

by JON KABAT-ZINN

mindful yoga
movement & meditation

For a number of years in the late 1970s, Larry Rosenberg and I taught back-to-back classes in a church in Harvard Square. He would teach *vipassana* meditation (a Buddhist practice of mindfulness) from six to eight p.m. on Thursday evenings, and I followed with mindful hatha yoga from eight to ten. These were big classes—upwards of fifty to a hundred people—and the idea was that everyone would take both. But Larry and I were always bemused by the fact that most of the people in the meditation class didn't want to do the hatha yoga, and most of the "yogis" didn't come for the meditation class.

We saw the hatha and meditation as different but complementary doors into what is ultimately the same room—namely, learning how to live wisely. Only the view from the doorways was different. We had a definite sense that the meditators would have benefited from paying more attention to their bodies (they tended to dismiss the body as a low-level preoccupation). And the hatha yogis, we felt, would have benefited from dropping into stillness for longer stretches of time and observing the arising and passing away from moment to moment of mind/body experience in one sitting posture—interspersed with periods of walking meditation. We didn't push our view of this on either group, and we tried not to be too attached to who showed up for what, especially since we saw the essence of what we were both teaching as identical. Nonetheless, it was an interesting phenomenon.

Over the years, my own experiences of combining mindfulness meditation practices and hatha yoga into a seamless whole prompted me to experiment with different ways of bringing these ancient consciousness disciplines into contemporary mainstream settings. I wanted to explore their effectiveness in transforming health and consciousness. How might they be connected?

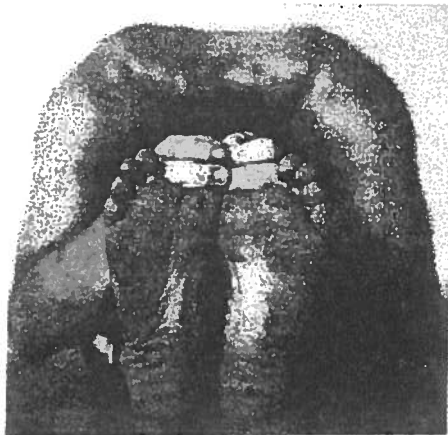
For one thing, the hatha yoga had the potential, I thought, to help reverse the huge prevalence of disuse atrophy from our

highly sedentary lifestyle, especially for those who have pain and chronic illnesses. The mind was already known to be a factor in stress and stress-related disorders, and meditation was known to positively affect a range of autonomic physiological processes, such as lowering blood pressure and reducing overall arousal and emotional reactivity. Might not training in mindfulness be an effective way to bring meditation and yoga together so that the virtues of both could be experienced simultaneously as different aspects of one seamless whole? Mindfulness practice seemed ideal for cultivating greater awareness of the unity of mind and body, as well as of the ways that unconscious thoughts, feelings, and behaviors can undermine emotional, physical, and spiritual health.

This personal exploration led ultimately to developing a clinical service for medical patients in which we used relatively intensive training in mindfulness meditation practices based on the *vipassana* and Zen traditions, along with mindful hatha yoga, with medical patients suffering with a wide range of chronic disorders and diseases. This program evolved into an eight-week-long course, now known as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR).

MBSR is now offered in over two hundred medical centers, hospitals, and clinics around the world. Many of these programs are taught by physicians, nurses, social workers, and psychologists, as well as other health professionals who are seeking to reclaim and deepen some of the sacred reciprocity inherent in the doctor-caregiver/patient-client relationship. Their work is based on a need for an active partnership in a participatory medicine, one in which patient/clients take on significant responsibility for

doing a certain kind of interior work in order to tap into their own deepest inner resources for learning, growing, healing, and transformation. Hatha yoga has played a large and critical role in this work from the very beginning, and many yoga teachers have been drawn to teach MBSR.



Through a seamless integration of mindfulness meditation and hatha yoga, MBSR taps into the innate potential for healing that we all have. It mobilizes our ability to cultivate embodied wisdom and self-compassion; and by so doing it teaches us to live our life and face whatever arises with integrity, clarity, and open-hearted presence.

Mindfulness lies at the very core of Buddhism in all its forms. Yet its essence is universal in that it is about refining attention and awareness. It is a powerful vehicle for cultivating deep insight into the ultimate causes of suffering and the possibility of liberation from that suffering. In that sense, it is exquisitely appropriate that such practices be readily accessible to a wide range of those who are faced with pain, stress, suffering, and uncertainty. What better place to offer such training than in hospitals, which function as dis-ease magnets in our society?

