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Mind And Body At eAse sarah PoWers

Hatha Yoga is an introspective path of self-transformation that utilizes the body as a vehicle for harmonizing and strength- ening one's energy. With balanced energy, we are better able to understand and free our minds, as well as develop an open and receptive heart. Mindfulness is a meditative awareness practice that develops a capacity to attend to our body, emotions, mind, and the environment with a receptive, noninvasive attitude. When we braid Hatha Yoga and mindfulness together as our practice life, we create a potent opportunity to diminish the suffering that is fueled by our habits of distraction and aggression as well as to increase our happiness as we begin to enliven our natural vitality and discover our authentic nature, an alert quality of presence and openness. Physical Yoga practices involve placing our bodies in various shapes and, while focusing on the breath, directing our attention to specific areas within us as we alternate holding and flowing from pose to pose. This kind of practice not only strengthens the bones, muscles, and systems of the body but develops what I will call active attention. We learn in a nondistracted way to increase the potential for greater vitality within and between the body and mind. The attitude we foster is directive and is a main feature of our discerning intellect that develops as our practice continues. There is an additional aspect of our intelligence that similarly requires alert interest, yet instead of altering the body or mind, requires that we simply observe these qualities without interfering in their flow in any way. This kind of training can be called receptive attention and is what we develop in mindfulness practice. Practiced together, we develop the capacity to be both active and receptive while on the mat, as well as in our life.

I have found it very helpful to develop these complementary Yin and Yang qualities of attention in distinctively active and receptive postural practices. While I do engage in receptive attention in active practice and active attention in a receptive practice, a slow flow or Yang-style practice can be an appropriate style to heighten our responsive atten- tion, while a Yin floor practice that holds poses for longer periods cre- ates a natural container for receptive attention. Since so many Yoga classes already focus on the directive features of attention to the body and mind, I have felt inspired the last few years to focus on the recep- tive ones, not because they are better but because they require skillful guidance, as they are harder to develop and are often less popular in many Yoga classes. I have found the insights that can arise when we rest in a receptive attitude open us to deeper truths about ourselves that can directly enhance the way we operate in daily life. If our practice includes a receptive element and is genuine and skillful, we should notice direct shifts in how we relate to challenging circumstances in ordinary moments, feeling better able to connect with ourselves with increased care and kindness, while feeling more able to meet unavoidably difficult circumstances in life without adding suffering to our suffering.

In order to develop this attitude of sensitive, nonmanipulative attention, we need a simple and quiet āsana practice in order to discover what's going on in our body moment to moment, to learn to tolerate difficult sensations while opening to a wide array of emotions, all the while attempting to stay intimately connected to our experience in this body.

When we are in a pose feeling challenging sensations pulsing through us, our resistance to difficult sensations can cause even more suffering than the pain itself. This insight into how we add to our

suffering when we struggle, and how awareness of the resistance can diminish the suffering, develops a practical skill we can apply to simple moments outside practice.

Last night for example, I was lying on my bed bathed in sweat from the searing heat. At a certain point the ordinary discomfort turned into blazing hot flashes across my entire body. Everywhere was running water; my forehead, my neck, my legs. . . . Lying there, I became utterly intolerant of my experience and before I knew it, I was defiantly standing, almost expecting I would encounter an enemy lurking. As if catching myself in the mirror, I stopped and looked at what was happening inside me—the raging heat as well as the familiarity of discontent. As my attention dropped down and in, I simply felt the firm ground under my feet, sticky sweat pouring down my belly, and the heavy warm air all around me. Without planning it, I dropped into awareness of sensations, the First Foundation of Mindfulness. As I simply watched all this, I became aware that my angst had effortlessly slipped away and I was now feeling calm and present. I erupted in laughter at my familiar response to discomfort. Again and again I am astonished at how a forceful and indignant emotion can simply decompose as my attention turns toward my direct experience mindfully. I lay back down noticing that the next moment was no less fiery, yet my inner attitude had shifted. My experience of the sweltering heat had changed simply because my attention had shifted from resistance to observation.

