

## Yoga notes

Yoga is a Sanskrit word that literally means yoke, to tie things together. It is interpreted as union. When the practice started becoming popular in the West, 50 or 60 years ago, the description was interpreted as the union of mind, body and breath. The problem there is with the word mind, which in our culture generally means thinking, which is mostly judging. Later on, people said maybe that word should be interpreted as Heart-mind, which doesn't help us very much since we don't have a concept of Heart-mind in our culture. The concept we do have that I think is closer to the original intent is awareness. Union of awareness, body and breath. That's very different. If you practice the union of **judging**, body and breath for 50 years, what you wind up with is an exercise class, or even a competitive sport, masquerading as a mindfulness practice. I think that kind of practice, where the goal is to be strong and flexible, is more properly called bodywork, not yoga. There is absolutely nothing wrong with wanting to be strong and flexible, it just isn't in and of itself mindfulness practice. What makes it mindfulness practice, what makes ANYTHING mindfulness practice, is what happens when you start thinking. If you have the thought -That person is more flexible than I am, and you find that you are pushing a little harder and adjusting your posture, that's bodywork. If you have the thought -That person is more flexible than I am, and you NOTICE the thought, let it go, and call your attention back to the sensations of your stretch, your breath, that's yoga. And that noticing the thinking and calling your attention back is just as much a part of the practice as doing the pose. That's what makes it mindfulness practice and not an exercise class.

Even in very competitive bodywork classes, most people feel pretty good at the end of the hour, so they think something special has happened. All that has happened is that you have spent a lot of moments paying attention to what is present – mainly sensations in the body. In between, you may also have spent a lot of moments thinking, more specifically judging and striving, which is the opposite of mindfulness. There are loads of ways to call attention to what is present that are not mindfulness practice. Hobbies are relaxing because they draw your attention to what is right in front of you, at least for a certain number of moments. However, with hobbies, as with bodywork, we tend to be attached to the outcome – judging and striving, the opposite of mindfulness.

The most important of the Seven Attitudes in doing yoga is trust. Trust your own experience. The body knows what your limit is in each pose. Your mind may have other ideas about what you think you should be able to do, or what you would like to be able to do, but your body knows, so trust that. There is some real value in exploring your limits, but there is nothing skillful about pushing your limits so hard that you wind up getting injured. Pay attention to what your body is telling you, and you can explore your limits deliberately and respectfully, without overdoing it.

Two other attitudes that you can learn a lot about in yoga are non-judging and non-striving. There will be judging and striving, that's just what the mind does. The practice is not to stop the judging and striving or to resist it or suppress it, but to NOTICE it, because the moment you notice it, you have a choice. You can safely close your eyes

for most poses, except for some standing poses and balance poses. You may find that closing your eyes reduces judging and striving. In addition, closing your eyes changes the experience of paying attention to sensations in the body. The visual system is a huge attention hog, so closing your eyes leaves much more energy available for paying attention to the sensations of the pose and the breath.

In this class, we will only do beginner's poses, for two reasons. First, they're safe. You don't have to worry about injuring yourself if you are not perfectly aligned. That is not true of more advanced poses, where proper alignment can be very important. When learning more advanced poses, it is important to be in a room with a teacher who can observe and adjust your alignment, but for these beginner's poses, just trusting your body to tell you when to stop will keep you from injuring yourself. Second, this is not an exercise class, it's a paying attention class. From the standpoint of paying attention, it really doesn't matter which poses you do, it matters how you pay attention to the experience. You could do the same pose ten times in a row, and it could be very good mindfulness practice, if not such a great exercise class.

If you have done a lot of yoga and have already developed some strength and flexibility, another attitude to bring to the practice is our old friend beginner's mind. You may find yourself having some expert's thoughts, such as – This is too easy, I should be doing something more challenging, I already know how this is going to go. Notice how it feels to do this beginner's pose THIS time. Notice what your range of motion is RIGHT NOW. And, most importantly, notice the thoughts and let them go. It is always helpful to practice beginner's mind, and it is especially helpful when you can expect some expert's thoughts.

Yoga can be a great practice for exploring the difference between pain and suffering. In a lot of yoga poses, approaching your limit of flexibility or strength can generate some very noticeable physical sensations, or even **intensely** noticeable sensations. These sensations are often accompanied by suffering – the resistance in the mind to the experience. I don't like this, I want it to stop. Often the mind tries to run away, to find some distraction that will compete with the sensations for attention. This is so automatic that it can take some practice to realize that's what is happening. The mindful move is always to go **into** the experience without resistance or judgment. Bring full attention to the most noticeable sensations just as they are, with curiosity and kindness for the body. Start with mildly unpleasant sensations, when you experience a little resistance, and notice that the resistance is just a mind state. Once you experience the difference between the sensations and the story in the mind about the sensations, you can gradually explore letting go of the resistance to increasingly unpleasant sensations.