

NCHTANTED

BEN ROTH

MBODIMENT

"I don't believe people are looking for the
meaning of life, as much as they are looking
for the experience of being alive"
— Joseph Campbell



Being Present is often described as being *Here and Now*. But where is this place? How do we get there? And where do we arrive when following this lead? To me, this journey starts with the most tangible—inside my body. This is the most obvious place from which to begin any investigation into being present as a human in this world. Despite the many theories about the nature of reality, what I experience as most real, is being a creature with a body. Being *Here* means arriving in this animal body, acknowledging my corporeality fully, feeling it as deeply as I can. Being *Now* means participating in this continuous process of life as it unfolds within, and all around; witnessing it in all aspects and subtleties as it takes form in the endless moment of *Right Now*.



To me, this is the baseline reality that I can relate to at all times when the frantic mind takes over. It is the antidote to a disembodied consciousness that passes as normal in the world at large today. Our world is composed of narratives. It is all too easy to get lost in this groundless territory of identity, language, social roles, ideology, religion, philosophy, economics, and politics. These are all purely mental constructs, existing only in the mind. When we realize this to be true, our identification with this mental construct crumbles and makes room for the felt presence of direct experience.

We step into a new realm of spaciousness and unfolding potentiality—the actuality of life as a continuous process, as felt by our somatic perception. Then we experience sensory impressions: The visual and auditory field, the feeling of our feet touching the ground, sensations of pressure, weight and tension, the air going in and out of our respiratory system, the beating of the heart and the pulsing of blood. That's it. That's more or less the totality of life minus narrative. And this space of living presence is a place from which we can truly create.

So for me, Being Present is not about transcending the body to reach an ideal state of truth, detached from this earthbound life. Instead, it's about becoming fully alive in our bodies and realizing the Enchanted Embodiment that is our birthright.

This state is synonymous with health and well-being. It is the human potential we ought to develop — our capacity to feel and to perceive. As much as possible. I see this as the uniquely human role in this big play. Not to understand, but to stand in awe before creation like a child. This is as true as it gets. This is *Presence*.

1% theory

99% practice

This curiosity about our human potential has always spurred my inquiries; what stops me from living life to the fullest? How alive can I feel when all false identifications are dropped? How lightly can I walk this earth when there is no armour weighing me down, no mask obstructing my vision? How does it feel when I am aligned with my natural state and life can flow freely? What are the obstacles I face on the way? And what are the techniques of realizing this purest state of wellbeing as a human?

The Body—Mind Continuum

Body and mind are inseparable. Any method that aims to correct dysfunctional patterns should be based on this understanding. Two further main characteristics that constitute the human condition are plasticity, and the tendency towards repetition. Everything begins with acknowledging that we are drastically malleable and constantly changing. We can adapt to any given circumstances beyond measure, and we do it continuously. This is just as true in the province of the mind as it is on a cellular level, on which the only absolute term is the constant flux of adaptation, death and rebirth.

The body-mind continuum continuously works to maintain a level of equilibrium that ensures life. This process of homeostasis is essential for survival but it has one weak spot: The dissonance between clinging to the status quo (inertia), and the ever-changing reality of all life (flux). We blindly repeat the past, applying a modus operandi that once seemed appropriate, and assuming that it remains effective. But we are actually stuck in the proverbial rut: a holding pattern that assumes an outdated image that isn't real anymore, and so doesn't work within the actuality of the new situation.

This is the opposite state of *Being Present*. Rigidly existing in the past is what I understand as the great human downfall.

Our body-mind continuum is the accumulation of the endless adaptations we undergo in our lives. Every cell in the body holds the imprint of everything

we experience. I believe this to be true on all levels: The traumas of our lives are not only manifested in our posture but are actively memorized by every single cell.

This infinitely complex system of acquired behavior builds a unique pattern of how we react in life. Many of these reactive patterns that govern our movements are outdated and dysfunctional as they don't allow us to dwell in the present moment. This process of dissolving restricting and disenchanting patterns, and replacing them with healthier ones, is the core idea behind my approach to Yoga.

When asked why I practice Ashtanga Yoga, I sometimes say that the reason is fitness. Of course, not referring to any shiny words from the so-called spiritual realm is intended to provoke a moment of disturbance. But it is true that I simply understand the word 'fitness' in a much broader sense. I want to be fit to make the most of this human life given to me. I want to experience the world in as uninhibited a way as I can, and act freely in it. In Ashtanga Yoga I have found a method which allows me to cultivate this embodiment that makes one come fully alive. Or at the very least, it's the best system I have come across in terms of its holistic approach and the depths into which one can grow with time. It is definitely a very comprehensive and sustainable maintenance of the body and a guide for consistent self-inquiry. The rest is unwritten and can only be uncovered by individual experience.

Mysore Style Ashtanga Yoga

The Sanskrit word 'Ashtanga' or 'eight limbs' is representative of the eightfold path of yoga outlined in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. This source text synthesizes the philosophy and practice of yoga and stands as the centerpiece, passing on this ancient knowledge through time.

However, nowadays most students referring to Ashtanga Yoga practise only two of the original eight limbs described by Patanjali. These are the third and fourth limbs, Asana and Pranayama, posture and breathing exer-

cises. This modern interpretation of Ashtanga Yoga was created by Krishna Pattabhi Jois during the 20th century. He was a student of Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, who can be referred to as 'the father of modern yoga', since most of the popular systems practised in the West are descendants of his lineage. The Mysore style is the most distinctive feature of Ashtanga Yoga: Each student in the class



practises independently at his or her own pace and skill level, following a memorized set sequence of asanas called series. There are six of them, each taught posture by posture as the teacher doesn't move on to the next pose until the student has understood the former one. So in the beginning, your practice might take less than an hour, but after some years of consistent practice, it can stretch to two hours or more. This means that the level of experience amongst the students in the room might vary greatly, but all are treated as equal. A beginner practises alongside a very advanced student who might have practised for decades. People of all ages and all physical constitutions come together each morning, six times a week, to cultivate a deeper relationship with themselves. This dedication alone creates a powerful energy in the Mysore room, an almost palpable focus accompanied only by the sound of deep breathing.

