

## In This Chapter

- ◆ What yoga is
- ◆ How yoga helps alleviate stress
- ◆ Using yoga to promote strength, balance, and flexibility
- ◆ Using yoga as preventive medicine



# Everybody's into Yoga

When it comes to yoga, idiots just don't exist. Banish the thought that yoga is something you'll never be able to do. These days, yoga classes are everywhere, and yoga students are so varied, they have become impossible to stereotype. Yoga is neither too esoteric to understand, too mystical, nor on the fringe. Not anymore! The Western world has embraced yoga and, in our usual way, we have adapted it, searched out “new” ancient forms of it, renamed it, recast it, cast aside trends that don't work in favor of new trends that work better, loved it, fought with it, made peace with it, and in general, made yoga our own.

Yet yoga is still the ancient and venerable tradition it once was. It's simply now wonderfully and irrevocably accessible to anyone and everyone. Just about every city and most small towns have someone teaching a yoga class, and often, the choices are amazingly varied. Where once there was nothing resembling “yoga” in the “Y” section of the Yellow Pages, today you might find classes in beginning yoga, advanced yoga, Iyengar Yoga, Bikram Yoga, Ashtanga Yoga, Hatha Yoga, or such Westernized hybrids as power yoga, relaxation yoga, fitness yoga, yoga for seniors, yoga for pregnancy, and yoga for kids. You can find yoga classes at traditional yoga studios, high-tech health and fitness clubs, in city recreation centers, community colleges, and even in people's homes. Yoga is mainstream.

So you can forget about the notion that yoga is only for double-jointed people who've been able to fold themselves into a suitcase since birth or for perpetual 1960's flower children who sit around and chant all day. Yoga is user-friendly. Anyone—at any fitness level, and with a wide range of personal and fitness goals—can benefit from beginning a yoga practice—even you.

Maybe you want to try yoga because you've never been able to touch your toes and you'd like to do it before you retire. Maybe you're seeking a quiet place to center yourself, to meditate by taking your mind somewhere far away from the house, the kids, the office, and the million nagging details of everyday life. Maybe you're an athlete who wants to learn yoga breathing for the advantage gained by stronger lungs and better circulation, not to mention the strength, balance, and agility you can gain from a regular yoga practice. Or maybe you've heard that yoga is great for migraine headaches, relief from chronic lower back pain, or good physical therapy after an injury or during an illness. It's all true.

The ancient and venerable art of yoga is neither a sport nor a religion; it's a journey of the body and mind. When you do yoga, you nurture the movement of *prana*—life force. You'll read a lot of Sanskrit words in this book because yoga terminology originated thousands of years ago in this ancient language. But there's nothing ancient about the concept of *prana*: *Prana* is the life “force.” May the force be with you as you begin your yoga practice.

## What Is Yoga?

*Yoga* is a system of techniques that reflects real and proven scientific concepts. Many things Western scientists understand about the body have actually been known by yoga practitioners for centuries. Yoga sees the body from a different perspective than traditional Western medicine, but the basic principles are the same. What we Westerners call *nerve plexus*, yoga calls *chakras* (although these terms don't coincide precisely—*chakras* include psychospiritual energy). What we Westerners call *spinal alignment*, yoga accomplishes through various poses or exercises designed to do what some of us

pay chiropractors to do. The human body is in a constant state of flux, continually adjusting internally to the influence of a changing external environment. Western medicine calls this process *homeostasis*. Yoga's *five sheaths of existence*—in essence, the body, the breath, the emotions, the intellect, and happiness—reflect the same need for balance between internal and external forces. The terminology may be different, but the concepts are universal.



### Know Your Sanskrit

*Yoga* (pronounced YOH-gah) is derived from the Sanskrit root *yuj*, meaning “to yoke or join together.” *Prana* (PRAH-nah) is a form of energy in the universe that animates all physical matter, including the human body. *Prana* is the soul of the universe. Doing yoga maximizes your body's flow of the universal life force, giving you better health and increased vitality. *Chakras* (CHAH-krahs) are centers of energy located between the base of your spinal column and the crown of your head. Each *chakra* has a corresponding color, sound, perception, and biological function. Note that the actual spelling of *chakra* is *cakra*, but this spelling isn't commonly used.

