



Mind Your Body

A FASTER PATH TO YOUR NEW YEAR'S FITNESS GOALS

by Victoria L. Freeman

Imagine wanting more and getting it—more energy and serenity, more vitality and inspiration. According to the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association, about 25 million Americans turn to mind-body systems of exercise, such as yoga, T'ai chi and Pilates, for just such results and many others.

These folks know that enlightened exercise is about much more than burning calories, flattening abdominals and toning thighs, although all are welcome by-products. Like the ancient Eastern traditions from whence they come, today's mind-body exercise disciplines recognize movement as a way to restore and harmonize mind, body and soul. Indeed, the traditional phrase "bodymind" reflects a belief, passed down through the ages, that mind and body are inseparable.

Benefits of Mind-Body Harmony

Although embraced by the East, the bodymind concept has long encountered scientific skepticism in the West. Then, in the mid-20th century, Dr. Hans Seyle glimpsed the phenomenon of mind-body fusion when he discerned how mental stress produces a cascade of physical reactions affecting heart rate, blood pressure, digestion and even immune func-

tion. A couple of decades later, Dr. Herbert Benson made a critical leap when he discovered the relaxation response—essentially a reversal of the stress response. Following these milestones, research on the mind-body connection took off.

Today, even the once critical medical profession recognizes some of the healing benefits of mind-body exercise. For example, "We know that yoga and T'ai chi dampen the stress response, thereby decreasing insulin resistance and high blood pressure while improving immune function," confirms Dr. Molly Roberts. Roberts is a holistic medicine physician at Canyon Ranch Resort in Tucson, Arizona, and founder and co-director of Tucson's Lighthearted Medicine clinic (LightheartedMedicine.com).

Athletes, medical patients and fitness fans reap the same benefits generally associated with exercise through practicing movements known to harmonize the bodymind, such as greater strength, endurance, coordination, balance and flexibility. But some participants also report other life-affirming outcomes as well, such as enhanced concentration and focus, greater calm and confidence, and inspired awareness and creativity.

Surely exercise is good, but does the mind-body variety deliver benefits transcending those of less enlightened workouts? While the research community continues its debate, the tidal wave of converts continues.

Amanda McKenzie, an avid yogi and freelance graphic designer in Eugene, Oregon, explains the appeal. "Mind-body exercise is grounding," observes McKenzie. "It's a safe place where I can turn inward and connect with my body and the Divine."

She also enjoys other types of workouts like kickboxing, with its intricate high-energy choreography. Yet she always returns to yoga. "Through yoga," she says, "I've discovered new possibilities for my life. It promotes a deep sense of well-being and peace."

We know that mind-body synergy is a good thing. Yet in order to mine the real gold from this fitness trend, we must first understand the fundamental nature of bodymind exercise—what it is and how it differs from a conventional approach. *Natural Awakenings* turned to experts in the industry for insight.

Inside the Mind-Body Connection

Many of the world's religions, including Christianity, Judaism and Buddhism, recognize mindfulness, or being aware of the present moment without judgment, as a starting point for spiritual awakening and growth. A simple Buddhist phrase aptly captures the essence of mindfulness: Chop wood, carry water.

Mind-body exercise disciplines recognize movement as a way to restore and harmonize mind, body and soul.

"In other words, if you're chopping wood, do that. If you're carrying water, do that. Focus your mind to be fully present and attuned to whatever you're doing," notes Cyndi Lee, founder of OM Yoga in New York City and author of *Yoga Body, Buddha Mind*.

Lee points to meditation as an age-

old method for facilitating this mind-body harmony. "During meditation you learn to clear your mind of chatter, release all judgment of thoughts and feelings, and bring your attention home to sensation," she counsels. "Master that ability and it leaks into all your life, whether you're exercising, dealing with a screaming child or making dinner."

