

Fitness Informer Article
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Finding Om - How to incorporate eastern philosophy into traditional fitness classes

We have been incorporating yoga poses for our stretching section of our fitness classes, using Tai Chi for cool downs and using Martial Arts moves in our kickboxing classes for years. Incorporating eastern poses is easy, but incorporating eastern philosophy is hard... Or is it? By having an understanding of yoga philosophy we can ensure our students make deeper mind body connections, improve the effectiveness of the workout, and open doors for further growth. We are more than our biceps and to not recognize the other aspects of ourselves we are missing an opportunity to help our students as a whole.

From a yogi's point of view, everyone is doing yoga (or choosing not to do yoga). In certain moments in our life we have all experienced the stilling of the mind, an inner peace, pure uncaused joy or maybe just pure unconditional love. It is these moments that we are connecting with our true awareness, pure being or our Self as our innate spirituality. Especially in a world of change, uncertainty and unrest, it is this state of fulfillment that the yoga practitioner and more and more of our fitness participants are seeking to gain more consistently, more permanently.

The following are simple techniques from yoga to incorporate into your classes. Try them yourself and with your students and watch how your effectiveness and retention grow. Your students will find themselves connecting to their internal messages earlier and more concisely, feel better about themselves as a whole and develop tools for dealing with decisions and stress while staying true to who they are.

Step 1 - Connecting to the present

The most important component of the ability to listen and respond to our bodies is to actually be here with it. Many times our bodies may be going through the motions of the class but our mind is still at work or thinking about what happens when they leave the class. Sound is one of the strongest sensations that brings us into the present. Use music and cue your students to be aware of all of the sounds of the room to help bring them into the present. Invite your students to let go of what was and what will be and be here for the whole length of the class.

Step 2 - Setting an intention

Everyone comes to the class for a reason. By getting your participants to identify why or what brought them today and what do they wish to achieve in your class, they can realize their goals much more effectively. At the beginning of each class, get your students to set an intention for today's class and repeat it in the present tense (as if it is already happening). Your subconscious only lives in the

present tense – setting the intention in the present tense allows it to become reality.

You can also set a “Heart’s Desire” at this time as well. What are you working with in your life, what is your goal, hope, dream, desire for your life. Phrase this in the present tense as well and repeat this at the beginning and end of the class. Instead of “I want to be loved” phrase your Heart’s Desire as “I am filled with love”. I always warn my students to be careful what you ask for – it may come true but in a different way that they were planning or thinking.

Step 3 - Connecting to the physical body

How can we respond to the messages our body is sending us if we are not connected to it? It seems so straight forward but an alarming amount of our students are not connected to their body at all. By getting your students to check in with their body, scanning the whole body, they will start to learn how to listen to the messages it is sending correctly. Your participants will learn the difference between anaerobic burn and overdoing it; alignment vs. postural habits and which muscles should be contracting and which are compensating.

Step 4 - Connecting to the breath body

Years ago we told our students to “stand at the photocopier and hold your stomach in”. As a result of this cue, stress compensations, and various breathing conditions, we have become a society of ribcage breathers. By being aware of our breath and where it is in the body we can help return the breath to the primary respiratory muscles (diaphragm) and move away from the secondary breathing muscles (upper trapezius and chest muscles). Just by cueing your students to become aware of the breath as well as incorporating various breathing techniques and practices into your classes we can help our students return to this more effective breathing pattern. Try placing the hands on the low side ribcage and inhaling and exhaling here during the warm up or cool down section of your class. Conversely, try exhaling and pulling up the belly from the pelvic floor to the bottom of the ribcage while in table top position. Inhale and let go, allowing the abdominal contents to hang down. Keep the spine neutral during the inhale and the exhale and your students will not only connect to their core stabilizers more effectively, but they will also return more quickly to a diaphragm breath.

