Yoga & Dharma For Body & Mind

Cyndi Lee, Sarah Powers and Phillip Moffitt on why yoga and Buddhist meditation are the perfect combination.

Desirée Rumbaugh
Yoga poses for meditators.

Tom Robbins
In praise of spiritual rebels.

Jack Kornfield
A new psychology of original goodness.
AFTER TWELVE YEARS suffering chronic pain, Jill Satterfield was told that all the symptoms were in her head. “My first smart-aleck response was, well, if the pain is in my mind, then how do we work with my mind? But the doctors didn’t respond to that question.”

Seeking her own cure, Satterfield, who is now on the faculty of Spirit Rock’s first Yoga and Buddhism teacher-training program and Kripalu Institute’s integrative leadership program, turned to yoga and meditation. “I kind of shopped around until I found out about Buddhism,” she says. “As an artist and a self-motivator, I don’t readily accept whatever anybody asks me to do, and that’s why the minute I heard that the Buddha taught his students not to believe what he said unless they’d experienced it, I thought, that’s my guy. The Buddha’s teachings are about knowing our own minds.

“When I first started using Buddhist view in my yoga practice,” she continues, “I meditated for long periods of time in simple postures. Then I added more advanced poses, which I did with the same intention of working internally in the subtle body, as opposed to the physical body.”

It took seven years, claims Satterfield, but eventually she healed herself by retraining her nervous system. Because of that experience and because of what she has seen her students go through, Satterfield now says that meditating in the body is one of the most helpful ways for people to understand themselves—mentally, physically, and spiritually. It’s effective, she says, “because we all know the body exists. It’s something we can feel. It’s something we carry around.”

Mind-body work, she believes, is particularly useful for people living in the West because so many of us here are badly in need of physical grounding. “Our society is based on information. We’re removed from the earth—we’re not working the earth, we’re not sitting on the ground. Often our awareness and our breath are up in the head region because that’s what we’re using more.”

To ground people, Satterfield usually begins a class with seated meditation. Then students meditate in various asanas, do standing meditation and, sometimes, do walking meditation. She ends the class with seated meditation. “I don’t teach your typical hatha yoga class,” she says. “I don’t put music on. I don’t get people to move very quickly. My classes are extremely mindful.”

One key way Satterfield has of guiding students to mindfulness is teaching them about alignment, which keeps the mind in the body. “Awareness of alignment gives us something to do,” she explains. “If you’re thinking about what your foot or hand is doing, you’re not thinking about what you’re going to do after class or what you did before class.” Her hope is that classes blending yoga and Buddhism will give students an hour-and-a-half experience of meditation in motion.