

YOGA For Health, Fitness and Relaxation

by Ken Rowlett

Several thousand years ago, Hatha Yoga originated from observing breathing and movement patterns of animals and ascetics who long remained strong and healthy. They used deep breathing and stretching upon awakening to revitalize and limber their bodies. The techniques and patterns of their movements developed into yoga postures that were designed to enhance health, vitality, and relaxation.

Hatha Yoga is a form of art using the body as an instrument. Similar in form to dance or gymnastics, the effects of yoga postures combined with deep breathing permeate deep layers of the body. Yoga stimulates the internal organs and glands, and develops the anatomical structure through stretching and strengthening muscles and joints.

Yoga means union, and denotes union of the body, mind, and spirit. The literal translation of Ha/tha is sun/moon, symbolizing balance. Yoga postures, or asanas, are the physical aspect of Hatha Yoga. Traditionally speaking, asana implies posture that is firm, steady, and comfortable, one in which the mind is free of internal or external distractions. One of the sources of disturbance to the mind is the physical body, and that is why Hatha Yoga emphasizes stretching and strengthening the body to still the mind.

The exercises (asanas) are isometric in principle and provide an ideal balance between exertion and stillness (relaxation). One uses only the muscles necessary to create movement, while other muscles relax and lengthen. Hatha Yoga is a way of developing body awareness, reaching profound relaxation and promoting health and fitness.

Yoga postures massage, stretch, contract, and expand internal organs. They stimulate the digestive organs, soothe and strengthen the nervous system, as well as strengthen and improve the efficiency of the respiratory, circulatory, and endocrine systems.

Yoga also stimulates acupuncture meridians to balance the energy of organs and glands. Thus, there is balance and harmony between the outer body and the physiological functioning of the inner body. A balanced body that is in harmony with itself functions more efficiently and enjoys greater freedom of movement.

Yoga is gentle enough to accommodate those with injuries or health problems, and can be vigorous enough to give anyone a good work-out. It is an excellent complement to running, swimming, skiing, or most any form of exercise and sports. Many athletes are turning to yoga and flexibility training for strength as well as correction and prevention of injuries, or to enhance their training program. Others use it to improve the quality of their life.

Stretching with alignment develops strength, flexibility, balance, coordination, endurance, and concentration. Asanas function to balance the body's structure by strengthening weak areas and stretching areas that are tight. In this manner, yoga helps correct misalignments that often precede injuries, lower back and other spinal problems. Correct alignment brings energy to and stimulates areas that are weak, malfunctioning, or lacking aliveness.

Yoga is an effective means of relieving tension and reducing stress by stimulating the endocrine system and soothing nerves and muscles. Practicing yoga is a metaphor that can be applied in all aspects of our life. The challenge in practicing is to synchronize breath with movement, remain relaxed, present, mindful and aware of the body, posture, and feelings. From this perspective, it is a lifetime endeavor. Asanas practiced with this kind of internal and external awareness are meditation in movement. When you become the pose, you are the doer and the observer, and then the pose unfolds from the inside out. You are the pose, not separate from it, so the messages, thoughts, and feelings are coming

from your body, not the brain.

Breathing is an integral part of yoga and is central to all physiological functions of the body. Breathing directly influences movement within the body and movement influences breath. Conscious breathing synchronized with movement is an efficient way of influencing the shape of the spine—the single most important structure in the practice of Hatha Yoga. The breath is a bridge between the mind and body and is a vital link with emotions. With enhanced sensitivity to the breath comes a sense of well-being and inner freedom.

Yoga practice alone does not automatically bring good health, and it is worth considering diet, nutrition, mental attitude, and emotions. Eating habits and the quantity and quality of food we consume is important for health. Whole foods in their natural state are most easily digested and assimilated to produce the energy we operate on. Thoughts and feelings greatly influence bodily processes on all levels. Mabel Todd states in *The Thinking Body*, "We sit and walk as we think. Behavior is rarely rational; it is habitually emotional. We may speak wise words as the result of reasoning, but the entire being reacts to feeling. For every thought supported by feeling, there is a muscle change. Primary muscle patterns being the biological heritage of man, man's whole body records his emotional thinking." The inner and outer body, down to the cellular level, are influenced by the way we think and feel. Working with body posture, as well as attitude, yoga, diet, nutrition, and emotions is a way to create balance and harmony that lead to optimum health.

[Ken Rowlett is a certified yoga instructor. He teaches yoga for health, fitness and relaxation, has been practicing yoga for 10 years, and consults with businesses and individuals in Eugene. He has personally applied yoga therapeutically to overcome a severe chronic lower back problem. He is a distance runner and ran cross-country at the University of Tennessee.]

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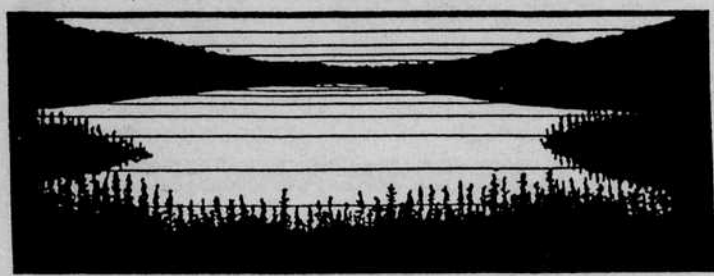
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