

# Scoliosis and Yoga

Scoliosis is an abnormal curvature of the spine to one side, with the spine bending either to the left or to the right. The skeleton of Richard III showed that the king had a severe degree of scoliosis. Richard would have benefited from hanging off the ropes at the Institute as part of a royal remedial programme.

*by Naomi Gorta-Slight*



*Naomi in 2008*

I was 14 years old when my Dad noticed in the summer of 2008 that my back looked different, with a curve in my spinal column and a sticking out shoulder blade. My GP thought it might be scoliosis and I was eventually sent to the Royal Orthopaedic Hospital in April 2009. The x-rays showed that I had scoliosis Risser Grade 4 with a double curve measuring 46 degrees.

When I first heard that I might have scoliosis I wasn't too worried because I had never heard of it before. I also thought if it were that serious I would have felt some sort of effect on me, but I hadn't experienced anything. But when I went to the hospital and found out how bad my scoliosis was and that I might have to have surgery, I was very frightened as I hate hospitals, blood and that sort of thing. The thought of an operation scared me very much.

My mother was also terrified and she felt



*Naomi in 2013*

determined that there must be another way than the operation. After asking around we were given the name of a cranial osteopath. I started weekly sessions with her. After a while she suggested that yoga might help too and recommended an Iyengar teacher who taught young people and had a therapy background.

Korinna Pilafidis-Williams let me come to her classes, but she soon established that I needed a tailor-made programme of asanas which I would have to do daily at home. She saw that when hanging off the Iyengar ropes my body evened out and the curve became straighter as the muscles of my back released and stretched. During a home visit she gave me a personal daily practice schedule using chairs and the wall to help me orientate my body and spine because my sense of straightness was very different to what it should be. I also attended a weekly teenager class with her where all yoga poses were included, but I usually arrived 15 minutes

earlier to hang off the ropes to benefit from the traction of my spine. I also continued the osteopathy and was advised to have orthotic insoles fitted in my shoes.

When I went back to the hospital, less than 6 months later, the curve had reduced to 41 degrees.

Encouraged by this, I practised yoga every day. Every morning I would get up and do my programme for 15-20 minutes. I felt good. It made me feel positive and I also felt stretched and awake for the day ahead of me. Also, if my back hurt slightly the yoga would always help. Even when we went on holiday I packed my mat and yoga strap although my mother said there was no space. There was never any need to remind me to practise yoga: I did it religiously every morning.

Finally, the day came when we had to go to the consultant to talk about the operation. We were all prepared to ask questions about the operation as I had started to think that it would be easier to accept the fact I needed it. When the x-ray came back and the curve had decreased to 31.7 the consultant gasped and exclaimed: "That's not supposed to happen! What have you been doing?". And he joked: "Did you stand up very straight when the x-ray was being taken?". My mother explained that we had tried yoga and osteopathy, but the surgeon had stopped listening and moved on to say that with a curve that size I did not need an operation at all and I should continue whatever I was doing.

My mum, dad and I were delighted and I burst into tears partly because I was so relieved, but also because I was prepared to have surgery and I could not take it all in.

I continued classes and my daily practice as well as the regular osteopathy treatments. After a further examination I was told that there was little change in my curve and I was very disappointed because I hoped it would improve all the time. Korinna explained to me that my body would take time to change and I would have to increase my yoga practice for further change to be achieved. She suggested having ropes installed in our house so I could hang from them daily. So I told my mother that I thought it would be a very wise investment and she agreed.

Sure enough, at the next examination nearly 12 months later in May 2011 my curve had gone down to 23.1 degrees, half of what it was initially.

I was very lucky to find both the osteopath and Korinna who helped me on my way and to have my mother who encouraged me all the way. It took, however, enormous dedication on my part and everyone says that if I hadn't put the practice in, nothing would have happened. Getting up every morning to do the yoga was not easy, but it was well worth it, because I don't need the operation now.

Recently I let my practice slip a bit, mainly because of school work and just being generally tired. This affected my back a lot as my shoulder felt higher, my hips twisted and I felt compressed. After doing my yoga daily again for a week, I feel much better all round. I have also been shown how to use my breath to release tension in my stiff areas and to breathe in so as to fill the concave parts of my back. It really helps and you can visually notice the difference. I know that yoga will always be part of my life!

I would recommend yoga to anyone who has scoliosis, but to also make sure the teacher is experienced and understands their problem.



*Naomi in rope Uttanasana*