

Buddhism and Yoga

Looking around I can think that a lot of people practising yoga are first of all out to stay healthy. I don't see anything wrong with this, as far as it goes. This I see as simply benevolence and I can have a lot of muditā (sympathetic joy) for the health and well-being of Yoga practitioners. It can be a shame, although, to not take the practice a bit deeper and add the meditation to it – where you can be as benevolent to your minds as you are already being to your bodies. It is also the case that problems can arise if we attach to being healthy, we are simply very unhappy when we get sick. The wisdom of the Buddha's teaching, brought alive through meditation, can help us to prevent this attachment without limiting our enjoyment in the moment.

So let us consider how Yoga fits into with Buddhist practice philosophy. Yoga was already a highly developed science in the Vedantic tradition at the time of the Buddha. As I understand the Buddha incorporated the meditation practices of the yogis into his own practice and teaching. Within Buddhism we can see the physical practices of Yoga as a preparation for the meditation and as representing an overall discipline of benevolence in relation to the body, the body being the first, fundamental foundation of mindfulness.

So the Buddha is encouraging us to meditate and explore our bodies with a calm, benevolent and accepting mind. In doing so, we discover that there are many ways in which the body and mind are woven together, so we find this also yields methods to gain emotional and psychological benefits. In particular there is the awareness of the breathing cycle. Here, on the simplest level, there is the possibility of a physical means for breaking cycles of stress. Stress tends to push the respiratory process into chronic overdrive. We can learn to arrest these patterns and reset our body's alarm systems. Combined with stretching we can also release the chronic muscle tension associated with stress. Furthermore we can greatly enhance our awareness of our bodies, particularly in relation to posture. We can avoid the physical problems associated with poor posture and introduce a positive poise and grace to our lives that can take our hearts and minds in a similarly upright direction. Mindfulness of the body, if it thus becomes continuous, provides the ideal basis for the skill of mindfulness as a way of life – there is a lot of evidence for the value of this in preventing mental problems such as anxiety and depression.

We can discover that our attitude towards our own body is formative of so much of our mental and emotional life, of our view of ourselves and others. Not only is a healthy body in many ways a healthy mind, but a healthy view of the body is also in many ways a healthy mind. In this respect the Buddha also teaches us to recognise and then both accept and see beyond the limitations of the body in a way that these limitations need not dampen a positive attitude to life. It can be important to realise that the sickness of the body is not necessarily a source of suffering in life if we have the right attitude, one formed by the correct view of the body and our relationship to it.

On the deeper, and more subtle level, through meditation we can learn to deeply energise the body and mind. This is associated with the deeper benefits of long-term meditation practice – the possibility of the peaceful and blissful mind states of samādhi, which come with heightened awareness of the body and breath together. These can transform our lives, we will never be the same again. If you have not experienced such things yourself it is well worth meeting people who have experienced them, to learn to know these people: they are likely to be the happiest people you have ever met. Yet these states of mind are only experienced by those whose Yoga represents a broad and dedicated spiritual path, including the keeping of moral precepts – only then can our mindfulness be clear enough to go this deep. Being part of a spiritual community is of enormous help in establishing and maintaining this kind of dedication. If we have discussed so far principally the place of Yoga in Buddhist practice, this is perhaps the most important place for Buddhism within the practise of Yoga.

I offer this for your reflection.

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