

Tucked away in America's Ayurveda books are intriguing references to the benefits of foot massage. In *Dhanwantari*, Harish Johari writes, "Diseases do not go near one who massages his feet before sleep, just as snakes do not approach eagles." And in *Prakriti*, Robert Svoboda says, "When you have no time to massage your whole body, at least massage the soles of your feet." But where do these statements come from? And what do they mean? To investigate, *Yoga International* consulted a keeper of Ayurveda's oral tradition: Dr. Vasant Lad, a renowned Ayurvedic physician from India and head of the Ayurvedic Institute in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He told us everything we wanted to know about feet—and more. His knowledge shapes and informs this article.

BY SHANNON SEXTON

Footwork

Vibrant Health Through Ayurvedic Massage

Ask the average American what she thinks about her feet and she'll inevitably say, "They hurt," "They're ugly," or "They stink." Ours is not a culture conditioned to honor or appreciate our feet—a pair of misfit trolls that bears the burden of our weight and carries us from place to place. By living indoors and wearing shoes during most of our waking hours, we have become more distanced from our feet than our ancestors, who knew the value of caring for their feet after a hard day's work. Lovers, parents, children, friends, neighbors, folk healers, and physicians have practiced the art of foot massage since time immemorial. Ancient texts, illustrations, and artifacts reveal that people in places as far-flung as Russia, Japan, Thailand, Iran, Peru, and North America used foot massage to relieve pain, treat disease, and promote overall health. The Chinese used a combination of foot massage and

acupuncture to treat illnesses more than 5,000 years ago. And in Saqqara, Egypt, a wall painting dating from 2300 B.C. in the tomb of Ankhamor depicts people massaging each other's toes. The ancient Egyptians believed that the body was a symphony of vibrations that could be tuned, or played, by manipulating points on the feet.

Even today, children in the villages of India continue an age-old tradition of massaging their parents' legs and feet as a symbol of service, humility, and love. This custom originated in Vedic times, when Indians began rubbing specific, medicated oils (prescribed according to their body type) on the soles of their feet to treat a variety of ills and boost their overall health. According to Dr. Vasant Lad, Ayurvedic foot massage can be traced back 5,000 years and offers myriad benefits: it nourishes the skin, reduces fungal and

A pair of feet is shown from a top-down perspective, floating in clear, blue water. The feet are positioned centrally, with the toes pointing downwards. The skin on the soles of the feet is light-colored and shows some texture. The water is a deep, clear blue, and the background is slightly blurred, suggesting a shallow depth. In the upper right quadrant, there is a white text overlay.

**“The feet are the
foundation of
consciousness.”**

bacterial infections, and soothes an agitated mind; it can also help alleviate psychological imbalances, including anxiety, nervousness, and depression; and it may even balance brain chemistry. Lad says we can reduce stress, activate our immune system, and even heal our body, mind, and consciousness through the simple act of foot massage. “The doors to the body’s inner pharmacy,” he says, “are under the bottoms of your feet.”

A STABLE FOUNDATION

In the Veda, the feet are referred to as “organs of action.” They are the body’s foundation, structured to support its weight and provide a mobile platform in a variety of terrains. Just imagine: if the foundation of a

house is weak, stressed, or unhealthy, the entire structure begins to buckle. In the same way, problems in our feet can creep into other parts of the body and weaken our overall health and sense of well-being. Because the feet work in conjunction with the legs, knees, hips, and back, foot problems can lead to muscle tension elsewhere in the body—especially in the neck and shoulders—and intensify fatigue and irritability. And according to the American Podiatric Medical Association (APMA), “Your feet mirror your general health. Such conditions as arthritis, diabetes, nerve and circulatory disorders can show their initial symptoms in the feet—so foot ailments can be your first sign of more serious medical problems.” Today, APMA estimates that 20 percent of the popula-

Foot Notes

The average American takes 8,000 to 10,000 steps a day, bringing a force equal to several hundred tons to bear on the feet and spanning several miles.

We walk about 115,000 miles in a lifetime—more than four times the circumference of the globe.

A 150-pound person walking one mile exerts the equivalent of 63.5 tons—127,000 pounds—on each foot.

