

The Elbow

How wonderful it is to have elbows that enable us to embrace life and each other. How much expression and grace arises from these joints in the arms .

The elbow is the hinge joint that connects the long bone of the upper arm with the two fine bones of the lower. It provides the anchorage for the tendons and muscles that allow for the rotation of the lower arm, wrists and hands and whose subtle connections to the fingers allow for a range and delicacy of movement. An awareness of the elbow can bring a lightness to the upper arm bone as it connects to the shoulder, lifting in turn the shoulder girdle and the ribs and freeing the spine. The elbow can draw back the hand gently as it extends so that a feeling sense of connection to the spine is ever present. To hold the elbow softly, and not to lock it straight holds a connection with this lightness and gives the possibility of refined response. Which is really all that is being asked of us in any given moment.

The softness of the elbow and the shape it gives the arm reminds me of the grace of ballerinas and of the art of Degas, a lover of the art form who captured so beautifully the essence of the dancers and their whole body expression of feeling in his paintings.

In this picture by Degas the dancer in the form of a swan (I imagine it is the dying Odette in Swan Lake). She has her breast thrust forward and her arms stretched back behind. Her elbows are locked and her fingers drop like the wing tip feathers of a swan. It is suggestive of someone who is less embracing her fate than abandoning herself to it. Her head is tilted back - no longer looking forward. There is a feeling of disconnection from life and a fragility beneath the power of this pose.



Below, in contrast, a living swan. Like the dancer her wings are back and her breast is forward. It is the position of her head and the softer bend in the elbow of her wing that suggests that, rather than abandoning herself to fate she will scoop all before her towards her heart. There is connection. There is possibility.



When I reflect upon the origins of the practice of yoga and how many of the poses reflect the movement and the essence of the natural world I get a glimpse of the power and beauty of embodiment. It is not in the attainment of a shape but in its feeling that we embody its essence. It is not through the idea of but in the embodiment of that we connect with the divine.

In this painting the dancer's arms are reaching out, her head tilted back and the breast exposed, as with the 'dying swan' dancer - but here the elbows are not locked. The hand appears to be both reaching out yet connected to the body and the pose is softer and more connected. There is an element of abandonment but it is more playful and trusting than despairing. Somehow the elbows being softer allows for life (and fate) to be embraced. In that there is a subtle strength and a joy.



In my own practice when I bring my attention to my elbows and use that awareness in moving my arm I sense a response in my spine. It is as if there is a point in the middle of the spine that knows the elbow intimately and wakes up when the elbow moves. When I move from my hands alone only the shoulders respond. It is as if the elbow, by releasing the heaviness in my shoulder wakes up the connection to the spine at a point which in the body from which, almost like a starfish, my limbs seem to emanate. I have explored this connection whilst swimming - it has slowed me down and given the whole movement of my body a more nourishing quality. I am not longer 'out there' but more 'in here'.

We use the expression 'more power to your elbow' to praise someone when they are on the right path and talk of using 'elbow power' in relation to our work. Having spent some time bringing more awareness to my elbows, their connection to my spine and consequently my whole being, I would heartily echo the sentiment of these expressions. From this practice of yoga and from now deepening the connection to this small joint has gradually arisen in me a greater capacity to embrace all of life.

More power to all our elbows!

with love

Lynda