The role of the teacher is to watch over all students and offer guidance when needed. But most importantly, he holds the energetic container in which the students are allowed to meet their edge. Obviously, a beginner needs more cues and hands-on adjustments. But it's still very much an independent practice despite the teacher's presence. It's a moving meditation in which you encounter yourself while keeping external influences to the required minimum. The teaching is embedded within the practice itself, and so only requires little explanation in order to take effect. 99% practice and 1% theory, as they say.

Aside from these external characteristics of the Ashtanga framework, there are certain main components that are performed internally during the asanas. These play a vital role in accessing the full potential of this method: The most important one is Vinyasa—the fusion of breath with movement. For each movement, there is one breath. When this link is firmly established, the mind is under control and a deeper transformation can occur. By moving and breathing together, we heat up the body and allow an internal cleansing to occur. Toxins and impurities are freed from organs and tissues, and are then eliminated out of the body through sweating. In bringing together fire and air—the heat of vinyasa and the air of the breath—the body becomes an alchemical vessel of purification. This cleansing effect is the main goal of the Primary Series, besides establishing a balance between growing strength and newfound flexibility.

The nature of the breath is slow, deep, and steady; and always through the nose. This is called Ujjayi breathing. It creates a rushing sound that provides a strong audible point of

focus for the practitioner, staying with them and indicating when they push too far. Each asana is held for five to ten breaths and connects to the next one in a fluid motion. The gaze follows specific focal points (Drishti) throughout the whole practice and is never just wandering around the room. Another key principle of Ashtanga Yoga are *Bandhas*, subtle internal engagements that are applied to direct and channel the flow of energy. Although they are a very real and tangible thing, it's hard to explain them sufficiently without any first-hand experience of them. It's the balancing of the push-and-pull in the tensegrity (tensional integrity) system that is our body.

Pranayama

After reaching a certain level of steadiness in our Asana practice, and refining our capacity to sense the inner stirrings of the body, we are ready to focus on a more subtle layer of energy: Pranayama, the fourth limb of the eightfold path of yoga, which refers to breath control. Prana is the vital life force and energy that runs through the body. This energy is continuously flowing through us, and through all living beings. Pranayama is the act of controlling and directing this energy by controlling the flow of breath. It is the umbilical cord that connects the body at large to its most subtle realms. And so, conscious breathing is the doorway into a new depth of felt bodily integrity that was unknown to us before.

It offers a very accessible tool to directly determine the quality of our life, as proper breathing is the foundation of healthy living. A life spent in a constant state of stress and agitation takes its toll as the body is not designed to stay in this 'fight or flight' mode for long periods of time, let alone a lifetime. Shallow and nervous breathing resulting from this disembodied lifestyle is a root cause for disease. Pranayama involves many different breathing techniques that aim at slightly different results. But the general aim is to calm and heal the body by making the breath slower and deeper, sending a signal to the nervous system that we are safe and everything is ok. This relaxation is inextricably bound to the parasympathetic part of our nervous system, telling the body to rest and digest, and ultimately heal. This newfound place of peace and calm opens a spaciousness from which deep concentration can arise. If this mode of operation becomes our prevailing state of being, we thrive in vibrant health and longevity. Some yogic texts state that a life is determined by the number of breaths, and not by the number of years lived.

The deeper you breathe, the longer you can live.

As breath starts flowing deeper and deeper through our body, it becomes a direct agent of healing, massaging and helping to melt any areas of tension it touches and moves through. And as the ebb and flow of breathing slowly melt away old restrictions and rigid patterns, we become softer and more flexible, allowing for a new capacity to bloom. We become permeable, allowing the body's intelligence to take over and show us new ways we couldn't conceive of before. Over time, the trust in this innate intelligence grows stronger: We realize that structural change beyond our comprehension is happening in the body and in the mind. But in order to initiate this process, we have to show up for it, which means consistently and diligently providing the body with positive stimuli to stir up the old patterns. This will not happen without pain. The disruption of lifelong habits will inevitably cause discomfort and confusion as we move into the unknown. But the reason we set out on this journey was not merely to feel better, but to feel better. And to develop the quality of equanimity in the face of challenging situations. The demands we impose onto ourselves through the postures simply mirror the activities that make up our daily life. The mat is a training ground on which to explore your edge. Just pay attention and keep breathing. And then act from a deep intimacy with life and not from fear.

Enchanted Embodiment

The system of Ashtanga Yoga provides a multi-faceted tool for cultivating this presence, this ability to deal with the actuality of our human existence—as it happens; right now—instead of spending life in a confused state between the habitual reaction and avoidance created in the dull and senseless comfort zone that is modern life.

Alienated from the living world, including our own bodies, we drift further and further into virtuality—a state deprived of the nurturing immediacy of feeling truly alive in this animal body. I call this felt presence of direct participation in life Enchanted Embodiment. And when this all-encompassing enchantment and belonging inform our actions on this planet, the practice becomes a deep ecological one, as our sense of Embodiment ultimately grows to include the whole of the earth.

Ben runs a 'fascinating blog called 'Door of Perception' that I'm following since many years. We were in contact already because of common interests, so I asked him one day to contribute an essay on BREATHING from his perspective. I love the text and the self-portraits he drew as exercises-free and the text and the self-portraits he drew as exercises-free and the text and the self-portraits he drew as exercises-free

