



For better
mental health

The Mind guide to yoga

The Mind guide to yoga

'My greatest benefit went beyond increased physical ease. By directing my attention to my body in this new way, my sense of self became transformed.'

'When the abandonment to gravity comes into action, resistance ceases, fear vanishes, order is regained, nature starts again to function in its natural rhythm and the body is able to blossom fully, allowing the river of life to flow freely through all its parts.'
Vanda Scaravelli

Yoga can make us feel better psychologically, as well as physically, and can help to heal and free our minds. This booklet outlines the different forms of yoga, how you can benefit from the practice, and how to go about finding classes or a teacher.

What is yoga?

The word yoga tends to conjure up images of bodies in contorted positions, or semi-naked men sitting cross-legged, with rolled-up eyes, in a deep trance. These are powerful images, which persist in our imagination – but they are only part of a very diverse tradition, which originated in India about three thousand years ago. Less extreme forms of yoga have been widely practised in the West for at least thirty years.

Yoga is a hard word to define, because it covers a very wide range of practices. In its most general sense, it is a spiritual practice designed to increase awareness and self-knowledge, so that a person can be freed from old behaviour patterns and exercise more choice in his or her life. The exercises can lead to greater physical and mental freedom, and to greater control over the body and thought processes.

Yoga stems from the Hindu religion, but it doesn't mean that people have to share this belief to do yoga. Within it is a deep understanding of human psychology, of the link between mind and body and of the way that both mind and body work. This understanding, born of practice and experience, is universal and can be a means of health and wellbeing when adapted for use in the West.

What are the benefits of practising yoga?

Yoga can give you a sense of being grounded, balanced and centred. It can help you to relax and tackle life's problems creatively, rather than feeling like a victim of them. As tension gets released, you will feel more energetic. It will also open up a general sense of wellbeing and optimism, improving your self-esteem and bringing greater enjoyment of your body, as it becomes more supple and fluid in its movements. You will learn to be present with your attention and to get more pleasure out of life, as you feel both more relaxed and more vital.

When you take part in a yoga class, the teacher helps you to focus awareness on your body and its relationship to the ground and the surrounding space. You will be invited to sense and to feel things, as much as to do things. So, when you make movements and assume positions, you will not be trying to make your body conform to an external shape (as in dance or gymnastics, for example). You will not be trying to impose anything on the body. Instead, you will be using the movements to explore your body from the inside, to find out where the tensions are. Gradually and patiently you will be able to release them, so that you can find a different way of moving and of being in your body, one that is more effective, more beautiful and more pleasurable. You are working from the inside out, as it were.

The very act of listening to your body and breathing, of bringing body and mind together, is deeply relaxing and energising. It is a kind of meditation. While creating more space in the body, you also create space inside the mind. The normal, constant flow of thoughts is interrupted. Even a few minutes of changing your attention level can give you a feeling of rest and renewal.

Someone who has never practised yoga in this way may find these claims surprising. But if you reflect on your daily life, you may realise just how rarely, if ever, you do anything with such integrated awareness. When busy mentally, you may well ignore your body altogether, unaware of tensions until aches and pains alert you. When physically active, you may let your mind wander – or use will power to make your body meet the demands you are making of it. This is more ‘mind over matter’, rather than bringing mind and body together and respecting the body’s intelligence.

What is the best way to learn yoga?

Yoga is best learned from a teacher. It is almost impossible to gain a good grounding from a book, because it’s about developing an internal body awareness, rather than making the body conform to certain positions. But reading books can certainly help.

You can enrol in one of the many classes now available, privately, or at adult education institutes and leisure centres. The advantage of joining a class is that you can learn from watching other people, and benefit from the social contact with fellow students and the atmosphere of concentration that comes from a group of people working together. However, many teachers offer one-to-one lessons. This is particularly effective, because learning yoga is such an individual process and the teacher can then give more direct, ‘hands-on’ help.

The best way to find a teacher is by personal recommendation. Even within the same school of yoga, teaching styles vary considerably, and it's important to work with someone you like and feel you can trust. Alternatively, approach your adult education authority (or consult *Useful organisations*, on p. 12).

If you want to arrange personal lessons, it might be a good idea to attend a class first, to make sure you like the teacher. Beware of teachers who do not watch their students carefully or give any individual attention, or who allow beginners to try advanced postures, such as a headstand, unsupervised.

