



Say Yes To Yoga



Image Courtesy: Manasa Yoga, Kuala Lumpur

The pursuit of good health is a common trend today. From movie stars to housewives, almost everyone is jogging, buying flashy sports gear, and talking about fitness and wellbeing. It's easier to exercise than you think – and it does not have to be about huffing and puffing while you rain sweat! Yoga is a non-rigorous routine for anyone and everyone; it is a philosophy, rather than just a form of exercise; one that can prevent and cure some illnesses, as well as strengthen and tone your body.

What is yoga, really?

Practised in India for over 3000 years and recently gaining immense popularity in the West, yoga is a set of disciplines that will bestow upon you the strong and well-toned muscles, an improved immune system and a calmer and more balanced frame of mind.

The most well-known of the many, many systems of yoga is *Ashtanga* (eight-pillared or eight-limbed) yoga, developed by the great sage Patanjali. The most prominent of these metaphorical pillars or limbs are *asana* (posture), *pranayama* (breath control), *dharana* (concentration on a single object), and *dhyana* (meditation).

Meditate - it will make you a better person!

Everyone knows that it is good to meditate, but most often don't know what it is all about and where to start.

First, meditation is not just sleeping or keeping still like a statue. Meditation aims at powering up the seven energy centres or 'chakras'. These chakras are located along the central 'nadi' which runs inside the spine. Each chakra in your spinal column is believed to influence or even govern bodily functions near its region of the spine. They are also believed to control personality traits, both good and bad.

The 'Manipura' chakra, located at the navel, has envy, selfishness and other strong traits ascribed to it. Remember the boiling feeling in the stomach when one feels jealous? This chakra is said to be the culprit. Focusing on the Manipura chakra when meditating and chanting 'om', 'mm', or 'oo' strengthens it and drives the green monster away.

Chanting is important, too. When you chant, you send resonant waves throughout your entire body, which vibrate particularly strongly in the skull, creating a powerful positive feeling.

Experts say that prolonged focus on any single chakra is bad - this weakens the other chakras. The Ajna or forehead chakra, though, is said to strengthen all seven centres simultaneously if meditated upon long enough! Also, each chakra is supposed to have a different colour and symbol delegated to it, like a rune you might find in ancient Gaul. Pretty mystical, isn't it?



Image Courtesy: Yoga Nidhi, Chennai

Yoga for children

Yoga can be very beneficial for young children as well. It can improve the general physical health of your child by boosting stamina, enhancing stability and balance and improving immunity. Asanas also strengthen the child's muscle tone and improve his posture. But yoga has benefits beyond the physical. In an increasingly hurried and harried world, yoga can teach your child to control his emotions and his mind, and cope with stress. This is of especial relevance to children, who tend to be excitable and hyperactive by nature.

Children can begin practising yoga from the age of five. Initially, they should start with a 15-20 minute session that gradually stretches to half an hour as they grow older. However, do keep in mind that not all asanas are suitable for children since their bodies are still growing and cannot cope with the more strenuous ones. So be sure to find a yoga teacher who specialises in children's yoga for your little one.

Asanas and their versatility

Yoga offers asanas (postures and exercises) for every part of the body, from each individual toe to the muscles of the eye.

An asana is done in tandem with a fixed breathing pattern, to coordinate with the movement you are making. Most asanas are split into parts - moving into the posture while breathing in, holding the pose while breathing deeply, and exhaling while releasing the pose.

Just as each fruit has its own flavour, each asana has unique benefits as well as precautions to follow. Repeating an asana regularly is important! Doing it once and waiting for the boost in strength is like eating one idli for lunch and expecting to be full.

People with certain conditions, like diabetes or weak cardiovascular systems, are advised not to perform certain asanas while there are other asanas that can help them. A person with a bad back, for instance, should not attempt the 'Utthanpadasan' (a leg-raising exercise done with the back flat on the floor), while the 'Katichakrasan' (a systematic torso-twisting routine, that is done with increasing speed) can help relieve the pain.

Pranayama - breathe in, breathe out

This practise involves different types of breathing, in and out, at different speeds, through one or both nostrils, with or without using mudras or hand gestures. Sounds easy, doesn't it?

Not really. Pranayama is not just regular breathing, but uses controlled breathing techniques such as arrested breathing, stepped breathing patterns etc to regulate the flow of air to the lungs. There are several types of pranayama, like anulom-vilom, bhramari and ujjayi, and each one confers different benefits, such as deep relaxation, clearing the nasal passages, improving digestion etc.

Pranayama, according to most yoga instructors, regulates your breathing, your metabolism, controls BP, blood sugar, and stress hormones in the blood. You can expect to feel very calm at the end of it, with renewed concentration.

Now that you know how great yoga is for you, don't waste any time getting started! Find a good instructor and keep doing



Image Courtesy: Manasa Yoga, Kuala Lumpur

your suryanamaskars, brahmari breathing, and bridge poses. Remember to take the same precautions that you would take before you start on any exercise programme - check with your doctor before beginning, start slow, be sensible, and stop when there is pain. As we said earlier, yoga is a way of life, so you will begin to see its effects not just on your body, but in your daily life as well. Good luck and have fun!

A word of caution: remember that yoga should only be practised under the guidance of a qualified instructor; otherwise you could very well end up hurting yourself!

- Darshini R ■■■