Mindfulness proponents have long known that what we focus on matters. For to a large extent, our minds create our physical reality. In a golden chain, mindfulness leads to serenity, which in turn leads to clarity of consciousness. Clarity provides fertile ground for making informed choices toward manifesting health. It is this serene, clear space that resides in mind-body exercise, providing a place for our best qualities to flower.

Bodymind in Exercise

Cameron Shayne, founder of Budokon, a mind-body system of movement integrating martial arts, yoga and meditation, explains that America's fitness and sports industries typically focus on mastering movements and controlling body weight rather than holistically exploring the movement experience, emotions and all.

"Interest in mind-body fitness," he avers, "is the result of people in the United States learning to embrace self-reflection and self-observation. When the bodymind is fully engaged, practitioners watch themselves move through time and space, becoming aware of how they are moving and what they are feeling in the process."

In contrast, more conventional exercisers often speak of "zoning out" during workouts. They may don a headset and focus on music or watch TV from a treadmill. That's not mind-body exercise, says Lee. During bodymind movements we tune in rather than out.

Furthermore, an integrated bodymind moves organically, not mechanically. Movements that stem from a mind-body conversation are fluid not

How to Make Any Exercise More Mindful



James Gavin, Ph.D., a clinical and sports psychologist from Concordia University in Montreal, Canada, is one of today's scientists who believes that although some disciplines, such as yoga, martial arts and T'ai chi, focus overtly on mind-body integration, any type of exercise can be mindful.

Think of weightlifting, for example, which requires that we clear our heads of chatter to focus on breathing and movement form. "The hallmark of mind-body or conscious exercise," explains Gavin, "is when your whole being achieves single-pointedness. There's a clear and present connection between mental and physical activity. That can happen during any exercise."

The difference may reside not so much in the type of movement itself, but rather in the state of mind participants bring to and develop from the experience. For instance, a weight training session could be more mindful than a yoga asana if the yogi came preoccupied with a deadline at work while the weightlifter arrived focused and centered.

Simple suggestions for a more mindful workout:

- **Watch yourself move.** Focus intently on what you're doing and pay attention to what you're feeling as a result. Exist fully in the moment. Enjoy the paradoxical experience of being a participant-observer.
- **Perform a body scan.** Check in with all areas of your body during a workout. When sensations arise, explore them, don't ignore them.
- **Free yourself of judgment and attachment to results.** Instead of focusing on a future flatter stomach or tighter tush, view the workout as an opportunity to be awake in your life today.

rigid, compassionate not judgmental. They fulfill the participant's evolving personal needs instead of conforming tightly to some predetermined protocol.

Lee gives an example: A mindless approach to exercise would be to say, "I must lose fat, so I'm going to keep running on this treadmill for 30 minutes regardless of what I'm feeling." Running may not be the best move for you, says Lee, but meanwhile the "shoulds" are out-shouting the wiser direction of the bodymind.

She asks, why not take a mindful approach and declare, "Running may be good for some people, but it just doesn't feel right for me. So what else can I try?" Remember that mind-body movements will feel natural and honor who you are, Lee says, not what someone thinks you should be.

Although an enlightened perspective can transform any workout, some disciplines openly strive for mind-body synergy. Following are some of the most popular.

Classics long-established disciplines

- **QIGONG** (chee-GUNG), an aspect of traditional Chinese Medicine, translates to indicate "energy cultivation" or "working with the life energy." This ancient system coordinates different breathing patterns with various body postures and motions to improve the body's qi or life energy. Qigong can be used either to maintain health or as an intervention.

- **MARTIAL ARTS**, philosophically influenced by Zen Buddhism, comprise several Asian arts of combat or self-defense, such as aikido, karate, kung fu, judo and tae kwon do. Movements include kicks, throws, dodges, holds, somersaults and handsprings. These may be used offensively, defensively or simply to promote health.

