Mindfulness-Based Movement

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Mindfulness-based movement: By Christine Wushke

Overview:

This booklet contains the how and why of incorporating the important dimension of mindfulness-based movement into your meditation practice.

Mindfulness-based movement has numerous benefits, we will dive into what they are and how you can use them effectively in your practice. We will also look at the fascial system and how mindfulness-based movement can improve the health of our bodies tissues and how this can help us facilitate nervous system resilience.

What is mindfulness?

Founded in 1979 by Jon Kabot Zin, mindfulness-based stress reduction began the process of westernizing and modernizing mindfulness. As research gained momentum, it caught the attention of the medical community and is now a recognized addition to traditional therapy. These days, mindfulness is becoming even more widely accepted and well-researched (1) for its efficacy in psychotherapy, and is also beginning to be appreciated for its effectiveness in movement practices. (2)

My friend Dr. Lenka Zdrazilova, a clinical psychologist with a specialty in neuroscience, defines mindfulness (3) as "present moment, nonjudgmental awareness of your current experience." In other words, you are turning your attention to whatever is happening right now—whether internally or externally—without bias or judgment (4). Another popular (though much older) definition (5) is "the self-regulation of attention with an attitude of curiosity, openness and acceptance," which was an explanation created with the intention of being clear and accessible to both professionals and the public.

I personally like to think of mindfulness as a "gentle curiosity," because for me there is something profound yet so very simple about turning my attention toward what's coming up inside me. Particularly when I am struggling, or when my feelings are intense, turning toward those emotions with that gentle curiosity is soothing to my nervous system. It also allows me to have a complete experience of whatever that intensity is. For example, if I am sad and I apply this to the sadness, I notice a sense of fullness to the feeling, facets of the sadness I might not perceive if I were actively resisting it. I notice flecks of love and even warmth in there. And somehow, when this is done in a skilled way, I find these moments of sadness deeply fulfilling… which is contrary to what society often leads us to believe about such feelings.

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One of the goals of mindfulness meditation is, as I just expressed, to allow yourself a complete experience of whatever you are noticing. If you are eating a piece of sweet fruit, your practice might invite you to chew slowly and take in every aspect of that fruit, to embrace the full experience of that fruit: the movement of your jaw in chewing, the flavorful taste sensations on your tongue, the way the juices squish out with each bite, the feeling of swallowing, and even the emotion of enjoyment. Or if you are doing a walking meditation, the objective would be to notice every nuance of the gait cycle: the feeling of your feet on the ground, the roll from heel to toe, and the breezy sensation of your arms moving through the air. What we will be practising in this manual is engaging our movements with this same high level of alert awareness.

What are Mindful Micromovements?

Mindfulness-based practices have been shown to create functional movement patterns by reprogramming motor control in the brain. These healthier movement habits aid our tissues in becoming stronger and more pliable which offers us more movement possibilities in our various undertakings. In addition to facilitating healthier movement habits, these mindfulness-based practices improve executive function, neural variability, and decision making.

To put it quite simply: mindfulness-based movements impact both your brain and body to not only make you smarter and stronger, but also help you experience less pain.

Mindful movements are also done in smaller, micro ranges of movement. Moving within tiny ranges is also beneficial for those with chronic pain conditions. Micro-movements that feel pleasurable will motivate more movement, which will then lead to a gradual improvement of range of motion and strength in a safe and organic way.

An added benefit to micromovements is that they retrain the brain out of fear, encouraging new pathways to move in healthy ranges in a way that doesn't trigger the brain's alarm system and thus trigger more pain responses. When someone is in pain for a long time, they become hypersensitive, and the slightest movement has the potential to trigger pain. This hypersensitivity can lessen in time as the body and brain learn that movement is safe.

