

It's All Yoga, Isn't It?

Brad

I am fascinated by what people believe, especially when it comes to health and wellness. I find myself skimming through fitness journals and magazines for the latest tidbits and trends that if embraced are sure to improve my health and save my life. As a certified personal trainer in addition to being a naturopathic physician, I receive newsletters, magazines and workshop flyers weekly on a variety of topics. Several recent publications crossed my desk containing features on “bodymind” fitness. I was eager to see how the authors described this term; however, no such definition was forthcoming. Instead, readers were given examples of bodymind exercises sweeping the nation, specifically yoga and Pilates. To ensure total and complete fitness, each author advised complementing one’s current routine with two or three postures or exercises from these disciplines.

Yoga and Pilates, it seems, hold the market on bodymind fitness, as more and more people are enrolling in these classes. This got me wondering; what happens to the mind in all the other activities people are doing? Are cycling, weight lifting, running, or rock climbing mindless and merely physical exercises? Do people check their minds at the front door or leave it in their lockers with their street clothes? What makes yoga and Pilates bodymind practices, and bench pressing 300 pounds not? In one of the same magazines touting the benefits of these two disciplines, another article described the psychology of sports. It mentioned how focus, deter-

mination and concentration are key elements for the successful athlete, which suggests to me that the mind is a crucial player in all we do.

I have attended many yoga and Pilates classes throughout my life. When I was living in Seattle, my good friend Cathy - a fellow naturopath and yoga instructor - and I had a Saturday morning ritual. Every week we would choose a different yoga studio, drop in to take a class, and then find a neighboring restaurant to share a meal and discuss our experiences. Our intention with this “Yoga and Breakfast Routine” was two-fold. We wanted to cultivate and maintain our personal yoga practices, to find a sangha or community of like-minded individuals with whom we could share our love for yoga; and we wanted to learn enough about the various studios and teachers in order to direct patients to places that might resonate with their individual constitutions and interests.

Both Cathy and I come from an Iyengar yoga background, and as naturopaths who practice some physical medicine, we recognize our bias towards classes emphasizing structure and alignment. We’re aware of the physical harm that can be done when asanas, or postures, are executed incorrectly. Still, Cathy and I were eager to expand our horizons and experience as many styles of yoga as possible, not only for our own personal growth, but also as seekers on a quest to answer this mystery of what is a bodymind practice. Again, I must admit a bias; I held strong opinions about the authenticity and



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Lichtenstein is a licensed naturopathic physician living and breathing in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His passion is shifting the healthcare paradigm from an emphasis on illness to one of living well, despite diagnosis or disease. Currently, he practices as meditation teacher, breathworker, energetic bodyworker, and movement and yoga therapist at WellSpace (www.wellspace.com). For the past decade, he was an adjunct faculty member at Bastyr University where he taught counseling, yoga therapy, pranayama theory, movement therapy, and naturopathic philosophy. He created the *Explorations in Mindfulness* and *PranaPlay* workshops to teach the cultivation of life through active mindfulness, meditation and movement, believing that body-centered awareness is the key to unlocking the doors to our innate wellness.

essence of yoga. During that period of our Saturday morning ritual, I was teaching yoga philosophy and therapy at Bastyr University, which kept me immersed in texts on the nature of yoga. The more classes we attended, the more curious I became. I still questioned what placed yoga in the bodymind domain, while other forms of physical activity were not.

While in Thailand some years ago, I frequented local wats, or Buddhist temples, to practice vipassana (insight meditation). Several of the young Thai monks, captivated by the sight of a farang, or Westerner, sitting in meditation beneath a statue of the Buddha, would venture forth to speak with me in their broken English (and my horrendous Thai). On a majority of these occasions, monks offered me books, printed in English, on the teachings of their masters.