Walking on cement can give each foot a 180-pound jolt with each step.

When we run, the pressure exerted on our feet can be three or four times our body weight.

There are approximately 250,000 sweat glands in a pair of feet, and they excrete as much as half a pint of moisture each day.

Our feet are more subject to injury than any other part of the body.

Walking is the best form of exercise for the feet.

Foot pain affects the quality of life and mobility of millions of Americans.

Contrary to popular belief, foot pain is not normal!

There is an important relationship between our feet and our overall health and well-being.

(Courtesy of the American Podiatric Medical Association, www.apma.org)

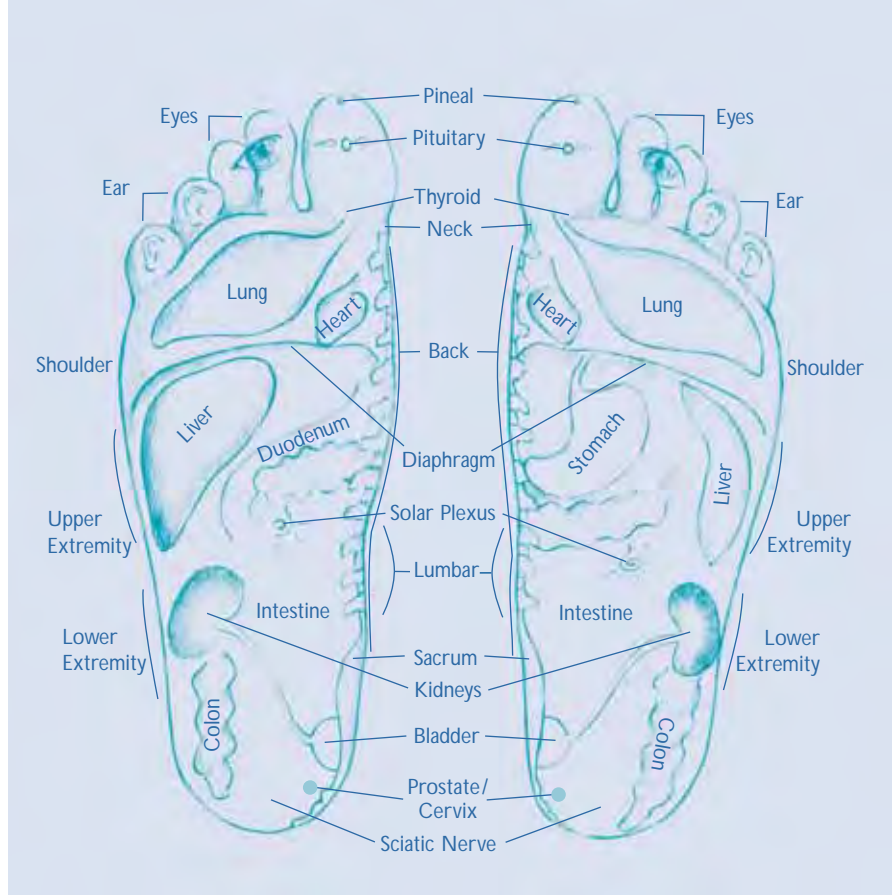


tion experiences a foot problem during any given year, and 75 percent of Americans experience one at some point in their lives. The majority of these problems are caused by abuse and neglect, and many can be prevented by wearing proper shoes and giving our feet a little TLC.

MAPPING THE FEET

According to Ayurveda, the feet contain reflex points to all the organs and other parts of the body. And even though they're a hot spot for pain and discomfort (each foot houses 26 bones, 33 joints, and over 7,000 nerves), they're also an effective site for treatment. Ayurvedic physicians know how to treat various ailments by applying pressure and oil to points on the feet that correspond to the troubled body part. Imagine that your feet are a mirror for the rest of your body: if you're having shoulder pain, you can press on the part of your foot that corresponds to your shoulder and alleviate the discomfort. Similar treatment is prescribed for kidney stones, pancreatic dysfunction, liver pain, and other problems. And a spot of tenderness on your feet might signify an imbalance in another part of your body before you even notice symptoms.

