



## **Yoga - Complementary to Health**

**This article discusses yoga and how it, as both a hobby for fitness and a lifestyle choice, can benefit almost everyone, in health and everyday life.**

Experience shows there are a number of commonly held misconceptions about Yoga, largely due to the culture in which we live and images generated through the various forms of media. As these misconceptions discourage many people from experimenting with a system that could be of great benefit to their health, let us begin by dismissing one or two of the more frequently occurring ones...

Firstly, when yoga comes up in conversation, nine out of ten responses are something like: "Oh, I'd love to do yoga, but I'm not flexible enough." In reality, the people who should be doing yoga (the physical practice) are those who are stiff and inflexible, as regular asana (physical posture) practice helps to tone muscle and increase flexibility, no matter what the beginner's level of flexibility and fitness may be.

Secondly, there is a generally held view that yoga is only 'stretching' or just another 'fitness class', a typical impression being: "Yoga? That's women stretching isn't it? Tying themselves up in knots?" A good example of this view is the recent Yellow Pages™ advert showing a man first finding a yoga class to go to (to impress a girlfriend) and then subsequently needing to find a chiropractor when he falls and injures himself during a difficult balancing posture. Yoga, however, is much more than stretching and balancing.

### **So, What is Yoga?**

In a nutshell, yoga is a complete system of holistic living with a history dating back thousands of years, of which asana - the physical aspect (or 'stretching') - is just one small part. Other aspects of the system include breathing techniques, meditation techniques, body-cleansing practices, nutritional guidelines, moral guidelines and a philosophy that stems from a wealth of ancient philosophical texts. Traditionally asana was practiced mainly to keep the body fit enough to sit for extended periods of pranayama (breathing techniques) and meditation. A beneficial 'side effect' of yoga is increased flexibility, muscle tone and general body fitness resulting mainly from asana practice; it is due to this (alongside celebrities practicing yoga) that yoga, as a mainly physical practice, has become popular in the Western world.

### **How can yoga benefit me?**

I believe one of the most important factors in achieving good health is to change the mindset that good health can be achieved with a pill; it is of prime importance that people take responsibility for their own health, and work alongside their doctor/therapist rather than expecting him/her to 'fix' them with no effort on their part. People in general could be happier and healthier if they knew and understood a little more about themselves, their bodies, and how they can help improve their own health. Yoga provides the tools to effect these changes, in a holistic and safe way. Yoga is broken down into a number of practices, asana (physical postures) usually being the first practiced and definitely the most readily available in the West. Below, each yoga practice is described in the order in which people usually progress.

### **Asana (Physical Postures)**

A range of postures are practiced which stretch all areas of the body in a balanced way, working to tone muscles, increase flexibility, stamina, balance, concentration and body awareness. Most general yoga classes consist mainly (some exclusively) of asana practice.



### **Pranayama (Breathing Techniques)**

This is where yoga begins to differ from other exercise classes generally found in leisure centres and gyms. Most people do not breathe properly and fully, the breath normally being shallow and focused in the upper chest. Basic pranayama exercises encourage abdominal breathing, making full use of the lungs, increasing towards their full capacity, and lengthening, slowing and relaxing the breathing process. This encourages mental and physical relaxation, and increases control over the body and mind. Co-ordination of the breath and body movements increases body awareness and develops concentration.

### **Yoga Nidra (Relaxation)**

A period of relaxation, usually about 10 minutes, is a common feature at the end of a yoga class, with some also having a shorter period at the start and at intervals in the class. Yoga Nidra, the 'yogic sleep', usually refers to the final relaxation where guided visualisations and other techniques are used to encourage the students into states of deep relaxation. Relaxation of this kind has all the usual benefits in common with many complementary therapies (stress reduction, lowers blood pressure etc.), but it also prepares and leads the student towards meditation.

### **Nutrition**

Yoga nutritional advice usually promotes a healthy vegetarian diet, along with avoiding stimulants and fermented (i.e. alcoholic) foods and drinks.

### **Meditation**

Yoga practitioners have known for thousands of years the numerous benefits of meditation, many of which have been confirmed in recent years by scientific studies (a search on the Internet for 'meditation research' using the Google search engine returns over 2 million pages!) Research shows that when you meditate, the body experiences: deep rest; reduced levels of stress hormones; a natural change (slowing) in breathing; increased relaxation; reduced anxiety; increased productivity and concentration; and more.

### **Kriyas/Shat Karma (Cleansing Techniques)**

Kriyas are advanced yogic practices, probably unheard of by the majority of people practicing yoga in the West. Practices range from specific pranayama techniques (sometimes combined with specific postures), to extreme practices requiring days or weeks set aside in retreat centres with experts on hand to guide one through the processes. Non-extreme methods can easily be applied by a reasonably dedicated yoga practitioner with little or no special equipment and can be learnt in a short space of time. Kriyas have many health benefits, such as improving the functioning of the digestive and respiratory systems, and associated health problems. It is important to combine Kriyas with the appropriate nutritional changes.

In most areas of the UK suitable classes can be found for any level of ability, and if not available, many yoga teachers offer one-to-one sessions for yoga practice and advice on home practice. It is also possible to find specialist Yoga Therapists who offer sessions in which a client's specific problems are addressed holistically and appropriate yoga practices prescribed.