

Yoga Tips for Healthy Living

by Nicola Phoenix

Yoga is a spiritual science of life, a system incorporating all aspects of a healthy mind, body and spirit. It is so immense that its dimensions of breathing, exercise, diet, cleansing, devotion, chanting, relaxation and meditation, to mention but a few, span every aspect of healthy living.

This article can only touch on a few aspects of yoga within its vast texts, teachings, techniques, philosophy and disciplines. Let your intuition guide you to further reading, and your appetite for growth to consider the philosophies and simple yet affective techniques.

The word yoga translates as *union*.¹ The yogic system goes back so far that it is difficult to date precisely. There have been adjustments to its teachings as taught by some in the west, to purely an exercise system. This is false. Yoga is a complete system of life, its magnitude vast, and benefits limitless. Great importance is placed on knowing the theory of yoga, but the true benefits come when we put it into practice in our every day lives.

The great sage Patanjali recorded teaching notes around 400BC stating the essential practises of Yoga. The eight limbs of yoga, as they are known, are said to “encompass the whole of human behaviour from personal conduct, posture, breathing and control of the senses to an understanding of the mind or self-realization.”²

The first two stages of these teachings (the *Yamas* and *Niyamas*) focus on rules of conduct and observation of the self. These include not lying, stealing or being violent, finding contentment and living in the present. If you are being deceitful or angry, then the mind is not calm. Bring your awareness to your behaviour. If the mind is reacting negatively towards it, then it is not at peace.

The third stage from Patanjali’s teachings refers to the postures (*asana*). The benefits of postures are immense. They are actions for keeping the internal and external parts of the body in good health, and help the process of elimination of waste matter from the body. Flexibility, purification of the blood to a great extent, stimulating the glands, strengthening and improving the health of the body, are of some of the benefits gained from the postures. Specific postures are also therapeutic.

All yoga practices should be undertaken with guidance from an expert teacher. The relaxation posture described below is useful in the management of high blood pressure, peptic ulcer, anxiety, hysteria, cancer and all psychosomatic diseases as cited in the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (a yogic text). Even though a static pose, it revitalizes the entire system.

Shavasana – Corpse Pose

Lie down flat on your back. With arms and legs slightly away from the body, the palms of the hands facing upwards, and legs and feet falling out to the sides. Close your eyes and relax the body. You can maintain this posture for up to 20 minutes, using the relaxation technique described below to assist you.

To fully relax and calm the body and mind we will introduce further stages of Patanjali’s teachings, i.e. the control of the breath (*Pranayama*), sense withdrawal (*Pratyahara*) and concentration (*Dharana*).

Marmanasthanam Kriya (22 part relaxation).

Relaxation has a huge benefit on the psychological-physical system, whether done alone or with other yoga practices. To reduce insomnia and tension, it is best practised before sleep.

Repeat this practice as many times as necessary until calm and relaxed. Work through the body in the order stated below, bringing your full awareness to each part of body in turn, focusing on it, then relaxing it, letting go of any tension in that part of the body before moving on to the next part.

Toes, feet, lower legs, upper legs, buttocks, back, pelvic area, abdomen, chest, fingers hands, lower arms, upper arms, shoulders, neck and throat, mouth and chin, nose and cheeks, eyes, back of the head, top of the head, and forehead.

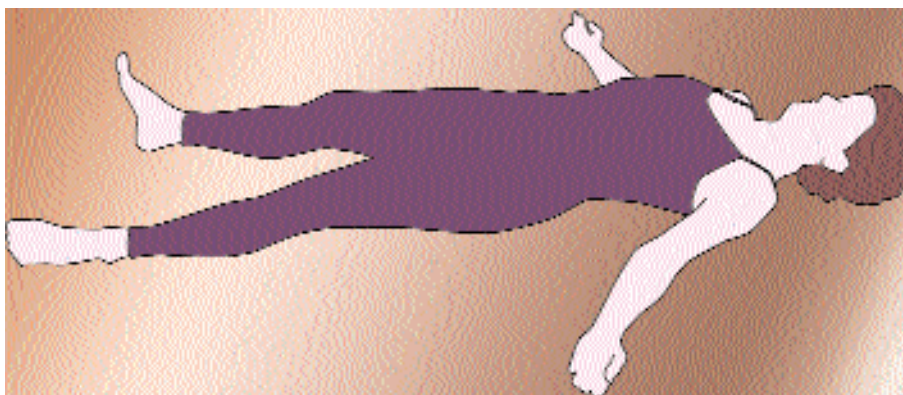
To induce an even deeper relaxation, work in the reverse order from head down to toes.

Pranayama Techniques

Pranayama is the control of life-force, called *Prana*, with which all things exist. Many different breathing techniques stimulate and increase this vital energy.

“Many people breathe incorrectly, using only a small part of their lung capacity, in a shallow manner depriving the body of oxygen and *prana*.”³

Breathing in and out should always be



Shavasana – Corpse Pose

through the nose unless stated. Sit with a straight spine; head and neck should also be erect, and only practise on a stomach that is empty of food for at least three hours. The importance thing here is not to strain the breath.

Natural Breathing

With the eyes closed, observe your natural breath. Feel it come in through the nostrils and reach the back of the throat. Move your awareness next to the chest and feel the chest expanding slowly, rib by rib as the breath flows into the ribcage. Then bring your awareness to the abdomen, and as the breath comes into the abdomen it expands. Then slowly allow the breath to leave the body as the abdomen falls, the ribcage and chest empty, and your awareness of your natural breath continues. Repeat for a few more minutes while watching your natural, relaxed breathing rhythm.

