

Yoga Articles – Lifestyle

Yoga is a living practice and a lifestyle which will, over time clearly re-acquaint the student with their authentic heart. With practice, we study *svadhyaya*, the knowledge of ourselves with clarity and confidence. With practice, we communicate powerfully and gracefully and confidently contribute to our society, living our heart's true virtue.



Why Hatha Yoga

is the Friend of the Mystic

By Max Strom

Sufism, Buddhism, and Yoga are three great rivers that carry so many people toward the light. But it is Yoga that is booming, exploding, and surging across the globe. In a February 2005 Harris poll commissioned by Yoga Journal, the leading American Yoga magazine, found that 7.5 percent of U.S. adults, or 16.5 million people, now practice Hatha Yoga. That's an increase of 43 percent from 2002. What is profoundly more interesting is that many people are turning to this ancient regime as an alternative not only to exercise, but also as an alternative to the experience of a spiritual gathering they cannot find in a church, temple, synagogue, mosque, or website.

Yet a common criticism of Hatha Yoga is that it is not really a spiritual practice unto itself. That it is solely a body/health regime and therefore the serious aspirant on a spiritual path need not bother with it. To the cynics I ask you to consider this viewpoint; the Yoga tradition teaches us that our bodies manifest our *samskaras* - (inherent

tendencies) carried into this life from our previous lives, and these samskaras predetermine much of our behavior, both helpful and detrimental. But by consciously manipulating the body with breathing practices and postures in Hatha Yoga; we can guide the crooked course of our samskaras straight - like the tail wagging the dog, altering the course of our life.

Also, equally significant is that we hold our personal past emotional experiences, energetically, in our bodies. So many of us become unexplainably stuck on our path, not from lack of effort, but by the chains of the past known as anger, grief, and fear. These buried emotions, like splinters in the heart, can be ultimately crippling to our spiritual practice. It is as simple as this; when people are in pain, they become self-centered and myopic. When people heal, they become more empathetic, self-less, and sympathetic to the pain and welfare of others.

Through the practice of Yoga, in particular the breathing practices, we can liberate these buried emotions and experience a rapid and meaningful transformation.

Our God Intent, fueled with breath and powered by our will, ultimately realigns an emotionally misaligned body.

When I stumbled upon Yoga in my own life nearly two decades ago, I knew well what spiritual practice was, and I knew what exercise was – but I had never seen a system that combined the two, except for martial arts. But martial arts usually involved a fighting mindset, and that was purpose-defeating in my eyes. For my aim was peace within and unity with all. After a month of practicing yoga three times a week, I finally connected the dots and understood Hatha Yoga as an integral part of spiritual, and even mystical practice. At its simplest, hath Yoga supports the body of the seeker on his or her spiritual quest. Why ruin your back and knees in meditation? What if you could meditate without damaging your body? Why suffer from internal disorders when they can be avoided? Why die prematurely after suffering years of chronic pain when through conscious work it can be avoided? Why prematurely shorten your life/transformational practice through passive neglect of the body? The vehicle we travel in (the body) must be kept in order, or travel on the road of internal transformation becomes difficult, then painful, then impossible.

Sufism, Buddhism, and Yoga schools have their own partiality, their own leaning toward work primarily in the mind, emotions, or body. When I was the director of Sacred Movement Yoga in Los Angeles, California, we often hosted luminaries from a variety of spiritual lineages. We had leaders from various branches of Buddhism, Sufism, and of course Hatha Yoga. On the evenings of the events I would watch as over a hundred people would file in to be in the presence of these excellent and rare teachers. It was most interesting to notice certain commonalities in the posture, level of bodily health, and mannerisms of the audiences of these different lineages.

For example, the Buddhist audiences seemed calm and quiet. Their discipline of meditation was apparent, as they were able to sit quietly on the floor for long periods of time. But also, as a whole they tended to be subdued and aloof. Physically, their bodies seemed inflexible, even hardened, with a slouching posture. Those over 40 years old revealed generally poor health.

The Yoga students tended to have excellent posture and excellent health, but were more restless and less well-mannered than the Buddhists. The yogis could sit without discomfort, but because their minds were restless this caused their bodies to fidget more. Their minds were not as disciplined as their bodies.

The Sufis appeared noticeably more joyful and friendly than the yogis or Buddhists. But the Sufis seemed to be the most restless of the three groups, and like the Buddhists, they were not in optimal health. Many had trouble sitting on the floor at all and required chairs.

It was clear to me that these three rivers of spirituality have much to learn from each other. What was also clear is how important Yoga is to enable and empower our other practices: breathing, meditation, ritual, daily life itself. Without health we are or will be in a perpetual state of suffering. If it is within our power to heal then we should make all effort to do so. If your mind is a jet engine, but your body is a run-down 1969 Volkswagen bus, then the jet engine will be unable to make you fly.

Integrating and balancing is one of the seminal purposes of Hatha Yoga. This requires us to develop strength where we are weak and flexibility or openness where we are congested – in body, mind, and emotions. As long as we are imbalanced, our lives and our spiritual path will be hindered by our own nature. Hatha Yoga it could be said is the foundation of the temple. This is because Yoga takes one's spiritual life and embodies it, healing it, removing stress and pain. After a time, the drugs one may have depended on to battle depression, sleeplessness, and ulcers, are thrown in the wastebasket. No matter what you believe or disbelieve spiritually – it doesn't matter. Yoga works, regardless of your belief system. Try it three times a week for one month and see for yourself. Health comes as a side effect from a grander intent - the intent to breathe in God and to ultimately embody God. ~

Yoga, Meditation and Compassion

The Keys to Meditation

By Aaron Hoopes

In true meditation there is none of the nonsense about emptying the mind or stopping your thoughts, or even contemplating your navel. That having been said, the Buddha listed roughly forty different methods of meditation and other ancient texts speak of over one hundred different ways to practice. There are more than enough books that go into the details of meditation methods, so I will refrain from doing that here. Just be aware that if you are having difficulty meditating, there are methods that might help put you into the ideal frame of mind.

Everyone is different and the methods of reaching a perfect state of meditation differ for each individual. It is

important to find a method of quieting the mind and relaxing the body that suits you particularly, but remember not to get caught up in the method itself. The act of sitting quietly and breathing is what is important. Set aside whatever time you can spare (five minutes in the morning and evening is plenty to start). Remember you are not doing this for anyone but yourself. It makes no difference to anyone if you sit for five minutes or five hours. It is the state of existing that matters. Awareness of the thoughts in the mind and the breath in the body is all you need to be concerned with.

The Keys

The body and the mind reflect each other. As one calms, the other relaxes and vice versa. Sometimes it helps to have some keys to concentration in order to bring the mind in tune with the body. These keys are general qualities of the breath that we want to have as a framework for our breathing. They work in two ways. First, by bringing quality to the breath within the body, we relax and enhance our breathing practice. Second, by focusing on these keys to concentration, we calm the mind and bring our thoughts into harmony with our breath.

Deep and Long

Breathing that concentrates on the keys of deep and long draws the air fully and completely within the body - not in the sense of inhaling to the maximum and tensing up the muscles, but in the sense of actually feeling the breath reach all of the deepest recesses within. Keeping the chest and surrounding muscles relaxed allows the breath to fill the lungs to their ideal capacity. Then inhalation and exhalation should be lengthened, allowing the body time to become used to the deep expansion within. The longer and deeper the breath, the more in tune with the natural world around us we become. Deep and long breathing relaxes the body, calms the mind, and focuses the spirit.

Silent and Slow

Breathing that concentrates on the keys of silent and slow allows even more relaxation. The silent breath is felt with the whole body instead of being heard. We become aware of the feeling of the lungs being filled. Slowing the breath relaxes the entire breathing process and extends the length of the breath to a point where it reaches a calm and natural state. Silent and slow breathing calms the body, relaxes the mind, and brings peace to the spirit.

Soft, Even and Continuous

Breathing that concentrates on the keys of soft, even and continuous brings completeness to the breath. Soft breath loosens the mind's control over the breath allowing it to reach a more spiritual level. Keeping the breath even brings the mind into a meditative state where thoughts flow with the breath. Continuous breath is like a circle. Inhalation

creates exhalation which in turn creates inhalation. Soft, even and continuous breath brings the body and mind together in a pure calm and relaxed state that allows the spirit to open up and expand.

With the tranquility that meditation brings, comes an appreciation for life as you begin to truly observe the world around you. You also begin to experience improved health as your body relaxes and functions naturally without the blockage that stress and tension bring. Meditation is simply the practice of existing in a quiet place and turning the attention inwards. By concentrating on your breathing and letting your thoughts flow of their own accord, you can find a deep inner stillness that will help you deal with the stresses and tension of life.

Personal Ritual, Creating Your Meditation Practice

By Maryann Laraia

When beginning to meditate, it is good to have a routine or ritual. Routine and ritual will key the mind into what is going to follow. The routine / ritual can be simple or elaborate, whatever suits your personality. A basic routine is deciding to relax and meditate every day at the same time and in the same setting.

Time

What time of day is best for meditation? Decide on what time slot fits your schedule best to meditate. For beginners to make meditation a habit, it is recommended to set a definite time each day. This way if you miss your meditation appointment you are aware of the omission and can reschedule with yourself before the day is over.

Setting

Meditating in the same place when starting is also helpful to develop habit and focus. The optimum setting is one that is comfortable and quiet with minimum distractions obviously away from telephones, TV, adults or children interrupting. Some meditators have to compromise on comfort to gain quiet. I know people who meditate in their bathroom or garage to access quiet time. You might want to try several locations before settling on your favorite. If you are interrupted, just acknowledge what is happening and return to your practice when possible. Eventually you will be able to be in a light meditative state anywhere, even with your eyes open.

Ritual can be as simple as just knowing it is the time that you decided to meditate and going to your meditation place. Or, you can elaborate and use candles, incense, crystals and other background objects that aid your sensation of peace or power. I do not recommend using music during meditation as your mind will listen to the music instead of focusing. Keeping brief notes or a journal on your daily sessions is also recommended.

Clothing

It is best to wear non-restrictive clothing with as much natural fiber as possible. Loosen belts, ties and if possible remove shoes and socks for some styles.

Posture

Sit however is comfortable for you. If you enjoy sitting with a pillow on the floor, go for it. It is also perfectly acceptable to sit with a straight back in a chair and let the chair support your back. (I sit in a chair with my back supported and my legs crossed under me.) Your legs do not need to be crossed and the feet can rest on the floor. Observe the position of your shoulders, neck and head. Relax your shoulders down and lengthen them straight out. Relax your neck muscles. Feel that your head is balanced and centered on your neck. Image that your head is a fish bowl and if it is tipped forward or back, you will spill water and fish out! Check if your jaw is relaxed by allowing the lower jaw to drop slightly.

Breathe through your nose. Begin each lesson observing a few breathes expanding the abdomen on the inhale and contracting the abdomen on the exhale.

How long to meditate? A ten to fifteen minute meditation session will give you results. If you choose to meditate longer, it is because you enjoy the activity (or should I say non-activity). Greater results are not necessarily achieved by time spent in practice as much as your consistency and concentration during practice. Decide how long your meditation will be. Choose whatever works best for you to time the session. Set a timer to ring when your session ends or tell your mind to alert you when the set time has passed. Eventually your mind will know precisely when your set time is up. Do not use this method until you have perfected it if you are on a tight schedule.

During meditation and visualization you will be aware of any outer physical situation that requires your immediate attention. Remember, meditation is a state of heightened awareness, not of unconsciousness. Most important, enjoy yourself as you explore your meditation practice.

Yoga & Joy

On Yoga & Joy By Dr. Kev

No matter how rough it gets,
without yoga, it would be worse.

With it, everything becomes possible,
and that is my limitless spring of joy!
www.yogaclass.com

The Joy of Yoga

By Trudy at Rainbow Yoga

Why do I do yoga?

Yes... I understand that yoga enhances the metabolism and helps to regulate weight.

Yes... I am aware that I do everything better when I am true to my yoga practice. I have more patience, endurance and a clearer mind.

Yes... I know about the therapeutic side of yoga, I myself have experienced the healing power of yoga in so many ways.

Yes... I realize that regular practice can often prevent the illnesses or aches and pains of daily life. I am living proof, after over 30 years of practicing yoga, I feel physically and mentally stronger than many people my age around me. I carry wood, cook on a fire, walk long distances, teach yoga, teach 14 4 year olds and work 14 hour days but I am rarely sick and almost never really sick. I put it to yoga.

But I do not practice yoga for any of the above reasons.

I practice yoga because it gives me joy! I never fail to feel better after my yoga practice, I walk with a feeling of lightness, I feel at one with my body, I feel glad to be alive, I feel a tingling all over, I radiate joy and feelings of well-being. Ah, the joy of yoga!

"What sunshine is to flowers, smiles are to humanity?"

These are but trifles, to be sure; but, scattered along life's pathway,

the good they do is inconceivable." - Joseph Addison

This Work is Very Fun

By Mark Lilly

One of the joys of this work that I didn't foresee was how fun it is. On Friday I was teaching at the Community Transitional School. We did crow pose, half hand stand and the other usual poses, and then everyone lay down for Savasana. We were in a cafeteria, since they were removing insulation from the gym where we usually have class. Ten seconds after our group of ten to fourteen olds let go into the relaxation, a troop of five, six and seven year olds came barreling down the stairs for snack. They stopped abruptly, surprised to see the big kids lying on their backs where the snack tables should be. I told the big kids to lie back down and appreciate their breath and I walked over to the group of youngsters and told them we were doing yoga. Then I asked them to raise their arms as high overhead as they could. They all did.

For the next few minutes, I talked the big kids through an appreciation of the hard work they had done that day, a mindfulness of their breath and uniqueness, all the while miming to the little kids to rise up on their toes, to quietly sweep their arms out to the sides, to be still but strong. They got it, and didn't make a sound.

We ended soon thereafter, and while the big kids moved on to kickball, the younger ones helped me fold neglected mats, move the tables back, push chairs into place. They were way into it!

I left that day feeling so touched to have connected with so many young people, and so grateful to have been able to share this practice of yoga with two dozen of tomorrow's adults.

Another day I was blessed to watch nine youth at Outside In practice sun salutations in unison. It was a spiritual choreography. Another class a young woman at the White Shield Center told me she couldn't do shoulder stretches because she had an injury, only to have her tell me ten minutes later that she had been lying and she could do it. She trusted me and herself enough to tell the truth. It was beautiful.

We're working on putting together a plan to directly help the youth with critical issues, issues that go beyond the yoga mat. Details are still sketchy, but a peek at [Home Boy Industries](#) will give you a heads up to some of our ideas.

In closing, thanks for your sustaining interest in Street Yoga. All the emails and phone calls, with ideas and support are wonderful. Blessings to you all! Mark Lilly, director of StreetYoga. <http://www.streetyoga.org>

Yoga and Joy

By Jan Thronson

Joy...A very glad feeling, happiness, great pleasure, delight. Sometimes I feel I know so little about this topic. Other day's joy just springs upon me unbeckoned. It just is. I love when that happens. I probably take it for granted while it's happening, though awakening to it first thing in the morning definitely gets my attention. I bounce out of bed, head into the day, and everything just falls into place, flows beautifully, feels amazing.

On the days, and sometimes it's been weeks, or even years, that joy seems hidden, hard to find, impossible to reach, I've got to pull out my life tools. Yoga is one of them, a very big one. As soon as I get down on the cool floor and spread out on my back, resting my weight, it's like a huge surrender. I let go of my weight, physical, mental, emotional, even spiritual, and begin to feel the relief of not going or doing. Just being on this floor, my back on the earth, my chest spread open, my heart relaxing, my lungs opening, my eyes sinking deep into my skull is IT!! IT is bliss, joy, all-pervading happiness through every muscle, bone, cell and point of awareness in my Being. Oh my God, I'm actually just being, and it's feeling really, really good. I could do this some more, and I even feel a little smile creeping into my body.

Yes, my body is actually smiling now, and by and by this smile even reveals itself upon my lips, cheeks, forehead and eyes. My face is smiling now and only a moment ago I was so caught up in getting my ducks in a row, doing things right. But this just feels right. Just being becomes joy, and I let go some more and here comes another mega-wave of the joy stuff again!

Somehow, as I relax into this, I get the picture...the Bigger Picture, that all is ok, right, even good with everything, everyone, and most especially with me. This makes me very happy, and then the feeling of gratitude comes over me. Gratitude seems to magnify joy a billion times over, and this makes me even happier in a deeper way. Gratitude becomes the way to sustain my joy, even find my joy when it appears to be missing. On a down day, if I can find my way to a tiny bit of gratitude for something, and then something else, and maybe one more thing, the joy begins to flow again. Of course, it was never missing. Just my awareness was.

Now, back to this floor. How happy I feel to be here. The feeling great pleasure in my back being connected to the floor to the Earth, and the stream of breath coming from the air, the Sky, through my nose is just adding to the delight of it all. It's really simple, this joy stuff, if I let it be. If this is all it takes, maybe I'll let go and sink deeper into this joy, bliss, and the wonderment of how gratitude amplifies it all. What a lovely ride.

Joy Is Who We Are

By Veronica Vaiti

If you're new to yoga or a seasoned practitioner, chances are you've come across the concept of "joy" being expounded upon in one way or another by teachers or fellow yogis. What exactly is meant by this JOY, where does it reside or derive from and more importantly, how does it relate to yoga?

As my teacher's teacher says, "Joy is who we are if we are not preoccupied with something else." Ok, pretty simple, right!? If we move from the position that our lives are basically molded by our perceptions, through our senses that is, then the moments when our direct perceiving/experiencing is impeded by our uncanny tendency and temptation to evaluate what we perceive we ultimately cast a judgment upon that experience. It is this tendency of ours to appraise and attach a value to our perceptions that leads us to then stand in our own way of the direct experience of joy gleaned from pure perceiving.

How can this experience of joy be found in my yoga practice you may ask? The next time you find yourself struggling with your balance in poses like natarajasana (dancer's pose) and bakasana (crow pose), or cringing in shoulder and hip openers like baddha parivrtta trikonasana (bound revolving triangle pose) and eka-pada-rajakapotasana (one leg king pigeon pose) first take note of the words of praise or ridicule or ideals floating about in your mind. For instance you might think "oh, why can't my pose look like the picture I saw in last month's Yoga Journal," or "I hate that my hips are awfully tight." Then, return your focus to your breath, again without judgment, just noticing the movement of the breath in your body as it exists in this moment in whatever contortion your body may be in. With focus on your breath and not lost in your ideals of what your pose should be tune into the fact that your body IS breathing, your body IS moving and just experience the present state of "whatever your pose at this very moment may be." Perhaps, your heart and mind may stumble into that space in which sheer joy resides. And just enjoy!