One of these books contained an intriguing discourse contrasting yoga and Buddhist philosophy. Yoga, the book contends, is based on control and will power, and this, it declares, is about force. Buddhism, on the other hand, involves ease, the absence of force. It goes on to say that mindfulness, the cornerstone of Buddhist meditation, is learning to be with what is. Mindfulness practice requires one to remain intentionally and non-judgmentally aware of our thoughts and actions as they unfold.

Through the practice of dispassionate awareness, we can begin to glimpse the reality that we are not our thoughts, not our feelings and not our bodies. Vipassana is merely a ritual to show the way, to practice observing without owning, as we watch the breath without trying to alter or control it. When mindful, we are able to watch our reactions, be they thoughts, feelings or physical sensations, without the need to respond or control them – we simply notice what arises in the moment.

This is only one perspective on the nature of yoga and Buddhism. One of my favorite writers on all things yoga is George Feuerstein, who on his CD series *The Lost Teachings of Yoga*, defines yoga as “the art and science of disciplining the bodymind by uniting or integrating all the aspects of our being.” In Sanskrit, the word yoga held a multitude of meanings, yet in the early part of the Common Era it came to denote a spiritual practice in the Hindu tradition.

As with any practice or religion over time, there were outgrowths of different, and even opposing, schools of yogic thought. Feuerstein suggests that we consider yoga to be more of a philosophy than a religion. One can practice yoga without believing in any of the Hindu deities. In fact, he goes on to say with this definition in mind, every religion has its own form of yoga; Judaism has Kabbahla, Christianity has Christian mysticism. The main point is that in order for a practice to be yoga in nature, all pieces

of the individual, including their spiritual and religious beliefs, must be united and integrated, a truly holistic view.

The practice of meditation, Buddhist or otherwise, is yoga. In the Yoga Sutras, considered to be compiled by the great yoga authority Patanjali, meditation is listed as one of the disciplines for uniting and integrating all aspects of our being. But is it without force and effort? Many students tell me that sitting in meditation, disciplining the bodymind to remain in spacious awareness by watching thoughts, feelings and sensations without owning or reacting to them, feels like a tremendous act of will.

In almost every class Cathy and I attended, Patanjali and the Yoga Sutras were mentioned. Like the monk comparing the practices of yoga and Buddhism, Patanjali, too, spoke of effort. In aphorism forty-six of the second chapter of the Yoga Sutras, he writes *sthira-sukham-asanam*, which has been translated to read that posture should be steady, stable, and firm as well as pleasant; or *posture should be seated in a position that is firm but relaxed*, both of which suggest ease. What then is the implication for a person sweating and shaking during sun salutation? Would Patanjali say that they are engaged in the practice of yoga?

Not much else is written in this classic text about asanas, yet despite this fact, almost every class we attended focused almost entirely on physical postures. Teachers, at times, would encourage students to release tension held in various parts of the body during a pose, yet classes primarily fixated on form. Meditation, when practiced, occurred during the last few minutes of class usually while lying in corpse





pose, as many people collapsed from all the effort exerted. A few minutes might be dedicated to chanting or breathing practices, but never did I hear suggestions on how one might integrate all aspects of one's being while doing a pose. Seldom were we instructed to turn attention inward while in the midst of a pose; to notice the flow of energy; or even observe what it was like to be bent forward, twisted, or even seated.

Were these yoga classes, then, bodymind experiences? Even amidst the trappings of incense, music, statues of god and goddesses, these classes concentrated on the physical. If integration happened, it was unexpressed, internal, and without framework. Students invariably felt "better", whether more relaxed, more energized, or less anxious. Do such changes in one's disposition determine whether or not an experience is a bodymind approach?

While in the midst of a marathon, runners claim that the mind is their constant adversary, advocate and companion. When runners do achieve the state of being "in the zone" where body, mind and the universe are one and everything becomes effortless, can we then call running a bodymind activity?