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In earlier booklets we discussed the window of tolerance model, and how quickly we can override our nervous system responses when we feel psychologically uncomfortable or unsafe. For many, this means to disconnect from the body and simply "go through the motions" in order to preserve a feeling of safety. One of the best ways to combat this is to bite-size the movements that make us uncomfortable, to stay with the body, and fully engage in the motion. Micro-movements—small movements done slowly and with mindful attention—can help us to master the practice of applied mindfulness, creating a sense of safety and enabling us to stay embodied through the whole range of motion. The goal is to find a range of movement that is non-threatening to the nervous system, possibly even pleasant, within which you can remain embodied rather than disconnected. This facilitates better motor control (7) and new trained neural pathways which can translate later into functional patterns in our everyday lives. One simple and effective way to incorporate mindfulness into simple movements is through synchronizing them with the breath. This engages both the fascial system and the brain for maximum benefits. The goal of mindful movement is not to increase range of motion, but to increase mindfulness and our level of embodiment. Think of it as small movement + large awareness.

Why is mindfulness-based movement useful for a meditation practice?

Beginning meditation practitioners can sometimes struggle with body discomfort as an obstacle to a successful meditation practice. Mindful micromovements can be introduced to students as a solution to this challenge or offered as a way to set them up for success on their meditation journey.

The goal of mindful micromovements is to find a range of motion that feels pleasurable. Over time this will motivate more time on our mat and inspire a fruitful practice in a safe and organic way.

The fascial system and its relevance to nervous system regulation:

Often fascia is described as connective tissue which prompts a visualization of a tendon or ligament or other distinct individual tissue in the human body. Yet when we are talking about 'releasing' fascia or mindful movement to improve the 'tone of the fascia' we are talking about a different type of fascia called 'The Fascial System'. For this reason, I would like to include two different definitions of fascia: 'A Fascia' and 'The Fascial System' as quoted from the fascia congress website.

- *A Fascia: is a sheath, a sheet, or any other dissectible aggregations of connective tissue that forms beneath the skin to attach, enclose, and separate muscles and other internal organs.*
- *The Fascial System: consists of the three-dimensional continuum of soft, collagen containing, loose and dense fibrous connective tissues that permeate the body. It incorporates elements such as adipose tissue, adventitiae and neurovascular sheaths, aponeuroses, deep and superficial fasciae, epineurium, joint capsules, ligaments, membranes, meninges, myofascial expansions, periostea, retinacula, septa, tendons, visceral fasciae, and all the intramuscular and intermuscular connective tissues including endo-/peri-/epimysium. The fascial system surrounds, interweaves between, and interpenetrates all organs, muscles, bones and nerve fibers, endowing the body with a functional structure, and providing an environment that enables all body systems to operate in an integrated manner. (11)*

A simple analogy that can be useful for understanding these two definitions is to imagine a jar of honey with multiple structures floating within it. The honey would be 'The fascial system' and the floating structures would be the individual 'A fascia' or individual connective tissues. Another metaphor for describing the fascial system is a bowl of jello with fruit pieces floating or suspended within it. Jello is a type of substance that can go through a phase change which is also true about this type of fascia. The polysaccharide gel complex which is referred to as the 'ground substance' in fascia research (12) will stiffen and soften in response to both internal and external stimulus or inputs.

To experience this in your own body put your finger on the heel pad of your foot. Allow your finger to soften and sink into the tissue. Move your finger around lightly and feel the softness of tissue yield to your finger and your light pressure. Then tap your heel pad quickly and firmly. Notice how the tissue will stiffen in response to this different input.

Now imagine that this is a body wide system that is responding automatically to multiple inputs and is in constant communication with the neurocpetion (13) of your nervous system as well.

Think of your fascial system and your nervous system as a pair of friends running a three-legged race. The better the communication and more synchronized the relationship, the more successful the outcome the three-legged race will be!

Why the fascial system matters to a successful meditation practice?

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How is this relevant to a meditation practice? Imagine that you are in a seated position and your body begins to give you cues of discomfort. Ignoring those cues send a message potential danger through the nervous system, which leads to the fascia stiffening to protect or prepare the body. The stiffness of the tissues begins to increase the signals of threat or danger, and we feel an increase in body discomfort creating a feedback loop of fascial stiffness and the neurocpetion of threat. To address this commonly experienced issue we can offer our students the simple practice of mindfulness-based micromovements before, during and after our meditation practice sessions.

Try this simple micro movement practice and let us know how it goes!

