



Integrating yoga & mindfulness on and off the mat



Hugh Poulton and Sarah Haden talk us through how the integration of yoga and mindfulness offers a kinder and more compassionate way to inhabit our bodies

Whether our yoga form is dynamic and fast moving or slow and measured, the quality of how we listen behind the physical appearance is at the heart of this way of practicing. The softer we learn to listen, the more we realise that what really limits our expression of yoga is not so much the shape we make but the subtle and not so subtle patterns of tension and resistance that are personal to us all. Integrating mindfulness into our yoga reveals how we constantly fight our own body when we are in pursuit of an outcome and ignore its natural capacity and flexibility. It leads us towards the discovery of a subtle mental and physical energy that underpins all our movements bringing us emotional as well as practical support in all that we do.

It's the other way round from what we might expect: our learning here is to open instead of brace; to allow instead of control; to soften instead of force. It has much more in common with some martial arts, tai chi and chi gong disciplines than aerobic fitness and cardio gym work. Cultivating this subtle energy and seeing how we get in the way of the support it can provide is a persuasive insight into our direction for personal growth. The

shapes we make in yoga then unfold as a place to encounter this, not as a source of frustration but as a teaching. The softness we seek sets us on a path of tough compassion constantly reminding us where we need to grow and inviting us to do so. So how do we make a start?

Awareness: body

From the practice of mindfulness we 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. We see with greater clarity the impact of the four elements: where to seek appropriate support, what needs to remain fluid, how to balance energy and the importance of keeping the breath free and easy. Combine this with the cultivation of the energetic body through the bandhas and ujjayi and we create a more dynamic and subtle support that promotes a practice that is tension free and responsive to mind states.

Awareness: mind states

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. Our body becomes a map of our mind revealing how states

of mind arise moment-by-moment and bringing understanding directly through bodily sensation. In a similar way, working with restrictions in the body through the mind reveals how much of our sense of physical limitation and release 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. 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.

Revealing choices

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 with 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 out these reactions and the tension they cause through distraction and striving. Mindfulness can teach us instead to treat these uncomfortable and unwanted experiences as a signpost pointing towards what most needs addressing and understanding.

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 ripe 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 resting against the pillow of resistive tension whilst keeping all our joints fluid and free of tension. This fine balance requires a mind that is softly listening at all times rather than dropping into autopilot which has something of a dissociative quality.

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, embrace openness and the surrender it represents to bring a freedom and softness to the body and mind that striving rarely brings however flexible the practice is. To surrender in this way is to invite our ego to step aside and allow our yoga to do us rather than the other way round. Doing this we remain receptive to the teaching yoga offers us, correcting us when we replace openness with tension and healing, as we learn to release this tension ever more deeply. In this way our practice truly becomes self-teaching, self-correcting and self-healing.

Hugh Poulton and Sarah Haden are teachers who share this compassionate approach to practice. This year they are running a 200hr teacher training starting in July and have retreats to join in Devon, Ibiza and India. Visit: yogaunlimited.co.uk



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