

YOGA

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By

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Gentleman, please indulge me for a few moments. I would like for everyone to sit nice and tall in your seats with both feet on the floor. Make sure you're sitting upright and resting on your sitting bones. Relax. Now, raise your shoulders up and roll them back, allowing your shoulder blades to drop down. Keep your chest open and shoulders back. Rest your hands on your upper thighs or the table. Hold your head upright and level and make sure your ears are over your shoulders. Make sure you have a nice, straight and strong sitting posture. Feel free to close your eyes during what some of you may consider my descent into insanity. Concentrate, for a moment, on your breathing. Make sure you are fully expanding your chest and pulling air down to the deepest portions of your lungs. On your exhale, pull in your stomach and push all the air you can out of your lungs. Please continue this slow, controlled, rhythmic breathing. On your next exhale, drop your head forward as far as is comfortable, gently stretching the back of your neck. Again, relax. On the inhale raise your head. On your next exhale drop your left ear over to your left shoulder. Keep your chin slightly elevated. On the inhale return your head to center. On you exhale, repeat this motion to your right, ear to shoulder. Keep your shoulders relaxed and don't scrunch up your shoulders or neck. Keep your breathing slow, and controlled. On the inhale raise your head. On your exhale, slowly drop your head back, raising your chin as high as is comfortable. Feel free to turn your head slightly left and right to get a little extra stretch. On the inhale, return your head to an upright position. On your next exhale, turn your head to the left as far as possible, trying to look behind you while keeping your shoulders square. On your inhale, return to center. On your exhale, repeat this movement to the right. And on the inhale return to center.

Now that we have completed this little exercise, I would like to welcome you to a fringe area of the world of yoga.

Yoga; just what is that (?) you may ask. Perhaps we should begin with what yoga is not. Yoga is not merely a series of exercises to make one's body fit; this is one of the most widespread misconceptions concerning yoga. Beyond its obvious physical aspect, Yoga is first and foremost a spiritual act with the primary goal of uniting the body, mind, and spirit. I'll be the first to tell you that yoga is and can be just about anything you want it to be. In preparing for this paper I found it to be everything from an excellent physical workout to a wondrous near religious experience. It can be used to dictate your diet or how you treat your friends, coworkers or family. In reality, you can't drive through a mid-sized town without seeing a yoga studio or yoga used in advertising and yoga this or yoga that. Some even offer up yoga as a cure for everything from the common cold to back aches and cancer. While I'm sure many of these claims are as full of bull as some of our members, I have found it to be an effective, well rounded physical workout, a workout that is challenging in the areas of strength, balance, and flexibility. All of this while delving into the realms of meditative stress reduction and to some degree, a higher level of spirituality.

As you may or may not know, yoga is enjoying an immense renaissance across the world. You may have heard about Hot Yoga, Power Yoga, the Lotus Pose, general physical pretzelling and where to buy yoga clothes, yoga mats, even yoga gear for our pets! However, the history of yoga is rich and long standing and deserves some mention. So without further ado, let us begin near the beginning.

Between 200BC and 300AD an Indian philosopher known as Patanjali gave the world the Yoga Sutras - a series of 168 brief statements that set out the practice of the eight limbs of classical yoga. Though we know very little about the man himself, Patanjali's work is considered the cornerstone of the knowledge of all yoga practice, from the practice of asana, the yoga of poses, to the deeper internal journey of meditation and self-realization. From the commentary and analysis of yogis, translators and philosophers over the years we have accumulated the wisdom of yoga as it is practiced today - a combination of asana, meditation and body/spirit care that has proven to be of benefit to those who seriously engage in this practice.

There are eight limbs of classical yoga as presented by Patanjali. The first of these is

Yamas: These are five virtues, all of which have Sanskrit names that I'm not going to attempt. These five virtues govern our relationships with others and with our environment. These include truthfulness, non-injury or non-harming, nonstealing, non-attachment/non-clinging and Godlike conduct.

Niyamas: These five practices address our own appearance, deeds and thoughts, and govern our relationship with ourselves. These include cleanliness, grooming and hygiene; happiness and contentment; introspection and self examination; yearning for reunion with God; and surrender and devotion to the divine.

Coupled with the Yamas and Niyamas are the following practices for the mind, body and spirit:

Asana - This practice of poses or postures is the most widely recognized form of yoga in the Western World. In the Eastern World, Asana is a much smaller part of the complete yoga practice. Asana is a series of postures or poses that firms the body, focuses the mind and cools the spirit in preparation for meditation.

Pranayama – This practice of breathing exercises steadies the mind and cools the body in order for the yogi to master prana or life energy.

Pratyahara - The practice of Pratyahara engages the yogi in a meditation practice wherein the yogi withdraws their thoughts and senses from the outside world and focuses their gaze inward to the Self.

Dharana – The practice of Dharana exercises the mind in focused concentration; asana quiets the body and pranayama quiets the breath and mind to bring the yogi through Pratyahara to the practice of Dharana.

Dhyana – Meditation. The yogi withdraws their consciousness from the outside world; the consciousness enters the soul.

Samadhi – Samadhi is enlightenment, self-realization combined with union of the Divine. The yogi experiences ecstasy, joy complete openness and consciousness. The experience of Samadhi is outside the mind.

