

This Which We Call Body

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ONE NIGHT A FEW WEEKS AGO as I watched a group of fellow students leaving the yoga class we had just attended, I started to reflect on how the body remembers what it learns. The teacher had taught an intense, stimulating session on how to elongate the middle and upper thoracic spine in backbends. Done properly, it can relieve much of the stress and compression that can occur in the lumbar spine. My teacher always says that if you want your students to love you, teach a backbend class, because backbends excite the nervous system, leaving people feeling invigorated.

So there I was, alert from doing all those backbends, quietly observing the postures and body movements of a group of animated students as they walked out of the studio, down the stairs, and out onto the

street. What was so striking was the tendency of many of them to abandon what they had just learned on their mats regarding the benefits of an elongated spine.

Some held their heads forward with their upper chests slightly collapsed, or they shortened the backs of their necks, creating an excess of upper thoracic activity. In either case they exhibited little lengthening in the area between the side floating ribs and hips as their legs moved.

There was no denying that much of the body wisdom we had just gained through hard work in class was simply being abandoned. Of course once I had made this observation, I immediately became mindful of my own spine. But even with conscious effort, I was not sure how well I was allowing my body to integrate what I had just experienced in class.

The simple truth is that it is quite difficult to integrate new learning into the body's habituated patterns. What happens more often than you may realize is that you simply become

more skilled at holding or moving your body in a certain manner in yoga class.

It may look as though you are gaining flexibility, but in reality much of what you are gaining is limited to that particular posture and ones similar to it. What doesn't happen in this kind of "activity-specific" training is an integrative mind-body learning experience such that your body in motion becomes more balanced and full of ease.

This activity-specific training is not limited to yoga; it can occur in dancers, martial artists, athletes of all types, even professional body workers whose practices emphasize integration. But it is certainly ironic that it happens in yoga, the very meaning of which is "union" or "yoking."

One of my somatics teachers tells me that some of her most difficult clients are yoga teachers. It seems that they learn how to impose stretched positions on their spines without developing stability and range of motion in all the parts of the spine involved in movement. As a result these teachers incur injuries that they repeatedly override; the nervous system recruits other muscle tissue to protect the injured parts, thereby creating layers of strain in the body.

Moreover, they resist changing, because it means not having the same flexibility to demonstrate poses. If some yoga teachers have this much trouble, it is certainly understandable that you, their students, would be less than fully trained in integrating yoga into your habitual patterns of movement.

We are certainly not accustomed to having a yoga teacher say to us as we leave class, “Be sure and integrate what we just experienced.” But in fact you are not receiving the fruit of the practice unless you do; you’re doing the work, but not reaping the benefits.

To practice hatha yoga in its entirety is to focus on translating what your body learns in yoga into your overall patterns of standing, sitting, and walking. The goal is not to achieve some ideal of perfect movement. The point is to discover how you can move with ease while working within your own limitations.

One must be realistic; you will inevitably have limitations in your range of motion. But whatever your range, within it you can achieve a spacious, relaxed feeling—the kind of freedom that you might experience in your best moments in yoga class.

This experience of ease in the body is not theoretical. It is distinct and observable, and has a discernible effect on the quality of your life.

You will be less tense, less tired, and more present in the body. So not only will you stand straighter, sit more comfortably, and walk with more fluidity, your experience of the body will be more enjoyable in general.

Body Imaging

TRYING TO UNDERSTAND how to integrate what you learn in yoga into the body in your daily life raises an intriguing question: What is this which you call body? The answer seems so obvious: I have a body; you have a body; everyone has a body. But then the question arises: Are you and your body the same thing? “Well, no,” you might say, “I am that which knows the existence of the body. I live in it and am completely connected to it, but at best it is only a part of me, for I’m much more than my body.” But what is your relationship to it? Do you so disidentify with your body that it is simply an object of pleasure and pain for your mind, which you believe to be your true Self?

