

The Indian Head Waggle

A tool for physical and cultural fluidity

Buddy Frank

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Ignoring the sage advice about the hidden pebble that exists in my pocket, I went to India in the winter of 2005, searching for a glimmer of truth and deeper insight into myself. Part of my travels took me to Mysore, about 100 miles west of Bangalore, in the southern state of Karnataka, to study and practice Ashtanga yoga. The daily practice of yoga is quite rigorous, demands a certain degree of physical change, and creates a state of fluidity in the body that is unique for non-Indians (specifically Westerners). But after being in Mysore for about a week, I realized that a large aspect of my personal yoga practice is practicing the art of Structural Integration (SI). Practicing SI helps me integrate the new understandings I glean from my personal yoga practice. I was lucky to have a captive audience of Western yoga practitioners to work with, and within a couple of weeks, I was quite busy, utilizing the opportunity to understand how the Ashtanga yoga system affects the body. I observed that every one of these yoga students, both men and women, had a body that was very fluid relative to the bodies of my regular clientele from the United States. It seems that doing yoga intensely, for an extended period of time, moves the inertia of the body, increasing fluidity and allowing for SI work that has almost exclusively organizational intent.

While in Mysore, I also had the opportunity to do some sessions with Indian men, both in single session and 'street clinic' format. (I never had the opportunity to work with Indian women. There are very defined gender boundaries in India, and aside from the daily shopping and culinary exchanges, I rarely spoke to Indian women.) In a truly interesting and serendipitous manner, the dominant element that came up in all of the SI work that I did with Indian men was the state of fluidity in their bodies. I found that the Indian men had a baseline state of fluidity

that I refer to as a 'post-ten-series' state of fluidity, meaning their bodies felt as if they had already experienced a ten-series of SI work. In fact, the fluidity of the Indian men felt as if they had been getting SI work throughout their lives. Although none of the Indian men I worked with practiced yoga, their bodies were even more fluid than those of the Western yoga students practicing rigorously every day.

My first experience with this heightened state of fluidity was with Fazil, one of a trio of brothers I befriended, who owned a fashionable silk shop. During one of our chai tea infused discussions at his store, Fazil asked me what I did for work. When I explained SI and what it does, he remarked that his left leg hurt and could I help? I had him sit on a small plastic stool, and casually bent over and placed my hands on his lower leg. Immediately, I was surprised by the state of fluidity in his leg. I felt separation between the tibia and fibula that I literally had never felt on anyone before. I relaxed into the fluidity and felt a wave of energy oscillate from his lower left leg, up his body to his head, down his body to his right leg, then back up to his head, and then back down to my hands. Astounded, and not knowing what else to do, I casually got up and said, "Stand up and check that out." Fazil stood and asked me quizzically, "What should I be feeling?" I answered, "What are you feeling?" He pointed to the middle of his forehead and replied, "I am feeling it right there." Mmmnn—a touch to the lower leg setting off a 6th chakra opening. Toto, we are definitely NOT in Kansas....

My second experience with Indian fluidity came when I was walking past the sundry shop near my apartment, where I bought water, candles, made phone calls, and befriended the proprietor, Yogesh, and his ubiquitous cronies. On a couple of different occasions I had told Yogesh

what I did for work, and had thoroughly explained SI to him. That morning, as I walked past his shop, greeting him as usual, he begged me to stop and help him with his neck. It turned out he woke up with his neck so stiff, that he couldn't move it to the left or right. A bit reluctantly, I told him to pull out one of the small plastic stools (yes, they are everywhere in India!) and sit on it, just outside his shop, under the awning.

Well, in India, if you do anything out of the ordinary for more than 10 seconds, you draw a crowd, and this was no exception. Immediately, there were almost a dozen men surrounding us, watching and asking questions. So there I was, on the sidewalk doing neck and shoulder work on Yogesh, while he explained to the onlookers what was happening in Kannada, the local dialect. My technique was really simple—basically I held his traps down while he turned his head left and right—but because of his body's fluidity, it was amazingly effective. After a couple of rotations, his head freed-up and his traps relaxed, and he began to exclaim that he could move his neck again.

The whole crowd got very excited, and as Yogesh stood up, another man, a rickshaw driver, jumped down onto the stool and pointed to a spot on his mid-back. Everyone laughed, and I began some simple back work. At first, the driver's body felt hard; much like a Westerner who has worked manual labor all of his life. But after only a few moments, the driver's body relaxed, and his inherent fluidity began to manifest throughout his whole body. Just as this happened, he jumped up with a wide grin on his face, vigorously shaking my hand, happy to be free of his pain. After another couple of rickshaw drivers got on and off the stool, with all experiencing similar results, I bid everyone a good day and left—an interesting morning of street clinic work, and an incredible lesson in Indian fluidity.