Now I'll be the first to tell you that I'm not completely comfortable with many of the ultimate goals of yoga but I have to admit that my days in general and more specifically, my interactions with others go much better on the days I attend my yoga classes at the local Y. I first became curious about yoga about 32 year ago. At that time, I had my family started, was teaching and coaching football, track and weightlifting. I was involved the leadership of a civic organization and active in my church. In short, I had too many irons in the fire. There was the stress of day to day life and family and in my desperation; yoga seemed to have something to offer. I did a little reading on the physical benefits of yoga but didn't pursue it further the time.

About five years ago after leaving the teaching profession and ending 20 plus years of operating a marina I began to actually quit paying lip service to my promise to myself about getting in better shape and began going to the Y. Now my philosophy is that if you're going to work out then WORK OUT. As a result I was lifting more than 110 sets a week and averaging more than 20 repetitions per set with some fairly serious weights. I began to bulk up a little but I also began to lose a lot of my flexibility. After mentioning this to the wife and wondering out loud about yoga the rest is history. Now I'm hooked, along with at least one other member of our society.

There are several different styles of yoga. The exact number will vary depending on the source one uses. Upon compiling and comparing several sources I would offer up the following list as the most recognized styles of yoga practiced today.

Hatha Yoga

This is the style most familiar and most practiced in the U.S. today. Hatha Yoga is also known as the forceful yoga. It is the most prevalent form of Asana. The name Hatha comes from a combination of two Sanskrit words Ha (sun) and tha (moon). As the name might suggest, Hatha is a yoga of opposites. The western practice of Hatha Yoga focuses mostly on the asana practice, which is designed to keep the body flexible and to cool the mind in preparation for meditation.

This form of yoga also aids in creating a harmony between our dual natures (masculine/feminine, hot/cold, will/surrender) and brings us closer to a deeper practice of yoga.

Bhakti or Kirtan Yoga

Bhakti yoga is the yoga of devotion and chanting. Predating Hatha yoga, Bhakti yoga is approximately 4000 years old making it one of the oldest forms of yoga in the world! North Americans most commonly come to yoga as a form of exercise, whereas Indian culture approaches the asana practice as a way to calm the mind before meditation and worship. Kirtan is the practice of singing the name of God in all his/her divine aspects; translated from Sanskrit it means 'I surrender to the Lord'. Traditionally, kirtan is performed in a call and response style. The kirtan leader sings a line or verse of a mantra or prayer, and the group responds as accurately as possible. Kirtan is a community, a dialogue between the call leader, the kirtan group and the energy of the Divine. In the eight limb system of classical yoga, kirtan is considered to be focusing the mind inward and is a bridge between our inner and outer selves. Bhakti yoga is the divine melody and rhythm of the human spirit, expressed in chanting and song.

Karma Yoga

Karma yoga is selfless service to others. This yoga asks that the yogi make his/her actions in this world expressions of devotion and offerings to God, without considering personal gain. If you do community work, volunteer work, or just do something very nice for someone for no reason at all, you are performing acts of karma yoga.. Gandhi's years of selfless service to South Africa and India are famous examples of the work of Karma yoga.

Dream Yoga

Dream yoga is about listening attentively to what your dreams are telling you. This knowledge is used to better your waking life by helping you pay more attention to your daily realities, dreamed or shared.

Jnana Yoga

Jnana yoga is the study of the philosophy of yoga; Jnana is the Sanskrit word for knowledge . The practice of this yoga involves deep meditation practice, study of the self, the True Self and the Transcendental Self. The yogi is challenged to examine the real and the illusory. In order to do so the yogi must use his mind to retrain the mind to separate the real from the unreal and thus

discover and liberate the True Self. Jnana yoga uses meditation, introspection and contemplation techniques to attain wisdom and enlightenment.

Mantra Yoga

This is primarily the yoga of sound. The word mantra comes from a combination of the Sanskrit words man or 'to think' and tra meaning 'instrumentality'. Mantra is intention expressed as sound, unlike Bhakti yoga, which is strictly the yoga of song and chanting; for instance when you were to chant 'OM' you would be combining mantra yoga and bhakti yoga. Mantras have been chanted for thousands of years (some continuously for thousands of years!) to guide the mind into meditation and to establish an intention to create states of consciousness or ask for divine guidance.

Raja Yoga

Raj is the Sanskrit word for king and Raja yoga is known as the Royal Yoga because it brings out the king in all of us; the noble inner self that is so infrequently acknowledged in our every day lives. Raja yoga provides an opportunity to focus on the quality of our daily thoughts and deeds, being careful to reveal the goodness that the workings of the mind often conceal or disregard. Most closely associated with the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, it is the most commonly expressed in the eight limbs of Classical Yoga.

As you can see there is a lot more to yoga than might first meet the eye. Locally, a typical yoga class has an open setting and is accompanied by soothing music. The only equipment needed is comfortable, loose fitting clothing and a mat for stability. Students or yogis generally vary in age from their late teens or early twenties to their mid eighties and everything in between. The class would be 15-20% male. First timers would be welcomed and put at ease. The class typically begins with suggestions for proper breathing techniques while encouragement is offered to the yogis to begin attaining the proper mindset for the session. Gentle stretching is followed but two to four balancing poses. Poses are generally described and gentle urging and lots of praise is offered. Terms such as think about doing such and such or have the intention of doing such and such are not uncommon, as students are often reminded to listen to their bodies. Students are often reminded that strain and stress in a pose is OK but pain is not so adaptations to the poses are OK and encouraged. After 30 to 40 minutes of various poses, the session generally winds down with some gentle torso stretches and concluded with a five to seven minute session of relaxation or meditation. This time of relaxation, for most, is well worth the strain of the yoga poses. Most of the students feel revitalized after the session.

In closing, I would only say: NAMASTE!