

Some Benefits of having Yoga in your Life

By Helen Craig, 19th July 2016

As you will know through your practice, having yoga in your life improves or maintains your general level of fitness, and this includes flexibility, strength and balance. Over time you can feel its effects on your body. However, it also has a positive effect on your well-being and can even influence your lifestyle, your relationships with others in the world, and, of course, most especially with yourself.

If you are rather unfit, you may start with the gentle practice of yoga, then feel more confident about other forms of exercise. If you have an active lifestyle, you will be looking for other benefits that yoga offers, such as finding stillness. Yoga is a good complement to many sports, as it is non-competitive, and works the whole body to bring it back into balance. Yoga can keep you feeling fit and stretchy as you get older as well.

Your ability to be flexible is tied up with the tension we all carry in our bodies, and yoga can help us to release such tensions in our joints and muscles. We all build up day-to-day physical tensions or store emotional tensions, and become more flexible as we release them. After one session you will notice a temporary effect, but over a period of weeks or months you will notice a more long-lasting increase in flexibility. You might also find that you are calmer in emotionally difficult situations.

If you are young, fit and already quite flexible, and possibly competitive with yourself as well, there can be a risk of injury, so flexibility needs to be counterbalanced with strength to give you safety & stability. Suppleness should be supported by strong muscles and joints, which protect the body from over-stretching, especially if you wish to develop your ability to perform advanced poses. Strength is also needed to maintain balance, and older yoga students in particular can benefit from this aspect of practicing yoga regularly.

Yoga works different joints and muscles in turn, promoting release of tension and good relaxation as well as increased strength, body tone and flexibility. In any one session, we aim to take the spine in all directions: forward, back, to each side and in a twist. We also include a balancing posture and some kind of inversion, and, crucially, always end with a relaxation. So any one session stimulates and then balances and stabilizes us energetically. Limbers prepare the body for stronger work to come and ideally, as well as general limbers, there are one or two which help to prepare the body for that week's main pose. Particular yoga postures are said to have particular benefits, and many students are quite interested in these.

Forward bends are one of the specific practices in every class. They help to lengthen and strengthen the hamstrings, make the muscles of the back more supple and promote space for breathing in the back of the body. When you use them to focus on the exhalation, they can promote introspection and a calm mind. Forward bends are said to express your ability to let go of your past. Depending on the intention of the teacher at the time, it may be that they are not about how far you can go but rather how deeply you can release.

Back bends take the spine in the opposite direction, lengthening the muscles at the front of the body, and opening into the chest. Some jobs require a lot of forward bending in the shoulders, examples being secretarial or manual work, leading to habitual poor posture. This posture is a gesture of low confidence and our body's natural response to danger. Back bends help us to find space in the shoulders and to put us in a posture which expresses confidence and courage. Opening the chest and upper body might also allow us to open more fully to emotions, experiences and relationships.

Yoga is said to bring balance to body, mind & emotions, and we can explore this with balance poses. Core strength supports the spine and internal organs, and so improves our ability in balance postures. Another way to explore balance is with asymmetrical poses such as side bends and twists, when you

feel uneven after taking the pose to the first side and even once again after the second side. Breathing practices can also promote a sense of balance and equilibrium

So yoga, as an exercise practice, can enhance the level of fitness in your body. Beyond this, regular practice and the teachings of yoga may help you to think about your lifestyle outside the yoga class. This may be having the chance to find space for yourself, to observe and reflect, in other words, your relationship with yourself. Or it may include your relationships with others in the world.

Many people experience an improvement in body awareness; an understanding of where you are in space, your breathing, how well you are able to balance, and the range of movement you have in your joints. You may also begin to notice any discomforts which would normally be just below the surface, so that you attend to them sooner. Bringing your attention to the time and place you are at the time, and into the body and breath, is a very powerful way of focusing on the moment and being mindful.

Yoga helps you to be aware of your breath, useful for focus and calm, but also useful for noticing stress, for example. This awareness can be developed so you can regulate it, for example, using breath control to reduce stress. Students have told me about using a particular yoga breath technique to help them get through situations they would normally find very stressful, such as a hospital scan or a plane journey.

If you have trouble sleeping well, you may find yoga very beneficial. Some people tell me that they always sleep better on the day of their yoga class. On other days you can use the techniques you have learnt in class, such as one of the breathing practices, or a taking yourself through the relaxation process. It's also helpful to make the daily rhythm of activity and restfulness work for you rather than fighting against it, and this relates to an ancient teaching called the Gunas: Tamas, Rajas and Sattwa.

Yoga helps to promote the process of Letting Go of distractions and bringing our attention into the body, reducing stress. It also helps bring clarity to the mind, as we let go of physical tensions, and let go of busy thoughts, leaving the mind calm.

In the yoga tradition, the food you eat is linked with various teachings. One of these is noticing whether you are suffering from inertia (see Tamas, above) or over-stimulated (Rajas) and planning your diet accordingly. There is a tradition of Ayurveda, or medicine through food, which can be compared with early herbalism. Another teaching, Ahimsa, meaning non-harm, leads many people to take up a vegetarian diet, or to perhaps reduce their intake of meat. Some yoga practices are said to stimulate digestion by working on Manipura Chakra, and the idea of digestion, transformation and the clearing away of waste can be thought of as acting at a symbolic, psychological level as well.

As you can see, a lot of yoga practice is about your relationship with your own body and your own self. However, there are teachings which can offer guidance regarding your relationships with others, and these are known as the Yamas. I have already mentioned Ahimsa, or the idea of kindness to others and not seeking to cause harm to another being, but there are others, and these are sometimes brought into a yoga class to provide food for thought and an insight into your life, often in a very practical way with yoga poses rather than as a lecture. Some people find that the practice of yoga goes beyond physical exercise and can help you to find new ways to think about dealing with the people in your life.

I hope that through the practice of yoga you have found or will find many of these benefits in your own life.

Love and peace, Helen