1. Move into your favorite seated meditation posture.
2. Take time to shift and adjust so you feel as comfortable as possible.
3. Begin your favorite meditation technique.
4. Track your body for slight or subtle cues of sensation.
5. The moment you notice the beginnings of a sensation arising in body, give that area permission to move intuitively.
6. Experiment with how small you can make those movements, seeing if you could feel motion on the inside of you, but have those movements almost undetectable from the perspective of an outside observer.
7. Allow your mind to rest on the tiny movements and bring your meditation practice into the movement. (for example, if you are counting your breaths or using mantra repetition, allow the breath or sound to reverberate into this area of your body.)

A more global benefit to mindfulness-based movement

As we have discussed in previous sessions, the health and wellbeing of the fascial system has an impact on our ability to move in a varied way. Fascia is an organ of communication, and in this section, we will be specifically addressing the communication between the muscles, fascia, and the nervous system and brain.

In the slide presentation we discussed what a fascia adhesion is, using the metaphor of a jar of honey. Imagine again that jar of honey with your whole body embedded inside it. You can see that, if a portion of that jar had changed phase and hardened into creamed honey, all the structures in and around that creamed honey would lack the ability to move as freely as in the areas where it is still fluid and free flowing. Structures need to move independently in all directions in order to be functional, and when the gel of the fascia is “hardened” this freedom is limited. What that looks like anatomically, or more literally, is that the polysaccharide gel of the fascia can collect calcium deposits which give the extracellular matrix a gluey consistency. This inhibits the surrounding structures from moving freely in all directions, so we adapt and compensate as a result. These movement compensations may then be stored in the brain as our new normal, and this new way of moving becomes habituated over time.

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When we think about fascia as a whole system, it is crucial to understand that the nervous system is embedded within that fascial system; this includes the brain, and therefore what we learn. As this compensation movement becomes a new normal, the brain is getting involved and creates an established neural network around this movement pattern. So, as we embark upon the journey of freeing the fascial system, we also want to engage the brain in unlearning its habituated movement, re-learning more movement options, and creating neural flexibility.

Neural variability and the benefits of a mindfulness-based movement practice

In mindfulness-based movement we can achieve not only the benefits of meditation for the brain, but also healthy resilient tissues at the same time. Once the fascial tissues are stimulated and hydrated through a safe and comfortable movement practice—combined with manual therapy if necessary—it's time to work on making new pathways of movements available. Here is where mindfulness really comes in handy.

As movement practitioners, one of the things we see all too often is the cost of sedentariness (6). Lack of movement can cause tissues to dry out and become brittle over time, leaving them susceptible to injury. This brittle or stuck quality also causes inhibited movement on a micro scale, compounding the problem and creating a sort of vicious cycle. This means that even though a person may actually have an active lifestyle, there are some tissues that are not moving, and those tissues are what I call sedentary pockets. (6)

Increasing movement variability

There is a common phrase in neuroscience: "What fires together wires together."

What this saying means is that the firing of our muscles (movement patterns) is intricately related to the wiring in our brains (habit-forming). The goal of mindful movement is to engage the brain in learning new and functional patterns, and to break the habit of unconscious movement or guarding tendencies that may be exacerbating symptoms. This gives us a greater ability to make conscious choices through our movement patterns, and create a new sustainable movement practice.

This expanded awareness can also help to uncover these sedentary pockets and get the tissues innervating again. Through the combination of Myofascial Self-Release and mindfulness, underused tissues wake up and overused tissues settle, leading to a more balanced and wholesome type of moving.

Neuroscience and the benefits of mindful micro-movements

A recent study (8) I came across showed that mindfulness-based movement is more effective than mindfulness alone for boosting executive function. Why is executive function (9) relevant to movement practices? Because it leads to cognitive flexibility. It helps us to think of things in more than one way, or to be creative with different ways of moving; it makes more options available to us. This facilitates the goal of increasing our movement variability and offering the body multiple loads for whole body resilience.