The ancient stream of hatha yoga practices is another of the great consciousness disciplines. My first taste came in 1967 at a karate school in Boston, where a young Vietnam veteran named Tex was using it as a warm-up. I quickly fell in love with the yoga. I was training in the Zen tradition at the time, and the two seemed to complement each other perfectly. That conviction has only deepened over time.

The appeal of hatha yoga is nothing less than the lifelong adventure and discipline of working with one's body as a door into freedom and wholeness.

Hatha yoga was never about accomplishment or perfection, or even about technique by itself. Nor was it about turning one's body into an elaborate pretzel, although the athleticism that is possible in hatha yoga (if one can manage to steer clear of the shoals of narcissism) is a truly remarkable art form in its own right. Certainly, we are seeing a marvelous flowering of interest in many different kinds of hatha yoga in mainstream circles now.



The question is, how mindful is it, and is this flowering oriented toward self-understanding, wisdom, and liberation—or is much of it just physical fitness dressed up in spiritual clothing?

To my mind, hatha yoga is potentially beneficial to huge numbers of people at every level of physical conditioning. In China, and in Chinese communities in America, you can see hundreds of people, most quite elderly, out in the early morning in city parks, practicing tai chi and qi gong, breathing the air, moving their bodies, and “playing” with inner and outer energies. If hatha yoga is to be accessible and meaningful in a similar way, beginners have to be encouraged to start wherever they find themselves, with an attitude of gentleness and kindness toward themselves. And they must be continually reminded that there is really no place they have to get to in any conventional sense. For mindful yoga is a yoga of wholeness that has nothing to do with what your body can or can't do in any given moment, or with how your posture looks. It has everything to do with the sincerity of your effort, with how awake you are in your life, and how embodied you are in the only moment in which you are ever alive—which is always now.

Mindful yoga is a lifetime engagement—not to get somewhere else, but to be where and as we actually are in this very moment, with this very breath, whether the experience is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. The body will change a lot as we practice, from moment to moment, from day to day, and from

year to year as we move through the different ages and stages of our lives—and so will our minds and our hearts and our views. Hopefully, whether a beginner or an old-timer, we are always reminding ourselves in our practice of the value of keeping this beginner's mind.

But what exactly do I mean by mindful yoga? After all, it is not a conventional yoga lineage or school, although some

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traditions, such as the viniyoga of T. K. V. Desikachar and Kripalu yoga have strong currents of it, and some hatha yoga teachers are also well-trained and deeply experienced vipassana or Zen teachers. Mindful yoga is a specific attitude and attentional stance that we bring to our practice, both on the mat and in daily life: namely, a refined moment-to-moment non-judgmental, non-striving attending to the entire range of our experience. This orientation is in complete accord with the core principles of yoga as a science of the body and its energies as well as an art of inquiry, exploration,

human development, and ultimately liberation. The yoga of Patanjali is, after all, a complete *sadhana* in its own right, a profound and multifaceted spiritual discipline.

Of course, the body dimension is only a small part of yoga, although it gets the most press. Nevertheless, through our work with medical patients and people in various work settings (from law offices, to schools, to businesses, to professional athletes) we find that hatha yoga and its emphasis on the body through *asana* has unique virtues—it is extremely

valuable as one cornerstone of a comprehensive mindfulness-based mind/body approach to reducing stress and enhancing health. It leads to a sense of well-being, effectiveness at work, and ongoing spiritual development.

Doing any exercise or workout mindfully turns it into meditation practice, no matter the speed at which it is done. In mindful yoga, we teach hatha yoga as a form of meditation. Within the primary focus on inhabiting the poses themselves, the postures (and flowing movements into and out of them) become occasions to cultivate a seamless continuity of awareness and discernment, just as one would in a traditional meditation posture.

