



Yoga Therapy and the Mind-Body Connection Part 2

Various yogic tools take advantage of the links between mind and body, to benefit both.

by Timothy McCall, MD

In Part 1, we saw how the so-called mind-body connection includes not only the mind's ability to affect the body -- for better and worse -- but the body's ability to affect the mind as well.

Using the Body to Affect the Mind

In understanding the effects on the mind of various yogic practices, it helps to know the three gunas that yogis use to characterize mental states: *tamas*, *rajas*, and *sattva*. In the modern world most people's mental condition is either marked by lethargy and inertia (*tamas*), or by constant motion and distractability (*rajas*), and sometimes by alternating periods of *tamas* and *rajas*. Most people only experience *sattva* -- the calm, balanced, mindful state -- for brief intervals every now and again, if at all.

The idea behind the sequencing you commonly see in yoga classes is, after gently warming up, to get the students to exert themselves physically to overcome *tamas* (or, in cases where it's necessary, to burn off excessive *rajas*). That's why activating practices like *Kapalabhati* (Skull-Shining Breath) and *Surya Namaskar* (Sun Salutations) usually are done early in a session. After a period of exertion, it's common to then use gentler practices like twists, forward bends and inversions to progressively bring a *rajasic* mental state to a more balanced, calm, and peaceful (*sattvic*) one, in time for *Savasana* (corpse pose). If the student remains either *tamasic* or *rajasic*, this final resting pose is unlikely to be very therapeutic or satisfying.

One of the lessons of yoga is that it's not just the poses you do but how you do them that affects the mind. For example, you might worry that backbends would be too stimulating for an already-*rajasic* student who suffers from anxiety or insomnia. But if you can get the student to resist over-efforting, the resulting backbends are likely to have a much more *sattvic* effect (and interestingly, from the perspective of the mind-body connection, alignment may also improve). *Sattvic* backbends will still increase energy levels, but are less likely to lead to



restlessness or agitation. In a student who is more tamasic, however, you may want to push them harder in backbends, assuming they are physically able, in order to break through their mental lethargy.

Similarly, be on guard when you prescribe practices like forward bends or breathing practices for their pacifying effects that the students are not trying too hard to achieve a specific result. Many students, for example, like to use their arms as levers to crank themselves more deeply into poses like Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend) and Paschimottanasana (Seated Forward Bend), when their bodies aren't ready for it. Others, whom you teach short breath retentions or to lengthen their exhalation relative to the inhalation, may be pushing the limits of their breath capacity more than is comfortable. In either case, the result is likely to undermine the mental calming you were shooting for. Since the breath is intimately tied to one's mental state, you'll usually be able to spot telltale signs in their breathing as you monitor their practice.

The Body-Mind-Body Connection

Thus, we can use our minds to calm (or stress out) our bodies and our bodies to calm (or energize) our minds. And, of course, when you use your body to energize then calm your mind, as we are often doing in yoga practice, the resulting sattva in turn causes numerous beneficial changes in the body, which may in turn facilitate dropping deeper into relaxation.

Perhaps a better term than “mind-body” to reflect the back and forth nature of the interconnections between mental and physical health would be “body-mind-body.” It's my belief, supported by some scientific evidence, that combining practices which target the mind with others which address the body is likely to yield greater benefits than single-pronged approaches.

A good example of body-mind-body medicine is the work of Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, and author of the bestsellers *Full Catastrophe Living* and *Wherever You Go, There You Are*. His Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction approach, which combines gentle hatha yoga with mindfulness meditation, has garnered impressive results in scientific studies, and is now taught at hundreds of hospitals and clinics worldwide.

In his work with patients with a wide variety of medical conditions including chronic pain, cancer, arthritis, anxiety and depression, Jon has found that



particular patients seem to respond better to some elements of the program. Those with primarily physical complaints like joint pain, he finds, often do best when they use meditation to go through what he calls the “mind door.” Others, particularly those with mental problems like anxiety or panic attacks may do better with “body door” approaches like asana.

Of course, not all patients will fit this rule-of-thumb, which is why it’s good to have yoga’s vast toolbox to choose those practices or combinations of practices that seem to bring your students the best results. Yoga also allows you to use both the body and mind doors, either sequentially or in combination, as when you have students do Ujjayi (Victorious) Breathing during their asana practice or chant a mantra as they move into a twist or forward bend.

Ultimately, yoga is about union, the underlying unity of things which on their surface appear to be separate. So while it can be useful to speak of the body and the mind and mind-body connection, through our yoga practice, we come to understand that the mind and the body are not just connected. They are two manifestations of the same thing.



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