Mindfulness practice is a method that helps us pause in the midst of any experience we are struggling with, helping to relieve many moments of ordinary suffering in our life. This practice has helped me become increasingly interested in not only listening to the inner messages I tell myself while in a pose, or while meditating, but also paying attention to my self-talk throughout the day. A popular internal and mental line I have caught myself saying is, “I can’t stand this another moment.” It might occur in the middle of a difficult hip-opening Yoga pose, during an uncomfortable meditation session, or in the middle of an argument with my husband. When I am able to interrupt my struggle with what’s happening long enough to question my contracting attitude, I can ask myself, “Where am I not able to stand this another moment?” Then I go on a search: “What’s going on in my body right now?” This is the First Foundation of Mindfulness, mindfulness of the body.

In order to entrain this capacity to simply observe our raw and direct experience without being seduced into believing in any commentary, we need to create a safe, optimal environment for reestablishing a renewed curiosity about learning how to be with ourselves in difficult moments. Our Yoga sessions are an optimal place for developing this quality of sensitivity toward our inner world. As we settle into a pose, we might be experiencing some tension in the abdomen, or some blockage in the shoulder. When we observe with a mindful attitude, our query becomes threefold: “What’s my current situation?” (knowing what’s happening now), “How does this feel?” (investigating the particular sensations dominating the moment), and “What’s my attitude toward this sensation?” (paying attention to how I am relating to what’s happening, while turning back to the direct sensation occurring now). We segregate these three features, learning to disentangle the direct body sensations from the mental factors, garnering insight into how both pleasant and unpleasant sensations are inevitable and how our mind states determine whether we suffer or not.

Giving ourselves time each day in a receptive practice such as Yin Yoga to inhabit our bodies in a nonstriving way creates an optimum environment for developing mindful attention toward the body. In the beginning of mindfulness practice, we track what is arising in us moment to moment without acting out for or against what we notice. This is sometimes called bare attention and allows us to observe the distinction between sensations in the body and attitudes of mind. When circumstances trigger discontent—for example, while holding a hip-opening āsana—with mindfulness practice we learn to disentangle the direct sensations from the familiar feeling of irritation or resistance to what is happening. We suspend immediately acting out from these feelings by trying to improve the posture or

by coming out of it in order to avoid these feelings. When mindfulness is added to our āsana practice, we develop an increasingly spontaneous ability to pause and soften into our experience as we connect to what is arising within us, even when what we are connecting to is the feeling of tension in the body or mind.

Without a daily intention in our practice to observe ourselves with kind yet keen attention, our “ordinary” moments will continue to be driven by the habits of our conditioned responses. And that, as we may already know, is a recipe for unhappiness. If instead we educate ourselves to turn the lens inward, a kind of magic can occur. It is not the fantasy of glibly assuming that our practice will make us immune to difficulty. It is simpler and more realistic than that. It’s the magic available in any ordinary moment when we attend to what is occurring in our body and mind in an uncontrived and authentic way. The result is that we untie the inner constriction, instead of seeking to eradicate the object of disdain. This enables an opportunity for liberation at any given moment. Let’s look at how habits operate and how our Yoga practice can become a place to develop mindfulness.

Each moment in our lives we are faced with stimuli that our sensitive organism registers as sensations and subtle feelings that operate in a wavelike manner; pleasant and unpleasant events arise, build, and then crest, before diminishing and eventually evaporating, only to arise again, alternating as conditions shift and reconfigure. We naturally react to these pleasing and disturbing features with attraction toward that which we like, and repulsion to what we don’t. Finally and quite unconsciously we move toward that which we are attracted to, and away from that which repels us.

These four beats are so swiftly passing through us each moment, we usually fail to notice they are really four distinct mind moments: stimulus, evaluation of unpleasant versus pleasant, reaction, and then action. We are often left wondering how we got here and why we are suffering without knowing there is any choice in how we relate to the recognition of unpleasant and pleasant experiences.

Mindfulness is a practice that begins with the fourth beat, refraining from action. The first two, stimulus and assessment of stimulus as pleasant or unpleasant, are unavoidable and outside our control. But the second two (reaction and action) are under our conscious control, and can only be developed with training.

In mindfulness meditation, we pause the fourth beat, the action, in order to observe reactions (the third beat) to pleasant and unpleasant stimulus. Initially, this is a lot like restraining a colt. We may be bucking and rearing in discontent, but we hold our seat so that we can observe the process of reactivity a little closer. We may begin to see that distraction and discontent often arise when we are experiencing unpleasant sensations that are at the apex point, at their peak of intensity. Instead of acting out from this repulsion (however slight), and moving our attention away from what we don’t want, we simply observe the feelings and sensations directly. Inevitably, we notice that what seemed solid and permanent is actually fluctuating, giving us experiential insight into the wavelike nature of change. We learn that when we can stay more attentive to both pleasant and unpleasant experiences alike, without drowning in the common hindrances of craving or aversion, we feel more alive and connected, even when what we are connecting to is difficult to endure.