In this study they had a group of meditators, a group of aerobic walkers, and a group of Tai Chi practitioners. Then they had a sedentary population. What they were looking at was the improvement in executive function in the brain. The Tai Chi practitioners showed the most improvement; the meditators and the aerobic walkers had better results than the sedentary population, but not as good as the Tai Chi group. What this indicates is that, if you really want to amp up the effects of mindfulness meditation, do it while you are moving, or even better, apply it to any movement you are already doing.

Embodied movement

In previous modules we discussed the window of tolerance model, and how quickly we can override our nervous system responses when we feel psychologically uncomfortable or unsafe. For many, this means to disconnect from the body and simply "go through the motions" in order to preserve a feeling of safety. One of the best ways to combat this is to bite-size the movements that make us uncomfortable, to stay with the body, and fully engage in the motion. Micro-movements—small movements done slowly and with mindful attention—can help us to master the practice of applied mindfulness, creating a sense of safety and enabling us to stay embodied through the whole range of motion. The goal is to find a range of movement that is non-threatening to the nervous system, possibly even pleasant, within which you can remain embodied rather than disconnected. This facilitates better motor control (7) and new trained neural pathways which can translate later into functional patterns in our everyday lives. One simple and effective way to incorporate mindfulness into simple movements is through synchronizing them with the breath. This engages both the fascial system and the brain for maximum benefits. The goal of the following yoga sequence is not to increase range of motion, but to increase mindfulness and our level of embodiment. Think of it as small movement + large awareness.

The goal of mindful micro-movements is to find a range of motion that feels pleasurable. Over time this will motivate more movement, which will then lead to a gradual improvement of range of motion and strength in a safe and organic way.

The following sequences are examples of micro ranges of movements that we will coordinate with the breath. Each time you are in an expanding movement, couple it with your inhale. Each time you are in a folding movement, match it with your exhale. However, if you feel the opposite breath pattern works best for you, go that way, as there are no wrong ways to do this type of movement sequence. The goal is mindfulness, pleasure, embodiment, and attentiveness to your current moment experience. None of these movements should feel painful.

Remember to start these movements small, and gradually increase to an optimal range that feels appropriate to your current pain levels.

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Mindful movement #1 (Figure 1): Simple arm raises with breath awareness. Begin in a standing position and induce mindfulness. Follow your breath for five cycles until you feel present in your body. On your next inhale raise your arms up over your head, and as you exhale bring your arms down. Begin to synchronize your breath with your movements, getting the timing of the inhale to match the timing of the arms lifting, and the exhale with the arms lowering.

Figure 1

Mindful movement #2 (Figure 2): Warrior One Pose to Half Airplane flow sequence.

Stand at the top of your mat and place one leg back behind you at a comfortable distance.

Take your front knee into a micro-bend. Stop as soon as you feel a stretch in your hip or front leg, then back up a bit until you feel the stretch sensation is gone.

Inhale and raise your arms to a comfortable range of movement. If you feel any discomfort in your arms or neck, reduce your ROM, even if that means your arms only come partway up.

Exhale and lean slightly forward until your torso is in line with your back foot.

Inhale and move back to Warrior One, raising your arms to the same height as last time. Continue the sequence for a few more repetitions.

pause for a moment when you are finished and notice the response from your body. When you are ready, repeat the sequence on the opposite side.

Mindful movement #3 (Figure 3): Side Warrior sequence

Begin in Warrior Two Pose.

Place your feet a short distance apart where you feel stable in both legs.

Begin with a micro-bend in your front knee and stop as soon as you feel a stretch in your hip or front leg.

Inhale, and then exhale as you move into a mini Side Angle Pose, bringing your hand onto your bent knee.

Inhale back to Warrior Two Pose.

Exhale and bend backwards slightly with your back hand along your back leg into a mini Exalted Warrior.

Repeat the sequence a few more times, flowing with your breath.

Pause for a moment when you are finished and notice the response from your body.

When you are ready, repeat the sequence to the opposite side.

Figure 3.

Notes.

Mindful movement #4 (Figure 4): Mindful Back Bending

Stand in Mountain Pose and take a moment to enter into mindfulness.

Inhale and lift the arms up, stopping just prior to a stretch sensation.

As you reach your appropriate range of motion, exhale and bring the arms back down slowly and mindfully.

