



Beginner's Guide to

Yoga & Meditation

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	5
What is Yoga	7
Why Do Yoga?	9
Types of Yoga	11
Getting Ready	17
Beginning Your Workout	21
Easy Pose	21
Downward Facing Dog	21
Sun Salutations	23
Tree Pose	25
Extended Triangle	26
Seated Forward Bend	28
Bound Angle Pose	30
Wide Angle Seating Forward Bend	32
Full Boat	33
Bridge	35
Legs Up The Wall	36
Corpse Pose	38
Meditation	40
Universal Mantra Meditation	43
Relaxation Meditation	45
Energy Healing Meditation	46
Color Healing Meditation	46
Centering	48
Desktop Yoga	49
Yoga For Headaches	52
Child's Pose	53
Standing Forward Bend	54
Yoga for Menstrual Cramps	55
Reclining Bound Angle	56
Upward Bow	57
Seated Twist	57
Yoga for Depression	57
Headstand	58
Head To Knee Forward Bend	60
Conclusion	62

INTRODUCTION

When one mentions “yoga”, many images may be conjured up. Perhaps you get an image of flower children from the 60’s sitting in a circle with their legs in impossible positions chanting “Ohm” around a huge candle in a poorly lit room. Yoga is an ancient art that has been practiced for centuries. Over the years, it has risen in popularity as a way to stay fit, get in touch with one’s inner self, and keep a balance of sanity in a sometimes insane world.

While yoga did come to popularity in the 60’s with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi who popularized Transcendental Meditation (TM) in the 60’s, because he was associated with the Beatles, yoga practitioners have brought the ancient practice to the forefront of wellness in recent years.

Many scholars believe that yoga dates back over 5,000 years to the beginning of human civilization. Scholars believe that yoga grew out of Stone Age Shamanism, because of the cultural similarities between Modern Hinduism and Mehrgarh, a neolithic settlement (in what is now Afghanistan). In fact, much of Hindu ideas, rituals and symbols of today appear to have their roots in this shamanistic culture of Mehrgahr.

Early Yoga and archaic shamanism had much in common as both sought to transcend the human condition. The primary goal of shamanism was to heal members of the community and act as religious mediators. Archaic Yoga was also community oriented, as it attempted to discern the cosmic order through inner vision, then to apply that order to daily living. Later, Yoga evolved into a more inward experience, and Yogis focused on their individual enlightenment and salvation.

Yoga is the most diversified spiritual practice in the world. Crossing over many cultures (including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and the West), Yoga also extends over multiple languages such as Hindi, Tibetan, Bengali, Sanskrit, Tamil, Prakrit, Marathi and Pali. The Yogic tradition continues to proliferate and spread its message of peace to this very day.

There are many different places that offer yoga classes – gyms, wellness centers, even the local YMCA. But you don’t have to join a class to practice yoga. It is just as easily done in your home or even at your desk while at work. Yoga can help bring you inner peace when you are stressed out. It can even help relieve the pain of headaches, backaches, and menstrual cramps.

As studies continue to reveal yoga's many health benefits, this centuries-old Eastern philosophy is fast becoming the new fitness soul mate for workout enthusiasts. Contemporary devotees range from high-powered execs trying to keep hearts beating on a healthy note to image-conscious Hollywood stars

striving for sleek physiques. Even prominent athletes are adding yoga to their training regime to develop balanced, injury-free muscles and spines.

Yet to applaud yoga for its physical benefits alone would only diminish what this entire system has to offer as a whole. By practicing yoga on a regular basis, you may be surprised to find that you're building much more than a strong, flexible body.

Initially, the sole purpose of practicing yoga was to experience spiritual enlightenment. In Sanskrit (the ancient language of India), yoga translates as "yoke" or "union," describing the integration of mind and body to create a greater connection with one's own pure, essential nature.

