

Phil's Group

The practice of yoga is an art and science dedicated to creating union between body, mind, and spirit. Its objective is to assist the practitioner in using the breath and body to foster an awareness of ourselves as individualized beings intimately connected to the unified whole of creation. In short, it is about bringing balance and creating equanimity so as to live in peace, good health, and harmony with the greater whole.

The foundations of yoga philosophy were written down in the yoga sutras around 200 AD, describing the inner workings of the mind and providing an eight-step blueprint for controlling its restlessness. What most of us in the Western World think yoga is, is the physical aspect of yoga postures, often practiced here as a form of exercise to strengthen and increase flexibility. And that's true of the postures, if done properly, but there is so much more to this picture. Breath work, the postures, and meditation are three of those eight limbs.

Yoga is a journey inward. We're training ourselves to notice and observe our thoughts, emotions, and messages from our bodies in the form of sensations. We are raising our awareness of the constant fluctuations of our mind in many different directions.

For me, all the Yoga practices I engage in, like delving into yoga and Buddhist psychology, breathwork, asana practice (physical postures), relaxation techniques, and sitting meditations are all done to help me build and maintain tools to become more self-aware - aware of my thoughts, my emotions, my physical state, my patterns, my beliefs and attitudes, my attachments, my aversions, my relationship with myself, my relationships with others and with my environment.

I also practice mindfulness so that I become more effective in my actions and to feel greater calm, equanimity, and balance. I build the tools to

handle difficult situations and emotions in my life. And, to get to know who I truly am, beyond my changing thoughts, emotions, physical conditions, life roles and identifications. Eckhart Tolle said, “Awareness is the greatest agent for change”.

The Buddhist truth of suffering is that things are the way they are rather than the way we hope them to be. And to come into a wiser relationship with life is to relate to what is, rather than what we'd like it to be.

Mindfulness is to notice what's here - what is present. Richard Miller said “Only when we acknowledge something and bring it into the clear light of awareness are we able to clear away false beliefs and reveal truth”. When we quiet our minds, making them open and still, we create a home for consciousness to grow. Nothing can grow in a garden that is so choked with weeds that there is no soil or sunlight left to spare. It is a skill and it takes practice to get good at it.

The more I come to understand myself, the more effective I am in the world. I often feel calmer, more grounded, and happier. Most of our actions are determined by the power of sheer habit because we developed perspectives long ago and maintained and strengthened them through repetition. We often react to people and situations fairly unconsciously. And often, we regret our actions, wondering why we keep acting in ways that prove counter-productive.

Mindfulness, practiced in a variety of ways, can bring the light of awareness to our internal processes, so that instead of living on autopilot, we bring awareness, objectivity, and insight. Only by allowing ourselves to get in touch with reality, rather than our particular version or story around a situation, do we create the opportunity for choice - for responding and acting from a clearer, wiser, and calmer place.

So whatever form of practice we are engaging in, front and center for me is training myself to notice, feel, and acknowledge what's actually going on for

me - physical sensations, quality of breath, state of mind, and emotional states.

Once I notice and acknowledge what my reality is at the time, I have the choice to redirect my thoughts and actions. So, for example, during a sitting meditation, I follow a technique where I sit in a safe quiet environment, withdraw my senses from their external focus, and direct them toward an internal focus in order to build the skills of concentration and observation, without judging, analyzing, or repressing.

I learn that my thoughts and emotions are not necessarily objective reality and truth, and that I don't have to buy into and believe everything I think. I don't have to be controlled by my unconscious thoughts, since thoughts, emotions, and habit drive our behaviours. Quote: "Feelings are like children. You don't want them driving the car, but you don't want to stuff them in the trunk either."

Sally Kempton said "a moment of stopping, turning inside, checking yourself out, noticing how you feel, and observing your thoughts without buying into them is a profoundly significant moment. It will give you the power to act from a resourceful skillful place.

So I'm learning to witness my moment to moment reality, but as soon as I noticed my thoughts, I don't then continue to wander further into my story or try to force my thoughts to go back underground. Instead, I acknowledge them by giving them a quick label, which is also then my cue to come back to the present moment - to my anchor which in meditation is breath and mantra.

I keep wandering off, noticing, acknowledging, and coming back, moving into deeper and deeper concentration on the now. I train my mind to become quieter and quieter. And eventually, I may, or may not, come to a point where I let go of all of that and sit in quiet stillness. Simply Being.

Asana practice can be done with the same purpose in mind. Once we learn how to do a posture safely, we can learn to let go of all the instructions and judgments and stories and let our minds be fully present to the sensations and messages from our bodies and our breath. The posture is a vehicle for self-knowledge. It is not the end result. We use the yoga poses to open our body-mind, instead of using the body to accomplish the perfect pose.

During Asana practice, our anchor is bodily sensations and the breath. When you notice that you have moved away from the present moment (ruminating about the past, planning for or worrying about the future), you give it a quick label (noticing, acknowledging, accepting) and return to your anchor.

When mind, breath, and body are all moving in unison, when we're fully present to the reality of the moment, we don't have to use our thinking mind to direct us. A knowing comes through. And during the movement, we are able to experience a sense of quiet and stillness. Use the postures as another form of mindfulness training.