

The Scorpion - Vrischikasana

By Wendy Teasdill

There is a story of vague and unknown origin about a scorpion and a frog. The scorpion was keen to cross a river, and asked the frog to take him on his back.

‘But why should I do that?’ Asked the frog. ‘You might sting me.’

‘Oh no,’ replied the scorpion. ‘If I stung you, neither of us would reach the other side.’

And so, though there was nothing in it for him, the frog allowed the scorpion to climb on his back and began to swim carefully across the river. Halfway across, the scorpion indeed stung the frog.

‘Why did you do that?’ asked the frog with his dying breath.

The scorpion replied – with his dying breath: ‘I couldn’t help it. It’s in my nature.’

The moral being that altruism is folly and, the scorpion’s nature being toxic, why should we expect it to change?

In pre-Buddhist times, when Tibet was a fearful warrior race, a toxic combination of bear-bile and scorpion venom would be

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marinated in the stomach acid of a snake and used to poison weapons such as arrow-heads and daggers. Death of the victim was guaranteed. Once Buddhism became established, the role of poison became more figurative. There are five poisons associated with the mind: ignorance, desire, hatred, jealousy and pride, and each of these is represented by an animal. The lizard is associated with ignorance, the toad with desire, the centipede or spider with hatred, the scorpion with jealousy and the snake with pride. And of the Scorpion posture, BKS Iyengar writes in Light on Yoga:

‘The head which is the seat of knowledge and power is also the seat of pride, anger, hatred, jealousy, intolerance and malice’, going on to say that ‘These emotions are more deadly than the poison which the scorpion carries in its sting.’ The Scorpion posture involves standing on the hands and touching the head with the feet – in the manner of a scorpion stinging itself. Iyengar makes this a positive: ‘By kicking his head he seeks to develop humility, calmness and tolerance and thus to be free of the ego.’ This in turn leads to ‘harmony and happiness.’

Twenty three years ago, I dedicated a few months to mastering this posture. I was quite proud of it. A few years ago I mentioned to my 17-year-old daughter (at the time) that I used to stand on my

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hands and stamp on my head with my feet. Her reaction was an unhesitant: 'Ew. Gross.' And she did not even know I was describing a scorpion.

Those born under the sign of Scorpio know that reaction only too well. People born in late October/November arrive – in the northern hemisphere at least – at the dark time of year when the last yellow leaves cling to dank black tree-trunks before falling to greet the decaying mould of their fluttering green summer companions. People born under the sign of Scorpio are associated with death, sex, intensity and solitude. They allegedly lock up their problems to stew on in private, make loyal friends, steadfast enemies and are possessed of beady black eyes.

When searching in my books on Tibetan imagery, it took a while to find the scorpions: tiny, tucked away under boulders of greater beasts such as yaks and horses, the scorpions are appropriately discreet. And yet when you do find them, you find they are guarding the gateway to a whole alternative universe. In Tibetan iconography they are depicted with eyes on every itemised section of their anatomy. At first I thought that this was the Tibetan

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imagination at work again ... but it transpires that yes, in addition to the two eyes on top of their heads – which are really light-sensors, sensitive to light and dark but incapable of distinguishing much details - scorpions truly do sport eyes studded all the way down their thorax.

And in Tibetan mythology they play powerful and transformative roles. In his early days as a black sorcerer, the eleventh century poet-mystic Milarepa vented his rage upon the uncle who had appropriated the family home from his mother by conjuring up giant scorpions. They destroyed the house and killed thirty five predatory relatives, whose remains were delivered to Milarepa's lap in the place where he sat in meditation. It was his horror at the sight of his relatives' remains which put Milarepa onto the path of renunciation which ensured his place in Tibetan Buddhist history: as a poet-saint whose dedication to rejection of material wealth was so strong that when his only possession, the pot in which he cooked his wild nettles, broke – he composed a song about it. The bowl had become his teacher as he now possessed nothing at all and was safe in the embrace of non-attachment.

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In western astrology Scorpio marks the tenth sign of the Zodiac, and a summary of the scorpion's attributes would be: sex, death and other peoples' resources. Perhaps it is the scorpion's dark impenetrable armour, its love of dark secret places and the culmination of its body in a toxic sting that compounds its association with dungeons, restraint, bondage and secret fantasies of forbidden fruits. One can attribute to the dark whatever fear or fascination one has – it is dark, indescribable - and embarrassing.

The proteins and peptides of scorpion venom comprise an effective medicine. It contains chlorotoxins – a tiny protein chain which is perfectly shaped to block the entrance of chloride ions into the muscles of the victim, thus preventing them from receiving the instruction to relax.¹ The result is paralysis. When respiratory muscles relax, the result of course is asphyxiation. On the plus side however, it has also been discovered that these chlorotoxins, if used deftly, can be used to block the advent of cancerous cells. Scorpion venom has also been used in heart surgery and is being researched for a number of conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis and lupus.

And the wheel turns: like so many other medical drugs,

¹ http://askabiologist.asu.edu/venom/scorpion_venom

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scorpion venom can be abused. In India, men from the Rabari tribe hitch-hike up and down the main highway with small boxes containing scorpions. For a small fee, clients are subjected to a shot of scorpion venom on their hand or foot. According to the report, they say the initial sting is worth the following eight hours of euphoria, and the Rabari scorpion-keepers claim to be able to get their clients addicted after one sting.

Perhaps all the eyes with which a Tibetan scorpion is covered are covetous eyes – or perhaps the humble scorpion is the mere target of projection. The eyes denote the watchful sensitivity of a scorpion. They do not attack unless threatened. Scorpions make great and faithful friends and lifelong enemies. They work with utmost vigour for charities – other peoples' resources being turned to good use.

There are 1400 species of scorpion, subdividing into nine main families. Fossils reveal that they used to be over 3 feet long and had gills for breathing underwater. When, 450 million years ago, these aqua-arachnids crept onto land, their legs adapted to walk on sand; and they can still stay underwater for two weeks without drowning.

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They hate the wind and have legs equipped to walk on sand; they can last up to a year without food or water and can afford to play a long game, and hunt without moving: their hairs act as sensors. Their sting is sensitive to light and dark, though they don't usually use it as they don't want to waste their venom. They prefer to use their pincers, with the sting there for back-up. Their neurotoxic venom is deadlier than cyanide and though they are watchful mothers, carrying their babies on their backs, they will sting another scorpion in the belly and eat them if necessary. Their fossils are still phosphorescent after millions of years ... we need to be very respectful of the scorpion, shaking out our shoes before putting them on if there's any likelihood of their presence, and developing the posture with caution.