

Just Add Water

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"Mother mother ocean I have heard your call...in your belly you hold the treasure few have ever saw"... Jimmy Buffet, A Pirate Looks at 40.

Water is the giver of life. The sustainer of the earth, the primordial fluid our ancestors first crawled out of. The human being has always had a connection or a call to the water.

Want to ease your way into a greater range of movement? I suggest taking your training into the water. Now I am not talking about joining the local water aerobics class and prancing around in a speedo to the golden oldies, not that there is anything wrong with that. Whatever floats your boat. Nor am I suggesting joining some cult and having a new aged spiritual communion with the water lilies during a full moon, no talking to plants here my friend. I have a much more pragmatic approach. Read on.

We have already established the fact that to increase a stretch we must increase the muscles ability to relax and display its full length. The problem is to do any kind of split or extreme end range movement you have to be somewhat proficient at the move to even begin to get into the correct starting position. This can be problematic for several reasons. If your muscles are already fighting you at the get go you are going to have a long uphill battle to improve. Perhaps you are a little stiff from training...this will also prevent or at the very least make it harder and more painful to put the relaxed stretching idea into practice. One solution is to go to the water.

Most modern yoga classes use props and bolsters to help their newbies get into a yogic posture, or asana that may be beyond their current ability.

The purpose is twofold.

The bolster or cushion will take some if not all the weight off of the limb so the muscles can relax and get the student into a perfect alignment.

The yogi instructs the student to then relax, breath deep and attempt to melt into the stretch...as the student becomes more pliable the bolster or prop is lessened and gradually over time eliminated from the posture.

So to sum it up... support can be beautiful.

The other reason is to instill confidence and make the practitioner feel safe. If you do not

feel safe during a stretching session there is little chance that you will be able to relax.

All of the above is well and good but I want to introduce you to a better mouse trap.

Specifically, the Beach

Go to the beach and use the water as your bolster. Let me explain.

You need to do a little searching to find the perfect location...but the search will be well worth it. What you are looking for is a warm body of water with a nice gradually sloping sandy bottom. You are looking for stretching nirvana.

It goes without saying that you want to avoid water that is infested with nasty sea creatures...no sharks, jellyfish, sharp coral, leaches and the like... If you do choose to practice in a place that has these dangers then it will just be an act of natural selection and the gene pool will be better off. Say thank you.

Seriously here is what you do.

The water depth in which you will start will depend on where you are at in your journey toward the splits. If you are a beginner, start out in water that is around waist deep. For more advanced people just a couple of inches will do. The shallower the water the harder this will be. When in doubt, start deep.

Face toward shore so you will be looking "uphill".

Begin by practicing the kneeling lunge stretch. You may slowly "tread" water with your hands (think lazy breast strokes) to move you in and out of the stretch.

If you have gentle surf, that can work just as well. No crashing waves.

When you feel ready, push your lead leg forward into a front split. Now you may really focus on relaxing and gradually "sinking" into the stretch. The water will support most of your weight and you will find that it is very easy to move into a split. Gently rock side to side and as you relax and push your feet into a greater stretch.

You can and should hold the stretch for a loooooonng time. Combine deep breathing and gentle flowing motion of the water to lull you into a deeper stretch.

When you feel you can, move into shallower water. This will allow you to control exactly the amount of weight you put on the stretch i.e. the more of your body that is out of the water the less buoyant you will be.

The shallower the water the more weight the stretching muscles will have to bear.

Next practice the side splits in the same fashion.

Start in a little bit deeper water and slowly sink into the side split. Use your hands again to tread back and forth. Go from a toes pointing up split to a toes pointing forward split.

Every so often roll your hips and switch to a martial arts split...do these so called "hip switches" and then plant yourself into a wider version of the side split. When you cannot get any deeper into your split without your head going under water it is time to move in to shallower water.

You have a couple choices when it comes to moving in.

Option 1 - Simply stand up - move in and start another set from scratch.

Option 2 - Leave your legs in a split and use your arms to swim forward to the shallows.

Spend some time at this practice and be patient.

It is relaxed stretching after all.

Combine this water training with some deep meditative breathing and you will have a great recovery program.

- Training in the water like this will allow you to keep your back and the rest of your body in perfect position, even if you are not quite there on land.
- It will also allow you to manipulate how much tension you feel by either increasing or decreasing your buoyancy.
- It will increase your ability to relax in these extreme positions; why else would people buy wave machines to listen to the sound of the ocean?

Use the water training as just another arrow in your stretching quiver, but not as an end all strategy.

Like our ancestors, you cannot stay in the water forever, once you evolve you will need to wiggle your way toward shore and become a land animal.

A very flexible land animal at that!