Repeat the sequence in mindfulness, pausing at any time if your arms feel fatigued.

Figure 4.

Mindful movement #5: mindful tracking in movement

Watch the video here to see an example of mindfulness-based micro-movements combined with nervous system tracking.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Il2SoWg9gOc&feature=youtu.be

An embodied client-led approach

Interoception is a key element for stimulating a sense of embodiment and wellbeing, and is defined as "the sense of signals originating within the body" (10); in other words, detecting internal sensations such as hunger and thirst, pain, stress, danger, and emotions. Mindful movement practices can be an opportunity to re-establish interoceptive capabilities—particularly if we have moved outside of the window of tolerance and experienced a disconnect—when approached with a focus on moment by moment attention to our internal landscape.

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When working on increasing interoceptive capacity, it is wise to titrate the embodiment element, moving our awareness slowly into the body. Micro-movements are the easiest type of movement when there is a great amount of pain, as regular movement tends to spark more pain in an already chronic-pain-filled body; the tendency is usually to override the nervous system and disconnect from the body. The quote below explains why bite-sizing this process—and cueing in a way that's empowering to students—is so important. Even doing hand movements only, and beginning to practice mindful awareness of the movement of each finger, will allow for both a titration of interception ability and the improvement of executive function.

(Margin box quote by Yonnie Fung)

> "Many trauma survivors can have experiences of both hyperactive and compromised interoceptive capacity. Children, in abusive environments for example, develop extraordinary abilities to scan for warnings of attack, becoming very attuned to recognise subtle changes to their external environment [18]. However, this comes at the cost of their ability to feel what is going on internally.

> Interoception may also switch off in situations where people learn that their needs will not be met, or their needs anger their caregivers. Children raised in neglectful homes become habituated to having their needs ignored so over time, their ability to perceive their needs become weakened [19]. While this helps victims survive, in the long term, being unable to identify and fulfil one's own needs can make life very challenging.

> Yoga can help to reestablish interoceptive capabilities if participants are guided in such ways that encourage them to listen to their own bodies [20]. Prescriptive language further entrenches the pattern of not listening to the internal cues - in other words, they encourage disembodiment when the situation calls for the opposite course of action.

> As yoga teachers, we should be striving to facilitate in ways that do not reenact trauma dynamics of neglect and abuse, rather, to work against these dynamics to create safe spaces to practice and develop safe and respectful relationships to practice [21]."

A word of caution

The benefits of incorporating mindfulness into yoga are vast but it is not without some risk, and it would be irresponsible not to name and make allowances for this. One of the most important things to keep in mind when inducing a state of mindfulness in your students is that, when in mindfulness, your whole system is much more sensitive to subtle inputs. During deep mindfulness it is likely that a sudden touch, a mindless adjustment, or harsh wording can have a much more dramatic impact on the nervous system than in ordinary consciousness. For this reason, I like to have my yoga and meditation trainees do some mindfulness practices to experientially understand the effect their body language, movements, and touch may have on their students in the future.

Try this experiment from the Hakomi tradition with a partner, and record notes of your responses:

Stand facing your partner and choose who will be Partner A and who will be Partner B.

1. Partner A will induce mindfulness in Partner B, and Partner A will stay in ordinary consciousness.
2. Once Partner B is in deep mindfulness, she will give a nod to Partner A to signal that she is ready for the experiment.
3. Partner B will begin slowly taking steps toward Partner A (her eyes are closed) until Partner A is aware of her presence.
4. Partner B will practice tracking the body language of Partner A. Partner B: See if you can notice her notice you as you enter her "bubble" of personal space. Does she grimace? Does she tense slightly? Does she appear uncomfortable?
5. Partner A will fine tune Partner B's position to her body to a point where it feels comfortable for her nervous system. Partner A: Feel free to back her up or cue her forward until you have the space between your bodies just right. Notice your nervous system responses when she's too close, or not close enough.
6. Switch roles and try the experiment on the other side. Notice how it is to have your body approached when you are in a state a deep mindfulness vs when you are in ordinary consciousness.