Yoga is a fun activity that can produce powerful results. Yoga will wake up your body, sharpen your mind, and clarify your spirit. Yoga doesn't hurt, is only as difficult as you make it, and allows you to proceed at an individualized pace. Yoga can be a tiny part of your life, or you can incorporate its theories, rituals, postures, diet, and philosophy into every aspect of your life. You control how deeply yoga touches you. But if you begin a steady practice, be assured that yoga will transform the way you look, feel, move, breathe, and interact with friends, family, and co-workers.

## Yoga Is Occident Insurance

Life in the West (the Occident, as opposed to the Orient) is no picnic. Sure, it's exciting, even exhilarating, but after all the pressures, stresses, responsibilities, frustrations, resentments, choices, temptations, and obsessions the average Westerner has faced by the end of a typical working day, it's no wonder we are a culture eagerly searching for ways to simplify our lives.

So how can yoga help? In the face of a daily existence that is so vibrant it almost vibrates us apart, yoga is an oasis. Yoga teaches the frantic mind to settle and find peace, and it helps the ravaged body heal itself by optimizing our natural ability to heal and by building physical confidence as well as emotional well-being. Yoga removes scattered energy, replaces depleted energy, and keeps your body—including all its internal systems—toned and in good working order.



### Ouch!

Yoga doesn't hurt and isn't about unnatural contortion. Sure, accomplished yogis might be able to move into seemingly impossible positions, but these postures are for people who have progressed to a level where such positions are possible and helpful. Some bodies are born more flexible than others. Each person has to find his or her own edge—the point just before discomfort occurs—and grow into it at a comfortable pace. We're all working the same edge, just in different places!

So what are we getting at here, you ask? Yoga is the best life insurance policy there is. It helps you slow down, center yourself, and get the most out of your life so every day is precious. By holding the body in a series of yoga postures that stretch and strengthen your muscles, loosen your joints, focus your breathing, and tone your internal organs, you'll find a new friend in your body. While you continue to hold each posture, your mind will learn how to tune out the distractions of life and hone in on how things are for you in this moment of living. Doing yoga makes you *listen* to how you feel—physically and mentally. This newfound power of concentration will carry over into every aspect of your life. Signals you once ignored—that crick in your neck or your obsessive worrying over a detail that keeps you from seeing the forest for the trees—are instantly acknowledged and seen for what they are: warning signs that you are heading down the wrong path. Yoga can help you regain your sense of self-fulfillment and joy, ensuring a more satisfying, not to mention fitter, existence.

## Yoga Is a Great Stressbuster

Stress is a simple fact of life on earth in the twenty-first century. Stress is so common that countries all over the globe are incorporating the English word *stress* into their own languages: “¿Que stress? ¡Me siento agobiada/o!” (translation from Spanish: “What stress? I am totally overwhelmed!”). If you've never been under stress, we'd like to know your secret. (It's probably yoga!)

Yoga tackles stress on many levels. The postures, or *asanas*, help you control your wayward body, making it stronger, more flexible, better functioning, and, consequently, more resistant to disease and other physical problems. Practicing the *asanas* trains your body to do exactly

what you tell it to do. Your doctor knows that moderate exercise, deep breathing, and relaxation are all great ways to relieve stress—yoga accomplishes all three. Yoga’s breathing exercises, or *pranayama*, consciously channel the flow of the life force, *prana*, into and out of the body. Physiologically, deep, regular breathing sends a signal to each cell of your body to relax. Yoga meditation calms your racing thoughts and exercises your ability to master your own mind rather than let your mind master you.



### Know Your Sanskrit

*Asanas* (pronounced AH-sah-nahs) are the postures, or exercises, of yoga designed to help you master control of your body. *Asanas* are also meant to facilitate meditation. *Pranayama* (PRAH-nah-YAH-mah) are breathing exercises designed to help you master control of your breath.

Yoga is a physical, mental, and spiritual way of life that puts reality into perspective. Yoga doesn’t change your stressful circumstances, but it does teach you how to react to them without neglecting or injuring yourself.

