

yoga
JOURNAL

a practical guide to mindfulness



Tools and poses to boost awareness and concentration

How to stay mindful

Zen Buddhist teacher Frank Jude Boccio explains the Buddha's four foundations of mindfulness through physical yoga poses.

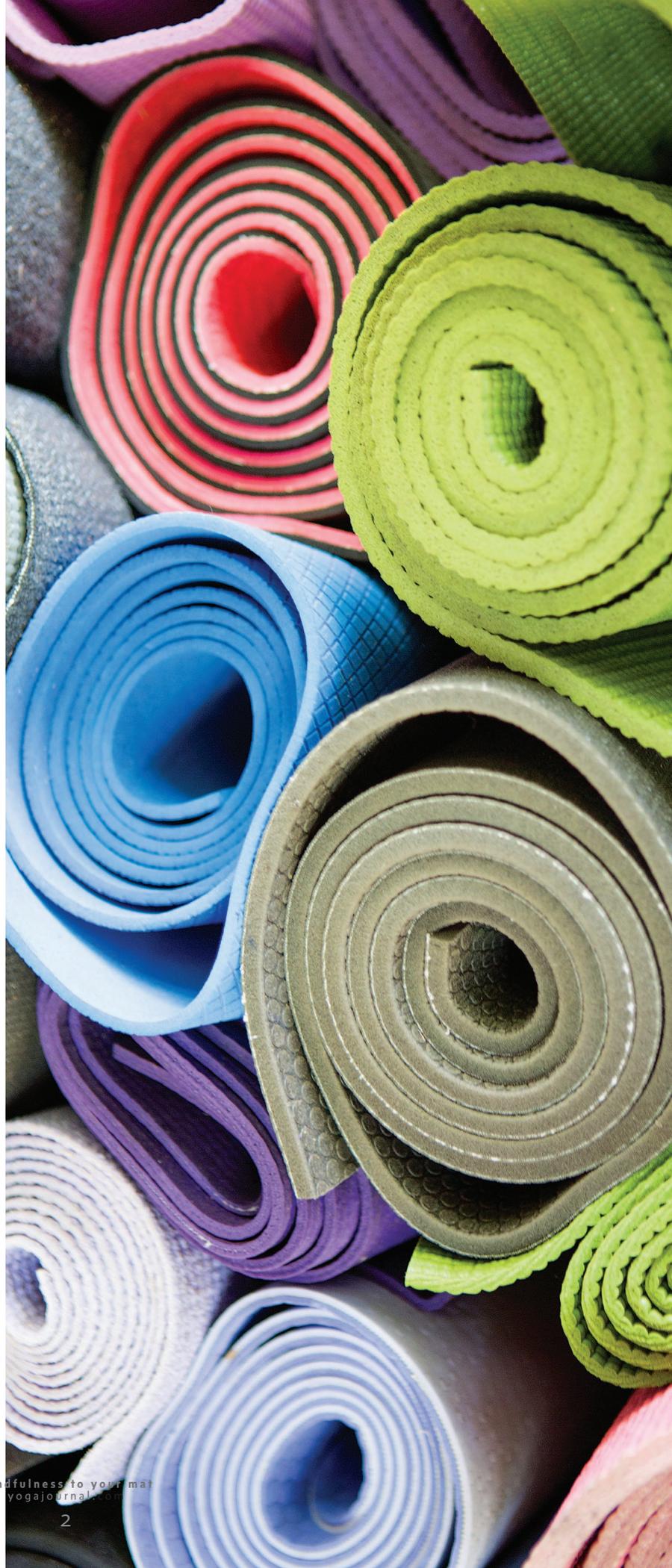
MINDFULNESS OF THE BODY The first foundation brings your attention to the present moment by asking you to focus your awareness on your body. The entry point is the breath, which helps you stay present. Begin by paying attention to the rise and fall of your inhalation and exhalation. Then refine your awareness and try to sync your breath with movement. Notice how your breath changes depending on the position of your body. In Tree Pose, for example, notice if you hold your breath to stay balanced.