Mahat Pranayama – The Complete Breath

This technique uses slow deep breathing, actively filling and then emptying each section of the lungs in a specific sequence.

Inhale through the nose, a deep, slow and relaxed breath, directing it down into the abdomen to expand it fully. Feel the air reaching the bottom of the lungs and the abdomen rising. Continue to breathe in, filling the mid-chest (feel each rib part as the breath enters). Continue this in-breath as you fill the upper chest (a slight movement may occur in the collarbone area and shoulder area). Now feel the lungs completely full in one continuous in-breath, with no jerks or strain, merging into one flowing movement.

The exhalation empties the lungs in the same order as they are filled. Move your awareness back to the abdomen area and begin to slowly empty from this lower part of the lungs by pulling the abdomen down towards the wall of the spine. Slowly allow the ribcage to empty, and then smoothly empty the chest in one exhalation until the whole of the lungs is empty.

Begin by performing this six times, gradually increasing to two or three rounds of these six breaths. With experience you can add counts to your inhale and exhale so that you are emptying and filling the

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lungs equally (to the same number of counts). This can be for a comfortable count of four or six in a slow rhythmic fashion.

As you bring your focus to the breath, you may begin to notice how the mind slowly focuses and relaxes. This allows you to continue your journey of stilling and calming the mind, preparing you for meditation practice (*Dhyana*). Meditation is the “unbroken flow of thoughts towards an object of concentration.”⁴

Progression in meditation can take a long time. Finding the most beneficial practices, and undertaking the gradual process of calming the mind as well as concentration, is a true learning process. Overcoming obstacles of the ego, and expectations, as well as patience and discipline, can be a huge part of the learning.

Meditation is ideal for rest and rejuvenation. The body gets rest during sleep, the mind does not, remaining active in

dream state. It is hard to detach the mind from mental activities, thoughts and stimulation.

Swami Saraswati⁵ states that “meditation brings excellent health and alleviates and cures many types of disease, giving the patients the power and tools to cure themselves.” Western medicine takes the power away from the patient. The patient can direct their inner energy and awareness to the specific area that an *external individual* is unable to do. “Blood pressure and heart rate lower during and after meditation, therefore effective for those with high blood pressure.”⁵ Meditation assists the body ‘improving the function of the brain, senses and perception and allows the body to recover from stress, injury and disease faster.’⁶

There are countless techniques for meditation, concentration and focusing the mind for beginning the process of taking your awareness within. Start with a five minutes practice, slowly increasing until you can hold your awareness for 20 minutes each day.

In your comfortably seated position, with the spine straight, the head and neck erect, an empty stomach, and a suitable environment, begin to bring your full awareness to your breath, observe it as it flows in and out. Keep this awareness, if the mind wanders bring it back to the breath, and allow your mind to become absorbed in the breath. You may wish to hold your awareness on the tip of the nose, following the breath from there.

For a technique to focus the mind by visualization, if you prefer, close your eyes and focus within. This technique involves moving your awareness around the outside of the body in rhythm with the breath. Shift your awareness to the base of the spine, as you breathe in move your awareness up the spine, over the head and down the face to the tip of the nose. As



Progression in meditation can take a long time

you breathe out move the awareness down the face and front of the body, underneath the body, until it reaches the base of the spine again. Continue this movement of your awareness around the body with the breath. You may wish to visualize light circling around the body as you move your awareness to develop this practice further.

Meditation can also involve silent repetition of a sacred word or mantra, or focusing on a specific object, symbol or deity. With so many techniques, the key is to find that which works for you, bringing your mind under control and fully focused.

The last stage from Patanjali's teachings is the state of pure enlightenment (*Samadhi*). This occurs "when all mental distractions disappear and the mind becomes a *state one-pointed*."⁴ Although few may actually ever achieve such an enlightened state, the path of yoga provides a system where at each level of the journey, and with each practice, there are benefits and rewards.

Diet and Nutrition

Yoga philosophy teaches diet and nutrition through knowledge of the three *Gunas* (three qualities which translate into food types), *Tamas*, *Rajas* and *Sattva*. This provides a diet for optimal wellbeing, but also the philosophy to why certain foods are not helpful to our system.

Rajas is fire. *Rajasic* food can over-stimulate the body, typically caffeine, salt, fish, chocolate, garlic, and bitter or very spicy foods. By substituting the natural form of energy for a

food stimulant, the body and mind respond by demonstrating highly active, energetic restless behaviour.

Tamas is darkness. *Tamasic* foods do not release *prana* (energy) and are stale, over-ripe, or fermented. These include meat, artificial additives, drugs, tobacco and alcohol. They can make the body and mind feel very sluggish as they do not provide nourishment. Mental blocks, irrationality, dullness and laziness are some effects of digesting *Tamas* food.

Sattva is light. *Sattvic* foods provide nourishment for the body and mind, and consist of vegetables, fruits, nuts, milk, seeds, grains and cereals. The diet of a Yogi will consist of *Sattvic* foods, high in nutrients and *prana* and low in processed foods.

If the yogic diet can assist in your choice of food, let it be both full of *prana*, freshness and grown, but more importantly make sure it *suits* your system.

Yoga not only teaches us ethical and moral behaviours, it also provides a complete system of breathing, postures, cleansing and meditation practices which work along with all other spiritual practices in helping the yogi to achieve enlightenment. However we choose to practise yoga, and whatever techniques we find work for us, the benefits are limitless.

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