

Core Energy

Core strength. It's a common phrase these days in exercise and health circles. Although heard and repeated frequently, core strength may not be well understood. Here's a little story about learning the meaning of core strength.

A few years ago over Thanksgiving, the Willamette river changed significantly. Continuous days of heavy rain and melting snow brought a lot of water through the watershed. Before this, river levels were at 3-5', current flow was 1 foot per second. On Thanksgiving day, the water level was 9' and current flow was 3 fps. In addition to a lot of swirling water, in practical terms this translates as, at least, three times more effort to paddle upstream on my regular Hawthorne-Sellwood Bridges round-trip. At that level and current flow, paddling upstream was a challenge and I finished with a sense of accomplishment. It took a bit longer than a regular paddle, yet I felt better strength and conditioning compared to the previous winter along with the clear insight that this was definitely my physical limit.

Two weeks and much more rain later, the river level was 11.0 and current flow was 3.25. Starting from the Hawthorne Bridge, I was paddling upstream as hard and fast as possible, freely sweating in 40° weather and making very little forward progress. Typically, a paddle stroke would move the kayak one boat length (16 feet). On this day, one paddle stroke moved the kayak one foot or less. It was the first time in many trips on the Willamette that I considered giving up and floating back to the dock. Rather than thinking about progress, or lack thereof, my attention focused on one paddle left, this stroke right. Body position. *Alignment. Structure. Breathe....*



It's fortunate no large barges were moving through the area as it took a while to clear the bridges and get to Ross Island where I could rest. There were three more rest breaks before arriving at the Sellwood Bridge. Typically, I could do the six mile round-trip without stopping.

Part way upstream through this endurance challenge, I noticed something unusual. Actually, I noticed the lack of something typically constant. My shoulder muscles, the trapezius, were not tight, achy, complaining. In fact, with some exploration, I found they were not even working hard. It was almost incomprehensible: beyond physical capacity *and* less shoulder muscle effort.

Had I not been so focused paddling upstream, the surprise of this insight might have knocked me right out of the kayak. It felt as if some basic law of physics had changed. Shoulder muscle tension had been a constant nagging companion for many years and, recently, for many kayak miles. At this moment, the phrase "core strength" became real, integrated, internalized. 'Ah, this is what core strength means.'

Once we recognize the value & need, core strength may be cultivated on physical, energetic and emotional levels.

Baby Crunches

When first getting interested in kayaking a few years earlier, it was obvious I needed to have better core strength. Sustained paddling, often for 10-12 hours per day on successive days, comes from abdominal muscles, not shoulders and arms. The first strengthening exercises were baby crunches.



These are not the typical sit up, which done improperly, doesn't involve abdominal muscles at all. Briefly, baby crunches are: on your back on the floor; feet against the wall; knees and hips at 90 degree angles. Inhale, arch lumbar off the floor; exhale, push lumbar to the floor, slightly lift tailbone, engage abdominal muscles to lift torso one inch off the floor. Repeat.

It may be very helpful to apply finger pressure to the lower abdominal muscles to feel when they engage. It is quite easy, and common, to lift the upper torso without using any abdominal muscles.

When referring to core strength, many people focus on physical structure, like muscle, through exercises, like abdominal crunches. There are also various energetic aspects of core strengthening

Meditation/chi kung.

One of the simplest ways to build core energetic strength is abdominal breathing. In the Chinese energetic model, the phrase *tan tien* describes the core region a little below the navel, halfway inward toward the spine.

Abdominal breathing engages the diaphragm muscle to expand the lungs vertically, allowing 30% more lung capacity. Focusing attention at the navel area (or *tan tien*) brings more chi (energy) to the abdomen.

Place a finger or your palm on the area just below your navel. Take a moment to notice the sensation of contact. You may apply a little pressure, if you like, to increase the physical sensations. With your attention focused on the area below the navel, take a slow, long deep inhale, feeling the expansion of your lower abdomen toward your hand. There is no need to force or strain your breath, just take a natural, long inhale. At the peak of the inhale allow the exhale to occur naturally without force or tension.

Repeat in a slow, regular and relaxed way for several minutes. If your focus begins to drift away to thoughts, plans or any distraction, gently, without judgment, bring your attention back to the sensation of your hand touching the navel area. The purpose of this practice is not to be perfect, but to notice when our attention has drifted and gently return it to the lower abdomen.

Other meditation and chi kung practices can build on and amplify the benefits of abdominal/*tan tien* breathing.

Bodywork

Touch is another way of connecting to our core, releasing tension and focus strengthening exercises or any other techniques. When doing an abdominal treatment, like chi nei tsang, another person's touch, energy, awareness facilitates our ability to access the physical and energetic body core. It's difficult to strengthen an area without any connection or awareness. Layers of tension, stress, trauma, surgery, emotions can be significant barriers to building core strength even if we are doing the “right” exercises. Exploring and releasing core tensions through bodywork can make strengthening much easier and more enjoyable.

Chinese Herbs

Utilizing specific plants & natural materials are another way to strengthen our energetic core. This is done by assessing our energetic constitution and patterns, addressing imbalances on an individual basis through a customized formula. Herbs function similar to bodywork to relieve internal tension. Herbs may also function similar to meditation as that they can bring more energy to the core.

Why bother with core strengthening?

Our bodies have a physical and energetic core. This is the center, nucleus, hub, pivot that our lives move from, revolve around. Our core is similar to a house foundation. We can fix/repair all kinds of roof and structural problems. If the issue is a weak foundation, those repairs won't maintain.

With it's current popularity, core strengthening might be another trendy health fad that will fade fairly quickly. It could also be a very useful way to bring qualities of strength and centeredness to our body, mind and spirit.