MINDFULNESS OF SENSATIONS The second foundation asks you to become aware of what feels good and what doesn't, without judging or responding. Applying this foundation to asana makes it easier to decipher the difference between discomfort and pain—and thus avoid injury. "By constantly being alert to sensations that arise, we keep an investigative mind," Boccio says. If a pose is neither pleasurable nor painful, watch for boredom. Notice if you do something to create stimulation, like stretch farther, and perhaps risk injury.

MINDFULNESS OF THE MIND This foundation involves recognizing thoughts, or what the Buddhists call "mental formations." During practice, the mind will often cling to a pose you like and create tension around one you dislike. This foundation asks you to watch as the mind starts in with "My arms hurt." When you practice mindfulness of the mind, you release these thoughts, recognize them as a conditioned response, and come back to the present.

MINDFULNESS OF THE DHARMA The fourth foundation, mindfulness of the dharma (defined as the teachings or the truth), asks you to stay mindful of all of the constant changes of body, sensations, and mind in order to see the truth of impermanence—the idea that everything will change. As you practice asana over time, it's easy to see the range of changes that illustrate impermanence, from the difference in the breath from one pose to another to long-term changes such as peace of mind or an aging body. When you realize through your practice that everything is changing all the time, it's easier to let go of attachments, such as achieving an "ideal" body, and see that painful situations will eventually pass. "We can see how all phenomena are impermanent and see that there is nothing to grasp on to," Boccio says. "That's called letting go—and that's nirvana."

Turn the page for eight yoga poses that foster mindfulness



8 mindful poses

SEQUENCE BY FRANK JUDE BOCCIO



1 SAVASANA (CORPSE POSE)

Savasana is one of the four main meditation postures taught by the Buddha; do it to start and end your practice. Lie on your back with your feet 12 to 18 inches apart, arms at your sides a few inches away from the torso with the palms up. Surrender the full weight of your body to gravity. Rest your awareness on your breath, wherever you

feel it in the body. Let go of any tendency to manipulate it; simply know an inbreath as an inbreath, an outbreath as an out-breath. Open to the breath and its various qualities: deep or shallow, fast or slow, rough or smooth, even or uneven. Scan the body. Is it fully released or still holding tension? When the mind wanders, note any irritation and judgment, and bring it back to the breath and the body.



2 EYE-OF-THE-NEEDLE POSE

From Corpse, bring both feet to the floor near the buttocks, hip-width apart. Place your outer right shin on your left thigh. Draw your left knee toward your chest, reach between your legs with your right arm and around the outside of your left leg with your left arm, and clasp your hands. Notice whether you held or restricted your breath as you moved into this stretch, and continue to let the breath flow naturally. Depending on the openness in your body, you may feel stretching sensations in your right hip. You may also feel some resistance to the sensations,

which causes you to tense the surrounding muscles. See if you can release this tension, and observe how the sensations change as you maintain the stretch. You've just established mindfulness of the body, sensations, and mental formations. Continue this work as you release and repeat on the other side. Since we are not perfectly symmetrical beings, you may find that one hip provokes stronger sensations and reactivity than the other. Can you stay with the bare sensation, maybe even see the difference between one side and the other, without getting caught in judging or picking and choosing?



3 CAT-COW POSE

Come onto your hands and knees, positioning your hands directly under your shoulders and your knees under your hips. As you exhale, round your back and scoop the tailbone between your legs. Let the head tilt so you are gazing back toward your thighs. On the in-halation, tilt the pelvis forward, opening your belly toward the floor and letting your spine move into the torso, creating a gentle backbend. Reach the crown of your head and your tailbone up toward the ceiling. Be careful not to reach upward with your chin, which compresses the back of the neck. Flow back and forth for a few breaths.

As you continue to coordinate the movement with your breath, let the timing of the breath determine your pace. After going back and forth several times, notice the mind's natural tendency to wander. This is a common reaction to repetition. The mind seems to assume that having done something well, it doesn't have to know anything more and needn't pay attention. This "knowing mind" is often the biggest obstacle to intimacy with oneself and with others. When we think we know, we stop listening and seeing. Try to maintain the "don't-know mind," and you will grow in understanding and intimacy. Come back to the breath again and again; it's the thread that keeps body and mind connected.