## Yoga Promotes Whole-Body Fitness

Maybe you’re an accomplished athlete, or maybe you’re a couch potato. To you, exercise might mean breezing through a five-mile run in the morning and a requisite visit to the gym three times a week or it might mean getting up to look for the remote control. Either way, yoga is perfect for you!

Because yoga combines so many different fitness elements and is so easily tailored to the individual, it can be practiced with great benefit at the beginner level as well as at the most advanced level. Whether you’re a beginning or advanced practitioner, yoga will slowly, gently, and easily open up your body. You’ll feel taller, breathe easier, and move about more comfortably.

Nonathletes might also be attracted to the idea that yoga isn’t competitive. In fact, a sense of competitiveness is in direct opposition to the yoga frame of mind. Your yoga practice is personal and has nothing to do with anybody else. Plus, yoga will give you so much energy and such an improved self-image that you might find exercise isn’t as bad as you thought.



### A Yoga Minute

According to the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, heart disease is almost twice as likely to develop in physically inactive people.

Yoga is designed to work all your muscles, not just a few isolated major muscle groups. Many of the postures, such as the twists and inversions, stimulate particular internal organs or release energy from stress-prone areas such as the lower back or neck. Yoga’s fine-tuning exercises are the ultimate full-body workout. Other exercise programs tend to develop only one part of you—cardiovascular fitness, leg strength, or fat burning, for example. Yoga does it all.

Although many types of yoga exist, *Hatha Yoga* is the branch of yoga that concentrates on the body and is the form of yoga most emphasized in this book and practiced by Westerners. Many of the well-known forms of yoga, such as Iyengar and Bikram, are Hatha Yoga as practiced by particular yoga teachers, such as, in

these cases, B.K.S. Iyengar, who popularized a form of Hatha Yoga that concentrates on proper alignment (sometimes using props to assist) and strength building, or Bikram Choudhury, who developed a set of 26 yoga postures practiced in order, often in a heated room. There are many other examples of yogis who developed and named their own systems of yoga, but most of them have something in common: They are all based on Hatha Yoga, and they all have the goal of harnessing or yoking the body to make it stronger, more flexible, and healthier.



### Know Your Sanskrit

**Hatha Yoga** (pronounced *HAT*ha *YOH*-gah, not *HATH*ah *YOH*-gah, as it is frequently mispronounced) is the type of yoga most commonly practiced in Western culture. *Ha* means “sun,” and *tha* means “moon,” so *Hatha* is a combining of complementary forces. Hatha Yoga is the branch of yoga that transforms the human body via physical strengthening and purification to make the body a worthy vehicle of self-realization.

Hatha Yoga is an excellent fitness program, but it's also more. Hatha Yoga is based on the idea that gaining supreme control over your body is the key to control of your mind and freedom of your spirit. Through postures (*asanas*), breathing exercises (*pranayama*), and meditation, Hatha Yoga exercises, tones, and strengthens the whole person—body, mind, and spirit. Even if you start with the physical exercises alone, Hatha Yoga will quickly begin to work its magic.

Fitness today means more than a healthy body. Our culture is experiencing a growing trend toward things spiritual. With a growing passion for holistic health alternatives, we are a society looking for balance in a world that is out of balance. Holistic fitness is quickly becoming a mainstream concept, and yoga fits comfortably into this trend. Yoga is the answer to the spiritual seeker's *and* the athlete's search for physical excellence because it's the best all-purpose, all-person, whole-self, individualized fitness program—time-tested over centuries.

## Yoga Is Healing Power

Yoga is a boon to the healthy body, but it can also be of supreme benefit to the body in need of healing. Of course, the best route for a healthy person to take is one of prevention. Healthy habits, maintenance of the body, peacefulness of mind, and calmness of spirit will go a long way toward protecting you from compromised health. Yoga is great preventive medicine, because it keeps all of you—body, mind, attitude, outlook, immune system—in top form.

Your spine, the “Grand Central Station” of your body, is stretched, loosened, and aligned by yoga—postures are designed to allow energy to flow freely through your spine and entire body. Many holistic health practitioners and even traditional practitioners argue that if the spine is aligned, the entire body works better, feels better, and fights disease more effectively.

