

Yoga — Beyond Fitness

by Shan Titus

Like many people, you may think yoga means contortions practiced by folks overly zealous about Eastern fads. Maybe you feel you can't possibly do yoga—even if you wanted to—since you can't imagine sitting in lotus posture or chanting Sanskrit syllables. Or, maybe you just think that yogis are a bit weird in the head from all the headstands they do!

These ideas come from a misunderstanding of what yoga actually is. There are different schools of this ancient discipline, but the most common form practiced in the West is hatha yoga. It involves physical postures, breathing, relaxation, and meditation techniques that originated in India thousands of years ago, and are still benefitting many people today.

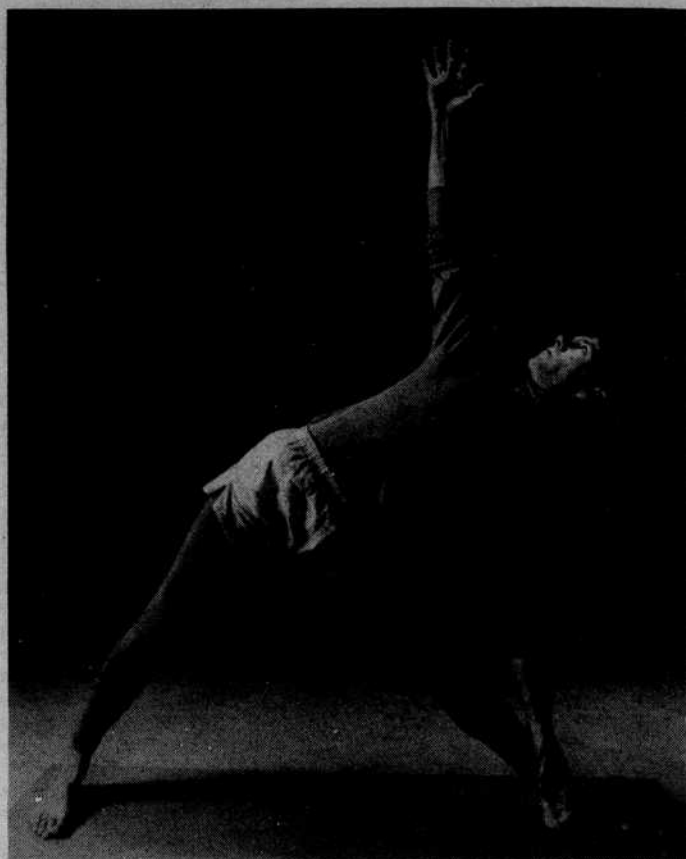
In its original Sanskrit form, the word yoga meant to join or unify. Therefore, it can signify any technique or approach which helps us to balance inner aspects of ourselves and to relate to others in harmony. This broader interpretation allows many possibilities.

In my classes I provide a variety of ways for students to discover their own yoga style. This may involve a rigorous hamstring stretch, free-form movement to a Vangelis score, polarity exercises, or a guided deep relaxation accompanied by sounds of the ocean. This diversity enables everyone to discover what is appropriate for their flexibility, personality, and level of fitness.

One of the special things about yoga is its lasting appeal. If you're like me, you find it difficult to stay with a health program. You may have a firm commitment to jog every day or eliminate desserts or attend aerobics class regularly. But after a short while, your resolve slips away. The only tool for health that I really stick with is yoga, because it is uniquely beneficial on many levels. Yoga heals physical, mental, emotional and spiritual imbalances. It goes beyond mere fitness or physical health. But best of all, it makes me feel great! I always come back to it, although it may be in a new form. Without yoga in my life, I feel like a car that needs a major overhaul. But when I do it, I'm an eagle in flight. My problems no longer seem insurmountable. My posture and breathing are much better. My thinking is clearer. And I feel so much more alive.