In mindful yoga exquisite attention is paid to the body and body sensations (which are so rich because of the various configurations the body assumes and rests in during asana practice). But our field of awareness also includes the full spectrum of thoughts, moods, and emotions, obvious and subtle, that are part of the interior landscape in any given moment. Allowing the field of awareness to be inclusive enough to contain our feeling states (however neutral, joyful, or painful they may be) expands our ability to become intimate with our own heart as well as our body. It allows us to experience the connection between emotions, thoughts, and sensations in the body, often in specific and meaningful locations. It invites us over and over again to observe the arising and passing away of sensations and thoughts and emotions like clouds or full-blown weather patterns within the all-embracing sky-like spaciousness of awareness, and to observe our reactions to them. And in making a gesture of this magnitude, moment by moment, as we practice in any posture, for any length of time, we may actually experience ourselves as being larger than we think we are, larger than our feeling states and our thinking mind. We may experience our essential self as being more akin to awareness itself, and we can listen to our thoughts and feelings and come to know them as events in the field of this awareness.

What is more, however painful or seductive our experience in any moment, even as we are doing the postures, we can begin to observe right then and there

(which is always here and now) how easily we are caught in prisons of our own creation through a strong self-identification with our thoughts and feelings. We can begin to see that we can actually choose not to get caught identifying with them or with the body (or to see it when we do, for we invariably do). In this way, we cultivate both insight and equanimity. Mindfulness of our emotions lies at the heart of what is now known as “emotional intelligence”; it is a key ingredient in recognizing the wholeness of our being, its beauty in our relationship to others, and to the world and its fleeting nature.

In a hospital or clinical setting, mindful yoga is consistently gentle and inviting. Whether standing or on the floor, its orientation is grounded in mobilizing the body to move into a posture to whatever degree might be possible, lingering within it in a spirit of “taking up residence” for a while in this perhaps totally unfamiliar space, and cultivating a high degree of non-reactive intimacy with the full spectrum of breath and body sensations, thoughts, and feelings that may be arising from moment to moment. This includes experiencing the body’s limits in any given moment within the posture, wherever they happen to be. Then, at one’s own pace, usually quite slowly, one moves out of it, maintaining mindfulness from moment to moment, into a neutral posture such as the corpse pose.

This approach to hatha yoga makes it possible for those with a wide range of chronic conditions (including various kinds of pain such as lower back pain, neck and shoulder pain, and arthritis) to explore the boundaries of their range of motion and their limiting ideas about their own body. Using this exploration as the object of meditative awareness, our patients often discover that they can reclaim far more movement and comfort than they ever thought possible because they have shifted from a fear-based mode of relating to the body to a gentle adventure-based mode. As a result, their confidence builds as they become more familiar with the interior landscape of body and mind—the thoughts and emotions related to the body as well as the sensations within it.

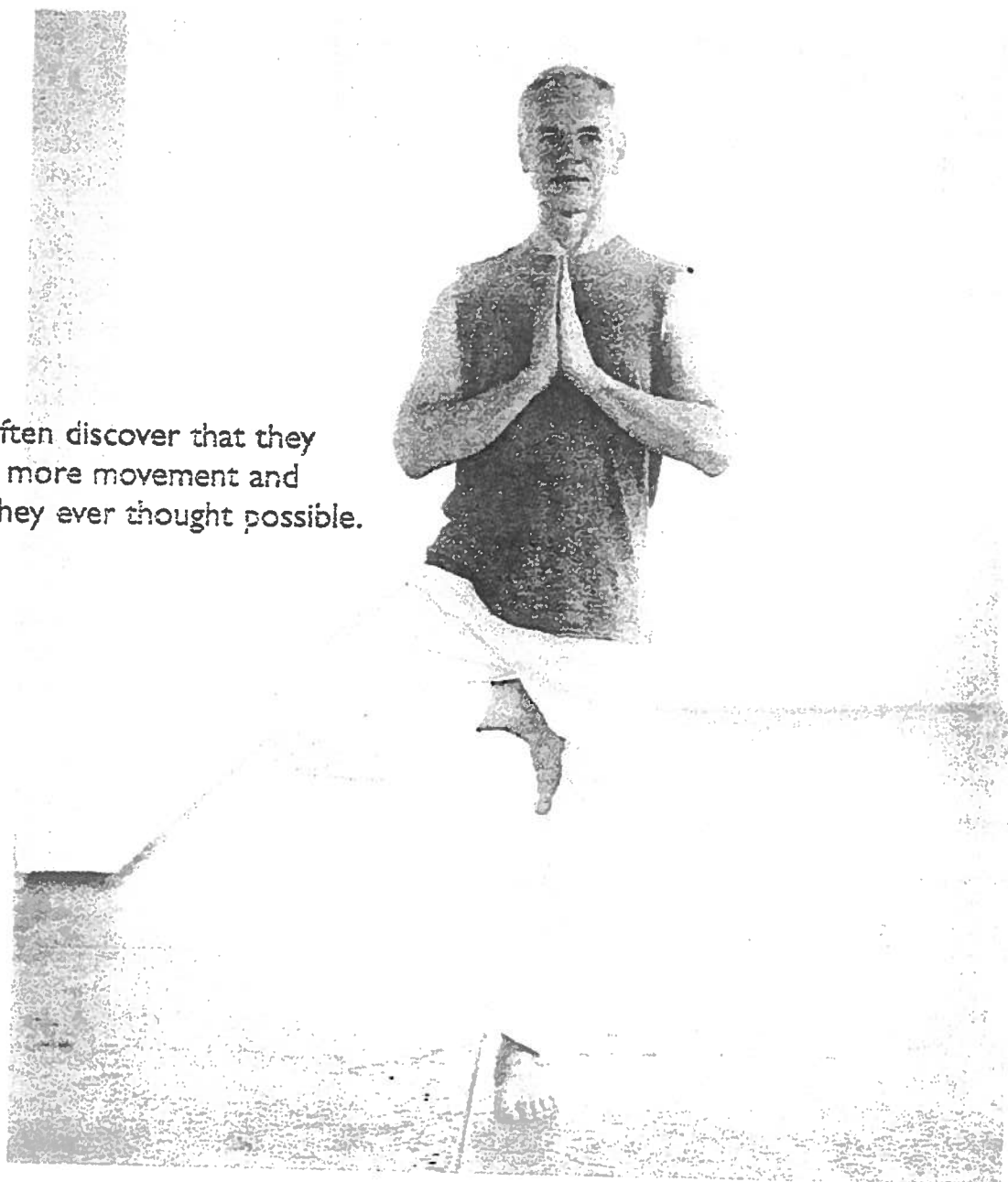
As we explore the boundaries of the body (and mind) through mindful hatha yoga, we readily

