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Yoga in All Conditions: Anytime, Anywhere

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To do yoga, you don't have to be ultra flexible and twist into a pretzel or be able to balance yourself on one leg, levitate in the air or, have a picture perfect body. Leave all that for the yoga gymnasts. Yoga can be done with any level of flexibility and health, at any age, in any position such as sitting, standing or lying down, any place such as a yoga studio, your own living room or even when you are sick and forced to lie down in your bed.

12th May 2007, on my birthday, I woke up from anesthesia in a surgery I.C.U. bed after emergency open-heart surgery. Slowly, I figured out where all the needles, tubes and medical gadgets were attached to my body and that I was not free to toss and turn in the bed. I asked myself what I was going to do with my body and my mind. I knew it was not a good idea to focus on pain and other uncomfortable sensations, or on worries and morbid thoughts, but what should I do instead?

Then I remembered what I had said all the time, "Yoga is not merely a set of physical exercises; it is a complete body, breath and mind system." The inside voice told me, "Exercise your mind! Follow your breath!" I decided to comply with the inner voice and chose a body-breath-mind yoga exercise, a "Body Scan" that could be done even when one is hooked up to the machines and confined to a hospital bed.

Body-breath-mind yoga exercises (hereafter referred as "mind-body exercises") are less well known in the west compared to the physical postures and stretches. This is unfortunate because mind-body exercises have unique benefits and are universally applicable. I did several different mind-body exercises during my stay at the hospital, but for now, I will briefly describe Body Scan. (I have described this and other mind-body exercises in detail on my website).

Body “Scan”

As the name implies you mentally scan your body. Some prefer to use other terms for scanning such as “internally surveying,” “traveling” or “walking through the body.” Whatever you call it, do it in a systematic manner by mentally coursing through the entire body and making sure you don’t miss any part of the body.

You may follow the “downward tour” method, that is, starting from the head and face going down all the way to the toes or follow the “upward method” starting from the toes and going up all the way to the face and head.

Downward Tour: Downward Tour is nothing but a complete head to toes scan. For that purpose, bring your attention to the crown of your head. For a brief moment, the duration of one or two breaths, become fully aware of the head in all its dimensions. Repeat the process for each body part. For instance, feel the skin of the scalp and roots of the hair. Feel the back of the head, neck and throat. Then move your attention to the face and become fully aware of the forehead, nose, temples, cheeks, etc. one organ at a time. In a similar manner, move your attention and awareness to the throat, chest, belly, legs and so on until you reach the tips of the toes.

Upward Tour: Having completed the downward movement, now move your attention back up, that is, from toes to head. When you reach up to the pit of the throat where the neck joins the shoulder blades, stop! Why do we stop at the pit of the throat? Because, we have to cover the arms as well! So, walk your attention through the arms, palms and finger tips. Then walk your attention back up from the finger tips to the pit of the throat. From the pit of the throat walk your attention through the neck, throat, chin and the rest of the face, finally ending your tour at the crown of the head, exactly the point from which you began the body travel. This completes one round!

Inside Tour: If you have time, why not utilize that time in taking an inside tour of the body? No work is complete until the inside job is done. Go deep inside your body moving your attention internally to the chest and belly. To facilitate that process, you may think about the location of your lungs, heart, stomach, intestines, etc.

If you have already not dozed off by then, try moving your attention inside the thighs, knees, ankles and toes.

Since I had nothing better to do at the hospital, I would do the downward, upward and inside body tour and then start all over again. Many times I would

doze off due to the lingering effect of anesthesia or fatigue and exhaustion. Other times, I would be interrupted by nurses poking my fingertips, jabbing my arms with mysterious fluids or pushing pills in my mouth for the tenth time that day. Interruptions and naps notwithstanding, I would return umpteen times to my mind-body exercises during the span of a day. Sometimes, my mind would wander or be forced out of my body due to pain. I would get back to my mind-body exercises as soon as I was able to.

Here are some of the benefits I believe I received from Body Scan:

1. It offered me something to do when there was little else I could do. Exercises kept my mind engaged in a positive task cutting down on the worrying and feeling-sorry-for-myself time.
2. Connecting the mind with the body is a subtle physical exercise. Psychologists call it “Ideo-motor connection.” You think of something happening in the body and in a subtle way it does occur in the body. For instance, imagine your hands are becoming warmer or still better imagine you are warming your hands by the fireside. You will notice that in a short while your hands become warmer. Why does it happen? There was no fire. You just had an idea but that idea increased the circulation in the hand and raised the temperature.

To take another example, while sitting or lying down, imagine you are climbing a long flight of steps. The idea of climbing will activate your leg muscles. You didn't get up or do any exercise and yet the muscle activity in your legs could be measured by a machine. In short, bringing focused attention to a specific part of the body and imagining that body part is breathing in and out in some way exercises it. It is a subtle exercise but still real activity.

3. If I can take poetic license here, Body Scan reconnected me with my whole body every time I performed it. Normally, the site of surgery, injury and pain forces all the attention to itself and the rest of the body like it has ceased to exist. This exercise by sending the mind and the breath to every nook and corner, from crown of the head to the finger tips and the toes, the four corners of the body brings the body alive. You feel you are “living” in the whole body in spite of the site of injury that feels like it's “killing” you.

For detailed instructions and explanations on mind-body exercises, refer to “Affirmations and Visualizations” at <http://www.mindpub.com/topic101.htm>

