image” -
Ida Rolf*

In a healthy body, when we raise an arm or move a leg, movement doesn’t stop there, but ripples through the whole organism. This smooth, orchestrated response is due to the fascial web, for no part of the body is isolated from the whole: fascia unites the body in seamless movement. Whatever happens to one part of the body is known to every other part.

In the yoga class we are working on the fascia, twisting, contorting and squeezing muscles and organs and their connective wrappings of fascia, in every possible way. When we stretch out an arm or a leg, or roll up into shoulder stand or over into plough pose, we bring about the ‘gliding’ of body parts, one against the other.

Yoga helps to un-glue muscles, organs and other structures where fascia has got stuck together, improving the fluidity of our movement vocabulary and our posture.

Fascia needs warmth and movement to keep it healthy. Where there is lack of movement, fascia hardens, stiffens and dries out (a ‘dowager’s hump’, for example). When it dries, cells fail to receive essential salts and minerals, and die. This is unhealthy not only for that particular part of the body, but for the organism as a whole:

“Fascia...must be free at all parts to receive and discharge all fluids...and eject all impurities, that health may not be impaired by dead and poisonous fluids.”

A.T. Still, nineteenth century founder of osteopathy



Fascia not only connects; it also divides. It separates every structure in the body from every other structure, in sheath-like packages. It creates divisions, barriers and compartments which help prevent the spread of infections, diseases and even tumours. Fascia thus plays a crucial role in our immune system.

“I know of no part of the body that equals the fascia...By its action we live, by its failure we die... (In it) can be found all the disturbing causes of life, the places in which diseases germinate and develop the seeds of sickness...” - A. T. Still

So when we're stretching out in the yoga class, we're enhancing our general health and resistance to disease - giving a boost to our immune system, via the fascia. This is what most of us have always felt, without knowing how or why!

Over the centuries, the vital importance of fascia has not been recognized; in western medicine it has been seen merely as an inert wrapper. However, in recent times it has been attracting interest and investigation.

It seems that fascia may be a communication system, as complex or even more complex than the nervous system, but as yet little understood (*Dr James Oschman*). Messages and signals pass through it, mechanically and in other ways which are just beginning to come to light.

It is thought that *“fascia is the emotional body...emotions travel through the fascial web.”* (*Schulz and Feitis*)

Bowen Therapy makes use of the signalling qualities of fascia. Sometimes the gentlest of Bowen moves have dramatic effects, and this may be because messages flow through the fascia to the brain and nervous system, suggesting to the body how to reorganize itself in a more healthy way.

Bowen helps to soften and release fascia in stubborn areas which have become 'frozen' - a stiff shoulder, a hollowed back or a dodgy knee. The practitioner can make Bowen moves on a site which is remote from the painful area, causing less distress, thanks to our internal messaging service: the fascia!

So it seems that current research into fascia confirms our subjective experience: that bodywork practices like yoga and Bowen help to organize all the systems in the body - nerves, blood circulation, muscles, hormones - into a harmonious whole.

By loosening up, stretching, bending and moving, we are enabling the free flow of information through all the various levels: physical, psychological and emotional. Our physical posture, written in the fascia, is the self made manifest.