



## Embodiment in Yoga

By Connie Dyer



### Embodiment in Yoga

*Embodiment* is a term we encounter in many contexts today, especially as advances in somatic psychology and neuroscience increasingly demonstrate that mind and body—awareness, sensations, feelings, and thoughts—are simply different expressions of one whole, one field of experience manifesting and expressing as you and me. While we might grasp this idea of wholeness and unity intellectually, in fact we mainly inhabit our mind, even when practicing asana or trying to meditate. Our attention is held captive by the flow of thoughts, impressions, ideas, and inner conversations, and by the powerful senses of sight, hearing, taste, and smell located in our head space. So we ride along in our heads, letting mind tell us what we need, what to do, how to behave, even how to move and what to feel. In so doing, however, the emerging science of *embodied cognition* tells us we are ignoring and possibly suppressing other important inputs.

In spite of what the mind tells us, the brain is not our only resource to solve problems and determine actions and experiences. In fact, our body--engaging, sensing, perceiving, and moving in the world--does most of the work of accomplishing our intentions without conceptual representations or commands from the mind.<sup>i</sup> The body has its own wisdom. It has known since birth how to move, adapt, and respond even though it might be bound and unbalanced by the residues of our traumas, fears, tensions, disappointments, judgments, and rigid thinking. Letting our awareness settle out of the head to spend more time listening to the body, we can reclaim and benefit from that knowledge.

### Making friends with the body

Unfortunately, trusting the body and relinquishing the illusion of mental control can be difficult. We're used to treating the body as an instrument of our will; we talk about it as an object outside ourselves. Sometimes we treat it like an adversary to be overcome, an unruly child, a bad influence; we're not sure we trust it—sometimes we feel it betrays us, scares us, or leads

us astray. Yet a recent study suggests that people who are more in touch with their bodies and attuned to their own physiology as it changes moment to moment are more resilient. Our ability to cope and recover from the stress of life appears to be more connected to embodied awareness—our willingness to simply tune in and trust—than to how we *think* about it.<sup>ii</sup>

### Being in the body right now—all the time

The most fundamental practice of embodiment is being Present—tuning in to how we travel in our body from our intention to its accomplishment, observing and understanding how the body responds and adapts from moment to moment toward useful, nourishing outcomes. This sensitivity is essential over time as we practice toward a concrete movement goal and also in the few seconds of moving in and out of a yoga posture or simply breathing and feeling. When we are truly IN the body, we align with the subtle intelligence and energetic support of our whole being; our intentions shift to reflect that alignment, and our attention flows without resistance into new movement, sensation, and experience.



### Embodiment begins with breath

We begin by bringing our attention to the breath. We slow down and feel it moving in the body. We notice where it moves and how some parts are subtly moved. We let our awareness ride along the arc of each inhale and exhale and float in the pauses. We notice how the breath changes, how WE change, how even our awareness seems to breathe and shift, how our impressions and experience of the body change. As we move with the breath, we notice how some movements are initiated by or supported by the breath. And we notice how the breath is affected by our movement. With practice, our awareness is never far from the breath and we find ourselves yielding easily to its power to shape and support our movement.

### Make contact with ground and space

Because we have weight and our planet's specific gravity, we are continuously falling into the earth and rising from it on the energy of the *ground force reaction*. We experience that force as a rising energy that flows up from the point of contact through the spine to the top of the head when sitting or standing, or more subtly through the tissues of the body when lying. In fact, the entire body experiences this energetic movement potential when any part of it makes contact with ground, walls, space or simply moves in relation to itself. Simply shifting our weight from one foot to the other can inspire movement in the entire body when we are attentive. As we tune in to this powerful physiologic and energetic flow, our structure gradually find its own integrated alignment. Movement that flows from that conscious contact and alignment is more graceful, efficient, stable, and effortless.

As Ida Rolf famously explained, "the integrated body should not feel weight due to gravity." When we consciously yield our weight to the ground and release patterns of holding that might block the upward flow of movement potential, the downward force of our weight falling toward earth in gravity is canceled out by the equal and opposite upward force from the ground. We feel light and supported and our mind-enforced patterns start to dissolve.

As we embody this upward flow through tissues and structures, our borders soften and we connect energetically with the space that surrounds us and our own subtle, pulsing spaciousness. Embodying these physiologic flows that express our relation with our environment helps open our awareness to the subtler circulation of energy in the channels and chakras of our yogic body.



### Slowing down, feeling more

Asana is a moment in the arc of a functional movement that receives its form from our contact with breath, body, ground, and space. It is shaped by our body's continuous interaction with initiating force, shifting attention, gravity, and momentum. Ideally, it is empty of concept or ego-driven purpose, full of awareness and possibility.

When we move slowly and open our awareness, we are more likely to notice the opportunities for change and growth that an embodied asana practice offers. We experience and absorb much less when movements are done in haste, when we are not fully present during their execution. Slowing down also lets us see and release patterns of unconscious holding that prevent effective movement or block a feeling of flow. Mind, emotions or inattention often create roadblocks in the body that undermine authentic movement in the moment. We freeze up unconsciously as performance anxiety, fear of pain, or misunderstanding the body's requirement distracts us. And when we space out during a gesture or posture and lose touch with the vital moving body, we fall back on habitual movement patterns that are less useful. Slowing down, we feel these blockages *as they occur* and can gradually release them.

### Being *In* the body

A movement practice becomes an embodiment practice when we make authentic contact with ourselves and our environment, when through breath and movement we observe ourselves closely and continuously, consciously and gradually releasing all embedded assumptions (expectations, tensions, habitual patterns) about the Body, the Self, and the nature of Experience. Being in the body is essentially a gesture of love and respect!

Namaste



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<sup>i</sup> See Jeff Thompson Ph.D. “Beyond Words: Embodied Cognition: What It Is and Why It's Important”  
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/beyond-words/201202/embodied-cognition-what-it-is-why-its-important>

<sup>ii</sup> Gretchen Reynolds, “To Better Cope With Stress, Listen to Your Body” New York Times, January 22, 2016  
<http://nyti.ms/1UOf4LF>