

Mindful Yoga by Jon Kabat-Zinn

For a number of years in the late 1970s, Larry Rosenberg and I taught back-to-back evening classes in a church in Harvard Square. He would teach vipassana meditation (a Buddhist practice of mindfulness), and I followed with mindful hatha yoga. The idea was that everyone would take both classes. But Larry and I were always bemused by the fact that most of the people in the meditation class didn't want to do the hatha yoga, and most of the "yogis" didn't come for the meditation class.

We saw the hatha and meditation as different but complementary doors into what is ultimately the same room--namely, learning how to live wisely. Only the view from the doorways was different. We had a definite sense that the meditators would have benefited from paying more attention to their bodies (they tended to dismiss the body as a low-level preoccupation). And the hatha yogis, we felt, would have benefited from dropping into stillness for longer stretches of time and observing the arising and passing away from moment to moment of mind/body experience in one sitting posture. We didn't push our view of this on either group, and we tried not to be too attached to who showed up for what, especially since we saw the essence of what we were both teaching as identical. Nonetheless, it was an interesting phenomenon.

Over the years, my own experiences of combining mindfulness meditation practices and hatha yoga into a seamless whole prompted me to experiment with different ways of bringing these ancient consciousness disciplines into contemporary mainstream settings. I wanted to explore their effectiveness in transforming health and consciousness. How might they be connected?

For one thing, the hatha yoga had the potential, I thought, to help reverse the huge prevalence of disuse atrophy from our highly sedentary lifestyle, especially for those who have pain and chronic illness. The mind was already known to be a factor in stress and stress-related disorders, and meditation was known to positively affect a range of autonomic physiological processes, such as lowering blood pressure and reducing overall arousal and emotional reactivity. Might not training in mindfulness be an effective way to bring meditation and yoga together so that the virtues of both could be experienced simultaneously as different aspects of one seamless whole? Mindfulness practice seemed ideal for cultivating greater awareness of the unity of mind and body, as well as of the ways the unconscious thoughts, feelings, and behaviors can undermine emotional, physical, and spiritual health.

This personal exploration led ultimately to developing a clinical service for medical patients in which we used relatively intensive training in mindfulness meditation practices based on the vipassana and Zen traditions, along with mindful hatha yoga, with medical patients suffering with a wide range of chronic disorders and diseases. This program evolved into an 8-week course, now known as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR).

MBSR is now offered in over 200 medical centers, hospitals, and clinics around the world. Many of these programs are taught by physicians, nurses, social workers, and psychologists, as well as other health professionals who are seeking to reclaim and deepen some of the sacred reciprocity inherent in the doctor-caregiver/patient-client relationship. Their work is based on a need for an active partnership in a participatory medicine, one in which patient/clients take on significant responsibility for doing a certain kind of interior work in order to tap into their own deepest inner resources for learning, growing, healing, and transformation.

Hatha yoga has played a large and critical role in this work from the very beginning, and many yoga teachers have been drawn to teach MBSR. Through a seamless integration of mindfulness

meditation and hatha yoga, MBSR taps into the innate potential for healing that we all have. It mobilizes our ability to cultivate embodied wisdom and self-compassion; and by so doing it teaches us to live our life and face whatever arises with integrity, clarity and open-hearted presence.

Mindfulness lies at the very core of Buddhism in all its forms. Yet its essence is universal in that it is about refining attention and awareness. It is a powerful vehicle for cultivating deep insight into the ultimate causes of suffering and the possibility of liberation from that suffering.

The ancient stream of hatha yoga practice is another of the great consciousness disciplines. My first taste came in 1967 at a karate school in Boston, where a young Vietnam veteran named Tex was using it as a warm-up. I quickly fell in love with the yoga. I was training in the Zen tradition at the time, and the two seemed to complement each other perfectly. That conviction has only deepened over time.

The appeal of hatha yoga is nothing less than the lifelong adventure and discipline of working with one's body as a door into freedom and wholeness. Hatha yoga was never about accomplishment or perfection, or even about technique by itself. Nor was it about turning one's body into an elaborate pretzel, although the athleticism that is possible in hatha yoga (if one can manage to steer clear of narcissism) is a truly remarkable art form in its own right. Certainly, we are seeing a marvelous flowering of interest in many different kinds of hatha yoga in mainstream circles now. The question is, how mindful is it, and is this flowering oriented toward self-understanding, wisdom and liberation, or is much of it just physical fitness dressed up in spiritual clothing?

Mindful yoga is a lifetime engagement--not to get somewhere else, but to be where and as we actually are in this very moment, with this very breath, whether the experience is pleasant unpleasant, or neutral. Our body will change a lot as we practice, and so will our minds and our hearts and our views. Hopefully, whether a beginner or an old-timer, we are always reminding ourselves in our practice of the value of keeping this beginner's mind.

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