

YOGA

From the Heart

By Alan Williams

Yoga: is it a science, an art or even a religion? Where does it come from and what exactly does it do for you? It may involve more than you initially thought and it may be just what you need in your life of never-ending challenges and the ups and downs of everyday life. It is an ancient practice that has stood the test of time, and is as needed just as much in today's world as ever before.

A personal perspective

When I was a teenager I was heavily involved with sports of all kinds, individual and team games, and loved every minute of it. It was great to use my physical body in a variety of ways at the same time as engaging my mind and emotions to achieve the purpose of the game. In that way the mind, body and emotions were totally engaged and focused on the task at hand, and time stood still as nothing else mattered during that game or activity. This is normal stuff for a teenager who loved sport. But I also loved drawing, painting, music and loads of other activities, and again when I was doing all of these things I was totally engaged in the task at hand and the outside world didn't seem as important as the inner world of doing the activity – whatever it was.

What has this to do with yoga? Read on...

Then one day in my mid-to-late teens I picked up a book that just seemed to be there in front of me entitled "Yoga and Health" written by two famous yoga teachers. And yes, I picked it up and read it. And I couldn't put it down. I cannot count how many times over the years that I have re-read this same book. Yes, it is that good. It didn't just explain yoga philosophy and techniques; it absolutely inspired me and still does to this day. It seemed to answer so many questions that I had lurking under the surface that needed to be answered. It helped me realise who I was, and how I could become more of that person. On a physical level, it inspired me to be healthy and showed me how. On a mental level, it explained how to link mind and body (something I did during sports) and how to be focused on what I was doing at the time. And it had nothing to do with following any particular religion as anyone could practice it.

Did I find Yoga, or did Yoga find me?

I can't say I went looking for the book, or the subject of Yoga, because I didn't do it consciously. Up until that day I don't think I had even heard of it. Maybe it found me. Or maybe what was within me guided me to it, who knows? The important thing is that Yoga suddenly appeared in my life and is still there thirty years later. It has been there in varying amounts and doses throughout my life and has always helped me to progress to the next level - when I've allowed it. And it has helped me in just about every way I can think of. It has made lots of seemingly unconnected areas become connected, and has tied up lots of loose ends, and opened up a much bigger reality to embrace by seeing more clearly the big picture of life. That is my story... now, what can it do for you?

What is Yoga?

As Paramhansa Yogananda stated in "The Essence of Self-Realization";

"Yoga is an art as well as a science. It is a science, because it offers practical methods for controlling body and mind, thereby making deep meditation possible. And it is an art, for unless it is practised intuitively and sensitively it will yield only superficial results."

Yoga is a science of life, a spiritual approach to living having its roots in India many thousands of years ago. It has several branches of which Hatha yoga is probably the best known in the western world. This is the physical branch involving postures and breath control. However, Hatha Yoga is part of Raja Yoga (the Royal Yoga) which embraces all aspects of our entire being, not just physical.

Yoga can be seen as a supreme method for uniting the body and mind so they come into harmony with each other, and for developing the art of energy control. Yoga as an art can help you to attain health, happiness and self-fulfilment by practising with intuition and sensitivity, and by going within to where your true nature resides. Yoga literally means "union" and this refers to the joining together of the little self with the Higher Self with the ultimate aim of achieving oneness, being at one with everything that is. The yoga postures (asanas) and breathing methods (pranayama) are all techniques of energy control in order to control the energy and to bring that energy inward and upward toward the brain to achieve a higher state of awareness.

Many people in the western world may be familiar only with Hatha Yoga, the physical aspect of perfecting the body. But to what purpose is all this time and effort put? Hatha Yoga is merely one dimension of Raja Yoga, the method of achieving Self-Realization or Super-consciousness. The physical postures are the means to provide the body with the strength, flexibility and capability to remain motionless in order to meditate deeply in a sitting position of complete comfort. In fact, asana means "seat" or "posture". The postures are also designed to increase energy within the system and to direct that energy upward toward the brain to be available for meditation and raising our consciousness.

The Energetics of Yoga

The practices of Hatha Yoga tend to emphasize getting underneath the energy at the base of the spine to force it upward. Raja Yoga, however, includes this concept along with the practice of inviting that same energy upward from above, by increasing the magnetism of the higher centres within the human energy system. All types or styles of Yoga ultimately have the same purpose; spiritual growth.