Questioning the Pattern of Fluidity

The 'fluidity lesson' got me thinking—after working with many Western yoga practitioners,

ranging from novice to 20+ years in experience, I realized that not one of them exhibited the fluidity of the rickshaw driver or silk-shop owner that I worked with. Why? What is the real difference between a Westerner and an Indian? I began to look for cultural clues to my inquiry. I was fairly certain it was not the air or water quality—the standards that exist in India are abysmal compared to Western countries, and are a main reason for illness and disease while traveling in India. (The residents of Mysore were proud of the 'lack' of pollution in their city, although to me, at times, it was unbearable. But compared to larger cities, such as Bangalore, where the pollution was so bad that it looked dark and overcast in the middle of the day, the air was relatively clear.) It definitely wasn't the hygiene standards of the city—with cows and feral pigs roaming the

streets, the state of garbage and decay was so pervasive that they were not even on anyone's 'radar screen.' Potentially, a food component could be behind the cultural differences in the states of fluidity among Westerners and Indians. A lot of Indian food is cooked with ghee, a butter derivative, which has the potential to create a type of 'internal lubrication,' but I know many Westerners who have changed their diets to include ghee, and they simply don't exhibit the type of fluidity that I tapped into.

So, what is the difference between Westerners and Indians that creates such a difference in the baseline fluidity of their structures? Thankful-

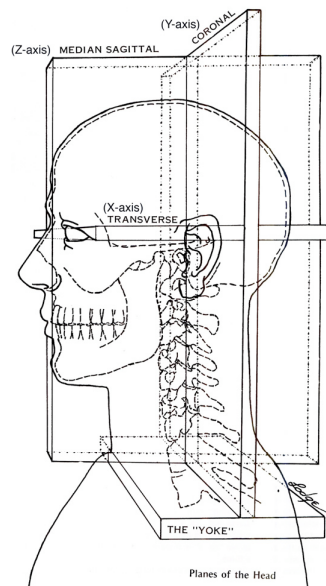


Figure 1. Reprinted by permission from the publisher of *Rolling*,¹ illustration by John Lodge.

ly, the art of SI develops the capacity to see patterns, and one of the patterns I noticed about Indians is an interesting head movement that they perform, one that is unlike any movement we see in Westerners. It is affectionately known as "The Indian Head Waggle" (IHW), and is a rotation around the Z-axis. The Z-axis runs through the cranium, using the bony landmarks of the nasal bone, ethmoid bone, and the upper aspect of the external occipital protuberance as a guide. (See Figure 1) The Z-axis rotation is a movement of the head from side to side—a rotation of the cranium at the occiput along the at-

las-axis complex (C1-C2). This rotation is neither a yes (a movement around the horizontal X-axis), nor a no (a movement around the vertical Y-axis).

The Z-axis rotation can be confusing to the unsuspecting Westerner, who is usually left wondering if the person they just talked to agreed or disagreed with them, and are they really going to get the *sag paneer* or *aloo gobi* they requested? I found the meaning of the Head Waggle can run the gamut of *Yes-No*, to *Okay-No Way*, to *I understand-I don't have a clue* what you're talking about. One really has to pay attention to all of the body language when having a conversation in India!

Truly one of the most remarkable things about the IHW is that literally every person in India does it: young and old, rich and poor, Hindu, Moslem, and Christian. It is a gesture that unites all of India, and besides its ability to communicate something specific, it can also create a 'zone of comfort' of sorts among strangers. In the widely acclaimed novel, *Shantaram*, by Gregory David Roberts, the author described his emerging understanding of the IHW, while on a train ride from Bombay, to the rural countryside of the west-Indian state of Maharashtra. He said there was "a universal message attached to the gesture, when it was used as a greeting, which made it uniquely useful.... The wiggle of the head was a signal to others that carried an amiable and disarming message: *I'm a peaceful man, I don't mean any harm....* It was the first truly Indian expression my body learned, and it was the beginning of a transformation that has ruled my life, in all the long years since that journey of crowded hearts."²

In my attempt to understand the fluidity that I experienced in Indian men, I looked to this universal body movement as an answer. When someone walks with a limp, its fairly obvious, from a gross physical perspective, what is happening to his or her structure. But the IHW posed a fairly unique inquiry—what is really happening to a person's structure from continued cranial movement around the Z-axis?