The beauty of a mindfulness practice is that we can actually learn to rest in awareness even when feeling highly uncomfortable. Our attitude can become one of wonderment rather than abandonment. “Wow, look at this,” might be the inner dialogue, instead of “No, I refuse to accept this.” This shift in perspective allows our inner experience to become much more fluid, flexible, and adaptable. The habit of resistance to what’s happening may still continue to arise, but our newfound skill to observe rather than fight or flee frees us from the prolonged damage unconscious reactivity promotes.

Mindfulness practice is taught in four domains of attention; to the body, to feelings, to mind states, to phenomenon. I have found that slower āsana practices can be a potent container in which to develop

mindfulness meditation since we encounter all the same qualities of inattention or aggression when we practice holding Yoga postures as we would when meditating.

When we place ourselves in a Yoga pose, we are often so focused on the body shape we are trying to create, that we may not even notice our current attitude. We may be unaware that we are feeling frustrated by our limited range of motion in our hips or tight hamstrings, unaware that we are unintentionally inhibiting the flow of energy because of our rigid attitude. Since prāṇa (energy) flows where our soft attention goes, how we practice is as important as what we practice. The congested areas of the body interrupt our natural energy flow, but so does our rigid attitude. If we approach our tight regions with care, we can relax the struggle with our experience and really enjoy coming home to our bodies in a dignified way, regardless of our limitations.

When we practice Yoga and mindfulness of the body simultaneously, we set up a quality of genuine acceptance toward our experience. This allows insights to filter through our ordinary states of consciousness that bleed into how we live ordinary moments. On that day of infernal heat, my reaction started out as self-righteousness. I felt I had already experienced my hot flash for the hour, so I did not feel I deserved to have to go through the internal burning again. In my view, it was wrong. This contracted attitude caused me to perceive the heat as even more unendurable. The healthy habit developed from my mindfulness practice to pause and acknowledge how I was relating to my experience eventually arose and allowed me to see my responsibility for my unhappiness. I was promoting my own suffering.

Becoming aware of our habitual patterns during our practice life helps us see that living in defiance of ordinary moments like the one I have described is a choice. At the height of tension and discontent, the crest of the wave, the challenge becomes to attempt to look at and accept the feelings of rejection we are experiencing in relation to unpleasant circumstances, rather than striving to get rid of the resistance to what we don't like. As we turn openly toward our hostility without scorn or pretense, acceptance itself shifts our experience.

In mindfulness practice we are neither controlling what is happening to us, nor wallowing in resignation of our fate. We are simultaneously accepting what is here, and allowing room for the potential of change. This attitude becomes the foundation for authenticity and discriminating wisdom to develop. When something horrible is happening to us, we meet aversion in a truthful way. If it is true that I am feeling resentful, then turning toward rather than away from these feelings and allowing them to move through me without censorship is the practice of mindful awareness.

When we can include rather than deny or fight with what is really true within us, the emotion becomes a little more porous. We can then inhabit the feeling consciously, discovering how every feeling feels inside our body. While we are exploring the immediate body sensations, we also relax believing the story we might be telling ourselves, whether we are justifying, blaming, or feeding self-condemnation for having these feelings. Instead of analyzing, we stay with the direct immediacy of our experience as it is unfolding in the body, giving our feelings room to breathe. Since emotions are not static, we will naturally notice how they morph into other feelings. As they shift, we continue to allow these changes without self-definition. In this way we learn to know anger or sadness directly, free of creating a permanent self or me out of them. We remain fluid within our moments, with a wider range of capacity for allowing the totality of human emotions to move through us.

As we begin our āsana practice, we acknowledge that challenges will indeed arise, and that we plan neither to cause harm to ourselves nor to abandon the scene. Temporarily (you might even say artificially), we learn to suspend the behavior that would usually result in us pushing, fighting, or running away from what is happening. Āsana practice is a perfect setting for this training since certain positions will inevitably trigger challenges. While we are experiencing various sensations, we see if we

can apply the method of mindfulness directly, in our own immediate experience.

