

Mindful Yoga – Learning to “Be in Yoga”

by Doug MacLean

Mindful yoga is a practice that integrates mindfulness meditation and Hatha yoga. It is more than just an athletic practice – there is ongoing emphasis on participant mindful awareness throughout the class which promotes an awakening of the union of breath, the body, and the mind. Mental and physical effort at the same time! This also includes the time moving in and out of poses, which is often missed as a time to maintain awareness and continue to “Be in Yoga”.

Mindful yoga is best practiced with a spirit of adventure where participants explore their edges of practice from an inner place of calm and stillness. Through mindful awareness, participants learn about the self by observing one or more of breath, physical sensations, thoughts and emotions. It is a wonderful opportunity to learn about our reactivity to challenge and movement. These reactions can help the participant to recognize when there is a sense of “out of balance”. For example, we can start to see how we “tense up”, “hold on”, generate self-critical thoughts or become emotional. Recognizing this “out of balance” sets the stage for looking deeply into the patterns, which are usually habitual and as a result of conditions. In the end, participants have the opportunity to release themselves from conditioned reactivity and to transform to a more balanced and deeply relaxed self.

The practice of mindful yoga involves developing compassion and kindness. Seeing yourself clearly and facilitating change and transformation calls for a gentle caring from both the mind and heart.

The practice is started with a short mindfulness meditation on breathing. The focus on the breath helps the body and mind to move into a more relaxed state. We then proceed with the asana practice and we pay sustained mindful attention to varying parts of our practice including the breath, the body, and the mind, and to the impermanence of our experience. The key feature of this class is the sustained mindful attention. There is an emphasis on practicing with a balanced effort between striving and relaxation. We also emphasize mindfulness as we move into and out of the poses.