Conversely, at the local gym, what are people doing when they watch television, read magazines or even talk on cell phones as they exercise on the stairmaster, stationary bike or treadmill? Finally, what about the current ads for mindfulness yoga classes? When yoga is practiced without mindfulness, does it amount to anything more than stretching or gymnastics?

If "feeling better" is the objective, several studies on exercise show equal, if not superior, results when compared to cognitive therapy and medication for

the treatment of depression. Not surprisingly, studies using yoga as the main therapy for the treatment of the depressed report similar findings. Can we conclude, then, that exercise and yoga are both bodymind approaches, since moving the body lead to changes in the mind?

Devoid of insight and awareness, yoga and Pilates remain physical practices. Your mood might brighten, but have you integrated all parts of your being? Furthermore, riding a stationary bike while reading a fitness magazine or listening to the news directs your attention away from your current experience and reinforces compartmentalization and segmentation. No wonder people consider the body and the mind separate entities. If I had my druthers, I would strike the term bodymind from our common health and fitness vernacular, and instead encourage ongoing mindfulness and embodiment in all activities.

How do we practice this *yoga of life*, this art and science of disciplining the bodymind by uniting or integrating all the aspects of our being? For starters, we must return to the physical body that we have ignored for far too long and listen to what it has to share. Our current world is left-brained, cognition dominant, seducing us to turn a deaf ear to the form we currently incarnate. If attention is given to the body, it is often to alter or change it; to make it behave in a manner that is in opposition to its current mode of being, such as exercising to eliminate fat or meditating to stop a headache.

How we tend to deal with emotions further perpetuates this perspective. When experiencing sorrow, hopelessness, anxiety, or frustration, how readily do we look to the body for guidance? How often do we sit in the emotional state and inquire, *What am I actually feeling inside, on a visceral, physical level?* Such a question demands patience, perseverance, presence and deep reverence for our experience of the moment. The next time you feel sad, ask yourself, *How do I know I feel sad? What is it that tells me I am feeling this way?*

Living primarily in the world of thought and story, we give precedence and preference to what we think, at the expense and disregard for what we feel. Hierarchically and neurologically, however, physical sensations are the "raw data" for the formation of our thoughts. Without them, we have nothing to which to respond. Every opinion I form, every decision I make is initiated by a sensation. If I judge someone to be mean, I must first hear the words that they say. If I judge the sunset to be amazing, I must first see it. The mind may label or conceptualize, but the body must first experience.

Miranda was in her third trimester when she stated emphatically, "I have been anxious this entire pregnancy." After two miscarriages, such a state-

ment seems reasonable. Not wanting to give the mind all that power, I asked, "How do you know? What tells you that you are anxious?" "My stomach has butterflies, it flutters, and I feel jittery and tingly down my arms," she replied. I invited her to sit for a moment with these sensations. To listen to what they had to say.

After a moment, she opened her eyes and exclaimed, "I am excited. I'm excited! I am going to have a baby!" Miranda's rational mind had made an assessment; namely, that such sensations mean anxiety. Without fully entering into the sensations, Miranda missed the chance to wholly appreciate the moment, as well as the initial months of her pregnancy.

I love inviting patients to become enraged at me without thinking anything particular or tensing any part of their body. Given such parameters, they are incapable of feeling anger. More than thoughts, therefore, are involved in the genesis of emotions. I know when I feel sad because my physical body responds. My stomach drops. My jaw quivers and vibrates. My chest sinks. My breathing is punctuated with sighs. This is how I know I feel sorrow. These are the indicators as to my emotional state. Emotions live in the body, in the tissues; and as such, they demand respect and attention.

The very word emotion is derived from the French and Latin word *emovere*; *e* → out, *movere* → to move. Thus, emotions are outward expressions of internal movements. Emotions are declarations of internal commotion, so to speak. *What tells you that you are sad? How do you know? What does it feel like to be in your body when you feel sad?* These are the questions that connect us with our physical reality and experience and encourage integrations.