Long ago, Ayurvedic physicians mapped out these reflex points on the feet and preserved them in Ayurvedic texts. According to Lad, these drawings reveal the following: The big toe is connected to the brain. The



Ayurvedic Foot Map

THE IMMUNE CONNECTION

stress • We all know that stress is the number one killer in our country—a leading factor in heart disease, immune disorders, digestive problems, and a host of other illnesses. In fact, stress and tension are responsible for about 75 percent of all health problems. Stress effectively alters our body chemistry, depletes our immune system, and leaves the body more susceptible to disease. But what, you may ask, does this have to do

Problems in our feet can creep into other parts of the body.

tip of the big toe corresponds to the pineal gland; the pad of the big toe corresponds to the pituitary gland; and the neck of the big toe corresponds to the thyroid. The base of the second and third toe is related to the eyes, and the base of the third and fourth toe is related to the ears. The cushion at the root of the toes is connected to the lungs. The middle portion of the sole is related to the pancreas. And the heel is related to the sciatic nerve. “All the bodily organs,” he says, “are there within the feet.” By activating these corresponding reflex points, Ayurvedic foot massage can indirectly heal problems we have in the rest of our body and prevent others from developing.

with my feet? According to Lad, all of the body's stress accumulates in the connective tissue lining the soles of the feet—so it's no wonder so many Americans have foot pain. Foot massage is a simple, drug-free method for reducing stress and stimulating the body's natural relaxation response.

the doshas • In the Ayurvedic tradition, foot massage is said to balance the bodily humors, or *doshas*—*vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha*. On a biological level, says Lad, “Vata is the principle of movement, governing the body's sensory and motor function; pitta is bodily temperature



Ojas, Tejas, and Prana

The doshas have subtle counterparts—three vital essences that according to David Frawley “promote health, creativity, and well-being and provide the support for deeper yogic and meditative practices.” According to Dr. Vasant Lad, *ojas* is the quintessence of *kapha*—it is the body’s vital fluid and the purified essence of its tissues. *Ojas* helps maintain natural immunity. *Tejas* is the pure energy of *pitta*, the metabolic, cellular fire that mobilizes the forces of the immune system. *Prana* is the pure essence of *vata*, the vital breath and life-energy that maintains the flow of cellular communication and activates the immune system on a long-term basis. These three vital essences are interrelated: prana kindles tejas, and tejas utilizes ojas. Together, they keep the flame of life—a flame of awareness and attention—burning strong. As Frawley explains, “with sufficient prana, tejas, and ojas, no disease can approach us.” According to Lad, foot massage helps to balance these three vital essences and further boost our immune system.

and governs biochemical changes, digestion, absorption, assimilation, and the transformation of food into energy; and *kapha* is the building material of the body, used to form new tissues and cells.” These doshas are present in every cell as a genetic code and create a “unique, biochemical lab” in every individual’s body. Since the combinations of *vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha* are endless, each person has a constitution that is “as

Lovers, parents, children, and healers have practiced the art of foot massage since time immemorial.

unique as his fingerprint.” In most people, however, one dosha is primary, another is secondary, and the third is least prominent. (The remainder of the population has two or three dominant doshas.)

According to Ayurveda, balancing *vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha* activates the body’s natural immune response. Foot massage is one way of doing this. As Lad explains, “Whenever we rub oil on the soles of the feet, the oil permeates the skin and travels through the superficial fascia, the deep fascia, and the oil goes to the neural ending, releasing the secretion of certain neuropeptides. These are the same neuropeptides that are released in the nervous system, and they play an important role in immunological response.”

The simple act of rubbing oil on the soles of the feet—especially at bedtime—calms the *vata* dosha. But Lad says that if you are experiencing fatigue or exhaustion, you can further alleviate a *vata* aggravation by rubbing sesame or bhringaraj oil on your soles at night to reduce stress and encourage sound sleep. For those with a predominantly *pitta* constitution—especially people who are suffering from headaches, migraines, or a burning sensation in the eyes—he recommends rubbing coconut and castor oil on your soles at bedtime. By morning, your symptoms will have vanished. And if you are coughing and congested from a cold (a *kapha* imbalance), rub mustard oil on your soles near the cushion at the root of the toes. “This will relax the bronchi, stop irritation of the bronchial tree, and promote a sound sleep,” says Lad. People with dominant *kapha* can also rub nutmeg oil on the soles of

their feet at night. According to Lad, this type of oil is “narcotic, tranquil, and will help you sleep like a child.”

