

Issues in Yoga Therapy

Perspective

Mindfulness, Meditation and Yoga: Competition or Collaboration?

Bidyut K. Bose, PhD

IAYT Board; Niroga Institute, Oakland, CA

In a recent discussion, the organizer of a conference on mindfulness stated that she felt yoga was “not secular enough” for the conference. This comment got me thinking about the relationship between mindfulness, meditation, and yoga. The perception that yoga is not secular enough, or is somehow separate from the practice of mindfulness, directly impacts our ability to pervasively disseminate these transformative practices where they are needed most: in our communities and schools, in the healthcare system, for violence prevention, for addiction recovery, and beyond.

Mindfulness is the practice of paying attention to what we are doing and experiencing, moment by moment. It is a nonreactive and open monitoring of the content of ongoing experience.¹ Mindfulness practices are essentially a repeated call to bring awareness to the present moment. Several techniques are routinely utilized, such as attention to the breath, a scan of the body’s sensations in the moment, and simply watching thoughts or movements of the mind without choice, control, or judgment. Jon Kabat-Zinn, who developed Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), considers yoga *asana* a practice of mindfulness meditation.²

What is the connection between mindfulness and meditation? Meditation has been described as a combination of open monitoring as well as focused attention,¹ involving two essential and sequential steps:

- Gathering up our usually scattered minds, much like a tortoise pulling in its limbs underneath its shell
- Focusing the gathered mind like a collated laser beam, uninterrupted, on one thought or idea

Common analogies for this concentrative state are an unflickering candle flame, or the pouring of oil from one container into another in an unbroken stream. Patanjali

outlines this process in his Yoga Sutras in three progressive steps: *pratyahara* (introspection), deepening into *dharana* (concentration), and deepening into *dhyana* (meditation). Since mindfulness-based approaches are centered on open and choiceless monitoring of our mental context moment to moment, they are an aspect of meta-cognitive processes or meditation techniques, a member among the family of meditation practices that involve awareness as well as regulation of attention and emotion. Therefore, mindfulness techniques can be viewed as a subset of meditation practices.

What is the relationship between meditation and yoga? Patanjali defines yoga as the cessation of the waves (*viritti*) of the mind (*chitta*), establishing Raja Yoga as the science of meditation and codifying the practice in eight secular steps: a moral and ethical foundation including secular practices such as nonviolence and truthfulness (*yamas* and *niyamas*); control of our bodies and minds through secular practices such as yoga poses and breathing techniques (*asana* and *pranayama*); an inward journey progressing through the secular practices of introspection, concentration, and meditation (*pratyahara*, *dharana*, and *dhyana*); all leading us to a clearer understanding of our real nature, self-realization (*samadhi*).³

And so yoga is indeed mindfulness, meditation, and a lot more. Yoga poses are a dynamic transformative practice anchored in mindfulness, connecting with breath, and emerging in movement. They invite us to be open to what is arising while simultaneously staying focused. Yoga poses are a secular exercise in moving meditation or mindfulness in motion, preparing us for the subsequent steps of Raja Yoga, leading us into the depths of meditation. Just as mindfulness

techniques are a subset of meditation practices, meditation is one component of the comprehensive and universal practice of yoga, which is not bound by any religion, age, or country.

Religion involves institutional teachings and traditions associated with specific teachers and books at best, and creed, cult, dogma, and fanaticism at worst. Spirituality, on the other hand, involves universal secular questions of the human spirit: Who am I, who are you, and what is the relationship between us? Philosophers sometimes refer to these questions as the universal secret impulse, questions that arise from the depths of our beings, especially when things seem to be falling apart around us.

It is high time that purveyors of mindfulness, meditation, and yoga stop competing for greater secularism, or fragmenting ourselves over differences in approach or practice. Instead, we must collaborate and integrate, realizing the inherent interconnectedness between these traditions and practices. We need to proceed with a united front under the banner of transformative practices, which includes and transcends yoga, mindfulness, and meditation. Such an integrated approach can be a game-changer in healthcare,⁴ education,⁵ public safety,⁶ and more.

Let us work together to generate awareness of the benefits of yoga, meditation, and mindfulness, and influence public policy to unleash the power and potential of these practices, helping to correct the current imbalance between our efforts on our external environments and our efforts on

our internal environments, so that we can “be the change we wish to see in the world.”⁷

Bidyut K. Bose, is the executive director of Niroga Institute (www.niroga.org), a nonprofit organization in the San Francisco Bay Area that brings transformative life skills to students, vulnerable youth, cancer survivors, seniors, and people battling addiction. Direct correspondence to Bidyut Bose, Niroga Institute, 111 Fairmount Avenue, Oakland, CA 94611. bk@niroga.org.

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