In addition, yoga aids each of the following:

- ◆ Circulation
- ◆ Digestion
- ◆ Respiration
- ◆ Reproduction

Yoga also ...

- ◆ Tones your organs.
- ◆ Improves your posture.
- ◆ Frees your breathing.
- ◆ Is cleansing.

Yoga helps your body purge itself of toxins that can negatively affect your health, both by releasing negative energy and, more directly, removing obstacles to the proper stimulation of the body's *lymphatic system*. The lymphatic system, the centerpiece of the immune system, protects and maintains the body's internal fluid environment, both filtering toxins and transporting nutrients to the blood. Lymph is pumped through the body by movement—when we breathe, contract or release our muscles, or even with the motion of our beating hearts or our digestive systems as we process food we've eaten. Yoga helps our bodies go with their natural flow. Even if you're not very mobile, you can practice yoga with eye exercises, simple stretches, and conscious rhythmic movements. Take your fitness personally and craft a yoga fitness plan that is all your own.

If you're sick, injured, or bothered by nagging health complaints, yoga can be a therapeutic addition to your physician's treatment plan. Of course, yoga should *never* be used in place of competent medical care. Ask your doctor or physical therapist about how yoga can be helpful in alleviating your specific health problems or concerns.



### A Yoga Minute

According to the World Health Organization, an estimated 691 million people worldwide suffer from high blood pressure.

## My Yogi, Myself

Once you've created your yoga plan and have begun to practice, guess what you are? Healthier? Sure. In better shape? Of course. But you're something else, too—you're a *yogi*! (A female *yogi* is actually called a *yogini*, pronounced *YOH-gee-nee*, but let's be contemporary and say we're all yogis.) Anyone who practices yoga is a yogi—that's what yogi means. You needn't be wise, you don't have to wear a loincloth, and you certainly don't need to practice for 10 hours every day. Even if you start with just a little yoga, you're a yogi. Of course, the more yoga you practice, the more you'll gain, and the wiser a yogi you'll become.

Yoga is practiced to varying degrees around the world, but some exuberant practitioners who have devoted their lives to the practice of yoga have achieved amazing control over their bodies. Although, according to yoga, such feats aren't important to the goal of spiritual enlightenment (self-realization), yogis have been known to ...

- ◆ Stop their own hearts (then start them again, of course).
- ◆ Live to be well over 100 years old.

- ◆ Suspend their breath for an hour or more a day.
- ◆ Stand on one foot for several years (don't ask us why).
- ◆ Lie comfortably on a bed of nails.
- ◆ Eat razor blades without harm (we prefer a nice salad).

Here are a few more incredible feats that border on the supernatural, but these we'd have to see to believe:

- ◆ Become invisible at will.
- ◆ Remain suspended in mid-air (handy when all the chairs are taken).
- ◆ Move through space at the speed of light (saves on gasoline).

It doesn't matter why you approach yoga—whether for fitness, stress relief, enlightenment, or healing. It doesn't matter how advanced you are, whether you are out of shape and inflexible or an athlete extraordinaire. It certainly doesn't matter how much you already know about yoga. If you let yoga help you, it will help you in whatever way you require.

If you're intrigued but still need just a little more convincing before you're ready to perform pretzel-like contortions or begin *dhyana* (your daily meditation), read on for 10 great reasons to practice yoga:

- ◆ Yoga will tone your muscles and trim excess weight. It might even change your attitude about your body for the better.
- ◆ Anyone can do yoga. It's just a matter of starting at the appropriate level and remembering that you aren't competing with anyone.



### Know Your Sanskrit

*Dhyana* (pronounced *dee-YAH-nah*) means “meditation”—the process of quieting the mind to free yourself from preconceptions and illusions. The result is a clearer vision of the truth about yourself, your life, and the world. For more on meditation in its many forms, read *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Meditation, Second Edition*, by the authors of this book.

- ◆ Yoga doesn't hurt. You go at your own pace, do what feels good, and stop before you feel pain. What could be better?
- ◆ Yoga will give you the gift of boundless energy.
- ◆ The increased energy and vitality you receive from regular yoga practice will make you feel as if hours have been added to your day.
- ◆ Yoga lets you dare to be different. People who tease you about doing yoga don't understand what you're doing—explain it to them!
- ◆ You can do as much or as little yoga as you like. Start with the postures, and you might find that your interest in breathing, chanting, and meditation develops later—or not at all, which is fine, too. It's all up to you.
- ◆ Yoga is definitely not about guilt! You can benefit the most from regular yoga practice, but practicing the postures whenever you have time is still beneficial and certainly better than no yoga at all.

- ◆ Contrary to popular belief, yoga isn't a religion. It's a method for life that can complement and enhance any religious system of beliefs, or it can be practiced completely apart from religion.
- ◆ Yoga will help ease your aches, pains, and stiffness. You'll feel like a kid again.

But don't take being a yogi lightly just because you've become one without too much effort. Your body, your mind, and your happiness are *your* responsibility. Your yoga program is a great start, but you need to have the right yoga plan. Learn as much as you can about yoga and consider taking a yoga class. The best way to learn yoga is with a teacher who can help you with the finer points of the postures, answer your individual questions, and guide you in finding a sequence of postures that best suit your needs and personality.



### Wise Yogi Tells Us

If you are overweight or have a problem with overeating, yoga is the perfect exercise for you; it's gentle on the out-of-shape body, stiff joints, and heart. You'll feel better about your body as you begin to lose weight, and you can achieve an inner peace and confidence that will help you avoid compulsive overeating.

Even before you find a teacher, though, reading and learning about yoga can start you on your way. The more you know about yoga, the more you can focus on how it can help you. This book is a great start in your search for the perfectly personalized program. Apply everything you learn to your own journey. How can each new piece of information improve the personal program you are creating for yourself? Think about what you've learned already. Are you beginning to see how yoga might fit into your life? Yes? Then you are wiser already.

## Yoga Sets You Free

Perhaps you're flirting with the idea of yoga because you imagine it's an interesting fitness plan, but perhaps you're looking for something more. People have been practicing yoga for thousands of years, not because they want to be "in shape" (a fringe benefit), but because they are seeking meaning in life. Yoga can be a fitness program, but it can also be a path to greater self-knowledge and, ultimately, self-actualization. Yoga helps you reach the fullness of your human potential. You will be more confident, stronger, healthier, and more at peace with who you are. You will make better decisions, set and achieve worthwhile goals, and become the person you want to be.

The ultimate goal of the yogi is to achieve the experience of truth, which might mean different things to different people, but which is, to some degree, a consistent experience for all—a clarity of vision, supreme focus, and a feeling of oneness with the earth, even the universe. This ideal state is called *samadhi* and involves consciousness to such a heightened degree that individual ego falls away and oneness with the universal force of love and goodness, or *brahman*, is achieved. It is the state of pure bliss.



### Know Your Sanskrit

*Samadhi* (pronounced *sah-MAH-dee*) is the goal of yoga. It's when the yogi finally becomes aware of nothing but *brahman* (*BRAH-mahn*)—the all-pervading Supreme Self, or God—everywhere. It's a state of absolute bliss and might be transitory or, ideally, perpetual.

A few rare and diligent yogis have been able to maintain this state for extended periods, but for most of us, *samadhi* is an elusive experience. We might get occasional glimpses of it, or sudden rushes of bliss that fall away but become imprinted in our memories. After all, we do

have to live in the world, which is often a less-than-blissful place. On the other hand, you and your world are what you make them, and yoga can help you optimize yourself, your experience, and your all-important perception of the world around you. Yoga is fitness plus peace and fitness plus joy.

## The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ Yoga has become mainstream. Yoga classes are available everywhere and people of all types enjoy yoga.
- ◆ Yoga reduces stress and improves concentration.
- ◆ Yoga is a great workout at any fitness level.
- ◆ Yoga helps prevent illness and keeps the systems of the body in order. It increases energy and vitality, promoting well-being.
- ◆ Anyone who practices yoga is a yogi!