

Running and Yoga: Taking a New Look at Fitness

By

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How then should we define physical fitness? To help answer that question, let me tell you my story. During one period in my life I was a respectable runner, competing for my university's track and cross-country teams, running marathons in decent times and finishing near the front in the annual race up the Grouse Grind. My body fat was really low, my VO2 max very high. I was pretty good in the gym as well, knocking off 15 pull-ups, 50 pushups or 200 sit-ups without a second thought. I wasn't just fit, I was super-fit, or so I believed. Then one fateful day, ablaze with superiority, I found myself in a yoga class. I can't remember exactly why I was there, but I'm sure it had to do with the fact that I was married at the time to the teacher. Otherwise I'm quite sure I would never have gone, convinced as I was that at the end of my days science would ask me to donate my body for deeper study, such a specimen was I. What little I knew about yoga consisted of photographs in a book from the 1960s that my mother owned. The black and white photos showed a woman in dark leotards contorting herself into impossible shapes, one leg was up here, the other down there, and God knows where her arms were. I didn't get it even remotely. Could this person run 10 miles fast? Then what was the point?

Perhaps due to the brain's ability to block traumatic events from conscious memory, my exact thoughts at the conclusion of the class are lost to history (or more likely stored - forever I hope - in a deep and dark corner of my mind). Nevertheless, something quite profound must have occurred, because I began to practice with the same dedication and effort that I had brought to my running. What started as a simple gesture of spousal support began a journey that forced me to examine what physical fitness is and why current definitions are somewhat lacking. Because it was there in that class, somewhere between the sun salutations at the start and the deep relaxation at the end, that I learned I wasn't the fitness machine I thought I was. Stated simply: yoga kicked my ass. And it gradually dawned on me that there was a lot more to being fit than sculpted abs and fast 10Ks. This comeuppance forced me to confront a painful reality: if I was so damned fit why couldn't I make some very simple shapes with my body without shaking and sweating as if possessed? Just what the hell was happening here? The simple answer is that my body was frozen from years of athletics. And my mind, well, that was a mess too - clouded, scattered, unfocused - and as dense and unyielding as my body. Yoga forced me to re-define my idea of both physical *and* mental fitness, and how the two are complementary necessities as a true measure of not just physical fitness, but health. It

was the rude awakening in that yoga class that showed me I was, at best, only partially fit.

In her book *Power Yoga: The Total Strength and Flexibility Workout*, Beryl Bender Birch writes that sports don't get us in shape, sports get us *out* of shape. Too true! As runners, we have to face the fact that as much as we like to run, it *is* traumatic to the body. This is because running, like most sports, is a one-dimensional action that stresses the same muscles groups, tendons, ligaments, and bones in almost exactly the same way hundreds, if not thousands of times each time we run. And you can see the results of our sports lifestyle everywhere: athletes and ex-athletes who wear their athletic careers like suits of medieval armor. By the time most runners come to yoga the years of pounding are beginning to show. When you combine the wear and tear of everyday living with participation in sports the list of bodily ailments begins to creep up on us little by little. Intermittent pains here and there become nagging pains that become serious pains that become chronic pain that we become so used to we don't even think of it as pain anymore. It just fades into the background music of our life, only hitting our full awareness when the barometer starts to fall. The smart ones understand, they do yoga (or something similar) and begin the process of preserving or restoring their bodies. One of the highest profile athletes to compete at last summer's Olympics was American swimmer Dara Torres. To prepare her 40-year-old body to compete against other swimmers - some half her age - Torres worked with a small army of coaches, including *two* stretching experts. She eventually won a silver medal. The reason yoga is such an effective tool is because it is a multi-dimensional mind and body discipline that takes the physical body through every possible plane and range of motion, while at the same time asking the mind to be absolutely composed.

Certainly, an important reason for runners to practice yoga are the benefits that arise from training the body *and* mind, and of actively nurturing and developing mind and body interaction. Using this approach, the mind and body are seen as a single interactive unit, much like the Yin and Yang symbol that expresses a set of complimentary opposites, with the seed of one found in the body of it's complementary opposite, rather than as separate components of the individual. So if we believe there exists a powerful interaction between the mind and body, and modern science has certainly proven this to be the case, then the welfare of one is inextricably linked to the welfare of the other. And we then have to believe that chronic and unrelenting tension and imbalance in the body's musculature will not only lead to an impaired ability to perform optimally on an athletic level, but will also lead to a mind that is, at a minimum, unrelentingly tight and unbalanced. Yoga tells us that body is a creation of mind, so it follows that because the practice of yoga creates an open and spacious body, this will in turn develop spaciousness in the mind, and the practitioner will become literally become more open-minded. And as with any of the eastern practices such as Tai chi, Qi Gong or the martial arts, yoga is as much about training the mind as it is about training the body. Yoga was first practiced by sages to strengthen their bodies as a means to withstand the rigors of countless hours of

meditation, and over the millennia it has continued to evolve, arriving finally at the modern incarnation we see practiced today in studios and health clubs.

Yoga teacher Richard Freeman says that yoga begins with listening, and when we listen we give space to our own bodies and minds. The problem, of course, is that we *don't* listen, at least not to our bodies. Go into any fitness facility and watch people go through their routines, eyes glued to a TV or magazine, iPod blasting the tunes, completely distracted and out of touch. How could what your body has to say ever compete with Oprah or Madonna? With all that is known about fitness and health, the idea that the mind should be distracted, even entertained, while the body works-out - and that this separation seems to be encouraged - is quite astounding. After all, what is the point of going to the gym and working out, to watch TV and read magazines? What would happen if people arrived for a workout and there was no TV, no magazines, and no music? I am absolutely convinced – and this is without a shred of evidence to support my theory – that the blaring music, TV, iPods and magazines are doing nothing more than adding to our stress levels. We go to the gym to work out and achieve good health so we can cope with stress, instead we are met with more stress. The gym should be a temple to the cultivation of fitness and health, a place where both muscles *and* mindfulness are strengthened, but it has become just another extension of our vastly over-stimulated and stressful lives. The author and meditation teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn summed it up perfectly, “It is amazing to me that we can be simultaneously completely preoccupied with the appearance of our own body, and at the same time completely out of touch with it as well.

