

Into the West: Yoga Outlasts Exercise Fads

CHRISTEN L. BROWNLEE

From its ancient roots in India, this beneficial discipline keeps growing in popularity.

Some diet and exercise crazes disappear as quickly as they become popular. Remember the run on oat bran in the early 1990s? How about the dance aerobics classes of the 1980s, complete with headbands and leg warmers? Both fads are now gone, with barely a trace of the following they once attained.

Not so with yoga. This healthy “trend” has lasted for about 5000 years, with no indications it will wane. On the contrary; with continued practice in traditional countries in the East and its wildly increasing popularity in the West, yoga is here to stay. Though it was made popular in the past by celebrities such as pop star Madonna and supermodel Christy Turlington, these days all kinds of people, from harried mothers to tumbling toddlers to CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, use yoga for exercise and relaxation. According to *Yoga Journal*, a magazine for yoga practitioners, there are around 18 million people in the United States who regularly practice yoga.

Although no one is certain how it confers its multitude of benefits, studies and practitioners agree: Yoga can increase the quality and perhaps even the length of your life. While published research has shown that yoga can lower blood pressure, ease back pain, decrease “bad” cholesterol, and lower stress, anecdotal evidence claims that its exercises confer an overall sense of well-being and give practitioners peace of mind.

Ancient Origins

Yoga is a Sanskrit word meaning “a union” or “to yoke”—it represents the joining together of body and mind. Although not much is known about yoga’s beginnings, it was started in India in roughly 3000 B.C.E. as a branch of the Hindu healing science known as Ayurveda. Ayurveda is an ancient and integrated approach to treating and preventing illness that brings together lifestyle interventions and a wide variety of natural therapies. Although it’s

linked to Hinduism, yoga itself is not a religion—it is simply a system of exercises for attaining bodily or mental control and well-being. In India, yoga is practiced by a variety of people with different religious and philosophical backgrounds.



There are several different types of yoga, some emphasizing more spiritual or athletic aspects over others. Since its introduction in the United States in the 1960s, Hatha, or physical yoga, has been the most popular. Hatha yoga highlights a series of poses or postures known as “asanas” with the goal of balancing the opposites in one’s life. For example, flexes are followed by extensions, a rounded back is followed by an arched back, and physical exercises are followed by mental meditations. Each asana has a descriptive name indicative of what the posture looks like—the cobra, boat, and tree are a few examples (see box, “Sample Pose, Step by Step”).

Each asana and period of meditation is accompanied by “pranayama”, or breathing exercises. There are many breathing techniques, but most require the participant to keep breaths deep, steady, and

even. Yoga philosophy dictates that each breath is forcing the prana, or life force, throughout the body.

A yoga session is much different from a typical Western workout—the stretches and poses stress motionless and anaerobic calorie burning over vigorous aerobic activity. Concentration and a connection with the body are preferred over distractions from bodily sensations, like listening to headphones. Teachers emphasize pace over competition—all are encouraged to do as many, or as few, of the positions as they feel comfortable doing.

A Typical Session

These days, you can find yoga classes almost anywhere throughout the world—in large urban centers and small towns alike. Sessions are held at community centers, colleges, senior-citizen centers, and gyms. There are also yoga schools, which usually have their own buildings or studio spaces. Some employers even sponsor free or low-cost classes for employees right in the workplace.

Sessions are usually held as group classes that last approximately an hour, but some instructors are available for private lessons in their studios or in students’ homes. Classes can be tailored for specific needs, and in many areas, a wide variety of class options are available. For example, many yoga schools offer several different levels of difficulty in addition to classes for seniors, toddlers, and expectant mothers.

Each class begins with a gentle warm-up exercise and proceeds to the three yoga disciplines: first pranayama, then asanas, and finally, meditation. The poses are practiced from one to three times, with breathing techniques emphasized throughout. After three or four postures, the class will be allowed to rest. Once the exercises are complete, there is usually a period of relaxation combined with meditation at the close of each session.

The Incentives

This form of exercise comes with a multitude of benefits that most Western work-

Sample Pose, Step by Step

The Boat

1. Lie on your belly with your chin on the floor, legs together, and arms alongside your body, 45 degrees away from your side, with palms down.
2. Pull up the knee caps, squeeze your thighs and buttocks, and press the pubic bone down into the floor.
3. Inhale and lift the legs, head, chest, and arms off the floor. Reach out through your fingers, toes, and crown of the head. Keep your neck in line with the spine.
4. Drop your shoulders down and back, and press your chest forward. Keep legs and buttocks tight, and keep the pubic bone pressing down into the floor.
5. Breathe and hold for 2–6 breaths.
6. To release, exhale and slowly lower the chest, head, arms, and legs to the floor. Turn the head to one side, slide the arms alongside your body and rest.

outs just don't offer. Like a typical gym workout, the stretches and weight-bearing postures of yoga can enhance muscle strength, coordination, flexibility, and agility and can relieve many types of pain. But the real incentive is the intense mind-body connection offered through yoga's meditation and concentration—through deep breathing and mental focus, practitioners can lower blood pressure and heart rate, increase cardiovascular and respiratory efficiency, normalize endocrine and gastrointestinal function, and lower stress.

Consider these documented benefits:

- A recent study showed that yoga may be as effective as drug therapy in controlling hypertension (1). Subjects in this study were randomly assigned to three groups—one that practiced yoga, one that received standard treatments, including medication, and a third group that received no treatment. Researchers found that the first two groups experienced the same level of effectiveness in lowering symptoms of hypertension.
- A second study in the same journal linked a yoga regimen to significantly

increased feelings of good health, as rated by a standardized "Subjective Well-Being Inventory". Volunteers who participated in a four-month yoga session reported an increase in their quality of life, compared with before their participation (2).

- A review of the research on complementary treatments found that mind-body techniques, including yoga, were helpful in treating musculoskeletal disease and related disorders (3). The researchers concluded that further studies on mind-body techniques involved in the area of "successful aging" should be a high priority.
- Two studies found that yoga helps with pain associated with osteoarthritis and carpal tunnel syndrome (4). Although the authors point out that the stretching and improved strength brought about by yogic poses would explain some pain relief, they propose further study into yoga's unique cellular and physiological effects.

A Word of Caution

Yoga's excellent qualifications have made it a popular complementary therapy to treat a variety of conditions, including cancer, diabetes, arthritis, asthma, heart disease, migraine, and AIDS. However, yoga alone is not an effective cure for any particular disease. Most new yoga practitioners start with sessions just once a week and increase their class load with their interest and ability. It's wise to check with your doctor before starting a yoga class—conditions such as high blood pressure or prior illness could limit the number of poses you should perform.

References

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- (4) *Rheum. Dis. Clin. North Am.* **2000**, *26* (1), 125–132.

Suggested Reading

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www.iayt.org.

Christen L. Brownlee is an associate editor of *Today's Chemist at Work*. Send your comments or questions regarding this article to tcaw@acs.org or to the Editorial Office address on page 6. ♦