

INTEROCEPTION: MINDFULNESS IN THE BODY

THE CONTINUUM OF EMBODIMENT

BY BO FORBES

What does it mean to be embodied? And doesn't yoga already take care of that? When we take a closer look, the answer might surprise us.

Think of embodiment on a continuum. On one end we have exteroception, in the middle proprioception, and on the far end interoception. Each of these points says something about where we place our attention: outside us, part of the way in, or deeply inward.

Exteroception deals with the question, "What's happening around me?" When we're engrossed in the latest *Hunger Games* film, scanning a crowd for a friend, working out and hear our favorite song, or note the tears pooling in a friend's eyes—these are examples of exteroception.

Proprioception deals with the inquiry "Where is my body in space?" When we sense where other people or objects are, and know the relative size and movement patterns of our own body, that's proprioception. It helps us navigate our world without knocking into things or, as often happens, other people. If you're a weekend warrior, athlete, or yoga practitioner, you need well-developed proprioception; it's an integral part of good movement.

Interoception addresses the matter of what's happening inside our body. In the interoceptive space, attention turns inward. Awareness matures and becomes subtler. Interoception can be seen as mindfulness expressed in the body. And in the words of renowned researcher Stephen Porges, it can be thought of as our "sixth sense."

Interoception has a few requirements. It asks us to:

- Let go of any predictions of what we'll encounter.
- Resist becoming "fixed" on a particular sensation.
- Turn down our mental chatter or narrative.



When we're truly practicing interoceptive awareness, we enter the body without expectations. We attend to momentary sensations in the body as they fluctuate from one point in time to the next. And we can move awareness after a few moments and not become immersed in one sensation too long.

What's the relevance of interoceptive awareness to our health and well-being? It turns out that many illnesses—anxiety, depression, gut disorders, eating disorders, and more—are diseases of disembodiment. In these illnesses, awareness becomes skewed. In chronic pain syndromes, for example, we tend to predict what we'll encounter, and to remain there ruminating about it. "I think that shoulder pain's about to start up," we might say. "Yep, there it is. In five minutes it's gonna feel sharp, like it always does, and then I'll get that stabbing pain that lasts for hours." Then we stay in that same area of the shoulder, refusing to move our attention. Should the pain actually let up, it creates a cognitive dissonance. We feel a disparity between the identity of pain and freedom from pain. The freedom is actually

harder to integrate; it's at odds with our pain-centered self-concept. Our mind cancels out the comfort, and wires the pain response in further.

The Continuum of Embodiment is a framework for understanding several things: First, the extent to which we inhabit our interior. Second, where we place our attentional spotlight, as it's called in MBSR and mindfulness: outside us, on the outer layer of the body, or deeply inward. Third, the continuum of embodiment refers to the degree to which our awareness is gross or subtle.

Interoception evokes the quality of the relationship between our mind and body. Can the mind move out of its comfort zone? Can it learn to tolerate and even seek out the gentle surrender, the humility required to enter the wilderness of the body? Can it cultivate a sense of neutrality, a kindness toward the pain and suffering it finds inside?

In the end, it's not all interoception, all the time. It's the dynamic interchange between the three kinds of attention that benefits us. And we might ask ourselves: as yoga practitioners, teachers, or therapists, are we engaged more with proprioception as beautiful movement or interoception as deep awareness?

Our response is significant. Neuroscientists are beginning to study the effects of interoceptive awareness on our brain, in our immune system, and in our emotional lives. The results are astonishing: Embodiment, as it turns out, is vital to our health and well-being. It may also be a doorway into higher consciousness. **IA**

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