I ask us all to live in the bodymind we inhabit, to

feel what it is like to be fully embodied. For numerous 'holistic' practitioners and patients, the term bodymind has been reduced to the notion that thoughts alone create health or disease. Change your mind, your body changes. However, many people fail to see that the street is not one way. Awareness needs to occur on all levels. Be in the body. Feel your physical form. Attend to your movements. Notice how the body influences your thoughts.

Make every physical activity a bodymind one. The next time you walk down the street, lift a dumbbell, or do downward facing dog pose, instead of being lost in reverie or focused on perfecting your form, turn inward. Practice everyday yoga by considering the following questions:

What is happening for me right now? What am I sensing, feeling, experiencing?

Who am I when I am moving this way, doing this pose?

What is my experience of the world and myself in this moment?

Does this movement or posture change my personal and global consciousness and orientation? How? In what way?

What does engaging in this activity or posture, right now, reveal to me about my true nature?

And finally, what is arising in me now? How can this insight extend off the mat, away from the gym? How can I have this awareness at work, in the car, in the line at the grocery store?

In my PranaPlay workshops, I encourage participants to be *moved* rather than be movers - to listen



to the body and follow its innate rhythm and flow. Under the impression that they control their thoughts, and therefore their movements, initially it can be frightening for linear thinkers to allow themselves *to be moved*. As with meditation and thinking, they are under the impression that they must be the mover and must control their every movement.

A 65-year old gentleman with whom I worked once told me about his trepidation of crying in front of me, as he "might not do it right." Such individuals tend to seek yoga and other classes in which they can follow the instructor or where the sequence is predetermined. In these cases, the brain tells the body how to move, and most of us are pleasantly surprised when our bodies remotely approximate the "idealized" form. In these instances, listening to the body is secondary, as we try to will our bodies into submission.

To be moved integrates body and mind. As you sit here reading this, right now, pause for a moment. Without moving, *how* and *what* do you feel? What sensations are arising? Don't move. Witness.

What is your mood? Are you happy, bored, scared, lonely, sad? How do you know? What tells you? Is it linked in any way to the physical sensations you noticed moments ago? Again, don't move. Observe.

Feel how your body wants to move without initiating the movement. Rather, sense the impulses

and directions in which it calls you to move. What is it asking you to do? If you feel the urge to stretch, refrain for a moment; stretching tends to be forceful and lacks awareness. We feel pain or discomfort and mindlessly stretch in an opposing direction. As you attend to your body, see if it has some other movement in mind. Had we been conscious all along, the need to stretch might be nonexistent since we most assuredly would not have maintained a posture that induced discomfort in the first place.

Finally, be moved. Slowly, even slower than you think necessary, allow your body to follow these internal impulses. When we move slowly, more of the brain is activated as a greater number of neurons fire and our consciousness expands. With curiosity and wonder, become absorbed in the movement. Do not worry where it will go, how long it will last or whether or not you are doing it right. Simply hang out with it.

This is the yoga of movement. This is meditation in movement. There are no rules or patterns to follow, just your own internal wisdom. No matter what fitness and exercise routines you prefer, see what happens when you listen to the body and integrate its information. Find the wisdom from inside and honor it. Practice being moved rather than telling the body what to do. You might be surprised at the person you discover in the process.



The American Association of Naturopathic Physicians

Naturopathic Doctors —
Physicians Who Listen



AANP ANNOUNCES ITS NEW PARTNERSHIP WITH



“Does arnica interact with prescription drugs?”

“Can pregnant women safely use Echinacea?”

For answers, log on to www.naturalstandard.com

JOIN AANP AND ENJOY FREE ACCESS

Email newmember@naturopathic.org or call 866-538-2267 today for more information

The **American Association of Naturopathic Physicians** is the only national association representing licensed or licensable naturopathic physicians. **Natural Standard®** is widely recognized as one of the world's premier sources of information in the area of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM).