

Mind, Body and Breath: Balanced Life

By Paula Beaudin

The days of yoga being taught in obscure studios or demonstrated on public television at 4 am are things of the past. Every health club and “Y” offers a variety of yoga workshops; yoga “classes” can be viewed on both network and cable TV; public schools schedule it in after school programs; senior centers include it their regular activities and church basements are filled with congregation members trying out this ancient practice. Yet, in spite of its increasing popularity, many misconceptions still exist about yoga.

As a certified yoga teacher, I am often asked, “There are so many yoga classes, is it normal to be confused?” “Will my religion fit in with yoga” “I’m not flexible, can I do yoga?” The one answer to all these questions is, “Yes.” Consider that the word “yoga” literally means to unite and what we’re uniting is our mind, body and breath – no matter what condition our minds, bodies and breath may be in. Yoga helps *develop* flexibility and strength. But perhaps more importantly, it can boost your self-confidence. So, even if you never touch your toes, you’ll be more accepting of yourself.

Thousands of years ago, yoga was developed in India by Hindus as part of an eight-limb discipline to help achieve a balanced life. For instance, pranayama yoga refers to breathing exercises. The term *hatha* yoga refers to the physical practice we’re familiar with today. Over the years, different approaches to hatha yoga have emerged. For instance, there’s Bikram Yoga (a specific pattern of postures practiced in a very hot room) and Ashtanga Yoga (a dynamic flowing style) - to name just a couple. These names may be confusing but don’t let that keep you from a class. A phone call to a studio to clarify their offerings is not only appropriate but welcomed. Yoga teachers want you to be comfortable in class -physically and spiritually.

Please know that yoga is not a religious practice. Yoga poses – or asanas – were created by observing nature and practiced in preparation for meditation. Today, however, yoga is not associated with Hinduism or any religion at all; it is one of many paths to good physical health. The bonus is that it can also calm the mind and awaken the spirit. Chanting or listening to words like “Om” (a sound representing the goodness in us all) or “Shanti” (peace) are ways to deepen that sense of well-being and unity. The final relaxation portion of most classes is simply a time to reconnect to you. You can count your breaths or imagine being in your favorite place – it doesn’t matter as long as it quiets the mind.

Like other forms of exercise, yoga fits into an overall healthy lifestyle with the intention of preventing or delaying illness and injury. I’ve worked with children as young as eight years old who hold their breath not only in response to stress but even in an attempt to look thin. Early in our lives, we reverse the full diaphragm-breathing pattern that expands our abdomen with the inhalation and relaxes it on the exhalation. Often, as we age, our breath becomes more shallow and less nourishing. We accept tight shoulders, reoccurring headaches, sore backs, disturbed sleep and poor digestion as part the natural

aging process. We lose awareness of our own bodies and the connection between our bodies, mind and breath. What's unfortunate about this is that it doesn't take much to feel more flexible, strong and self-possessed. A short, regular practice can make a big difference. In fact, in a study on yoga and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder done at the Kripalu Institute for Extraordinary Living, participants were required to commit to practicing at home for only 15 minutes a day in addition to two classes per week led by a certified yoga teacher. The majority of subjects reported a reduction in their symptoms.

This is particularly encouraging since the study was funded in part by the Department of Defense therefore demonstrating that our own government now acknowledges the power of yoga. It may also be refreshing to medical practitioners and patients alike to realize that yoga is one of the most cost-effective ways improve health. In addition to low-cost classes at community centers, free television shows and inexpensive DVD's, no special equipment is needed - a yoga mat is helpful, but not necessary. As far as clothes are concerned, sweatpants and a t-shirt are just fine. And, of course, no footwear is required.

My work over the past decade with people with special needs and seriously ill children has made me 100% certain that anyone can practice and benefit from yoga. I've witnessed students with cystic fibrosis, autism, Down syndrome and traumatic brain injuries grow from imitating simple stretches to flowing independently from one pose to another with confidence and joy. I've seen heart rates decrease and oxygen intake increase on palliative care patients. Staff members at major hospitals have commented on the positive impact yoga has had on patients. A doctor who observed one of my classes at St. Mary's Hospital for Children (Bayside, NY) commented, "This [yoga] is so good for him. He hyper-extends his arms all the time and yoga gives him a lot of relief."

Many patients with chronic health issues call upon yogic techniques learned in our sessions to find relief outside of the hospital. An adult CF patient at St. Vincent's Hospital (NYC) shared that one night she couldn't sleep because she couldn't cough up enough mucus. Then she remembered a twist we did together. After practicing it she was able to release the mucus and fall asleep.

Yoga's benefits not only extend beyond hospital walls, but beyond patients themselves. A mother of a pediatric cancer patient confided in me that after our family session she allowed herself to cry privately and realized the importance of tending to herself if she really wanted to be there for her daughter.

