



YOGA AND MENTAL HEALTH

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You've all probably heard or experienced that yoga is more than just a physical exercise. So then what exactly makes it "more"? The answer would quite simply have to be awareness... Moving consciously, relaxing completely and surrendering all effort and discomfort and focusing on your breath.

Breath is the bridge that links the mind and the body. My first yoga teacher told us something quite simple that has stuck with me all these years which is "Your attitude to an asana translates into your attitude to life." And I noticed it immediately - I always wanted to avoid any and all pain and get out of the asana quickly which is also how I dealt with work, relationships and just generally everything. Most people are either bound by the attachment to pleasure or aversion to pain. Yoga is a practice that allows you to study these tendencies of the mind and chip away slowly at this intense aversion to pain or addiction to pleasure, ultimately resulting in detachment or Vairagya (Sanskrit) which is when we stop getting affected by the highs and lows of life and are able to maintain equanimity in all situations.



Everyone can benefit from a yoga practice - it is suited for all ages, body types, lifestyles, schedules... It's always nicer to practice in a class because the community (or sangha) facilitates quick and easy progress. There are numerous physiological and psychological benefits of practicing yoga. Flexibility, strength, relaxation, balanced hormones, better sleep, better digestion and so much more.

We constantly live in our minds, think when was the last time you had a thought? You're probably thinking while reading this. Our minds are constantly active and alert and we constantly direct our attention to these thoughts. Practicing yoga grounds that same attention in the body. Focusing awareness on the different sensations you experience as you stretch or on the breath means that your mental world becomes less real. So it becomes easier to avoid triggers or get pulled in by thought patterns that we've adopted over the years.

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It's sort of like stepping back and watching the script running in front of you instead of getting sucked into the story and believing that you are the protagonist in it.. basically being a "witness". Yoga thus helps ease mental tension and is a great tool for building resilience, clarity, sense of purpose and strength.



In Patanjali's Yoga Sutras he lists the 5 main afflictions of the mind - Ignorance (avidya), the Ego (asmita), Attachment (raga), Aversion (dvesha) and the Fear of Death/Will to Live (abhinivesha).

Avidya - very loosely translated as ignorance it actually means an erroneous viewpoint or understanding or knowledge. Even though we know that all worldly things are impermanent we behave as though these things are stable and permanent. So we are always running after and seeking these ephemeral things which is ultimately why we suffer.

Asmita - the "ego" or the identification of the seer with the object being seen. This is basically what I was talking about earlier - we wrongly get caught up in mental stories instead of standing back and allowing them to pass.

Raga and Dvesha - We develop a love or attachment for things that make us happy and conversely hate things and people that give us pain and misery. These kleshas are the easiest to understand and curbing these kleshas on a daily basis is a great practice to cultivate - Notice when you avoid pain or when you chase pleasure and try to let it pass without reacting.



Abhinivesha - The fear of death or the extreme clinging to life which exists in all people. (I won't go into this because I will just lose all of you if I haven't already)

It's not important to understand these kleshas or even know about them but it's always nice to understand the way our minds work explained by experienced meditators and yogis - who have actually sat with themselves and their minds for years to become "enlightened". Their perspective should matter just as much as any other research being conducted on the mind today - because yoga is an experiential science. There is no fake knowledge and you can't alter results or fake progress. You really have to do the work to get there.

Patanjali also says the way to curb these kleshas is kriya yoga - Austerities or Practices (Tapah), Self Study (Svadyaya) and surrendering to the Divine (Ishwar Pranidhan). You could say these practices would help you deal with your mind whether or not you understand Patanjali's categorization of the problems of our minds.

Thus its important to have a daily consistent practice (pranayama, prayer, meditation, etc), study sacred books/scriptures (anything you like) and most importantly surrendering to a source bigger than you which automatically takes a lot of pressure off you.

These are small tweaks to our lifestyles that can go a long way, and if all this theory just goes above your head find a teacher and go to a class. It will all make sense eventually.

Malvika is a certified Yoga teacher from Yoga Darshanam Mysore (200 hr), ICYHC Kaivalyadhama Mumbai (post graduate diploma in yogic sciences) and Vipassana meditator teaching at Prisim Healing Institute. She also runs the raw vegan kitchen at Prisim with her best friend creating awareness about the impact of our dietary choices.