Classes that have gained popularity in the United States usually teach one of the many types of hatha yoga, a physical discipline which focuses mainly on asanas (postures) and breath work in order to prepare the body for spiritual pursuits.

We will attempt to simplify the ancient practice of yoga by showing you some basic yoga positions, giving you tips on performing yoga exercises, and inducting meditation practices into your everyday life. Through yoga and meditation, you could come to a new level of enlightenment with your personal life and enhance the quality of your existence.

No longer is yoga a mysterious phenomenon. It is now simply a way to keep you healthy and aligned. Now relax and read on as we explore yoga and meditation.

WHAT IS YOGA?

As we have said, yoga is an ancient Indian philosophy that enhances personal growth and well being. Although it is a systemic philosophical approach, yoga is not a religion, but complementary with most spiritual paths.

The physical aspect of Yoga (*Hatha Yoga*) use poses and focused breathing, requiring concentration and discipline. The result is a greater union of mind, body and spirit. Anyone, regardless of body type, age, experience, or physical abilities, can practice yoga.

Pop culture would have us believe that yoga involves contorting your body into uncomfortable positions while staring at a candle and breathing incense. You will see that yoga is much more than that. It is a series of exercises that can be done by almost all people – not just the young who are in shape and healthy. Yoga can be performed by senior citizens, disabled people, and even children.

Yoga is a tool for gaining body-mind awareness to enhance whatever spiritual/religious beliefs you have. A yoga session will leave you feeling energized and relaxed. You will work your muscles and will properly align your bones; you will breathe deeply, oxygenating the lungs and blood; you will experience true deep relaxation.

By bringing awareness to the body, and working the muscles, you are able to more deeply relax them than from any other form of exercise. You will gain a deeper appreciation of your body and mind through yoga in a way that no other exercise program will.

People who have done no physical exercise at all, as well as Olympic athletes, find enormous benefits from Yoga. The foundation of traditional yoga is careful alignment of your body as you hold the poses. This precision and the awareness that comes with it, leads to tremendous growth, physically, mentally, and emotionally.

As in all great arts and sciences, to become proficient in yoga requires effort, determination, and practice. But then, the fruit we reap is always in proportion to the seeds we sow and nurture. Thus, if you are looking for a quick fix, an instant cure, a quelling of surface symptoms while the true ailment remains unhealed, you will not find satisfaction in yoga.

On the other hand, if you want to keep or regain your health, vitality and vigor; if you want to feel younger and stronger; and if you are looking for a perfectly balanced and complete form of exercise that can be started by anyone

over seven years of age, in any condition, and which becomes more challenging as you get more advanced, yoga is for you!

There are many benefits of a regular yoga practice. Not only does yoga help maintain a healthy lifestyle, it clears your mind and provide clarity of focus – something we all could use from time to time! Let's look at the benefits of yoga.

WHY DO YOGA?

Yoga Creates both flexibility and strength along with cardiovascular health. It creates mental clarity and focus and emotional balance. Yoga is safe for all ages and body types. It facilitates healing from injuries and is a wonderful way to create wellness.

You weight train to gain strength, jog or do aerobics for a cardiovascular workout, practice tai-chi to develop a sense of balance and harmony, stretch to gain flexibility, and meditate to develop peace of mind and relaxation. Yoga is a form of exercise that gives you everything: strength, endurance, balance, flexibility, and relaxation. It is the only complete form of bodywork that does it all. Indeed, yoga is more than stretching and relaxation: it is the ultimate mind-body challenge.

Yoga increases flexibility as it offers positions that act upon the various joints of the body including those joints that aren't always in the forefront of notice ability. These joints are rarely exercised, however, with yoga, they are!

Various yoga positions exercise the different tendons and ligaments of the body. The body that may have been quite rigid begins experiencing a remarkable flexibility in even those parts which have not been consciously worked upon. Seemingly unrelated non-strenuous yoga positions act upon certain parts of the body in an interrelated manner. When done together, they work in harmony to create a situation where flexibility is attained relatively easily.