What you may notice through this exercise is how much "louder" it is to be approached when you are in a mindful state vs when you are in an ordinary state. It is essential to keep this in mind if you plan to introduce mindfulness into your movement practice. Mindfulness and tracking are a good pair to always stick together; if you are going to teach and induce mindfulness, be sure to track students' bodies and accommodate your proximity to them based on their nervous system responses. If a student is in mindful alertness and your proximity to them brings about a tension response, acknowledge and react as soon as you notice by backing up or by gently naming their response or asking if they would like more space.

Myofascial Unwinding: What It Is and Why You Should Do It

What is Myofascial Unwinding?

Myofascial unwinding is a term coined by John Barnes to describe a type of physical movement that comes from a higher intelligence which he often describes as a "feeling" (rather than a "thinking") intelligence. I remember the first time I attended John's unwinding seminar: I had a sort of epiphany where I realized that movement can feel good. I suddenly understood that moving my body didn't have to hurt to be healthy, and that I can enjoy smaller and subtler ranges of movement that spark pleasure, rather than pain.

(If you have never heard John Barnes speak, I would highly recommend you check out this short interview: http://bit.ly/JFBMFR_Yoga. You can skip ahead to 5:45 to hear him talk about unwinding specifically.)

Picture a cat waking up from a nap. If you watch very closely you will see that the cat is not merely stretching out, but going through a series of movements called pandiculation: a process of contraction, lengthening, and releasing. This is unwinding. Feel free to try it yourself right now. Invoke a yawn, then notice what movements instinctively go with that yawn. Do you notice a contraction with a lengthening, and then a relaxation at the end?

Unwinding can take many forms such as yoga moves, dancing, or – as illustrated above – a hearty stretch. The common factor is that the movements are intuitive and driven by this feeling intelligence. A good example of this natural type of unwinding is when you first wake up in the morning. Without putting much thought into it, your body goes through a series of movements: stretches, contractions, and releases. I invite you to bring some mindfulness to your morning stretch tomorrow. Make it a point to stay in bed a few minutes longer than normal, and simply unwind.

I want to say – before going any further – that I believe all movement is good movement. Pain, dysfunction, and injury do not indicate a "bad" movement; they are simply the result of not enough movement in certain areas, while the movement we are engaged in is repetitive and centralized.

Yoga Philosophy

In the yogic system of philosophy and lifestyle, there are 8 limbs. Here in the West, the 4th limb of yoga (called Asana) often gets the most attention and is usually what we picture when we hear the word "yoga." There can be many reasons why we do the yoga Asana as a practice – some people do this for more flexibility or strength, while others use the poses as a method of meditation and a means to achieve mental stability and peace.

Unwinding is movement which arises out of that state of mental calm. You could also think of unwinding as "the step that comes next." As Asana is used to still the mind and bring about inner peace, then – from within the state of stillness – let a new series of movements flow from beyond the thinking mind.

Akasha: In the yoga tradition there is something called Akasha, which translates from Sanskrit as "sky" or "ether." In the context of yoga it refers to a field of energy prior to form – the source from which life flows, and to which it returns. The Akasha contains a nonlinear, formless, and natural intelligence which some call the "organizing principle" or the primordial OM. This self-organizing principle can be seen throughout nature as fractal patterns; from broccoli to seashells to the human lung, there is order within the chaos of creation. These patterns can also be seen within the fascia of the human body, click here (strolling under the skin) to see how this looks. The fascial system is a nonlinear system, and the connections between fibres are multidimensional and fractaled. If we want to move in such a way to target this amazing living system, it makes sense that our movements need to come from a higher consciousness that is itself nonlinear.

Koshas: Yoga philosophy also discusses five different levels of consciousness and intelligence. These are called Koshas and are often described as layers or (when roughly translated) sheaths. The denser layers make up the physical body and the lower aspects of the thinking (analyzing) mind. The lighter layers are made up by the energy body, and the higher aspects of the mind like creativity, intuition, and wisdom. Together, these layers support each other and comprise the fullness of a human being.

We can instigate movement from any of the Koshas: from the linear mind (think of a highly technical choreographed dance or gymnastics sequence), or from the breath (think of the cat and cow sequence), and even from the highest level of the Self or soul. In yoga philosophy this level is called the Anandamaya Kosha, loosely translated as "bliss body," and is driven by a higher type of intelligence that is hard to put into words but could be likened to the aforementioned self-organizing principle.