discover that they are often much less fixed and permanent than we had thought. This is in itself a profound revelation. It shows us the limits of our tacit thought patterns (and the emotional charge they can carry) about how inadequate the body is—or how great. But this kind of attention is not merely for those who have medical problems and their attendant limitations, or for out-of-shape beginners. This quality of attention can transform the experience of hatha yoga practice at any and every level of physical fitness and proficiency.

Mindfulness of breathing is, of course, an essential dimension of this practice. The breath becomes an ever-present, ever-available anchor for the attention

and a vehicle for helping us locate, feel, and give ourselves over to the sensations in the body. Paying exquisite attention to the breath in any asana or movement reveals the life of the breath within the body in all its beauty and complexity. The sensations of renewal and expansion that accompany each inbreath as well as those of release (and sometimes relief) that are present with each outbreath become infinitely more vivid. And these sensations, especially on the outbreath, can be powerfully felt in both body and mind as built-up tension in particular regions releases and dissolves. And along with this awareness of breath and body can come a profound sensitivity to the air around the body, bathing and caressing the envelope of the skin.

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With mindfulness even the simplest yoga asanas promote greater intimacy with and appreciation for one's body. The basic invitation is to move gently and with exquisite attention to wherever one finds a limit or a boundary, whether the posture is evoking strength, flexibility, balance, or (most usually) a combination of all three. The challenge is to be with the breath all along the way, dwelling in this side of the boundary and exploring it in stillness and through the more subtle dimensions of sensation and movement that accompany the inbreath and outbreath.

We attend to all sensations moment by moment as breath and sensations interact in regions of the body most energized by the posture. And, to a degree, we attend as well to all the other regions which are not involved, since the body is one indivisible whole in every moment. Thus, we refine an awareness of the body as a whole from moment to moment, breath by breath. Every posture then becomes its own universe. Every time one comes to it, it will seem different and therefore new, fresh, mysterious, and potentially revelatory.

It is important to see such a practice as a way of life and to nourish it regularly, daily if possible, both on the mat and in the ways we carry ourselves in everyday life. On the mat, we attempt to work from a place of non-striving, even as we continually listen to what the configuration of the posture is telling us and make adjustments accordingly. We simply settle in where we find ourselves for a stretch of time—it could be outside of clock time altogether if we let go into what Krishna-murti called “choiceless awareness.” We work in this way as best we can without a spirit of competition, either with others or with ourselves through our idealizations of what we “should” be able to do or look like or feel like. Instead, we give ourselves over to experiencing things as they actually are in this very moment and drop into unconditional acceptance, total surrender to what is. And we always err on the side of being conservative, with a spirit of letting the yoga do (and undo) us

rather than thinking that we are doing the yoga. In this way, we minimize the possibility of injury, even tiny muscle pulls that can occur when the mind gets overly enthusiastic and stops listening to the body.