In my quest for self-discovery I began with a sampling of all the major forms of yoga, the teachings of Yogananda (*Autobiography of a Yogi*), and Buddhist and yogic meditation. Since I was living in San Francisco at the time, of course, I also explored est, Esalen, encounter and T.M. And while all of these were beneficial, the Iyengar form of hatha yoga has been the mainstay of my life, and I have been teaching it for ten years.

Like many yoga students, I was strongly influenced by studying with B.K.S. Iyengar in India and the U.S., and also by his book, *Light on Yoga*, the modern classic on hatha yoga. This charismatic East Indian is considered by many to be the leading hatha expert alive today. He brought yoga into the modern age by placing more emphasis on precision, safety, alignment, strength and concentration. (Iyengar will be featured in a lecture-demonstration video sponsored by the Eugene Yoga Teachers on Tuesday, November 26, from 6:30-9 pm at the Eugene



Photograph by David Stein

Ken Rowlett: The Triangle Pose

Ken, a certified Yoga teacher, has been practicing Yoga for nine years and teaching in Eugene for four years. He says, "I am fascinated with the functions of the human body. The purpose of my work is to help people develop body awareness for improving and maintaining health. I am interested in the relationship of posture, emotions and breath and the way our personal holding patterns limit our movement, perception and understanding of ourselves and the world around us."

His work focuses on posture therapy, exercise programs for lower back problems, flexibility training for athletes and stress reduction. It includes classes, workshops, personalized programs and employee fitness programs.

Public Library. This video is an inspiration to anyone interested in yoga.)

After teaching the Iyengar method for a number of years, I sensed a need for more fluidity and exploration in the poses. I discovered this in part from Jean Couch, author of the well-known *Runner's World Yoga Book*. Jean introduced play, creative movement, and a new spark to the poses. But the most important thing she taught me was that yoga can be fun. Before it had primarily been serious work!

Continuing my exploration, I visited Kripalu Yoga Center in Western Massachusetts last summer. Kripalu is one of the largest and most comprehensive yogic health centers in the country. Under the guidance of Amrit Desai, the Kripalu approach combines yoga, meditation, a macrobiotic diet, emotional release, and other holistic health practices into a unique and effective approach to fitness and spiritual growth. I was surprised to learn it even includes an original form of exercise called Dance Kinetics. Dance Kinetics can turn even the least confident and most uncoordinated person into an expressive dancer. I've found many of the Kripalu techniques invaluable in my classes.

How does yoga fit into an overall fitness and health plan? I recommend it as the perfect complement to any cardiovascular workout. Stretching is essential to prevent injury and is invaluable for lengthening muscles tightened by strengthening exercises. Other aspects of yoga provide the mental training that is an important part of physical conditioning. Another benefit is that breathing

capacity is increased, aiding aerobic efficiency. Also, running experts believe that correct posture can boost athletic performance.

Many times I've been tempted to approach a stooped-shouldered runner on Amazon Trail to straighten his posture. Or I've noticed his hamstrings are so tight they look ready to snap. I want to ask, "Have you ever thought of doing some yoga? It would really help your running!"

A perfect fitness routine would combine aerobic exercise with a yoga sequence. But, stretching is only part of yoga. Slow breathing, relaxation, inner awareness, and a meditative attitude are also important. By combining mellow energy ("yin" or "tha") with active energy ("yang" or "ha"), your nervous system is balanced in a unique way not generally provided by exercise alone.

How do you learn yoga? A book or a TV class can be helpful, but most people find it easiest to begin with a class. This way, you are motivated to practice and you receive feedback on your poses. If you're like most people, you can expect to gain some or all of the following benefits: mental calmness, relaxation and self-awareness, better posture, more energy, and an alleviation of back problems and other aches and pains. But above all, you gain a vitality and approach to health that extends beyond fitness into inner transformation.

[For more information on yoga classes and resources, contact the Eugene Yoga Teachers c/o Shan Titus, P.O. Box 1183, Eugene 97440, 683-1873. Also, look for more upcoming events sponsored by this newly formed group.]

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