SUBTLE LAYERS OF THE FEET

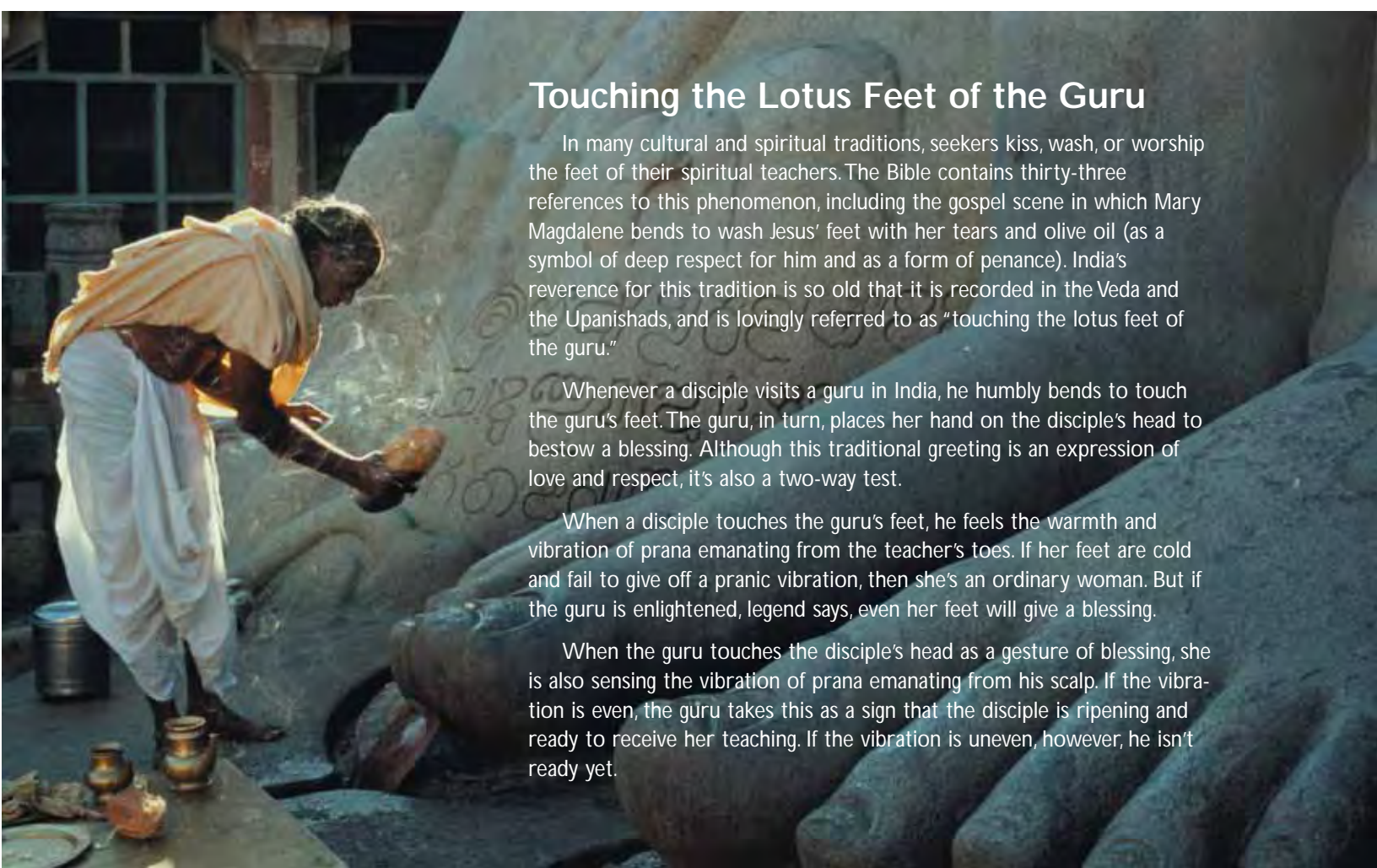
Beyond the mere biological aspects of our feet (and even more subtle than reflex points, the doshas, and their connection to immunity) lie aspects of emotion and consciousness that have yet to be quantified by Western science—at least in terms of our feet. Here are a few of the more elusive secrets that Ayurvedic sages observed and recorded long ago.