- **PILATES**, a total-body conditioning program developed by Joseph Pilates, is best known for development of core, or trunk, muscles. Exercises emphasize breathing, form and posture and can be performed on a mat or specialized equipment called a Reformer.

- **T'AI CHI** has become popularized as "meditation in motion." Originally a martial art based in Taoism, T'ai chi's slow, deliberate, rhythmic stances and movements work to harmonize feminine yin and masculine yang. Chinese philosophy holds that these two fundamental forces characterize everything in nature, including humans.

- **YOGA** is a blend of ancient Indian physical, mental and spiritual traditions founded on the Sanskrit word "yuj," meaning "to unite or integrate." Hatha yoga, the physical branch most accessible in the West, focuses on breath and movement by employing a series of poses or asanas ranging in style from vigorous (like Iyengar, Bikram or Ashtanga) to gentle (such as Kripalu, Ananda or Kundalini).

Recent Hybrids classic combos

- **AI CHI**, a series of mind-body water exercises derived from T'ai chi, employs a combination of deep breathing and soft, flowing movements of the arms, legs and torso. Tranquility, rather than precision and rigidity, is the goal. A comfortable water depth up to shoulder level decreases joint pressure and increases muscle elasticity.

- **BUDOKON** promotes integration of mind and movement through the use of

Movements that stem from a mind-body conversation are fluid not rigid, compassionate not judgmental.

martial arts, yoga and Zen meditation and emphasizes agility, control, speed, power, balance and flow. Although they are intertwined, the physical practice has two distinct themes: The Yogic Series and the Budo Series. The Budokon Yogic Series is heavily influenced by Iyengar and Ashtanga yoga. The Budokon Budo Series is composed of standing and ground techniques drawn primarily from Okinawan karate-do, gracie jiu-jitsu and Olympic-style tae kwon do. Zen meditation is the Budokon mind practice of choice and forms the foundation for the entire discipline.

- **GYROTONIC** (derived from words for "circle" and "stretch") fuses elements of yoga, dance, swimming, T'ai chi and gymnastics. Practitioners perform a series of rhythmic, flowing movements on equipment called the Gyrotonic Expansion System. Gyrokinesis, or "yoga for dancers" as it was originally dubbed, is similar but performed on the floor with no special equipment. Both floor and machine workouts pair fluid exercises with specific breathing patterns and



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core work. Benefits include spinal and joint articulation, muscle tone, posture, balance and agility.

- **NIA**, or “neuromuscular integrative action,” seeks to integrate the body, mind, emotions and spirit using nine different movement forms: T’ai chi, tae kwon do, aikido, jazz dance, modern dance, Duncan dance, Feldenkrais, Alexander Technique and yoga. Participants perform barefoot to music and enjoy cardiovascular and whole-body conditioning while making their own movement choices within a flexible class structure.
- **YO-CHI** combines the stretches and poses of Hatha yoga with the slow, meditative movement of T’ai chi to achieve more flexibility, concentration, balance and relaxation. Muscle contraction techniques include both isotonic (constant tension as muscle shortens) and isometric (building tension with no change in muscle length). Variations can be performed in water, called hydro-yo-chi, or on a balance ball, termed yo-chi-ball.
- **YOGALATES** fuses Hatha yoga and Pilates techniques for a workout of stretching, strengthening and balancing exercises. Yoga focuses on flexibility, then strength, while Pilates focuses on core stability, then strength and flexibility. By combining the two, participants gain the strong and stable core, or torso, required for, but often taken for granted, in challenging yoga postures.

Whether we elect to try one or two of these approaches or try them all, bodymind movements can enrich every exercise experience, shifting our focus from a short-sighted endpoint goal to a present moment process that leads to lasting well-being. Perhaps Amanda McKenzie describes the best reason of all for achieving mind-body fitness when she says, “It feels like coming home.”

Victoria L. Freeman, Ph.D., translates inspiration from her own practice of mind-body exercise into articles about health and wellness from her home office in Goodland, Kansas.