If the health of any relationship depends on the quality of the communication, then the quality of that communication depends on our capacity to listen. Why is it such a radical idea for most people to simply sit still, watch the breath, quiet the mind, and listen to our body's story? If we stop and listen to what our bodies have to tell us, even for five minutes, and truly develop an open and unquestioning awareness to what our body has to say, our approach to running, and by extension health and fitness, would be grounded in an attitude of balance and symmetry. Here's an idea: instead of thinking of your body as, say, a conglomeration of parts each performing a separate function, think of your body as an ecosystem, and that it is as densely packed, as intricately layered, and as interdependent as any rainforest, swamp or desert. When you take that approach to the entity that is you, you can perhaps begin understand why yoga can be so beneficial to the body and how it attempts to radically rebalance both mind *and* body, while promoting the efficient communication and connection between them.

One of the many benefits of a regular yoga practice is that the mind can be taught to endure discomfort as a means to achieve what is known as equanimity, a state of calmness and non-reactivity while under duress. During practice, a conscious breath is cultivated as a means to warm the body, stimulate the nervous system, and provide an anchor for the wandering mind. Breathing that is short, choppy or ragged reflects an uncomfortable or wandering mind; breathing that is smooth, deep and focused tells us the

mind is present, centered, and calm. So the breath becomes both a means to self-control and a measure of it. Breath cultivation in yoga is like a safety gauge, designed to measure the practitioner's level of physical effort and the quality and overall presence of the mind. And by "quality of mind" I'm referring to a mind that is focused, clear and aware. The applications for this type of mind/body awareness training in athletics are obvious. Who wouldn't want to be more relaxed and focused while competing in a marathon? What athlete wouldn't want to achieve a deep, almost meditative, level of calm and focus before and during a competition?

This is not to say that an inevitable outcome of performing a particular yoga posture is discomfort. That is certainly *not* the case. But certain styles of yoga are undoubtedly more challenging than others, and these "athletic" styles do tend to attract people who love to push the limits of whatever physical endeavor they undertake. These yoga styles, which can be grouped very loosely under the heading of Power yoga (but which also includes the subtly intense *Yin* style of yoga), are quite dynamic and muscular, and can place the practitioner at certain points of the practice into postures with a high level of discomfort. If the instructor is competent, they will have thoroughly prepared the students both mentally and physically during the initial stages of the class, and the students will then carry this preparation into the execution of the postures. The instructor will impress upon the students the importance of mindfulness and will actively work to instill this quality in the students. And returning to Richard Freeman's earlier comment, an attitude of listening to the ever-flowing river of sensations in the body is strongly encouraged. Without that attentive listening and mindfulness, the element that makes it a safe and true practice of yoga is lost.

Yoga is the antithesis of running, that's why it's so necessary - and so challenging - for people, because it represents everything that running isn't. Running tears down and depletes the body, yoga rejuvenates and restores it; running activates and stimulates the sympathetic nervous system, yoga stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system; running tightens, compresses and shortens the muscles and other soft tissue of the body, yoga opens and releases the body's musculature, creating space, suppleness and resiliency; the running breath is fast and shallow, the breathing in yoga is slow, focused and deep; the mindset in running tends to be unfocused and shallow, the mindset in yoga is quiet, calm and meditative; finally, running weakens, yoga strengthens. If we've had a hectic, stressful day, we can find it challenging at the beginning of our yoga practice to break free from the "flight or fight", sympathetic nervous system mindset that our bodies and minds operate in much of the time. Paradoxically, this usually happens at the end of a run as well, when people mistake the seeming sense of calm they feel with relaxation, when what they are actually feeling is a deep sense of fatigue. Through the effort expended running, people burn themselves into a state of exhaustion, so they return home after a run and collapse onto the couch. Their minds may seem focused, but all that's happened is the run has burned off the body's nervous energy, and people mistake this for being calm. This is certainly not relaxation, and the effect on the body and mind from

running is very different from being very relaxed. The extreme physical exertion has stimulated the sympathetic nervous system, but by practicing yoga, sympathetic arousal is reduced or eliminated and the parasympathetic system is stimulated, leading to what is known as the relaxation response. This is the true feeling of calm and relaxation that we are looking for.

Finally, a few tips should you want to try yoga. First, don't expect quick results. Like any physical exercise, progress in yoga is gradual and incremental, with peaks, valleys and plateaus along the way. But that being said even small improvements in flexibility can lead to huge changes in how the body feels and performs. Remember, the body has its own agenda quite separate from the needs of the ego, it doesn't respond well to force or aggression. Second, find a good teacher. As with any profession there are good ones and there are hacks, so ask around. And what about the bewildering assortment of styles and names? I could fill ten pages by describing each style in detail, but the way to tell what's right for you is by actually *taking* a class. I recommend you practice once per week at a minimum, two or three times is optimal. Don't forget, yoga is a supplemental activity that will fit around your training, so it will depend on how much time and energy you have after your regular workouts.

Which returns us to the starting point, and I will repeat my initial question: how then should we define physical fitness? How about this: *mens sana in corpore sano* – a sound mind in a sound body. It makes perfect sense, don't you think?