

## Practicing Mindfulness on Your Mat

In the last issue of Universal Magazine I spoke about 'yoga and weightloss' and 'mindful eating'. In this issue we take the theme of 'mindfulness' to our yoga mats.

For many practitioners and non-practitioners alike, yoga has been reduced to, and synonymous with, the postures and movements of hatha yoga. Yet for most of its history, meditation has been the essential aspect of authentic yoga practice. The word "yoga" comes from the root *yuj*, meaning to "yoke or to harness," signifying both spiritual endeavour and the state of integration. Buddhism, a bona fide child of the yoga tradition, offers a model of yogic theory and practice, and, like all authentic yoga, is *moksha-shastra*, a liberation teaching designed to free us from suffering.

The Buddha instructed us to observe the breath, and gradually extend our awareness to include the whole body. He said the practitioner should be aware of the movements and positions of the body while standing, walking, sitting, lying down, bending over, or stretching. He said nothing is excluded from mindfulness, that no aspect of our lived experience lives outside of practice.

In hatha yoga, when we combine awareness of breathing with asana practice, we can observe how movement and posture affects the breath, and how the breath affects the body. We become aware of habitual patterns of reactivity. For instance, do you hold your breath when reaching out with your arms into a deep stretch? Do you unnecessarily tense muscles not involved with the movement you are making? Do you compare one side of the body with the other? When engaged in repetitive movements, does your mind wander?

The Buddha taught four foundations of mindfulness as the basis for establishing mindfulness throughout our daily life. They are body, feelings, mind, and dharmas. Each foundation includes a variety of meditations and contemplations. When practicing asana, we can choose to devote our practice to any one of these, or work through them sequentially. Asana practice need not be viewed as a complement or preliminary to sitting practice. It's simply another way to practice mindfulness.

### First Foundation

Awareness of "the body within the body" is the first foundation of mindfulness. This phrasing reminds us that we are not distant observers of the body, with awareness located in our heads watching our body as an object. Rather, awareness permeates the whole body, like a sponge saturated with water.

The Buddha's first instruction is to bring mindfulness to breathing. We're encouraged to simply know an in-breath as an in-breath, an out-breath as an out-breath, free of all manipulation. We become intimately familiar with the experience of breathing, noticing the varying qualities such as deep or shallow, fast or slow, rough or smooth. Since mindfulness is a friendly, non-judgmental, fully accepting kind of attention, we are already cultivating a transcendence of the pairs of opposites.

Expanding our awareness to include the whole body, including its posture and movement, we deepen our sense of embodiment. The body and breath do not get lost in the future or the past, so if attention is fully absorbed in the body, there is a fully integrated sense of presence. The body and breath keep us anchored to now. Only when we become entangled and identified with thinking can we feel distant from life.

When practicing postures, we stay fully present through mindfulness of the breath. When noticing the mind leaning away from our experience of an asana, we can remember to come back to the breath. In this way, the breath becomes the sutra—the thread—upon which we weave our practice. We see for ourselves how the posture and movement of the body conditions the breath. The qualities of the breath are conditioned by whether we are in a forward bend, a backbend, or a twist. When we maintain a posture, we will see a change in the breath. We can also see how the breath conditions the body, affecting both movement and posture. All this points to a core teaching of the Buddha: since all phenomena are conditioned, there is no real autonomous “thing” to speak of. We say “breath” or “posture” as if these were things separate from the flow of experience, but through this practice we see they are processes—caused and conditioned, selfless and constantly changing.

Bringing attention to the parts of the body, we become aware of any reaction we have. Which parts do we like? Which parts do we dislike? We may feel revulsion contemplating our earwax, bowels or lymph, and prefer to contemplate our hair or our eyes. Yet those eyes free from their sockets might provoke revulsion and fear; that hair clogged in our shower drain may seem disgusting. All reactivity is conditioned. We see that “beauty” and “disgust” are not inherent in the objects, but have interdependently arisen. Already, in the first foundation, we can get glimpses of the emptiness teaching of the Buddha.

## Second Foundation

We deepen our intimacy with experience by bringing mindfulness to feelings—again, not as a disassociated observer, but from within the feelings themselves. Feelings here are not emotions but the “feeling tone” or “felt sense” of experience.

To see for yourself, take a moment to close your eyes and just sit, with your hands resting on your lap, palms down. Settle yourself into the experience, noting how it feels to sit here—physically and energetically. You may note such feelings as heavy, grounded, stable, or dull. Then, maintaining your attention, turn your palms upward and note if there’s a change in the feeling tone. You may find yourself feeling light, open, receptive, or vulnerable.”

Feelings are a primal experience that, according to the Buddha, precedes any reaction or emotion. The importance of bringing mindfulness to feelings or sensations cannot be overestimated. It is at the junction between feeling and reactivity that mindfulness provides the possibility of freely choosing how to respond to any given situation.

