

Yoga and Mindfulness for Daily Life

What is Being Mindful?

Being mindful is that state when we remember that we have been on automatic pilot: when we are more likely to have had our 'buttons pressed'; when thoughts, feelings and body sensations in the mind can trigger old habits of thinking, grooves in the mind. Mindfulness starts with the commitment to become more aware. It is this awareness and acceptance without judgement of our moment to moment experience.

So why combine Yoga and Mindfulness?

- With the practice of Buddhist Mindfulness Meditation and the experience of its impact when incorporated into asana practice, a new approach to practising Yoga with Mindfulness emerges. Once we develop Mindfulness techniques and combine them with the classic Yoga approach of Bandhas and Ujjayi pranayama, these are immediately effective at releasing the cause of obstruction or limitation in the practice of Yoga. Usually only accessible to the advanced practitioner, practising this way opens the body and mind, irrespective of previous experience, to directly feel the freeing effect of the presence of balance.
- A key component in Buddhist Mindfulness teaching is the releasing of craving in the mind. Craving occurs when we take our sensory experience personally. In Buddhism there is a 6th sense – the mind. Craving in the mind is reflected in the “I like it, I don't like it response” to the sensory experience. It is expressed experientially as a physical tension around the brain and elsewhere in the body, sometimes gross, sometimes subtle and it is the release of this tension and thus the craving which brings the mind and body into balance. This allows us to use the body as a barometer of our mental states and reveals to us through awareness the limitations and obstructions which we may not have seen clearly in consciousness. By adopting a light, soft, open approach and the practice of smiling, we are able to work with limitations and obstructions without impatience and aggression. When this occurs we have a body and mind that feels open and free.

Locating the Bandhas

Locating the Bandhas to one's own satisfaction can be a frustrating experience. These exercises cultivate awareness to help:

1. Sit comfortably, with the spine free of any support, each vertebra stacked one above the other in balance; breathe out fully, and then some more. The effort of the last stage activates the physical Bandhas, the sensation of the muscle between the legs

lifting and the lower abdomen being drawn in (Moola Bandha) and the rest of the abdomen firming inward but not aggressively so (Uddhiyana Bandha).

2. The Bandhas are also linked to the same muscle contractions used when we wish to stop urinating mid stream.
3. Pinching the nose almost closed, blow, the effort activates the Bandhas in a similar way.
4. Place the thumb deep into the mouth and use the back of the tongue to push the tip of the thumb to the roof of my mouth. Suck hard, and feel the Bandhas engage again. This action of the tongue is similar to that required to generate the Ujjayi breath. The connection between Ujjayi and Bandhas is seen.

From these simple exercises, it is possible to comprehend the connection between breath and the Bandhas. In order to consciously cultivate this, practise the following:

Sit upright on the floor, spine relaxed, with straight legs, spread wide with feet dropping out. Deliberately tighten all the muscles between the knees and lower ribs, thighs, quads, buttocks, anus, groin, genitals, abdomen and the muscles around the spine. Maintaining this, place your attention on the inner thighs and gently roll them towards the floor (medial rotation) so the feet become vertical. In spite of the effort, notice that it is almost impossible to maintain the tension: thighs soften, the buttocks noticeably so. Looking carefully, be aware of tension remaining deep within the body, from the pelvic floor to up in front of the spine, the lower abdomen remains firm, and there is a quiet tension in the abs, but it is not aggressive. Notice that other than that, everything has released, everything that is except the Bandhas. The connection between rolling the inner thighs backward and releasing unnecessary tension is felt. The ability to isolate the tension of the Bandhas from other tension in the body is a fundamental part of this practice.

Where our attention is, goes the sensation of weight and tension

When we choose to work from the Bandhas, with a commitment to the body being tension free and in balance, our experience of the postures changes dramatically according to where we place our attention. Wherever our attention rests, there goes the experience of weight and tension. The only place we want non-essential tension is in the Bandhas. The only place we want the sensation of weight is in the connection with the earth element. But we have to be careful, not all contact with the floor wants to be grounded through the earth element, especially if the intended posture requires that part of our body to lift off.

*If you expect your life to be up and down your mind will be much more peaceful
Lama Yeshe*