

Heather Quinn

Of all the yoga poses that are impressive to watch, this isn't one of them, but it's the thing I'm most proud of: I can point my foot.

Cut back to: nine years ago, in a local high school gym. I was 17 years old, running up and down a basketball court. The ligaments in my left ankle were severed, hanging like loose rubber bands inside my foot. There was no cartilage left. The bone was dying. It felt like there was a knife stuck sideways in the front of my foot. But, I thought I was being tough, and I thought being tough was cool. I didn't realize the body I had at 17 was the only one I'd ever have. Over the next four years, I had four ankle surgeries, and was on crutches for 20 of the 48 months I was in college. After many failed attempts and splintered hope, I found a doctor, at Stanford, who could help. He built me a new ankle, replacing the dead bone in my foot with a piece of my tibia; now, at 21, I had to learn to walk. Again.

Over the next four years, I became a meticulous student of my body. I had to focus on every step: lift toes, strike heel, bend knee, roll through, re-training my nerves to create the correct motions. I had learned as an athlete how to tune out the pain; now I had to learn to tune in. When my friend Laurel brought me to yoga for the first time, last year, I knew there'd be a lot I couldn't do. As frustrating as it was, I'd gotten used to saying, "I can't." When you're on crutches, the list is long: can't walk, can't grocery shop, can't hold a purse.

At yoga class, this was the list: can't do triangle pose, can't get up into handstand, can't straighten my back leg that's shaking (so stop asking me to.) But for every limitation in my ankle, the main one being, if I pointed my foot, the bone would slip out of place; Alvaro had a modification. With my ankle taken care of, one pose at a time, now I could engage my mind. The mental yoga was as difficult as the physical, but the acute concentration which yoga demands deepened my connection with my body even more. I was learning to embrace the physicality of a pose to where I could get past what hurt, and start studying why it hurt; or, better yet, move past why it hurt, by changing it. Slowly but surely, it actually started to work.

Progress in yoga is truly relative. I've gotten better at handstand. I can almost do trikanasana. But far bigger to me is something that is seemingly far smaller, a matter of inches, actually: I can point my foot, and the bone no longer slips out. This means I can walk. I can run. I can.