Hatha yoga practice can either help us grow in awareness and insight, or create *dukkha* (suffering), depending on whether mindfulness is present or not. For example, when practicing an asana you enjoy, experiencing the pleasure of a sensuous stretch, or the psychological pleasure of the “successful” performance of a challenging posture, if you are not mindful, you will get caught in craving and clinging, seeking to prolong or repeat the feeling as soon as it wanes (as it most assuredly will, all phenomena being impermanent). While it is indeed a pleasure to accomplish a challenging posture, without mindfulness, as the

classic yoga text *Gherandha-Samhita* warns, asana practice becomes an obstacle to liberation when ego-gratification is clung to, and identification with ego and the body becomes more rigid and solid. We get caught in pride and our identity as someone who can do advanced postures. When conditions change (through illness, injury, or age) and we can no longer do what we used to, we can become discouraged and even suffer despair.

Practicing difficult postures, we may experience unpleasant feelings. Mindfulness shows us how quickly the mind seeks to push the unpleasant away, to eliminate it. Such aversion creates tension that is often more painful than the original sensation. The Buddha referred to this added anguish as the second arrow. The first arrow is the experience of discomfort or pain; the second arrow is the tension, anguish, and unease of our aversion.

Bringing awareness to neutral feelings cultivates greater clarity about our experience. In fact, most of our experience is neutral, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. So we spend much of our time seeking intensity of feeling or falling into boredom. Through greater awareness of the neutral aspect of experience, we remain present to experience and cultivate greater ease, enjoying the calm of neutrality.

Zen's understanding of pure practice is to not add anything extra to the experience. If we bring mindfulness to our feelings, we can experience pure pleasure, untainted by clinging or grasping. But in order to be able to experience pure pleasure, we must be willing to experience pure pain or pure discomfort, free of aversion and resistance.

The most pain-avoidant people have the least joy in their lives. In trying to armour ourselves against pain, we numb ourselves to all experience. In opening ourselves to felt experience, we allow ourselves to live life fully, not caught in habitual patterns of reactivity. Rather than conditionally reacting to experience, we can choose to respond creatively. The doorway to this freedom is in bringing mindfulness to our feelings before they condition our reactivity.

### Third Foundation

While practicing asana, mindfulness of the mental formations provides a wonderful opportunity to observe and recognize our mental patterns and how they condition our habitual tendencies. The body is not completely symmetrical. You may find one side in a posture easier than the other side. Noticing how quickly the mind categorizes experience into good and bad can free us from believing these potentially limiting notions. As an old Zen saying puts it, "with one thought, heaven and hell are created."

Pain or discomfort often arises during asana practice. Much of our discomfort is really just a reaction to novelty, and much of our pain is the pain of change. Such pain can provide an opportunity to grow in mindfulness. Truly injurious or excessive pain should never be ignored, but the truth is, most of the pain that one experiences in asana practice is merely discomfort and not injurious. With discomfort, it is fruitful to drop out of your aversive reactivity and bring a gently embracing quality of mindfulness to the discomfort. When we do this, we see for ourselves that there really is a difference between pain and suffering—the misery and mental anguish that we add to the experience because of our aversion. This is an important insight with real benefit to life off the mat.

We practice with the discomfort and pain that arises in asana practice so that we can remain free from suffering throughout our life. If we feel discomfort in our shoulders while doing

warrior two, all we need do to relieve the pain is to lower our arms. But if we always do this, what will we do with the pain that we cannot avoid through such a simple strategy? What if you are injured in an accident? Or you lose your lover? How will you face your own sickness, old age, and death? Whether emotional or physical, embodiment means pain is inevitable. Working with mindfulness of the mind means that when the inevitable losses of life occur, you can just feel the pain, and not add suffering as well.

The Buddha encouraged us to notice the mind when liberation, or letting go, is present. But first we need to have clarity about what a grasping mind feels like. Yoga is not an ideology, philosophy, or moral code about the goodness of letting go and the badness of attachment. Letting go is what happens when the suffering of holding on is felt and recognized.

The most obvious attachment is to material objects and sensory pleasures, including possessions, and sensual or sexual sensations. Attachment to particular “feel good” experiences, like the potentially seductive enjoyment of stretching and moving the body, or the excitement of accomplishment, are some examples, as is the “yoga buzz” many practitioners seek in their practice. There’s nothing wrong with enjoying physical pleasure, but if we are dominated by our attachment to pleasure, we will suffer when it dissipates.

Another type of attachment is to opinions, beliefs, views, and theories. While practicing asana, we may find ourselves attached to ideas about what we should be able to do, what we should be feeling, and the correct form of the asana. We may find ourselves caught in a belief about what we cannot do or will never be able to do. Again, ideas and opinions are not the issue; it’s the degree of our attachment to them that creates suffering. If we are attached to strong ideas about what we need to be happy and free, the attachment to those very ideas becomes an obstacle to happiness and freedom. And there can be attachment to practice itself. The Buddha strongly warned against getting attached to ritual and traditional practices—secular or religious. It is possible to become so attached to a particular form of practice that you remain in your comfort zone, never testing your edges. The form becomes a trap rather than a tool for liberation. To appreciate and be firm in one’s commitment to a particular practice is one thing, but if we become overly attached and obsessive with the form, we can all too easily lose the liberating spirit of the practice.

