

# Mindful Yoga

from **Full Catastrophe Living** by Jon Kabat-Zinn

As you have probably gathered by now, bringing mindfulness to any activity transforms it into a kind of meditation. Mindfulness dramatically amplifies the probability that any activity in which you are engaged will result in an expansion of your perspective and of your understanding of who you are. Much of the practice is simply a remembering, a reminding yourself to be fully awake, not lost in waking sleep or enshrouded in the veils of your thinking mind.

Mindful yoga is the third major formal meditation technique that we practice in the stress clinic, along with the body scan and sitting meditation. *Yoga* is a Sanskrit word that literally means "yoke." The practice of yoga is the practice of yoking together or unifying body and mind, which really means penetrating into the experience of them not being separate in the first place. You can also think of it as experiencing the unity or connectedness between the individual and the universe as a whole.

We have already seen that *posture* is very important in the sitting meditation and that positioning your body in certain ways can have immediate effects on your mental and emotional state. Being aware of your body language and what it reveals about your attitudes and feelings can help you to change your attitudes and feelings just by changing your physical posture.

When you practice the yoga, you should be on the lookout for the many ways, some quite subtle, in which your perspective on your body, your thoughts, and your whole sense of self can change when you adopt different postures on purpose and stay in them for a time, paying full attention from moment to moment. Practicing in this way enriches the inner work enormously and takes it far beyond the physical benefits that come naturally with the stretching and strengthening.

This is a far cry from most exercise and aerobic classes and even many yoga classes, which only focus on what the body is doing. These approaches tend to emphasize progress. They like to push, push, push. Not much attention is paid to the art of non-doing and non-striving in exercise classes, nor to the present moment for that matter, nor to the mind.

Work at or within your body's limits at all times, with the intention of observing and exploring the boundary between what your body can do and where it says, "Stop for now." ***Never stretch beyond this limit to the point of pain.*** Some discomfort is inevitable when you are working at your limits, but you will need to learn how to enter this healthy "stretching zone" slowly and mindfully so that you are nourishing your body, not damaging it as you explore your limits. In the stress clinic, the ground rule is that every individual has to consciously take responsibility for reading his or her own body's signals while doing the yoga. This means listening carefully to what your body is telling you and honoring its messages, erring on the side of being conservative. No one can listen to your body for you.

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***NOTE: If you have physical limitations that are so serious that it would be difficult or damaging for you to even begin one or more of the practices, it is sufficient to simply vividly imagine doing the movements and/or postures. Neurologists tell us that vividly imagining physical movement involves the same motor neurons that come into play as when we actually physically move.***