What's involved in going to classes?

Most yoga classes will include a variety of postures – lying, standing, sitting and inverted. It will also involve sometimes sitting quietly, paying attention to your breathing or some other simple meditation method, and a few minutes, at least, of total relaxation lying on the floor.

All you need to get started are some loose, comfortable clothes, such as leggings or tracksuit trousers and a t-shirt. It is very important to work with bare feet and to have nothing constricting you around the waist and pelvis. For practice at home, it can be useful to have a non-slip mat.

Ideally, you should go to a class once or twice a week, to begin with. Gradually, as you get into a routine of practice at home, you may not feel that you need to go so often. But, it's important to have guidance from a teacher on a regular basis, for some years, if you are applying yourself seriously to yoga.

How do I choose between the different types of yoga?

There are various forms of yoga taught in England and Wales. Some put more emphasis on sitting meditation, others on physical postures. Those that follow a particular teacher or guru tend to have a more traditional Indian flavour and may have a devotional nature. Some of the main schools of yoga in Britain are the British Wheel of Yoga, Iyengar yoga, Sivananda yoga, Vini yoga and an approach based on the teaching of Vanda Scaravelli.

- The British Wheel is an umbrella organisation, which fosters the development of various kinds of yoga and organises events and teacher-training, nationally.
- Iyengar yoga follows the very precise technique of the Indian teacher B. K. S. Iyengar. It is a fairly strenuous physical practice, combined with breathing exercises and relaxation.
- Sivananda yoga, also named after its founder, teaches the classical postures and meditation practice.
- Vini yoga is based on the teaching of Desikachar, the son of Krishnamacharya (Iyengar's teacher). It is not unlike Iyengar yoga, coming from the same tradition, but it places more emphasis on the breath and adapting yoga practice to the individual.
- Vanda Scaravelli was inspired by Iyengar and Desikachar and developed a way of working using the pull of gravity and the breath to undo tension and awaken the spine. This is still evolving, and is now continued by her students.

There are many other forms of yoga, described by many different names. Hatha yoga simply means any form of physical yoga, not a particular school of yoga. Astanga yoga – also known as power yoga – has become very popular recently, particularly with the young and fit. It combines traditional elements with a more gymnastic approach and is very strenuous, designed to build up body heat. It is for people who are already very fit.

Kundalini yoga is based in tantric tradition and aims for enlightenment through the release of energy around the spine. It also makes fairly extreme physical demands.

Whatever kind of yoga you decide to try, it is important to find a teacher you like and who seems to embody qualities you would like to find in yourself. It's also vital to trust your own instincts and judgment (particularly when you are just starting yoga) and not to continue with anything that makes you feel uncomfortable, either physically or mentally. If it makes you feel jarred, or on edge – or if it hurts you – stop.

Is doing yoga something that needs a lot of will power?

You may need will power to go to your first class and to establish your own practice routine. After that, when you practise yoga, you should be aiming to give up the mindset of 'doing' and achieving goals that is characteristic of our education system (and our culture).

Patrick McDonald, teacher of the Alexander technique, talks of the 'terrible urge to do, which nullifies sensory awareness'. This applies to psychological awareness, as well. The urge 'to do' comes from the ego (the sense of self) and when a person is permanently in that mode, he or she may become imprisoned and isolated in themselves, bodily and mentally. When you begin to refine the quality of your attention, letting go of the will to do, you can start to become aware of dimensions beyond the ego, within and outside of yourself. You may then feel connected to something beyond the ego, within which you can rest and from which you can draw nourishment. It is as if you are placing yourself in a wider context.

The quotation that opens this booklet is from a yoga student who was a long-term sufferer of severe ME, and eloquent about her experience of being helped by yoga. She went on to say:

'Although I was still "only" lying down as I did the rest of the time, I inhabited my body in such a way that I no longer felt confined: imprisoned within the four walls of a room, or caged inside a body that had disowned me. I felt expanded beyond the boundaries of my body; to the elements around me – cradled by the earth below and nourished by the air above me. Simply inhaling and exhaling gave me the sense of an exchange with life, rather than feeling I had been forgotten in its darkest corner. And I felt connected to other bodies on mats around me, instead of feeling socially isolated. Normally, an ill or disabled person is defined in the negative: by not working or not doing. By non-connection to others, the "normal" world of friends, acquaintances and colleagues is drastically reduced. But doing yoga I no longer felt a non-person. The universe began to open up within me like a great still reservoir, soothing my aching sense of smallness.'