The true purpose of yoga is to take the experience of the postures and meditation and integrate that experience and growth in all areas of your life, otherwise it just becomes another form of exercise, albeit productive exercise, but limited merely to the superficial physical dimension. These benefits are profound in themselves, such as improving overall health, exerting a beneficial effect on all body systems such as glandular, visceral, musculo-skeletal systems.

The postures can irrigate and stretch joints, tone skeletal muscles, increase strength and suppleness while promoting healthy diaphragmatic breathing. All this helps to keep the body youthful by allowing energy to flow freely throughout the entire system. But on a different level they also help to develop Self-awareness that promotes the ability to expand our awareness of everything in life that is around us.

As the mind and body are interweaved, the postures can influence mental outlook, and the mind can affect body functions. The yoga postures are designed to harmonize the energy flow in the body. Mind and body together, so if we harmonize one, we can influence the other by the appropriate use of the energy within. This is one aspect of oneness.

Sequence of yoga postures

Many different 'styles' of Hatha yoga are practised, and the order of the postures can be seen to vary, even with different teachers. One sequence that can be used is to connect postures in such a way that energy is encouraged to flow inward from the periphery of the body, and then upward toward the brain.

After a warm-up which usually will include breathing exercises of some sorts, standing asanas begin the sequence of postures to help develop correct posture and to centre our awareness in the spine. Then we move to a variety of postures on the floor that are designed to stretch, open and vitalize the spine to create a free and open channel for the energy to flow. These postures include forward and backward bends, side bends and spinal rotations. Inverted poses follow and use the force of gravity, and "subtle gravity" to draw this energy up the spine toward the brain.

A period of deep relaxation can allow us to be absorbed into this awakened inner awareness to internalize the energy in the brain. Meditation brings energy to the spiritual eye, the point between the eyebrows. To keep the energy flowing, the aim is to move smoothly and consciously into and out of each pose and to remain calmly during the pose to become fully aware of its effect both mentally and physically. This requires focused attention during the entire routine, but then doesn't life in general demand the same to achieve maximum benefit from anything you do?

Yoga is not something separate from life, but a way of living, and a way of achieving true happiness right here and now, not waiting for the after-life. This is why its effects are so profound and far-reaching, as it can help every area of your life if you only let it. We must become more consciously aware of ourselves in order to be fully aware of life around us. Then we are at one with life and all its challenges. And when we practice yoga we aim to have more energy by the end of the routine than when we started, and we can then put that energy to use in everything we do. Even the time, or pause, between postures is vital not just for rest, but to assimilate the benefits of each posture, so that their individual effects build upon each other like building up a massive reservoir of energy with huge potential for when we want to use it.

Further along the path

Each particular asana is associated with a unique energy flow and this has an effect on the Chakras, the subtle vortices of energy within the human system. As we progress with yoga practice we can tune into these chakras more deeply and work with the energy within them as we become aware of it. This is a further advancement of dealing with the energy within us that we can use to become more fully aware of who and what we are.

Self-fulfilment

Our hopes and dreams are there for us to realize during this lifetime, and by following them we can achieve fulfilment. Yoga can help to balance the individual on the inside, so that he can be at peace with the world on the outside. The intent behind those hopes and dreams is really to achieve self-fulfilment, so a life can be lived without regret as we realize our true place and connection with all of life.

Yoga is something an individual comes to by choice, as he or she knows there is more, and that the time is ready to experience it. Then with practice the experience of Yoga becomes an experience of life itself.

If you need convincing, why not consider for a moment one of the simplest things in life, something that most people take completely for granted - breathing. It is so simple, yet where would you be without it? You know the answer to that question, so why not use this process of breathing to your advantage and see it as a method of increasing and controlling energy to put to good use. This is one of the many fundamentals of yoga and why it can have such a beneficial effect on your entire life.

Yoga is not so much something you do as something you experience and live. So, if you feel there is something missing in your life, something more to experience that can help you in all areas of your life, why not explore this ancient science of living as a means of being fulfilled in this modern world.

Alan Williams is a Certified Yoga Teacher, Registered Osteopath, and Certified Practitioner of Pilates for Rehabilitation.

"In the sky of your mind, you are the sun"
(Selvarajan Yesudian)