

Understand Your Backache: A Guide to Prevention, Treatment, & Relief

By Rene Cailliet, M.D.

Reviewed by Judith Lasater, Ph.D.

Not surprisingly, when I was in physical therapy school, our anatomy text was Gray's Anatomy. Because the text is so detailed, we would occasionally ask our teacher how much we had to know. The answer was always the same: "Know everything. You can't know enough anatomy."

Obviously, keeping anatomical details in mind is difficult at best, yet a thorough knowledge of lumbo-sacral anatomy is critical when working with Yoga students who may be suffering from lower back pain. Cailliet's book makes this task easier for several reasons.

First, the drawings are the characteristically humorous ones found in all of his books. Because of the humor and simplicity of these drawings, difficult kinesiological concepts, including biomechanics of the lumbo-sacral spine, are presented in an easily assimilated way. These drawings serve the dual purpose of reminding the educated reader of important facts while simultaneously giving the novice a clear picture of what is happening in the lower back.

Another helpful aspect of the book is the amount of time spent defining the functional aspects of the vertebral column. Anatomy is best understood through understanding function. In the first chapter, Cailliet immediately and clearly explains how the lower back functions and illustrates the stresses produced by normal movements. He explains especially well the forces at work on the intervertebral disc with a series of drawings.

One of the best sections of the book deals with the causes of lower back pain, namely poor posture and improper use of the body when bending and lifting. Generally, lower back pain is a problem of people from the ages of 25 to 55. Cailliet addresses the need for this group of people to pay attention to how the body is used and to keep supporting muscles, like the abdominals, strong and functioning well.

For the professional, Cailliet's chapter on examination is thorough and straightforward. He takes the reader through the important questions which need to be asked of the sufferer as well as the traditional orthopedic tests that can so clarify a diagnosis. Especially important for Yoga therapists is the point the author makes about observing the overall appearance and posture of the person suffering lower back pain. He states: "Body language has become an accepted science in which a person's inner feelings are clearly depicted in posture, movement, or facial expression."

(p. 93) This is an area in which Yoga teachers and therapists are especially adept. Coupled with an in-depth knowledge of anatomy and biomechanics this can be the foundation for a clear and deep understanding of lower back pain. Learning to look and listen to one who suffers is an intrinsic part of both the physical and spiritual aspects of Yoga. It is, of course, impossible to separate mental and physical stress, and therefore is more productive to look at the whole person from the beginning.

Some debate has occurred around the treatment of lower back pain in the last 10 years or so, regarding the efficacy of flexion versus extension exercises for lower back pain. Cailliet touches on this debate and recommends both, depending on the individual. Nothing could be more in harmony with the teachings of Yoga.

In conclusion, while Cailliet has written a number of useful books on various parts of the body, notably his *Soft Tissue Pain and Disability*, this book is one of his best and is an excellent teaching tool for students as well as a review for professionals. The fact that it concludes with a glossary of relevant terms and a short-but-clear epilogue-summary is an added tidbit.