Can everyone benefit from doing yoga?

Even very stiff or unfit people can start doing yoga – and have all the more reason to do so! Because yoga is not about performance or achieving goals, every body can respond in its own time, letting go of tension, changing habits and awakening a new kind of intelligence. Even supple and fit people do not usually have access to this intelligence, initially. This is a process that takes time for everyone and is a very personal journey.

On a physical level, yoga undoes tension in the muscles. There is an immediate effect as the day's tensions drop away.

Over time, the tension that has built up inside – tension you may not even be aware of, at first – also begins to dissolve. The quality of muscle tone changes, becoming softer. The muscles lengthen and become more elastic, changing the body's shape, in a subtle yet noticeable way. The face becomes brighter and more relaxed. Many students report that practising yoga helps them to sleep better. Beginners who attend one class a week often notice that they sleep better the night after the class than they do during the rest of the week.

On the mental level, turning your attention onto your body, in the light yet precise way that yoga teaches, can disperse obsessive and repetitive thoughts. The mind can expand pleurably, just as the body does, freeing you to see things from a different perspective. Because you are not trying 'to do' but rather 'to undo', you may become less judgemental of yourself and others. This can have a profoundly healing effect, psychologically.

Can yoga help me get fit?

Practising yoga won't enable you to run a mile or perform other athletic feats. But it can contribute to your aerobic fitness by improving the elasticity of your muscles, deepening your breathing and improving your circulation. Yoga complements other forms of exercise, so you may do them more easily and more efficiently.

Some people worry that doing yoga will mean losing their muscle tone. You will lose only the rigid muscle tone that prevents freedom of movement at the joints. It does not make you flabby! Your muscles will become softer to the touch and more elastic, sliding more easily over the bones, rather like a healthy animal.

Regular yoga practice can make you strong, but it is not exactly the kind of strength gained by pushing weights and training at the gym. While the large locomotive muscles of the body become softer and more elastic, deeper-lying muscles are invited to work more actively. These include the muscles close to the spine (such as the deep postural and breathing muscles). A person can then develop a sense of being strong and alive in the core of their body, and relaxed in the outer body. A healthier balance is achieved as the whole body becomes more integrated. People also engage the force of gravity and 'borrow' strength from outside, using their muscles in a much less tiring way that feels almost boundless.

When will I start feeling the effects?

Most people feel benefits after a single session. They usually leave a class feeling better than when they arrived, sometimes dramatically so, because fatigue, backache and headaches can vanish. However, permanent changes in the body take place gradually.

Naturally, the more often you practise, the more quickly you see improvement. Most people who attend one class a week notice positive changes in the way they look and feel in their everyday life, after a few months. It is important to remember that the process cannot be hurried through will power and determination. It is about learning to be in the present, rather than striving towards a future goal. Keep practise sessions regular, short and intense; don't let them become erratic, prolonged and mechanical.

Is there anything I can practise safely on my own?

There is a very simple relaxation exercise that will refresh you and start the process of developing deeper bodily awareness. It can also greatly ease back pain.

- Lie flat on the floor on a comfortable, warm surface, with your knees bent up and your feet flat on the floor. Alternatively, rest your lower legs on a bed or sofa. Make sure your body is straight.
- Take hold of your head with both hands and give it a slight tug to release your neck and help your chin to drop. If your chin pokes up in the air, place a book under the back of your head (not a cushion). Cover yourself with a blanket, if you like.
- Rest your hands palms down on your abdomen or, if you prefer, rest your arms on the floor a little away from your body, with palms turned upwards. Close your eyes and let them rest towards the back of your head. Relax your jaw muscles and your mouth and your tongue.
- Feel your whole body letting go into the floor, as if it is spreading wider. Feel your muscles softening, as if letting go of their grip on the bones. Become aware of the rhythmical, slight rise and fall of your abdomen and solar plexus, as the breath comes in and goes out. Keep your thighs, abdominal muscles, hips and shoulders completely soft. Let the back of your waist widen and drop towards the floor, in its own time.
- Rest your attention on the sensation of the breath and become familiar with its pulse, as though watching small waves breaking and receding on the beach. Stay like this for five minutes, or more, then open your eyes and roll on to your side before getting up.