4 ADHO MUKHA SVANASANA (DOWNWARD-FACING DOG POSE)

From Cat-Cow, tuck your toes under, lift your hips, and straighten your legs into Down Dog. Playfully explore the pose by bringing the heels to the floor one at a time. Coordinate with the breath and notice if your mind wanders in the face of repetition. Once you straighten both legs, remain in the pose for anywhere from 8 to 15 breaths, staying alert to sensations, mental formations, and the way the experience continuously changes. Teachers often talk about “holding” the postures, but notice how there is no fixed thing to hold on to. Moment by moment, breath by breath, the posture re-creates itself. The Dog of the first breath is not the same as the Dog of the sixth breath. You will begin to see that this is true not only for this asana, and all the other asanas, but also for all life experiences. You will come to see that you are not the same “person” when you come out of the posture that you were when you went into it.



5 TADASANA (MOUNTAIN POSE)

Mountain Pose is too often perceived as just something to do between the more important asanas, when in fact it is foundational for all the standing postures. Stand with your arms at your sides. Press the four corners of your feet into the ground, distributing your body weight evenly between both feet and centering it just in front of your heels. Imagine your pelvis as a bowl with its rim level, both front to back and side to side. Let the spine rise up, keep the lower ribs from jutting out, gently lift the chest, and open the heart. Relax the shoulders, with your shoulder blades moving into and supporting your upper back. Keep the chin parallel with the floor and your ears centered over your shoulders. See what happens as you simply stand there. Be awake to all the sensations that arise: the subtle swaying of the body, the movement of the breath. Does boredom, impatience, or anticipation arise? Can you just be here? When you feel you’ve been here long enough, take another 6 to 8 breaths and see what happens.



6 VIRABHADRASANA II (WARRIOR POSE II)

Reach out to the sides with your arms parallel to the floor and step your feet apart so that they are directly under your fingertips. Turn your left foot in about 15 degrees and your right foot out 90. Without leaning forward, bend the right knee toward a 90-degree angle so that the knee is directly over the ankle. Keep your arms parallel to the ground and gaze out over your right hand. As you breathe, stay alert to changes in the quality of the breath, its depth and rate. As sensations begin to arise in your front thigh or your shoulders,

notice how the mind reacts. Do you feel aversion to the tension accompanying the sensations? See what happens to the quality of your experience if you stay with the breath while releasing this tension. Notice the story lines that arise about what is happening and choose to just listen without grasping at any of them. Rather than solidifying the sensations into entities with which to do battle, embrace them with awareness. Notice—if you can—their habitual, nonpersonal nature. After doing both sides, come back to Mountain and scan through the body, being open to all that arises.



7 ARDHA MATSYENDRASANA (HALF LORD OF THE FISHES POSE)

Sit in a cross-legged position, sliding your left foot under your right thigh so that your left heel comes to rest at the outside of your right hip. Cross your right foot over your left thigh so that the sole of your right foot is planted firmly on the ground. Hug your right leg with your left arm just below the knee and use your right hand to press into the ground behind you. Extend your spine up. Twist to the right, using your left hand to aid the left side of your body in coming around to the right. You can take your left arm to the outside of your right leg and press into the leg for added leverage, but let the twist rise naturally from the base of the spine upward. Turn your head to the right at the end of the torso's movement and keep the neck relaxed. Stay present with your breath, allowing it to guide you in an exploration of release as you exhale and gently untwist. Repeat to the other side.

8 PASCHIMOTTANASANA (SEATED FORWARD BEND)

Sit with your legs straight out in front of you. Press the backs of your thighs, calves, and heels into the ground. Reach through your heels and flex your toes toward your head. Press your hands into the ground beside your hips and lift your chest. If your lower back rounds and your weight is on your tailbone, sit up on a blanket for support. Grasp your feet or your shins, soften your groins, and slightly rotate your thighs inward. Lengthen your torso out over your legs, keeping the lower back from rounding. Let go of "grasping mind" and be where you are. Feel the breath move within the body. Surrender into the posture, and keep letting go of any clinging or aversion to the ever-changing phenomena. Notice how the attempt to prolong or create pleasant feelings is itself a form of tension. When you're ready, rest in Corpse Pose for a few minutes, letting the experience of the practice penetrate the body-mind. After Corpse, consider meditating. Sitting after asana practice is a nourishing and satisfying endeavor. Why not try it now?

