

teenie yogini

What Is Yoga and Why Should I Do It?

From its origins in ancient India over 2000 years ago, the practice of yoga has spread to all corners of the world. New yoga studios are springing up all over metropolitan areas and yoga ashrams and yoga vacations are all the rage. The practice must be providing benefits to its practitioners, benefits attractive enough to lure students by the thousands. So what is it that brings people to yoga and keeps them coming back?



To answer this question, we must also explore the question: What is yoga?

Yoga has become popularly perceived in today's instant gratification culture as a series of exercises promising at the very best an awesome physique (I've heard the term "yoga butt" mentioned) and at the very least a nice period of relaxation. There is a flavor of yoga to suit every taste, each with its own trademark or brand name. Ashtanga Yoga, Forrest Yoga and Bikram (hot) yoga offer a hard-hitting, athletic workout. Iyengar yoga with its focus on alignment satisfies the intellect and those who crave precision. The gentle, flowing Viniyoga style and the heart-centered Anusara style promise a deeper connection with the soul. There are also the less traditional styles such as YogaFit and YogaLates - a blend of yoga and Pilates.

There's so much variety out there its no wonder a prospective yoga student might become confused. But if one were to visit several of these classes in different styles of yoga, a common vocabulary would begin to emerge. Each class consists of a series of poses (asanas) named in English and in Sanskrit (an ancient Indian language), depending on the preference of the teacher. The same asanas will be described in different ways in the different styles of yoga, but the final result is usually the same. Yoga works to liberate the energy of the body so that it can be fully alive.

Asana – The Physical Practice

The practice of asana was designed as a tool for removing energetic blockages from the body so that it would not be an impediment to meditation, through which

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enlightenment (samadhi) would eventually be realized. As such, the postures work on the physical body to release muscle tension and flexibility, and increase strength. However, on a subtle level, the postures also work energetically to increase the flow of the life-force (prana) through the body. Yoga teaches that the life force flows through channels in the body called nadis which can become blocked through poor posture, injury or emotional dis-ease. Restoring the flow of prana through the nadis leads to a sense of freedom in the body and a greater sense of well-being in the mind.

As a result of the physical benefits which can be obtained, yoga is being used more and more often in therapeutic settings such as hospitals. There are a number of cardiac yoga programs as well as programs for people with cancer and other conditions. In combination with mindfulness meditation practice, yoga is also being used in stress reduction programs such as John Kabat-Zinn's MBSR program and it is an important part of Dean Ornish's program to reverse heart disease.

Yoga is effective as therapy because each type of asana has a different effect on the body. For example, back bends are energizing, while forward bends are calming. Twists detoxify while the standing poses increase strength and build heat in the body. Depending on your state of mind or body, you can combine the poses to assist in the treatment of symptoms like depression, lethargy, restlessness, insomnia and many others. Additionally, different poses can be used to effectively balance the fluctuating energy levels which most people experience during the course of each day.

Since yoga works most directly on the spine, it is helpful in the treatment of back pain, which is pervasive in our society and can very often be traced to imbalances in posture that put stress on the spine and cause damage over time.

People are often afraid to attend a yoga class because they think they will be asked to get into the crazy, contorted poses that they see on the cover of the yoga magazines. This couldn't be further from the truth. The people who demonstrate those poses have often been doing yoga for many years. A good teacher will stress that the only place to start a yoga practice is "where you are." If you can't sit cross-legged on the floor, so be it. Start in a chair. As long as you don't have a serious injury that needs to heal, yoga can benefit everyone. You just have to start where you are.

One of my teachers, Roger Eischens, said that even if a pose is not done "well" by a beginner, some benefit can still be achieved. Refinement of the alignment and awareness in the pose over time is necessary to produce an even greater benefit. Thus

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the practice becomes a pursuit, deeper physical and awareness and ability.

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If you've never been to a yoga class, it's worth it to try just to experience the bliss of Savasana – the final relaxation pose, also called corpse pose. In Savasana, all effort is surrendered as the body rests completely supported by the floor. At this point the practitioner experiences the integration of everything that was done in the class via stillness. Who would've thought that lying still could feel so good?

Many people start off practicing yoga as an exercise routine and find that over time their way of thinking and being in the world begins to change. They crave a more authentic life that more truly reflects their sense of self. This is the effect of the shift that yoga can bring about. This shift is further enhanced by the practice of yoga as a lifestyle, rather than just an exercise routine.

The Eight-fold Path of Yoga

The practice of poses has become synonymous with “yoga” in western culture, but the ancient yogis performed asana as a small part of an overall “eight limbed” (ashtanga) practice which consisted of the abstentions and observances (yama and niyama); exercising the body (asana); regulating the breath (pranayama); learning to withdraw the senses (pratyahara); practicing concentration (dharana), meditation (dhyana) and finally the realization of enlightenment (samadhi).

Yama/Niyama

Though often presented as a sequential practice, each of the eight limbs supports the practice of the others. The yamas and niyamas work on the physical, mental and verbal levels since yoga teaches that thoughts also have power.

For example, the most important yama is ahimsa – non harming. In our society we generally take it for granted that physical abuse of another human or animal is wrong. However, how often do we verbally abuse others, especially those close to us and even more damaging, how often do we mentally abuse ourselves and place judgements on others?

Therefore the practice of ahimsa encourages us to be mindful of our thoughts, words and actions as we go through our daily lives. This mindfulness in terms of our thinking is a beginning exercise in concentration and meditation. This mindfulness also helps

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The most important niyama, santosha - contentment, offers similar insights. We exist in a culture of striving. As such we are always trying to be better, do better, have more. In our quest for a better life, we shun the present and become inhabitants of a non-existent future. The practice of santosha encourages us to be content with the present, to be “where we are.” Since the present is all that truly exists, being content in the present allows the experience of true and lasting joy – a way to dispel the fear that is born of the uncertainty of living in a future that has not yet happened.

By practicing santosha while on the mat in our asana practice, we rest easily in the present ability of our body, without frustration, even as we work to improve it. In life off the mat, we rest joyfully in the present condition of our lives, recognizing where we are blessed or fortunate in the present, even as we work to increase our fortunes or multiply our blessings.

Pranayama

When I get angry or upset about something, my five year old son will say: “Take a deep breath Mom, it will help you feel better.” This works because the breath is one of the means by which prana (life-force) is brought into the body and brought to balance. Dr. Andrew Weil, a well known advocate of integrative medicine, uses breathwork with many of his clients to reduce the severity of a variety of stress-related illnesses.

Yogic breathing techniques can be used to increase energy levels, reduce stress and emotional trauma, increase heat or cool the body. Since the nervous system responds to the cues given by the breath, these breathing techniques can be used in various situations on a day-to-day basis to control one’s emotional responses to a volatile situation, or merely to stay awake through a boring meeting.

Combined with asana practice, focus on the breath allows the body to move in a less constrictive way by directing it to move with the energy of the breath, and by using the breath to remove tension and stiffness in the body. This leads to a more mindful approach to asana practice, since it is hard to focus on the breath and the body and still pay attention to what the person next to you is doing.

So why do yoga?

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Yoga works
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At a basic

feels good. You could do yoga primarily for the strength- and flexibility-enhancing effects, or to destress from the daily grind. Yoga could be of benefit therapeutically, to increase strength and ease back pain, or to relieve the effects of stress-related illnesses.

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More profoundly, though, the practice of yoga will most positively affect your way of being in the world by taking it off the mat.

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