emotions • Did you know that you store emotions in your feet? Ayurveda has an intriguing perspective on emotions—it views them as a reaction of a past memory to a present challenge. There are three kinds of negative emotion: vata emotion (fear, anxiety, nervousness); pitta emotion (anger, hate, envy, jealousy); and kapha emotion (attachment, greed, possessiveness, depression). According to Ayurveda, when we suppress these emo-

tions, they crystallize in the body and eventually accumulate in the soles of the feet. This is not healthy, of course, because we end up walking, running, jumping, and twisting on our unresolved emotions, causing certain areas of our feet to become tender and painful, and burdening our body with additional stress.

According to Lad, Ayurvedic foot massage can alleviate psychological imbalances—including anxiety, nervousness, and depression—because it breaks up these emotionally related crystals, reduces stress, and relieves foot pain. Another way to accomplish this, he says, is to roll the feet back and forth along a hard, wooden roller.

consciousness • Here’s a fascinating fact: just as there are seven chakras in the body, says Lad, there are seven chakras on the soles of the feet. The lower portion of the heel is the root chakra (*muladhara*); the higher portion of the heel is the pelvic center (*svadhishthana*); the central part of the soles is the solar plexus (*manipura*); the heart chakra (*anahata*) is at the junction between



Touching the Lotus Feet of the Guru

In many cultural and spiritual traditions, seekers kiss, wash, or worship the feet of their spiritual teachers. The Bible contains thirty-three references to this phenomenon, including the gospel scene in which Mary Magdalene bends to wash Jesus’ feet with her tears and olive oil (as a symbol of deep respect for him and as a form of penance). India’s reverence for this tradition is so old that it is recorded in the Veda and the Upanishads, and is lovingly referred to as “touching the lotus feet of the guru.”

Whenever a disciple visits a guru in India, he humbly bends to touch the guru’s feet. The guru, in turn, places her hand on the disciple’s head to bestow a blessing. Although this traditional greeting is an expression of love and respect, it’s also a two-way test.

When a disciple touches the guru’s feet, he feels the warmth and vibration of prana emanating from the teacher’s toes. If her feet are cold and fail to give off a pranic vibration, then she’s an ordinary woman. But if the guru is enlightened, legend says, even her feet will give a blessing.

When the guru touches the disciple’s head as a gesture of blessing, she is also sensing the vibration of prana emanating from his scalp. If the vibration is even, the guru takes this as a sign that the disciple is ripening and ready to receive her teaching. If the vibration is uneven, however, he isn’t ready yet.

the middle two-third and the anterior (front) one-third section of the sole; at the base of the big toe is the throat chakra (*vishuddha*); the middle of the big toe is the fifth chakra (*ajña*), or the eyebrow center; and the

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tip of the big toe is the crown chakra (*sahasrara*). “So the whole chakra system,” Lad says, “is connected to the soles of the feet. Therefore, the soles of the feet are directly connected to the human soul. ‘Soul’ means ‘consciousness.’ So the feet are the foundation of consciousness.”

VASANT LAD’S GENTLE FOOT MASSAGE

In the Ayurvedic tradition, a full-body oil massage (*abhyanga*) performed daily is said to work wonders for the body. But in our hectic world, *abhyanga* can be too time-consuming to do on a regular basis. The next best thing, says Lad, is to massage your scalp and the soles of the feet with oil, preferably at bedtime. According to Ayurveda, all meridians (*nadis*) begin in the scalp and end in the soles of the feet. Many neural endings, receptors, and *marmas* (Ayurvedic pressure points) are also located here. If you perform the following brief massage, Lad says, “you will get the benefits of an entire body massage.”