The most challenging attachment includes everything that we can identify as “I,” “me,” or “mine.” Even becoming attached to our identity as a yogi can become a source of *dukkha* if we develop a holier-than-thou attitude that causes us to see ourselves as separate and superior to others.

Mindfulness shows how one creates a sense of self through reactivity, belief patterns, and dramatizing story lines. It happens in the instant a student uses her mat to mark out her spot in the practice room. The more attached we are to our stories of self, the more tension and suffering we create, but it’s not until we really see this for ourselves that any opening can occur.

#### Fourth Foundation

Mindfulness of the dharmas provides the context of bringing mindfulness to specific mental qualities, and analysing experience into categories that constitute core aspects of the Buddha’s dharma, or teaching. These classifications are not in themselves the objects of

meditation, but are frameworks or points of reference to be applied during contemplation to whatever experiences arise while practicing.

The dharmas listed in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, or Four Foundations of Mindfulness, are the five hindrances, five aggregates, six sense-spheres, seven factors of awakening and the four noble truths. One can contemplate these dharmas while practicing asanas, but I find that for most practitioners it's too easy to fall into abstraction or intellectualization, unless they already have a mature mindfulness practice.

In the *Anapanasati Sutta*, or Mindfulness of Breathing, contemplation of the dharmas takes the form of bringing mindfulness to the impermanent nature of all phenomena. Contemplation of impermanence is a dharma gate opening to the understanding of the interdependent, conditioned, and selfless nature of all that exists.

Asana practice offers a great window into impermanence. From day to day, the body feels and moves differently each time we come to practice. We know things change, yet we put so much effort and energy into trying to live life as if that were not so. This is *avidya*, “not-seeing” as a kind of wilful denial. But ignoring or denying the truth of impermanence perpetuates suffering and misery, and opening to the reality of change liberates that energy.

We look into the impermanent nature of all the earlier objects of meditation, starting with the breath. No two breaths are the same. Even within one inhalation, there is constant movement and change. There is no thing that is actually the breath that can be grasped and held on to. Every sensation we experience—whether pleasant, unpleasant or neutral—is impermanent, as is every emotion, thought, or perception. Changeless life is a sterile concept, yet without mindfulness, so many of us live as if such a life were possible.

If “self” is understood as an entity that is autonomous, independent, and persistent over time, then insight into impermanence leads inevitably to the clear view that all things lack such an unchanging self. Even the consciousness of self that we take great pains to protect and bolster is not an autonomous, independent, persistent thing or entity; it is a process that is in constant flux, conditioned by everything else that is in constant change. Insight into *anatta*, or “no-self,” leads to an understanding of *shunyata*, or emptiness—that we, and all phenomena, are empty of a separately existing, enduring self.

By penetrating the reality of impermanence, our grasping after ephemeral phenomena weakens. A taste of this can happen in the time it takes to work with one asana. Maintaining warrior two, unpleasant sensations may arise in our shoulders. These sensations lead to aversion, and grasping after relief. We identify with the unpleasant sensations and think, “My shoulders are killing me.” Thoughts arise about the teacher having us hold the posture too long; never seeing that too long is a relative concept. Clinging to that belief creates a sense of self; the more we cling, the more the self-suffers. Shifting our attention to the impermanent nature of experience, there is just sensation, and the sensation is ever changing.

With this insight comes *nirodha*, or cessation. This is the third noble truth of the Buddha, often used as a synonym for nirvana and also Patanjali's definition of yoga. Practicing asana, we may notice many small cessations. We may experience a pleasant sensation and the arising of a mental formation. With mindfulness, we see attachment, and based upon an awareness of impermanence, the attachment fades away. It happens once, and then again and

again. Over time, the fading away continues until that particular attachment ceases. This is a small, but potentially profound taste of liberation.

Finally comes letting go. But there is also the insight that it is not you that lets go. Throughout practice, there was still that final vestige of self-consciousness that could take credit for the insight into impermanence and cessation. The final thing to let go of is the idea of a separate enduring self. The irony is that this is a letting go of what was never there.

This isn't letting go of one thing in order to grasp something else. Letting go means to see through all that keeps us separated from reality as it is. The supposed boundary between self and other is seen as not real. Nothing needs to be removed or added or joined together. Enlightenment and liberation come not by turning away from our human condition, but rather arise within it, and as its fulfilment. This letting go means being with whatever is happening, free of personal agenda. When the desire arises that something be other than it is, we see through it to its fading away and ceasing.

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