Anatomical & Clinical Considerations

As I started my research into this question, I quickly realized that I was not the first to wonder about cranial movement at the top cervical vertebrae. While osteopaths and others might have mused about this idea of movement, the chiropractor B.J. Palmer is credited as the first person to create a system of therapy solely around ma-

nipulating the top cervical vertebrae. Prior to Palmer's research, most chiropractors believed that nerve interference could be generated by misalignment at any location along the length of the vertebral column.

Palmer's research showed that vertebral misalignment actually originates in the upper cervical area. As Dr. Palmer proved his method by getting results with a great variety of health problems, those accustomed to the old way of practicing likened the cervical manipulation technique to hitting a "hole-in-one," as in golf, implying that a perfect adjustment in the upper cervical region of the neck would cause everything else to fall into place. (The Toggle Recoil Technique is also a name for this type of adjustment.)³ Regardless of how one perceives the efficacy of Palmer chiropractic technique, it is interesting to note that there has been a tremendous amount of thought put into the idea that through adjustment of C-1 and C-2, the entire body can come back into a state of resolution, balance, and fluidity.

A quick look at the anatomy around the occipital triad can help one to understand why this area is so important. The O/A (occiput/atlas) junction acts as 'Grand Central' for the connections between the brain and the rest of the body. The brainstem (the lower portion of the medulla oblongata), and vertebral arteries pass through the O/A junction via the foramen magnum, with the vertebral arteries making an almost ninety-degree bend, as they transition from the vertebral transverse foramen to the foramen magnum. The jugular veins and three cranial nerves—the glossopharyngeal, vagus, and accessory—all descend through the O/A junction via the jugular foramen. The multitude of ligamentous relationships, both outside and inside the vertebral canal, allow for cranial movement, and help the occiput/atlas/axis triad serve as a functional unit

While the anatomical elements are fascinating, "a fluidic model is necessary to accurately understand the functioning of the occipital triad. Ideally, the atlas should be floating within the synovial fluids of its joints, and the axis should be hanging fluidly from the occiput via the ligaments supporting the dens. The atlas ideally floats between the occiput and the axis as the axis fluidly hangs from the occiput on tension fibers."⁴

Compression, contraction, torsion, shearing, and side-bending of the structures that make

up the O/A junction have system-wide implications, and many debilitating conditions can be relieved from the gentle release of tension in these tissues. The IHW movement, when performed with optimum fluidity, happens at the O/A junction. (When done with less precision or fluidity, many other areas of the head, neck, shoulder, and torso can come into play to make the motion.) When Indians move their heads in the movement of the IHW, they inadvertently open their system in a manner similar to the release found in bodywork, opening their whole body to a state of fluidity.

What I witnessed in India was an entire country (current population estimated at over 1.17 billion) moving their body in a Z-axis cranial rotation pattern of movement. And this movement wasn't simply performed once, but many times throughout the day. From my SI perspec-

tive, anatomical understanding, and clinical work, it is clear that the continued movement of the IHW creates a unique state of fluidity in the human structure.

Now, the interesting thing about this state of fluidity is that it doesn't mean that Indians do not have holding patterns, or that they do not exhibit any kind of rigidity in their structure. My experience in India showed me that without any type of intervention, be it physical, psycho-emotional, energetic, or spiritual, Indians exhibited the same vast array of holding patterns that exist elsewhere in the world. The difference was that just underlying their holding patterns, lay a state of fluidity that was readily accessible. It took only the smallest of interventions to find the fluidity that was sitting 'dormant' in their bodies.

The Waggle

The easiest way to find the Indian head waggle in yourself is to simply move your chin in the arc of your biggest smile. This can give you a quick idea of the motion that we are playing with.

But a deeper and more intrinsic head waggle can be found by first allowing the back of your neck to get long, and feel the 'skyhook' pulling your head up, while the sacrum and tailbone sink down. (Figure 2) From here, slowly nod your head in a 'yes' and 'no' motion, with the intention of finding the intersection of those two movements. Once you find the 'yes' and 'no' intersection, you have a reference point for the Z-axis.

(Figure 3) Imagine a line that runs from the tip of your nose, through the yes/no intersection, all the way to the back of your head. Using just 'a nickel's worth of effort,' allow your head to rotate around this line, moving along the arc of a smile at the level of your ears. Try it all again with your eyes closed, this time with even less effort. You'll know that you are doing it correctly when your entire body relaxes with the movement, and you feel fluid all over.