Some individuals may experience anxiety or even fear around this kind of intuitive movement. If you are worried that relinquishing deliberate control will cause you to overreach your boundaries and potentially cause you injury, start off slow and know that you can trust your body.

The same intelligence that expands your lungs and digests your food will also know how far you can stretch without harm.

Tantra: In the Tantric tradition there is a dance called the Tandava – or the Dance of Shiva – where the movements come from an intuitive (felt) sense. Initiates are instructed to begin the process of the dance by sitting and watching incense burn. The intention is to observe how the air currents in the room carry the smoke in unpredictable patterns of movement. After observing the smoke for a while, the initiate is then asked to tune into the energy currents that are active within their body. The next step is to allow their physical body to "become" the smoke as the energy currents carry and move the body through creative and intuitive patterns of movement. This quote on the Tandava by Diarmuid O'Murchu explains it quite poetically:

"The dance of Shiva symbolizes the dancing universe itself, expressed in the ceaseless flow of energy going through an infinite variety of patterns that melt into one another".

Organicity: In the Hakomi tradition there is a principle called organicity which is the natural intelligence within the body, or that same self-organizing principle described in Akasha. A great analogy to describe organicity is that of a plant in a greenhouse.

The greenhouse represents a nourishing environment where our bodies can thrive. It is constructed by eating healthy food, making time for self-care, surrounding ourselves with loving relationships, and keeping active by going to the gym, taking a yoga class, or going for a walk in nature.

The plant represents our body's ability to grow, adapt, and change when we are in a supportive environment. In other words, I don't know how to create cells, or clot blood, or grow hair. I don't need to. The intelligence that created my body does that all by itself, and that is the body's organicity or organizing principle. I can, however, support my body in its thriving and co-create with her a state of good health.

Why Unwind?

Let's face it. We live in a pretty sedentary culture. Most movement therapists would agree that one of the biggest issue the human body faces these days is not enough varied movements. When we sit all day in one position, then drive home in that position, then sit in front of the tv in the same position again, our fascia becomes conditioned and will shorten and adapt to that position. Then when we do move, it's quite often the same movements repeated again and again which leads to imbalances throughout the body. Some areas become tight while other areas become weak, compromising the biotensegrity of our whole bodily structure.

Because unwinding is a creative and intuitive process, it brings balance to the areas in our body that are underused. When we go through a sequence of unusual movement we tap into places that may be tight, weak, dehydrated, and/or craving stimulation. Imagine that your soft tissues are like a sponge that haven't been squeezed for a long time, and they are dry and brittle. Then imagine how it would be to start to move in such a way as to slowly and carefully squish all the dry sponges and allow the moisture and nutrition to return to them.

Habit: Human beings are creatures of habit, and the human body is a habit-making machine. Biomechanically, our bodies will learn a new movement and then store it to the subconscious as quickly as possible for the sake of efficiency. Because of this, even when our movement diet is varied, we end up defaulting to a handful of movement norms which may be taxing certain joints or connective tissues. Think of folding a piece of paper over and over in one place – eventually this spot becomes the paper's area of weakness. In our body this "weak fold" generally manifests as either tendonitis or bursitis, leading to injuries such as "tennis elbow."

Unwinding, however, is a nonlinear and intuitive type of movement which means it is less likely to create a repetitive movement habit. Therefore, each time we unwind, the sequence is unique and the body gets to experience new combinations of loads, forces, and input every time we practice. It is a movement that benefits soft tissues, muscles, connective tissue, and even the brain as it builds new neural pathways.

Biotensegrity: Tensegrity is a term coined by Buckminster Fuller, referring to the quality of architectural structures that allows them to distribute weight loads in multiple directions. Because "bio" in our case indicates a living body, the term biotensegrity thus introduces the concept that human bodies are designed to distribute loads and forces evenly in all directions. According to this principle, an injury caused by overloading the body forces us to "give" at an area of weakness, just as that repeatedly folded paper will tear at its fold.

