

# Health Insights Today

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## Back to Basics

By Ashley Cleveland, MA, DC

Recently, I found myself in a Basics yoga class. I was there for a couple of reasons. First, as a part of a yoga teacher certification program, I was required to take several different types of classes. Secondly, though, I had been experiencing a lot of neck and back pain. Initially, my mind rebelled at the thought of doing the “lesser” Basics class – after all, I’ve been practicing for nine years, what could I possibly learn in Basics? Fortunately, my ego didn’t prevail and a wiser internal dialogue ensued ... resulting in my request to be in the Basics class so as not to aggravate my body’s already compromised condition.

## Listening to the Body’s Messages

For many of us, the body’s needs and drives are treated as secondary, always subject to our socialization and enculturation, to what our mind tells us is important. This can be as simple as ignoring the body’s need for food at regular intervals in order to maintain a productive schedule or as detrimental as ignoring bodily signs and symptoms because there isn’t time to go to the doctor.

We live with an odd juxtaposition of values. On the one hand, emphasizing fitness, as measured by tightly-toned bodies that are capable of feats of endurance – observe the droves of office workers who participate in group training to run a marathon in support of a favorite charity – while on the other, rewarding with promotions and high salaries those who are most available to work all the time. Those who are working all the time are often the least able to truly take care of themselves by eating, resting and playing in the ways that sustain the body.

So, it is no surprise that neither I nor anyone else who considers herself fit would *want* to be in a Basics yoga class. After all, I need to make my time on the mat count, right? I need to do some difficult and complex *asanas* to demonstrate my abilities, my worth. Susie Orbach writes in her thought-provoking book, *Bodies*, that “we are encouraged to see the body as a place of personal accountability and truth.”<sup>1,p. 31</sup> Thus, when a body isn’t functioning the way we want it to, or isn’t capable of performing the feats we value, we may decide that we have failed. In deciding that we have failed because we cannot achieve what we want with our bodies, we then set up an unhealthy relationship between mind and body – the mind may be chattering away about how stupid it is that today it isn’t possible to do *X* (insert your favorite athletic endeavor here). This is separation and judgment, as if our bodies are separate from who we really are.

## Mind-Body-Breath, Without Harsh Self-Judgment

Yoga means union, and its practices bring greater harmony between the body and mind. Practicing yoga, whether injured or not, offers an opportunity to step out of the performance-based fitness culture and into a mind-body-breath practice that can reorient and restore our broken relationship with the physical. To have an experience beyond the physical with yoga, try any one or all of the following the next time you practice.

Take time at the beginning of your practice to set an intention for your time on the mat. Try naming an intention that is not about performance (“I **will** do headstand today”), aesthetics (“I will do core work today to tone my abs”), or self. Perhaps your intention is as simple as, “Today I will not judge a single thing I do during this yoga practice.” For some of us, this will be revolutionary if we even partially achieve it.

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Emphasize your breath. Focus your attention on breathing in and out through the nostrils throughout your practice. Try to synchronize the breath so that it initiates, sustains, and envelops every movement. If this makes it necessary to slow down your practice, do so.

Try closing your eyes. Closing the eyes takes our attention from the outer world of constant input and distraction to the inner world. It creates the opportunity for us to touch with the mind and breath places in our body that we forget even exist. Closing our eyes also reduces our temptation to look around the room and judge the appearances or skills of others, which means we cannot spend our time comparing ourselves to others – and either strengthening the ego or berating ourselves, thus reinforcing a pattern of harsh evaluation of the body rather than delight in its gifts and capabilities in the present moment.

So, what happened to me when I practiced in the Basics class? I had an amazing experience! I was able to move beyond concentration on the physical elements of my practice, the outermost body layer (*annamaya kosha*), because I'd done these basic *asanas* so many times before. Turning my attention inward, synchronizing breath and movement as fully as possible, dedicating my practice to supporting my body rather than corralling it, was transformative. I recall Orbach's claim: "The fact that we can transform the body makes it a site of dissatisfaction which can be overcome."<sup>1</sup>, p. 30

I believe yoga offers an antidote to both dissatisfaction with the body and the desire to overcome its impermanent nature. Injured or not, try going back to Basics. It might surprise and delight you.

## WORK CITED:

1. Orbach S. *Bodies*. New York: Picador, 2009.

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