



Article written by Nancy Tan for the Northview newspaper, January 2001

## WHAT IS YOGA?



Yoga is a complete system of self health care that began evolving over 4000 years ago in India. Meditation practitioners in India realized that a healthy body is essential in order to sit comfortably in meditation. The ancient yogis utilized their own experiences to formulate practices that would facilitate the attainment of a healthy body as well as breathing practices and a guideline for living that would facilitate a stable and calm mind.

The forms of yoga we are most familiar with here in the West is *Hatha Yoga*, consisting of physical postures, and to a lesser extent, *Pranayama*, consisting of breathing practices. We are less familiar with other forms of yoga such as *Karma Yoga*, which focus on selfless service as the path to enlightenment; and *Bakti Yoga* that utilizes devotion as the path to transcendence.

The word "Yoga" is a Sanskrit word for "yoke" or "union". This refers to the union between body and mind and the oneness of all beings. In the yogic view, "dis-ease" results from our experiences of separateness. Regardless of whether we focus on service, devotion, breath or our physical bodies, it is through this disciplined focusing of our consciousness that we can eventually have sufficiently clear perception to gain the experiential understanding that we are all a part of a larger whole. In that yoga acknowledges the concept of a larger whole, it is a spiritually based discipline or practice.

## YOGA MYTHS AND FACTS



Perhaps the most pervasive misconception about yoga is to consider it merely a physical exercise. Just as the computer can perform the simpler task of writing a letter or the more complex task of navigating a space ship, yoga can benefit us physically by helping our bodies become stronger and more flexible, and it can also be a vehicle for us to achieve and maintain a mental and emotional state that allows us to function at our highest human potential.

When we practice yoga with an inward focus on our breath and body alignment, yoga becomes a form of moving meditation. People who practice yoga in this manner over time frequently report increased mental focus and clarity, heightened perceptual and intuitive powers, increased feelings of connection to an inner self, sense of profound well-being, dramatic increases in energy and stamina, emotional steadiness and equanimity, and spiritual deepening.

The true spirit of yoga is actually the antithesis of our Western competitive approach to exercise. It is difficult to shift our way of thinking as we try to embrace this Eastern practice still new to many of us. We tend to look for a fast moving yoga class that gives us a good "work out" and evaluate the benefits of yoga in terms of its "aerobic value". We frequently ignore our bodies' signals to stop as we push through pain and exhaustion. Unfortunately, as we disregard our needs, we create an even

greater disconnection between the body and the mind; and in our competitiveness, we experience a further separation from others.

We also tend to underestimate yoga's complexity. We forget that not all stretching is healthy. Healthy stretching necessitates that the movement be slow, smooth, conscious, in good anatomical alignment, and with the body sufficiently warmed and prepared. Each yoga posture has a purpose that is usually more than its outer form. Each posture involves the coordination of a complex series of muscular contractions and relaxations guided by the breath. The postures were not intended to be static nor are they a series of movements to go through without attending to the details of breath and proper body alignment. It takes time, patience, humility, effort and good instruction to learn to practice yoga properly. When we underestimate yoga's complexity, we not only do not receive its full benefits, but we make ourselves more prone to injuries.

At the same time, yoga is not something so difficult that it is beyond reach. Strength and flexibility are not prerequisites for the beginning student since even the most seemingly difficult postures can be adapted to the beginner's abilities. The student should never be "adapted" to the posture. Yoga values self-acceptance and non-competitiveness. To know and accept where we are in any given moment, with all its limitations, is the hallmark of the truly advanced student.

## HOW DOES YOGA WORK?

Our muscles automatically go into contraction when we experience stress. When the stress is repetitive, contractions become habitual and out of our awareness. This is how we come to have chronically raised shoulders, forward thrusting chins, and other postural problems. Feelings, such as fear or anxiety that originally triggered the contractions, are now retained by the muscular holding patterns. These emotions can also become chronic and affect the way we experience ourselves in relationship to the world. With a regular yoga practice, the stretching and strengthening relaxes the muscles and allows them to release these holding patterns while increased body-awareness and improved posture lessens the formation of new ones.

Yoga's multifaceted approach makes it uniquely effective in reducing stress. The focused, repetitive movements and steady, even breathing induces the relaxation response. When muscles relax, feelings trapped by the tension dissolve. This frees up energy, increases a sense of vitality, and dissolves perceptual distortions caused by old, outdated feelings. This allows for a clearer self-perception and world-view. This is why over time regular yoga practitioners frequently report a transformation of their personality.

As we become more relaxed through yoga practice we also release addictive behaviors previously used to relieve stress. People who practice yoga regularly generally stabilize their weight at a place right for their bodies. They also tend to look and feel more youthful since their posture is better and their bodies better toned.

## WHY YOGA IS PARTICULARLY BENEFICIAL AS WE AGE

Many of the "symptoms" of aging are not inevitable, and many are reversible. It is not inevitable that we become hunched over. Nor is it necessary to suffer many of the chronic aches and pains commonly associated with aging. Through a regular yoga practice, we can improve our posture, increase the lubrication to our joints, work against osteoporosis by strengthening our bones, improve our circulatory and digestive systems, and move our bodies more easily, gracefully, and with better balance.

For women going through menopause, gentle yoga postures can help to ease many of the unpleasant symptoms. After decades of being the nurturer, this is a prime time to turn inward and tend to our own rebirth. We need to learn our internal rhythms, learn to relax, and learn to develop flexibility of both body and mind. We need a strong, healthy body. The body-mind integrated practice of yoga fosters the inward focus that is needed to encourage our intuition, creativity and authenticity into full bloom. These are the qualities we need to guide us so that we can live the second half of our lives consciously and with purpose.

Men, likewise, can benefit from the results of a yoga practice. Given that men's softer qualities are not as highly valued by our culture during their younger years, mid-life is also a prime time for them to develop their neglected qualities and regain a greater sense of wholeness. They need to hone their skills in reducing their vulnerability to stress, to replace competition with cooperation, and to begin developing intimacy and nurturance in their relationships. It is important that they, too, re-evaluate what is important and develop the tools to live in a more conscious manner.

## FINDING THE RIGHT YOGA CLASS FOR YOU

There are many different styles of yoga within the Hatha Yoga tradition, so classes can vary widely in style and difficulty. Ashtanga Yoga, for example, involves continuous movement, while Iyengar style of yoga focus more on proper body alignment. Bikram yoga has a prescribed sequence of postures done in a heated room of high temperature, and Viniyoga focus on the therapeutic application of yoga. Western practitioners are now developing their own schools of yoga, such as Tri-Yoga, Anusara Yoga, Power Yoga, and more.

To add to the confusion, presently there are no standards for yoga teachers. Anyone can teach yoga, with or without training. Training programs that offer certification can vary from one weekend to intensive programs that last two to three years. The Yoga Alliance is a national accreditation organization that is trying to bring some standardization to the profession. This is not to say that certification or registration guarantees good teaching, but it does assure that some minimum amount of training covering specific subject matters has taken place.

For the beginning student, it is important to give some thought to the style of yoga to learn. This is particularly true for those beginning yoga later in life. While it is never too late to start, the older body has sustained more years of stress and needs to begin slowly and correctly to avoid injuries. It is also important to choose teachers who can make the kind of posture adaptations so that learning can take place under safe conditions. Perhaps the most important guide in choosing a class is that the student feels he/she is receiving sufficient challenges to stay interested but not overwhelmed, and feels safe that his/her boundaries and ability will be considered and respected.