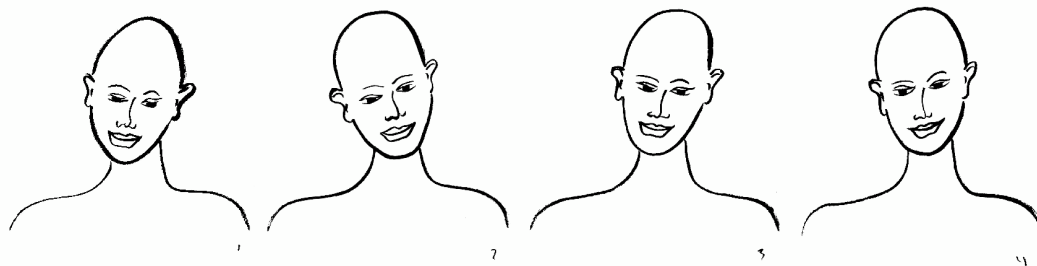
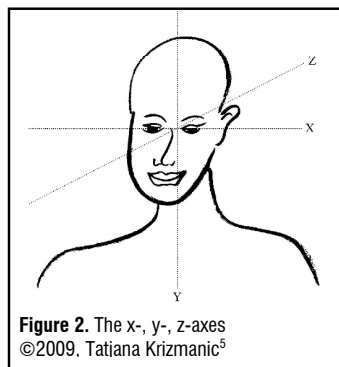


Figure 3. The Indian Head Waggle ©2009, Tatjana Krizmanic⁵

Cultural Ramifications of Individual Fluidity

What does it mean for the population of an entire society to move their bodies in a particular pattern that allows everyone to experience life in a fluid manner? What are the cultural ramifications of this concept?

Most Westerners, when first going to India, are met with an intense culture shock, unlike that of most other countries in the world. Everything seems radically chaotic, especially the street traffic. It all seems a jumbled mess, and everything is happening, all at once. Cows are roaming the street, rickshaws are going against the traffic flow, people are crossing the street everywhere, and car and truck horns are constantly blaring. It seems like it can't work, yet everything flows, and there are relatively few accidents. When the Western mind relaxes (and perhaps an IHW is done a few times), a pattern emerges that helps things make sense: the bigger vehicle gets to go first—scooters give way to rickshaws, rickshaws to cars, cars to trucks, and everything gives way to cows. But the 'chaos' runs deeper than merely the traffic. In India, everything is out in the open—poverty, sickness, death. There is a larger acceptance of life in general (perhaps due to an acceptance of *karma*—an acceptance of the circumstances that arise from past actions), and a lack of trying to control everything in life.

What the Western mind sees as chaos is really a state of fluidity that we are simply unaccustomed to seeing. When we look at a river, and see swirling eddies, raging rapids, areas of stillness, and pockets of debris, we don't think to

ourselves that it looks chaotic. Rather, we experience fluidity, which relaxes our mind, settling and stilling us. In India, life is experienced much like the river—fluid, if we can only relax around the pattern.

And how did India become so fluid? It is too simplistic to attribute India's cultural fluidity to the IHW, although the IHW does have a place in the interdependent causal relationships that create fluidity.

The IHW embodies and epitomizes an attitude embedded deep within Indian culture, one that lies in the indefinable boundary between yes and no. As Westerners and tourists, we see and experience the IHW *mudra*, and recognize something is being communicated that is simply not found in Western culture—a feeling of being able to accept and connect to the fluidity of life. How much control does it take to only move our heads in a yes/no pattern? What cultural drama unfolds from controlling our bodies in this way? What would happen if we allowed our heads to move in a Z-axis rotation?

So, do we all need to start wiggling and wagging our heads all day long? (Hey, it couldn't hurt.... Give it a try!) How do we live a life that contains and exemplifies the qualities that the IHW allows us to feel? The first step is recognizing the challenge of our habitual and limiting patterns of constrained cranial movement. From there, we can make an active choice to live in a freer, more fluid way. Free the cranium, and the mind will follow. Have fun with your new waggle!

Notes

- ¹ Rolf, Ida P. *Rolfing: Reestablishing the Natural Alignment and Structural Integration of the Human Body for Vitality and Well-Being*. Illustrations by John Lodge, first Healing Arts Press edition, Inner Traditions/Bear & Co., 1989, p.237.
- ² Roberts, Gregory David. *Shantaram*. St. Martin's Griffin Press, 2005, p.107
- ³ Information on B.J. Palmer and Palmer Chiropractic gleaned from www.wikipedia.org, www.palmer.edu, and www.chirobase.org.
- ⁴ Sills, Franklin. *Craniosacral Biodynamics*, Vol.2, North Atlantic Books, 2004, p.116
- ⁵ Illustrations of the Indian Head Waggle were created by Tatjana Krizmani, who holds the copyright and can be reached at <http://www.tatjanastudio.com>.