Nothing without awareness

What we think about while we think · Yoga Loznica · 30 January 2020

An exercise done with full attention is experienced differently from mechanical repetition. Here is how yoga teaches awareness, body and breath to work together.



Note. Focused attention changes how the body is experienced. If we feel pain or discomfort, we stop the exercise. The research mentioned concerns mindfulness programmes.

The mental part is inseparable from every yoga practice. Physical exercises done with full attention have a greater effect on the muscles than ordinary exercise, and without any philosophical or religious assumptions, because the focus of the practice is on our own body and mind [1].

Thoughts are a form in which our awareness shows itself, and they shape our relationship to ourselves, to people and to our work. How we think determines how we experience what happens to us. A positive attitude helps us find the good around us, while the constant repetition of negative thoughts exhausts us and strengthens the feeling of powerlessness. That is why attention to our own

thoughts is an inseparable part of yoga practice. The power of a concentrated thought is great, but people devoted to yoga do not strive to master circumstances in their surroundings; they want to get to know their own essence in the given surroundings.

What the research says

Attention is not an empty word. A review of 209 studies (over 12,000 participants) showed that programmes based on mindfulness help with anxiety, depression and stress, about as much as other psychological therapies [2]. The authors of one review explain this through four things: directing attention, awareness of the body, managing emotions and a change of view of the self [3]; a more recent review links the practice with changes in the parts of the brain responsible for attention and emotion [4].

Attention and sensations in the body

Try it right now. Stretch out your right arm with a clenched fist and the index finger extended, and concentrate on the tip of the finger. Just feel. After a short time many people feel tingling, then warmth and pulsing. Nothing has moved, and yet the experience of the body has changed: that is directed attention.

The same happens in every asana: when attention stays in a muscle, a joint or the breath, the sensations become clearer and the movement more precise. Patient practice improves coordination, the sense of the body and posture, and stretching and warming up give a pleasant feeling of warmth and blood flow.

The body changes with what we do

The body is a set of systems that constantly renew themselves. The **nervous system** adapts to practice: in one trial, brain scans showed that after three months of learning to juggle, grey matter increased in the parts of the brain that process movement [5]. Skin, mucous membranes, blood and bones are constantly replaced: the lining of the gut within a few days, red blood cells in about four months, and bone is remodelled in about ten years [6]. The **endocrine system** keeps this renewal in step, so it is not the same how we think, breathe and move from day to day: these are signals the body receives every day. The human brain is capable of wonderful things.

The German athlete of the late nineteenth century, Eugen Sandow, born Friedrich Wilhelm Müller, noticed that exercises done without concentration, purely mechanically, contribute little to the development of the muscles. According to [1], he and Professor W. G. Anderson of Yale University were among the first to hear of the Indian system of practising with slow movements in front of a mirror, and then applied and described it.

The authors stress that the seat of awareness is in the brain, but that nerve cells in other parts of the body have similar properties. Most neurons and cells of the heart muscle are hardly replaced during a lifetime [6].

Practice shows that awareness can be trained by directing thoughts (concentration), focused reflection (contemplation) and abstaining from thinking (meditation). Yoginis and yogis have trained awareness in this way for more than two thousand years [7]: in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* [8] the first stage is dharana, holding attention on one object, the second is dhyana, the unbroken duration of that attention, and the third samadhi, complete absorption. A modern review of eight trials in healthy practitioners showed that these two stages of meditation differ [9]. It is neither easy nor quick, which is why continuity is decisive: whoever practises long enough shapes body and mind, and can direct attention through the simple contemplation yoga teaches us: conscious breathing with a feeling of a particular part of our own body.

The experience of others

Few of us can stand on our head. Whoever watches someone stronger and better at balance sees that they take the position without effort, because they have practised for a long time. Such a position changes the experience of oneself and of the world, but another person's experience stays unknown to us. Modern instruments can register the presence of consciousness (for example brain activity), but not its quality. That is why we recognise another's consciousness only by behaviour, and get to know our own when we become aware of ourselves. Whoever practises yoga cannot prove their experience to another; they can only show the way.

The whole system of yoga, whatever its kind, rests on a return to a more natural way of life and on the intuition that leads a person to their essence. The authors close with the thought that the time is approaching when people will develop a healthier and more conscious way of life, and the three great gifts of yoga are, as they say, health, strength and youthfulness of spirit.

Photograph

Photograph: Yoga Loznica.

Sources

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