First, choose a type of oil that is appropriate for your body type. Warm oil is preferable to cold because it is comforting and penetrates the skin more easily. (A clean, quick way to warm the oil is to put the bottle in a bowl of warm water for a few minutes.) It’s also helpful to maintain a nurturing attitude and to focus your attention on the part of your body that you’re massaging to bring yourself into the present moment. Sit in a comfortable chair or on your bed, and keep a pair of cotton socks nearby to put on after you’re done.

First, rub your hands with oil and make small, circular motions along the surface of your scalp, using the flat of your hand and your fingers. Then focus on your feet.

Beginning with your right foot, gently rub oil in small circular motions from the ankle to the toes; then from the ankle to the heels. Gently rub oil in small circular motions on the soles of the feet. Next, press your thumb on the place where the shin meets the top of your foot. Gently, slowly, drag your thumb across the top of your foot to the big toe. Return to the ankle and in the same way drag your thumb toward the second toe. Repeat this motion from the ankle to the third, fourth, and fifth toes. This initial treatment improves circulation and activates important *marmas* on the feet.

Then cross your right ankle over your left knee and cup the side of your right heel in your left



Your Vision and Your Feet

There is a direct link between the feet and the eyes through two primary spinal nerves. Wearing shoes that do not allow the feet to breathe impairs function of these nerves and spoils the eyes (as does exposing the feet to a fire or other kinds of excessive heat). By keeping the feet clean, eyesight is aided. Massaging the feet with clay, mud, and henna pastes also improves the vision. Henna is especially good, but only for use in warm and hot weather because of its strong cooling power. By application of oils and pastes to the feet, coupled with gentle massage, one waters the plant of good vision and ensures proper eyesight in later life.

—Harish Johari, *Dhanwantari*

Choosing an Oil

Ayurveda says that organic, cold-pressed oils have stronger healing properties than more processed ones. If you know your *prakriti* (constitution), choose an oil accordingly or follow the chart below.

for dry skin (vata): use a warm, heavy oil such as sesame, almond, avocado, or bhringaraj

for sensitive or overheated skin (pitta): use a cooling or neutral oil such as olive, sunflower, coconut, castor, or ghee

for oily skin (kapha): use a light oil such as mustard, flaxseed, canola, or safflower



hand. Place your right hand on the top of the foot, lace your fingers between your toes, and push the foot inward, outward, and then in a circular motion. With your right thumb, apply pressure from the big toe to the heel along the inner border of the foot. Then drag your thumb from the root of your fifth toe to the heel. Make a fist with your right hand and press it against the foot, working it along the sole in a circular motion to activate a variety of energy points. Slowly pull each toe away from the foot, as though you are “popping” the joint, to remove stress. Then repeat the entire massage on your left foot. When you’re finished, soak your feet for five to ten minutes in a bucket filled halfway to the top with warm water and one teaspoon of salt to draw the stress and toxins out of your feet.

SACRED FEET

Many spiritual traditions believe the body and soul are connected to—and even embodied in—the soles of the feet. Buddha’s footprints, for example, have long been used to represent his entire being. And even today,

Vishnu’s footprints are worshipped in temples and other holy sites across Asia. Hindus have also been known to wear amulets of Vishnu’s footprints to ward off evil. And in ancient Egypt, undertakers removed the soles of a dead man’s feet during mummification to liberate his soul from the physical plane.

But if the connection between your feet and higher consciousness seems a little far-fetched, at least consider cultivating some respect for their earthly function: the feet are the body’s workhorses, and without them our mobility, health, and well-being are severely limited. So why not follow in the footsteps of the yogis and use your body as a laboratory to conduct an experiment? For the next month, make a commitment to develop a deeper awareness of your feet and begin to appreciate all they do for you. Treat them to Dr. Lad’s foot massage every night and observe the results. Chances are, you’ll be taking a step in the right direction. ●

Shannon Sexton is the managing editor of Yoga International.

For more on Dr. Vasant Lad, see page 6.