References

Awakening the spine Vanda Scaravelli (Aquarian Press/Harper Collins)

The spiritual heritage of India ed. Swami Prabhavananda (Vedanta Press, California)

The thinking body Mabel Elsworth Todd (Dance Horizons, New York)

Psychology and the East C. G. Jung (Routledge/Kegan Paul)

Useful organisations

Mind

Mind is the leading mental health organisation in England and Wales, providing a unique range of services through its local associations, to enable people with experience of mental distress to have a better quality of life. For more information about any mental health issues, including details of your nearest local Mind association, contact the Mind website: www.mind.org.uk or MindinfoLine on 0845 766 0163.

British Wheel of Yoga

28 Jermyn Street, Sleaford, Lincs NG34 7RU

tel. 01529 306 851, fax: 01529 303 233

email: office@bwy.org.uk web: www.bwy.org.uk

Acts as a focus for yoga organisations in the UK, and provides facilities

Iyengar Yoga Institute

223a Randolph Avenue, London W9 1NL

tel. 020 7624 3080, fax: 020 7372 2726

email: office@iyi.org.uk web: www.iyi.org.uk

Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centre

51 Felsham Road, London SW15 1AZ

tel. 020 8780 0160, fax: 020 8780 0128

email: london@sivananda.org web: www.sivanandayoga.org

UK base of the International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centers

Satyananda Yoga Centre

70 Thurleigh Road, London SW12 8UD

tel. 020 8673 4869, fax: 020 8675 4080

web: www.syclondon.com

The Yoga for Health Foundation

Ickwell Bury, Biggleswade, Bedfordshire SG18 9EF

tel. 01767 627 271, fax: 01767 627 266

email: admin@yogaforhealthfoundation.co.uk

web: www.yogaforhealthfoundation.co.uk

A registered charity promoting the practice of yoga for all. Lists local practitioners

YogaSense.com Ltd

PO Box 30676, London E1 6GD

tel. 07971 274 929

email: info@yogasense.com web: www.yogasense.com

For information on yoga and Vanda Scaravelli's teaching

Useful websites

www.satyananda.net

Satyananda yoga online information

www.self-realization.com/yoga/yoga_centers_england.htm

The International Yoga Directory and Yoga Centers England lists yoga centres from all yoga traditions

Further reading

- Ageing, spirituality and wellbeing* A. Jewell (JKP 2003) £17.95
- The complete guide to mental health* E. Farrell (Mind/Vermilion 1997) £9.99
- Good mood food* M. Van Straten (Cassell 2002) £10.99
- Healing minds* J. Wallcraft (Mental Health Foundation 1998) £12
- Conquering fear* D. Rowe (Mind 2003)
- How to cope with panic attacks* (Mind 2004) £1
- How to cope with sleep problems* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to cope with the stress of student life* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to deal with anger* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to improve your mental wellbeing* (Mind 2004) £1
- How to increase your self-esteem* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to look after yourself* (Mind 2004) £1
- How to rebuild your life after breakdown* (Mind 2004) £1
- How to stop worrying* (Mind 2004) £1
- Learn to sleep well* C. Idzikowski (DBP 2000) £9.99
- Lifting depression the balanced way* Dr L. Corrie (Sheldon Press 2002) £6.99
- Making sense of herbal remedies* (Mind 2004) £3.50
- Making sense of homeopathy* (Mind 2004) £3.50
- Making sense of traditional Chinese medicine* (Mind 2004) £3.50
- The Mind guide to food and mood* (Mind 2004) £1
- The Mind guide to managing stress* (Mind 2003) £1
- The Mind guide to massage* (Mind 2004) £1
- The Mind guide to physical activity* (Mind 2004) £1
- The Mind guide to relaxation* (Mind 2004) £1
- The Mind guide to spiritual practices* (Mind 2003) £1
- Mind troubleshooters: stress* (Mind 2003) 50p
- Mind troubleshooters: panic attacks* (Mind 2004) 50p
- Relaxation: exercises and inspirations for wellbeing* Dr S. Brewer (DBP 2003) £4.99
- Understanding anxiety* (Mind 2003) £1
- Understanding depression* (Mind 2004) £1
- Understanding mental illness* (Mind 2004) £1

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Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 028 9032 8474

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