Biotensegrity is also about balance. When we can allow underused parts to regain motor control, and overused areas to become more stable and strong, we bring the tensegrity back into balance and create an overall strength and flexibility to your body as a whole.

How to Unwind

There are many ways to practice unwinding. The key, however you choose to practice, is for you to connect with your intuition and your feeling intelligence, and allow that to be the driver of your movements. If you are a yoga teacher, I recommend that you add in some unwinding to your personal routine and then, once you have a firm grasp of the practice, introduce it to your students, too. A mere two minutes at the start of each session can be a great way to increase movement variety within your classes, and will give your students more ways to bring unusual and unpredictable movement into their own practice.

I think of myofascial unwinding as movements on a spectrum. One end of this spectrum includes broader movements such as the pandiculation of your early morning intuitive stretch. The other end includes subtler movements that come from a place of stillness and meditation. These movements are tiny micro-adjustments that you will feel to be corrective and mindful, but which are barely noticeable to the observing eye. Any movement along this spectrum falls under the unwinding umbrella: from large graceful movements that resemble a body floating underwater, to big cat-like stretches, to tiny micro-movements, and sometimes even the uttering of certain sounds or words.

Invoke a yawn: It's best if you start this while lying down, but you can do it sitting or standing if that's not an option for you. Invoke a yawn and notice the movements that instinctively accompany it. Do this a few times to get more movements going, then turn your focus to the movements themselves and stay with them five to ten minutes longer. Get creative and let your body move or stretch in whatever way feels good. After you have finished with your unwinding, allow yourself to come into a few minutes of stillness or meditation, noticing how it feels to simply be centered and aware of your bodily sensations.

Tandava: The Tandava, as mentioned before, is an intuitive movement process led by the spiritual body that mimics the movement of smoke as it rises from burning incense. To perform the Tandava, start seated and let yourself come into a meditative and calm state of being. If you so choose, you can watch an actual stick of incense burn as inspiration. Imagine that this incense is sitting at the base of your spine, and pretend that the smoke is a force that can push your spine in any and all directions. Let the random sway of the smoke (which symbolizes our kundalini energy) be what moves you, and allow your body to sway and move organically. Stay with this for five minutes or more, and then settle back into stillness and notice the results. Usually this takes the form of balance and calm within your body, but every person and every experience is unique.

Silence: Advanced meditators know that in silence and stillness lies our greatest power. I often find that unwinding is itself a form of moving meditation, where I begin with entering stillness and silence and then allow the movements to arise out of that still and silent beingness. The deeper my state of meditation, the lighter the movements feel, as if I am floating through space, weightless and fluid.

The still point: Take a moment to focus on the stillness between breaths. In the yoga tradition, the micro-pause between the inhale and the exhale is known as the still point. One particular meditation practice focuses on taking time with the breath, finding that still point and learning to abide there, and this is one of my favorite ways to teach and practice unwinding. Once I am established there, I allow the stillness to be the starting point of the subtle movements, seeing if I can stay centered in the silence within as my body is moved by a higher intelligence. These movements, as subtle as they may be, are extremely impactful when it comes to deepening body awareness, and understanding and trusting the body's natural ability to self-correct.

Partner practice: Stand with a partner, facing each other. Place your hands palm to palm with them, fingers facing up, and hold this intention: "I will not lead; I will follow." Should movement occur, with both people adhering to this principle, then both know that the momentum occurring is being sparked from a higher intelligence, or the organicity of the connection between both bodies and energy fields.

Movement can feel good.
I recently had a student come up to me after class and say, "Today I realized something huge. I realized that moving my body can feel good. I always thought that movement needed to hurt to be a good thing." I was immediately thrown back to that moment in John Barnes' seminar when I realized the same thing.

Unwinding is powerful. When so many of us are struggling with chronic pain – from an aching back to debilitating dysfunctions – it shows us that having a body can be a pleasurable experience rather than merely a painful one, and that movement can be an expression of that pleasure.

I sincerely hope that the information contained in this article will spark some creativity within your movement or yoga practice. And, if you are a teacher, I also hope that your students will have their own epiphanies and life-changing realizations.

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