Intentionally cultivating mindfulness within our hatha practice invites us to inhabit the postures more fully. We become aware of what is technically called “proprioception,” the body giving itself feedback on how and where one part of it is in relation to the whole, and to what the overall status of the whole is in time and space. It is the body intelligence, the body knowing itself, feeling itself. And we watch what happens moment by moment as we respond to our own intuition about where the posture is pointing (or to our instructor's suggestions) by adjusting or shifting in ways we might not otherwise have chosen or even seen. We dwell in this interior landscape as best we can without forcing or striving. And if such impulses come up, as they sometimes do with exasperating persistence, we can at least greet them without judgment and with kindness and acceptance.

The implication is obvious. We can potentially benefit in profound and unexpected ways from inviting the mindfulness dimension inherent in the practice of yoga to blossom, whatever our “level” of practice might be. Through mindful yoga we can come to see how much the mind's incessant noise, the *vritti* (fluctuations of mind), keep us from being truly in touch with and accepting things as they are in the body and in the world. And we can come to know how valuable it is to recognize the waves of the mind for what they are and hold them in awareness without losing touch with the silence and the stillness, the heart of yoga that is always lying beneath the surface of the mind. It is available to us in any moment we can relax our judging and our striving, and surrender to clear seeing and awakening.

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To learn more about Jon Kabat-Zinn and his views on pain and healing, visit www.yiextra.org and click on “At Home in Our Bodies: An Interview with Jon Kabat-Zinn.”

Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., is Professor of Medicine emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. He is the author of Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain and Illness; Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life; and co-author, with his wife, Myla, of Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting.

MBSR at a Glance

Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) is an eight-week outpatient program in which patients come to a hospital clinic or stand-alone program once a week for a two-and-a-half-hour class of between twenty and thirty patients. Participants are either referred by their physicians or come on their own. They come with a wide range of medical conditions and problems—heart disease, many forms of chronic pain conditions including lower back pain, fibromyalgia, and headaches; breast, prostate, and other forms of cancer; gastrointestinal problems such as irritable bowel syndrome; HIV and AIDS; hypertension; chronic fatigue, anxiety, and panic; and various situations characterized by high levels of job, family, or life stress.

Most MBSR classes consist of heterogeneous groups of adults of all ages with a wide range of medical conditions and life situations. All are exposed to the same intensive training in mindfulness and its applications to daily living. Participants are required to attend class each week, spend between forty-five minutes and one hour per day (six days per week) practicing the formal meditation techniques (the body scan, sitting mindful meditation, and mindful hatha yoga) at home, using guided practice tapes designed for the purpose. They are also required to attend a day-long silent mindfulness retreat led by the instructor(s) on the weekend in the sixth week of the program.

The MBSR program is designed to catch people falling through the cracks of the health-care system (more accurately, a disease-care system) and challenge them to see if they can do something for themselves to complement

whatever traditional medicine is or is not doing for them. Participants experiment with the powerful techniques of meditation and yoga to tap into their own inner resources for learning, growing, healing, and transformation, and see what happens.

Since 1979, approximately 13,000 people have completed MBSR training in the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. A number of studies over the years have documented the outcomes, not only for those with medical problems but also for those in corporate work settings. On the whole, the majority of participants show dramatic and clinically relevant reductions in medical and psychological symptoms, including pain, over the eight weeks of the program. They also show changes in terms of a more positive perspective on themselves and their relationship with others and with the world. Follow-up studies show all these improvements to be maintained in the majority of people, telling us that even a brief exposure to these consciousness disciplines can have long-lasting effects on health and quality of life. Most participants also report that they continue to practice both formal meditation and yoga and/or informal mindfulness practices to varying degrees for periods ranging from four months in some studies to four years in others. Other studies have shown that mindfulness meditation can speed up healing in patients with psoriasis and that MBSR delivered in the workplace can positively influence immune function and enhance the way the brain processes negative emotions under stress.

For a complete listing of scientific papers on MBSR, professional training programs, and other offerings, see www.umassmed.edu/cfm/ind and www.mindfulnessstudies.com.