Undoubtedly, you come to hatha yoga to work with the physical postures, for that is the very definition of the practice. But why do you choose to work with the body? Is yoga a time-out from the rest of your life? Is it a kind of body-repair shop, as though your body was an automobile? Do you direct the body to yoga class because its health is necessary for the mind’s well-being? Do you come to challenge the body because doing so stimulates your mind?

Many people study yoga without ever consciously considering what deeper beliefs they hold about the body. It is easy to understand why this is so, for one does not necessarily need a deeper understanding to receive many of yoga’s benefits.

Yoga relieves stress; it is a respite from the pressures of daily life and a type of health maintenance and repair program for the body. But yoga in its complete manifestation is only experienced when you integrate the practice into your life. Without integration your yoga practice is limited in its effect; it is merely serving as a kind of pit stop for replenishing the vehicle you call body as you race along the fast track of your life.

It takes real effort to keep a yoga practice going outside of class. This effort requires that you stay mindful of your body at work, while driving your auto, or talking to your loved ones. It demands that you maintain a spirit of inquiry into how the body is manifesting moment to

moment.

Integrating your “yoga body” and your “daily life body” requires that you continually explore how to be more at ease with the body, learn to free it of unnecessary tension, and allow the yoga principles to shape your regular patterns of movement. The inner experience of doing this kind of integration work is known as “being in the body.”

Your Body as Teacher

INTEGRATING YOUR YOGA BODY with the body that sits and walks and does all sorts of other movement is a lot of work. Without having a view of the body that inspires you to do so, it’s hard to stay focused on your body in daily life. The energy for the work has to have a motivating source. One such motivating source can be the purely practical goal of maximizing the health and ease of your body. For instance, you want to bring the release of tension in your shoulders that you found in yoga class into the other parts of your day to help you cope with stress. Although this perspective is valid, in my experience, it’s insufficient to sustain the attention necessary to fully integrate your yoga body and your daily life body.

A more powerful motivating force, one that reflects a larger vision, is a commitment to experiencing the mind and body as a linked, ever-changing unity. In this point of view your body has as much wisdom and authority as your mind, so each is treated with respect, but neither is particularly identified as being you. Your body becomes your teacher, providing you with feedback as to what your actual experience is in the moment. For instance, you discover you are slumping while sitting in a meeting and realize it’s because you don’t want to be in the meeting; rather than being present to the feelings of dissatisfaction, your mind has made your body carry the weight of the unhappiness. Or you may discover that the reason you don’t maintain length in the spine after backbends is that you habitually tune out the body; you are not comfortable with how others judge your body, or you have an old, no longer appro-

priate habit of rejecting your own body. In each of these instances, it's what's happening in your mind that is causing discomfort in your body. But if you view the mind and body as one, you can change what's going on in your mind by altering what's going on in your body.

To embrace this larger view is not easy because it takes courage to be committed to being fully present in the moment. Keep in mind that the point isn't to perfect the body; everyone knows that's a dead-end course because ultimately the body decays and dies. Instead the idea is to be fully awake to the body, accepting it as it is, while at the same time not imposing any old patterns of movement on it.

Since that backbend class, I've worked to keep an awareness of my middle and upper thoracic spine. For the first couple of days, I caught myself slightly collapsing in the upper chest when sitting so that my back would round. Because I still had the sensation in my body, I could make an adjustment that freed my spine. But after a few days, I lost the sensation, so all I could do was imagine what it felt like to have the spine open and free. Doing this felt frustrating and a little dumb, but I persevered. Gradually, I started to discover a possibility of movement in that part of my spine while going about my regular activities.

Last night I went back to class with the same teacher and once again did backbends. As I pushed up into Urdhva Dhanurasana, the midsection of my spine opened like a lotus (within my range of motion, mind you). I wish I could say after this wonderful experience that I walked out of class with my spine completely free. Unfortunately, it was the same old struggle, but I was beginning from a place of more freedom than before. ■

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