Step 5 - Connecting to the emotional body

When we experience emotions we express them in the physical body. It may be as simple as tightness in the chest during anxiety or the feeling of the smile in our face during joy. It makes sense that when we release muscles in the body, we can also release the emotions that are stored there. It is not uncommon in yoga classes to have someone become very agitated when releasing their chest or sad when opening their hips. By allowing people to recognize this and know that if they change positions they can come out of whatever feelings are arising. You can help your students release built up tension and emotion in their body without having to re-live the experience that put it there. Invite your student’s to scan

and recognize what is present right now, how do they feel, how would they describe themselves to a friend.

Step 6 - Practicing acceptance (non- judgment)

According to yoga texts we have over 60,000 thoughts a day and each one we categorize as either good or bad. We judge ourselves even more than we judge others. By allowing what is present to be there just as it is, without trying to change, it we can work towards becoming less and less judgmental. This is the gateway to contentment and happiness. It is amazing to watch how our thoughts change over time and how the happiness in our lives changes along with it. As your students connect to the present, their body, their breath and their emotions invite them to allow them to be with what is right now. It is all going to change. Becoming attached to a state or constantly striving for something different is only going to lead to disappointment and failure. This doesn't mean that we don't work towards our goals, it means that we accept where we are right now, recognizing it for just what it is and then are better able to recognize what we need to do to move towards those goals effectively. If you are stuffed up with a cold and choose to ignore it and get frustrated by your inability to work hard during your cardio workout, then you will not be able to realize what you can do instead and assist your recovery vs. hindering and prolonging it.

Our job as fitness leaders is not to become our student's spiritual guide but to show them some open doors on their journey. They will walk through those doors only when they are ready and some may never walk through those doors, but to not show them the door creates a lost opportunity that they will eventually search for elsewhere. We can create an environment of empowerment, connection and the resulting rewards can be life changing.

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Continuing Education Credit
Multiple choice Questions:

1. The strongest sense that brings us back to the present is
 - a. The physical sensation of our body in space
 - b. The physical sensation of our breath
 - c. The visualization or observation of the room in which we are right now
 - d. The sense of sound

2. We can practice non-judgment by:
 - a. Paying attention to our thoughts
 - b. Replacing our negative thoughts with positive thoughts
 - c. Avoiding situations where we find ourselves judging
 - d. All of the above

3. By practicing non-judgment, we are
 - a. Learning to accept what is right now
 - b. We learn that everything changes
 - c. We learn to become less attached to things and states
 - d. We find ourselves becoming more and more happy
 - e. All of the above

4. You can invite your students to recognize the emotions that are present in their body right now by
 - a. Scanning their body
 - b. Scan their breath for pauses
 - c. Open their heart
 - d. Link their movements to their breath

5. We are a society of
 - a. Diaphragm breathers
 - b. Ribcage breathers
 - c. Torso breathers
 - d. None of the above

6. The primary breathing muscle(s) are the:
 - a. Upper trapezius
 - b. Intercostal muscles
 - c. Rectus abdominus, internal obliques
 - d. Diaphragm
 - e. Pelvic floor
 - f. All of the above
 - g. C & D

7. By checking in and scanning the physical body, your students will learn
 - a. The difference between anaerobic burn and overdoing it
 - b. Increased pain and previous pain
 - c. Neutral spine and postural habits
 - d. All of the above

8. A Heart's Desire
 - a. Is a loved one that is unobtainable
 - b. Is a goal, dream, hope that you are working on in your life
 - c. May come true in a way that you did not expect
 - d. Is an intention for the class
 - e. B & C

9. An intention
 - a. Should be repeated in the future tense
 - b. Is a goal for the class
 - c. Should be done at the end of the class
 - d. Is given by the teacher as the goal for the class

10. Your students
 - a. Need to be directed to the open doors on their spiritual paths
 - b. Are all searching for something more in their lives
 - c. Should all practice yoga
 - d. Can increase their mind/body connections; improve effectiveness and open doors for further growth by our own understanding of yoga philosophy.