



Yoga Therapy and the Mind-Body Connection Part 1

Yoga deepens our understanding of the links between our states of mind and our bodies, and vice versa.

by Timothy McCall, MD

For the sake of full disclosure, I should mention that I don't like the terms "mind-body connection" and "mind-body medicine" too much. From what I've seen, most people who use the phrase "mind-body" seem to mean the way your mind, primarily your thoughts, can influence the functioning of the body. While that notion may have once seemed radical, to the yogi it's pretty obvious. In yoga, however, we learn that this aspect of the mind-body connection is really only part of the story.

The Mind-Body Connection

I've heard yoga teachers describe the mind-body connection as something elusive, a link we hope to forge with our yoga practice. In reality, the mind-body connection is present all the time—for better and worse—whether we or our students are aware of it or not. Consider a few examples.

If your mouth waters at the thought of a dish you love, you're experiencing the mind-body connection. If you've ever felt the butterflies in the pit of your stomach as you prepared to make a presentation, you've felt how your thoughts affect the functioning of your intestines. An athlete who "chokes" at a big moment in a competition, performing worse than usual, is similarly seeing the results of a fearful state of mind on his or her ability to coordinate muscular actions.

Experiencing the mind-body connection is a routine occurrence, not something that only the advanced yogi can achieve. The problem—and the reason we've got the concept of mind-body medicine at all—is that often the connection is all too real, and it causes problems. You may have students who are so anxious or stressed out that they can't sleep well or concentrate on their work. Others may be carrying around so much anger that they're setting themselves up for bleeding ulcers or heart attacks.

What we are doing when we teach our students techniques like pratyahara (the turning of the senses inward) and dhyana (meditation) is getting their minds out of the way. Without the interference of their usual anxious or angry thoughts, the



stress response system relaxes and the body can do a better job of healing itself. You could say, in a sense, that mind-body medicine works by severing the mind-body connection, at least for a little while.

At Harvard Medical School's Mind-Body Medical Institute, Dr. Herbert Benson and colleagues teach a technique they call the Relaxation Response, which is a demystified system of meditation, modeled directly on Transcendental Meditation (TM), a type of yogic mantra meditation. Numerous studies have shown that when you quiet the mind with these techniques, a variety of beneficial physiological responses—including reduced heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure, and levels of stress hormones—result, benefiting conditions from migraines to high blood pressure to infertility.

Although most yogic practices have not been studied as much as TM and the Relaxation Response, it makes sense that wide variety of yogic tools, from chanting to pranayama practices like Ujjayi (Victorious Breath) and Bhramari (Buzzing Bee Breath) to other meditation techniques, all of which cultivate pratyahara and quiet the mind, would have similar health benefits. And many yogis believe that there are additive benefits from combining different practices—for example, by doing pranayama as a prelude to meditation.

The Body-Mind Connection

The piece that I sometimes find missing in discussions of mind-body medicine, however, is the way that your body can influence the state of your mind. This again comes as no surprise to the yogi, nor to anyone else who is paying attention.

Most people have discovered that exercising, whether it's going for a walk or doing a vigorous yoga class, can lift their mood. A massage or a hot bath can relieve stress. It works the other way too: Regular exercisers may notice themselves feeling grumpy if they are denied their usual physical outlet several days in a row.

Physical illness can also have direct effects on your mental outlook. On several occasions over the years, I have found myself feeling depressed for no reason I could apprehend. Only the next morning, when a sore throat, nasal congestion, and other flu symptoms had appeared, did I realize that my sour mood had been the way my mind was reacting to the impending illness (and my body's response to it), even though I had no conscious awareness of it. You might call this piece of the puzzle the body-mind connection.

"Take a deep breath," the simple injunction commonly given when someone is angry or stressed out, is an acknowledgement of the body-mind connection. And this is, of course, the principle that we are taking advantage of in asana practice in particular. Yogis have discovered that certain poses, like backbends and side stretches, tend to be stimulating to the mind, while others, like forward bends and inversions, tend to promote a quieter, more introspective state.

In Part 2, we'll discuss individual practices and sequences of practices designed to elicit specific effects on the mind (which in turn affects the body).



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