Yoga is perhaps the only form of activity which massages all the internal glands and organs of the body in a thorough manner, including those – such as the prostate - that hardly get externally stimulated during our entire lifetime. Yoga acts in a wholesome manner on the various body parts. This stimulation and massage of the organs in turn benefits us by keeping away disease and

providing a forewarning at the first possible instance of a likely onset of disease or disorder.

By gently stretching muscles and joints as well as massaging the various organs, yoga ensures the optimum blood supply to various parts of the body. This helps in the flushing out of toxins from every nook and cranny as well as providing nourishment up to the last point. This leads to benefits such as delayed ageing, energy and a remarkable zest for life.

But these enormous physical benefits are just a “side effect” of this powerful practice. What yoga does is harmonize the mind with the body. This results in real quantum benefits. It is now an open secret that the will of the mind has enabled people to achieve extraordinary physical feats, which proves beyond doubt the mind and body connection.

Yoga through meditation works remarkably to achieve this harmony and helps the mind work in sync with the body. How often do we find that we are unable to perform our activities properly and in a satisfying manner because of the confusions and conflicts in our mind weigh down heavily upon us? Moreover, stress which in reality is the #1 killer affecting all parts of our physical, endocrinal and emotional systems can be corrected through the wonderful yoga practice of meditation.

In fact yoga = meditation, because both work together in achieving the common goal of unity of mind, body and spirit – a state of eternal bliss.

The meditative practices through yoga help in achieving an emotional balance through detachment. What it means is that meditation creates conditions, where you are not affected by the happenings around you. This in turn creates a remarkable calmness and a positive outlook, which also has tremendous benefits on the physical health of the body.

There's no doubt that yoga has tremendous benefits to your health and well-being. So how do you get started with your own yoga program? Let's look at the basic styles of yoga and what they mean.

WHICH IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

In ancient times yoga was often referred to as a tree, a living entity with roots, a trunk, branches, blossoms, and fruit. Hatha yoga is one of six branches; the others include raja, karma, bhakti, jnana, and tantra yoga. Each branch with its unique characteristics and function represents a particular approach to life. Some people may find one particular branch more inviting than another. However, it is important to note that involvement in one of these paths does not preclude activity in any of the others, and in fact you'll find many paths naturally overlapping.

Raja Yoga

Raja means "royal," and meditation is the focal point of this branch of yoga. This approach involves strict adherence to the eight "limbs" of yoga as outlined by Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras*. Also found in many other branches of yoga, these limbs, or stages, follow this order: ethical standards, *yama*; self-discipline, *niyama*; posture, *asana*; breath extension or control, *pranayama*; sensory withdrawal, *pratyahara*; concentration, *dharana*; meditation, *dhyana*; and ecstasy or final liberation, *samadhi*.

Raja yoga attracts individuals who are introspective and drawn to meditation. Members of religious orders and spiritual communities devote themselves to this branch of yoga. However, even though this path suggests a monastic or contemplative lifestyle, entering an ashram or monastery is not a prerequisite to practicing raja yoga.

Karma Yoga

The next branch is that of karma yoga or the path of service, and none of us can escape this pathway. The principle of karma yoga is that what we experience today is created by our actions in the past. Being aware of this, all of our present efforts become a way to consciously create a future that frees us from being bound by negativity and selfishness.

Karma is the path of self-transcending action. We practice karma yoga whenever we perform our work and live our lives in a selfless fashion and as a way to serve others. Volunteering to serve meals in a soup kitchen or signing up for a stint with the Peace Corps or Habitat for Humanity are prime examples of selfless service associated with the karma yoga path.

Bhakti Yoga

Bhakti yoga describes the path of devotion. Seeing the divine in all of creation, bhakti yoga is a positive way to channel the emotions. The path of bhakti provides us with an opportunity to cultivate acceptance and tolerance for everyone we come into contact with.

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