



MIND

MINDFULNESS AND THE PHYSICAL PRACTICE OF YOGA

Whatever type of yoga you practise and whatever your level of experience, its synthesis with Mindfulness creates an experience that is light, fluid, flexible, and energetically effortless and deeply rewarding. Bringing the two disciplines together your body becomes a map of your mind revealing how states of mind arise moment-by-moment and bringing understanding directly through bodily sensation. This direct verification builds curiosity and confidence and provides a dynamic foundation for personal development and a less ego-led practice both on and off the mat.

*"You immediately see
changes reflected in
your body."*

From the practice of Mindfulness you can use the ability to place attention in parts of the body at will, the capacity to release the body and mind back into balance and the clarity of intention moment by moment. In this way mental and physical tension caused by striving can be released.

This synthesis of yoga and Mindfulness enhances both practices making each accessible in a fresh and engaging way through the other. Working with mind states experienced through the body bypasses the internal dialogue and story making that so often obscures the clarity needed to see what is happening in the mind. In a similar way, working with restrictions in the body through the mind reveals how much of our sense of physical obstruction and limitation has little to do with flexibility, suppleness or lack of strength but more with reluctance to take responsibility for our experience in the present moment.



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"Our stiffest muscle is between our ears."

REVEALING CHOICES

The capacity to directly experience the tension created in mind and body by our attachment or aversion to whatever we are doing or anticipating is a characteristic of the nuts and bolts form of Mindfulness I've studied and practised with Bhante Vimalaramsi. When we cultivate direct observation of our self-limiting reactions and how they occur, the real choices we have are revealed and with them the understanding that the responsibility for those choices is ours alone.

Most of us are familiar one or more of the following:

'I want to do this'
'I can't do this'
'I don't like this'
'It's not going to defeat me'
'I'm no good'
'It'll never happen for me'
'I like this, I want more'

Each of these dramas is played out continuously, both physically and mentally all through the day both on and off the mat. Just listen to the resistance sometimes simply to stand on the mat for a self-practice. If we are not careful we choose to drown these out through distraction and striving. Mindfulness can teach us instead to treat this tension as a signpost pointing towards what most needs addressing and understanding. Often we would rather follow our instinct to move purposefully in the opposite direction ignoring or pushing through this unwanted and uncomfortable experience.





TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

When we choose to be responsible for our mind states we turn towards them and investigate with curiosity and interest just what is going on. If we do just that, what we witness is a chain of events, one link after another of sensory experience and reaction triggering off one another often with accompanying stories and habitual emotions and responses. We can see how all of this conditions the present moment experience to conform with and support our personal beliefs both about ourselves and the world as it unfolds moment by moment. "I'm too stiff, I can't do this, it won't ever happen for me, I'll never be able to." Just think for instance about the anticipation, expectation, fear, determination or whatever mental response there is around the prospect of inversions or backbends. The temptation is to resent this, believing that our practice and life will be so much better once we have mastered a troublesome posture. Mindfulness invites a different approach: to see these postures as an opportunity to experience the richness of learning yoga has to offer.

CULTIVATING OPENNESS

Not all displays of physical flexibility are expressions of opening. Our task is not to strive for flexibility at the cost of openness. It's all about subtle and not so subtle tension. This tension can be so familiar that we no longer see it. It manifests in the body and also as a tension around the brain. This can be slight, but as we try to control and determine how our practice will be, it more often makes the brain feel like a dried walnut reflecting a closing off and a closing down. Our responsibility is to restore it to feeling like a fresh peach. This ability is cultivated through a soft listening which seeks to avoid a single pointed concentration, preferring a soft, spacious awareness that retains a wider sensitivity to the process of feeling, thoughts, images, emotions and sensations. Key to the approach is maintaining a light touch with the mind. Try the mindfulness approach of smiling; the softening of the corner of your mouth and eyes and see how your mind lightens and brightens and how this helps to cultivate and maintain a responsive and open listening in the moment. This way we can remain open, both within our body and in our mind at the limit of our capacity. Here we rest against resistive tension, felt like a supportive pillow rather than in tension, and this fine balance requires a mind that is softly listening at all times.



WE JUST NEED TO GET OUT OF THE WAY

With this soft listening we become sensitive to our internal dialogue and reactions and with it the impatience and judgements of our internal critic. We can start to see we have choices in the moment. Instead of following the siren call for increased effort in the name of ever greater flexibility, why not embrace openness and the surrender it represents bringing a freedom and softness to the body and mind that striving never brings however flexible the practice is?

To surrender is to invite our ego to step out of the way and allow our yoga do us rather than the other way round. In this way we remain open to the teaching yoga offers us, correcting us when we replace openness with tension and healing us as we learn to release this tension ever more deeply. In this way our practice truly becomes self-teaching, self-correcting and self-healing.

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