The list of major hospitals that include yoga into their care plans for both pediatric and adult patients is extensive including heart specialty centers such as St. Francis Hospital and major cancer treatment centers like Sloane Kettering. In fact, just this year The National Cancer Institute awarded their largest grant ever (\$4.5 million) to the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center to study the benefits of yoga and cancer patients.

Previous studies have demonstrated the benefits of yoga for those living with cancer. An article in the Journal for Symptom and Pain Management reported, "...[yoga] intervention was helpful in significantly boosting daily invigoration and a sense of acceptance in patients. There were also trends for improvements in pain and relaxation"

If many of us feel challenged by certain asanas or just getting to class, we may wonder how someone with special needs or a serious illness can do yoga. In these cases, a certified teacher is vital so postures can be modified appropriately. My focus is on what a patient *can* do while honoring any limitations and respecting the healing process. Although, working directly with a certified teacher is ideal for everyone, the most important thing is to move slowly and listen to your body. Noticing the difference between feeling challenged rather than pain is imperative. Below is a brief series of breathing exercises and asanas that can serve as a gentle introduction to yoga for well patients and caregivers alike.

CREATE A PEACEFUL SETTING:

- Dim lights
- Turn off your phone
- Use aromatherapy – potpourri, lotion on your hands, etc.
- Take off your shoes

Sit on the floor or a chair. If you're on the floor, your legs can be crossed or straight – whatever's more comfortable. If you choose a chair, place both feet on the floor. It's okay to use the back of the chair or even a wall for support. Close your eyes and breathe in and out of the nose. If this is difficult, breathe out of the mouth. Try to feel your abdomen expand with the inhalation and relax on the exhalation – like you're filling and emptying a balloon. Do this at least 20 times, knowing it's natural to have thoughts enter your mind - simply acknowledge them and then refocus on your breath.

WATERFALL

Lift your arms and flip your fingers back so palms face upward, lift your eyes to the ceiling. Stay here for five breaths. Repeat, but this time interlace your fingers and lift palms up. Without moving your hips or feet stretch toward one side and then the other. Return to center and let your arms plummet to your lap.

SEATED CAT/COW

From Waterfall, bring your gaze straight ahead and lower your arms out to shoulder height, Inhale and feel your chest, ribs and abdomen expand. Exhale and bring your chin toward your chest and wrap your arms around yourself. Repeat a few times.

TWIST

Place your left hand on outside of your right thigh and place your right hand behind you flat on the chair or floor. Fingers should be facing away and the wrist is close to your hip. Press your back hand down and inhale. On the exhalation, look over your right shoulder. Stay here for 10 inhalations/exhalations, allowing the chest and abdomen to twist as well. On your last exhalation slowly untwist. Repeat on the other side.

MOUNTAIN

Stand up and bring your feet as close together as comfortable with toes facing forward. Bring your middle fingers in alignment with the seam of your pants to open the chest.

Find a soft focal point - something straight ahead of you that doesn't move. Stretch your toes and place them on the floor - one at a time - if possible. Repeat Waterfall and Cat/Cow standing.

PENCIL

From Mountain, lift knee up and bring your foot toward your buttocks. (Use a chair or a wall for support if needed). Reach back with your left hand and hold the outside of your foot. Keep the knees as close together as possible to stretch the front of the thigh. If it's difficult to reach your foot, use a soft belt or tie – make a loop and wrap it around your foot to lift it. If you feel steady, lift your right arm. On an exhalation lower your arm and foot. Repeat on the other side.

FORWARD BEND

Return to Mountain. Relax your chin to your chest and “rag doll” forward until you're bent at the waist and your hands hang toward the floor. Keep knees bent if you have any lower back strain, but if you feel comfortable, bend and straighten one knee at a time to stretch the backs of the legs. Eventually begin to bend both knees more and more until you're kneeling on the floor. Sit back and bring your legs in front of you. Bend your knees so your feet are on the floor. Hold on to your thighs, exhale and slowly roll down onto your back.

SAVASANA (RELAXATION POSE)

“Savasana” means to surrender but by this we don't mean to give up. It simply means to surrender to the moment and accept how you are right now without judgment. If you feel comfortable staying lying down, do so. You can keep your knees bent to support the back or you can straighten them. If you like, you can sit on a chair just as you did at the start of your practice. Either way - notice how you feel. When you're ready to return to your day, acknowledge the fine work you did and promise yourself that no matter what happens the rest of the day, you'll remember this positive experience. Gently open your eyes. Allow a minute before jumping back into the world - let each sense get used to reality. Remember, there is a difference between being relaxed and being asleep. When you're relaxed you're still alert; you're aware of everything going on inside and outside of you but you're at peace with it. Enjoy this feeling and take it with you throughout your day.

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