As we begin the practice, it is helpful to clearly understand the method. The first tool of mindfulness of the body is to track the in- and out- breath without interfering with its cycles. Although breath awareness can seem too dull or ordinary to elicit any insights, there are features in the breath that can teach us simple truths about life.

As we take a breath in, it feels good, particularly when it is a fresh, oxygenated breath. As we inhale, the body feels a natural relief. Then as the breath continues to come in, we usually take it for granted. After pleasure at the beginning of the in-breath, we are now feeling more indifferent. As we get to the end of the inhale, the longer we go without breathing out, the more uncomfortable it gets. It was great in the beginning, we didn't really care so much in the middle, and now we really want it to end and something else to occur. This pattern of pleasant, neutral, and unpleasant within one cycle of breath is ubiquitous in all cycles of all experience. It's a kind of arc we are exposed to in all of our waking moments. So to watch this patterning inside us breeds particular experiential insights that can translate to other encounters. Establishing the breath as our primary anchor also gives us a trustworthy base of support to return to when we either disconnect with our experience or become entangled in it.

There are outer, inner, and innermost levels of method to every practice. In mindfulness of the body, the outer or foundation level of training is to know what is happening while it is happening, to know something is changing, or to know its absence, in a noninterfering way. (The inner level of training focuses on impermanence, and the innermost is a direct recognition of emptiness.) Let's look at how this applies in our Yoga poses. The foundation level of mindfulness while in a back bend may involve paying attention to all kinds of events throughout the body and mind. On the physical level, there may be the feeling of compression (this is the word for "bones pressed closer together is not a bad thing") along the back of the spine and elongation along the front. On the emotional level we might notice trepidation and unease, while mentally we may observe we are talking to ourselves incessantly, wondering whether we should go further or come out, or we may be caught up in the memory of an event where we injured our spine.

The first method of mindfulness of the body is to disentangle the direct and immediate sensation in the body from our mental processes and reactions to the sensation. We attempt to place the sensation itself in the foreground and fully observe it, while allowing our likes and dislikes, thoughts and fantasies, to be noticed and let go of. We are not pretending we like unpleasant sensations. We are instead fully observing the nature of the sensations at hand instead of fixating on whether they are good or bad, right or wrong (unless of course we are sure it is simply risky to be in this pose).

Working with what is most difficult at the moment can allow us to stay in the process of mindfulness before any mental agitation hijacks our commitment to observe. We look into the experience more microscopically and discover the size and shape of the sensation, noticing how it feels on inhale versus exhale, and whether or not it stays the same or is shifting as we watch. This simple movement from identification with pain to observation of discomforting sensations shifts our experience completely. We might have the insight that it is easy for us to become caught in a struggle with our experience, or to become engrossed in concepts about our experience, or just to simply space out. Maintaining an attitude of intrepid curiosity and inquiry moment to moment is an essential component to preserving mindfulness. While folding forward or bending back we can nourish this inspired attitude during our āsana time by first simply noticing pressure in the external hip rotators, thickness in the groins, or hardness in the abdomen as we bend into a hip-opening forward bend.

Secondly, we investigate how it feels specifically within the sensation itself. Instead of shifting our attention at this point, we penetrate the experience a little further. We go directly into the outer hips

and notice the size and shape of the sensation. Is it stronger over on the right end or is the center more intense? Is it more oblong or rectangular? What's the texture feel like? And how is it changing moment to moment?

Lastly, we ask what's my attitude toward this experience? Once you've recognized that there's a distinction between the raw event of sensations and how you're actually relating to what's happening, you gently acknowledge the current attitude. We might feel frustration, resentment, hope, or fear. At this stage it is very important that we not censure our feelings and instead simply and nonjudgmentally, recognize what is arising within us, even when we would prefer to feel otherwise. As we accept our psychological condition with honesty and care, we can then come back to the first step and ask ourselves anew, where am I feeling this in my body? As we are investigating the various sensations within us, pose by pose, we keep coming back to the breath as our primary anchor and domain of stability.

When we give ourselves time for this noninvasive and nonabandoning quality of mindful attention during our Yoga practice each day, our relationship to ourselves becomes naturally kinder, softer, and more intimate. This primary method of mindfulness of the body develops greater ease of being under a myriad of conditions, laying a foundation of maturity in the yogic practitioner and readying us for deeper inquiry into the nature of change—the inner method of mindfulness—and eventually stimulating direct insight into the empty nature of all phenomena—the innermost path.