

What is Yoga?

If you are beginning to think that Americans everywhere “do yoga”—you are right! Celebrities, the young, and the old, are spending time in the yoga studio. Over 18 million Americans practice one of the many styles of yoga for health, fitness, and spiritual well-being. Perhaps it seems like a new fad—the latest in a long line of abdominal crunch machines, aerobic dance routines, or martial arts hybrids. But yoga is not another dance routine requiring leg warmers; yoga has been a powerful mind and body therapy for thousands of years. While it first made an appearance in the United States in the 1800s, but it took the peace loving youth of the 1960s to bring it to popular attention. Today you can find yoga classes at the local YMCA, or as an extension of the New Age community, in nearly every city in the US.

There are many types of yoga, but yoga practice usually consists of a series of poses. These poses, called asanas, are designed to stretch and strengthen the body; most asanas are practiced in pairs to balance opposites. Yoga practice usually emphasizes breathing exercises and meditation in addition to series of asanas. Many consider yoga meditation in action. However, most Americans do not practice yoga as part of a specific spiritual tradition, rather they seek stress reduction, relaxation, and general health benefits of yoga. Regardless of your spiritual beliefs, yoga practice is designed to strengthen the link between mind and body.

History of Yoga

The roots of yoga are found in India, more than 5000 years ago, before written language even existed. Ceramics from this period include images of yoga poses. Many people mistakenly attribute the origins of yoga to Hinduism, but Yoga actually predates Hindu practices. In fact, the term “yoga” is a Sanskrit, one of the world’s oldest languages, meaning to connect the mind, body, and spirit.

The main branches of yoga as we know them today began to appear in India at approximately the same time as the Christian era began in the Middle East. In the 1960s when Western celebrities, like the Beatles, sought out the magnetic yogis like Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, yoga reconnected with the West.

Benefits

As alternative therapies, like acupuncture, massage, and meditation, have become more popular options for those with chronic pain, interest in yoga has also increased. However, Western medicine has only recently begun to quantify the benefits of yoga. Consistent yoga practice results in flexibility, strength, and endurance. There is, however, virtually no limit to the healing

powers yoga advocates attribute to it. According to yoga devotees, yoga reduces stress, results in weight loss, can ease depression, chronic back pain, and migraines.

Many yoga devotees consider it the best anti-aging therapy available. Yoga keeps major muscle groups and joints limber. It also improves circulation and thus gives skin greater elasticity. The meditative effects of yoga also keep the mind limber.

Types

As yoga has become more popular the hybrids and specializations that have emerged are almost limitless. Disco yoga, desk yoga, Techno yoga, and water yoga are the latest hybrids of yoga available. You may choose from numerous styles and traditions. Here is a list of some common styles:

Ananda: This classic yoga discipline is gentle and focuses on meditation and self-awareness. It is designed to be an introspective act that unifies mind, body, and spirit. Ananda yoga emphasizes silent affirmations and higher awareness and is not aerobic or athletic.

Hatha Yoga: Hatha yoga is the most popular type of yoga. It is commonly a blend of two or more other types of yoga practice. Some instructors consider hatha yoga the most practical style, it is often called the yoga of activity.

Ashtanga (Power Yoga): If you are looking for a workout, this type of yoga may be for you. This is a demanding practice that consists of poses done in a Vinyasa style. This is a very fast-paced routine.

Kripalu: The primary emphasis of this discipline is working within the limits of your own strength and progress, while focusing on proper alignment and breathing technique. Kripalu is sometimes called the yoga of consciousness for these reasons. There are typically three stages: exploration of the poses and your abilities, concentration and awareness of your body in the pose, and meditation in action as your body flows between poses instinctively.

Svaroopa: This yoga discipline imagines the body is an instrument used to achieve higher consciousness. Svaroopa emphasizes healing and transformation through opening of the spine.

Bikram (Hot): Bikram yoga is a series of 26 poses performed in sequence in a heated room. Temperatures can reach up to 115° in the studio. It is believed that the heat in the room allows muscles to stretch further and deeper with less difficulty. The heat also purifies the body through sweat.

Getting Started

Most yoga practitioners and instructors recommend attending a yoga class before beginning yoga practice on your own with books or videos. Any questions and problems you may have will be easily answered or corrected in a class. You may want to explore classes in several different yoga styles with different instructors. Some consider the use of Sanskrit names for the poses an essential teaching tool. Others believe that this is unnecessary. You may find you have a preference either way. This is only one example of the differences in style you will find between instructors. Other factors to consider in an instructor include personality, emphasis, and experience.

There is virtually no equipment required for participation in a yoga class. Many people prefer to carry their own yoga mat. Some instructors may encourage the purchase of a beginner's yoga kit. These kits usually contain a mat, a foam block, and strap for use in more advanced poses. You may want to bring a water bottle as well.

It is best to choose a time for your yoga practice and remain consistent. Most people prefer to begin their day with yoga. You do not need special clothing, but consider something comfortable that will not restrict your movement. Also bear in mind you may find yourself in an inverted pose, loose shorts or shirts may be inappropriate. Shoes are not worn during yoga class. Do not eat for at least an hour and a half before your class. Remember: You do not need to be flexible or athletic to begin a yoga practice. Your development and pace is individual and there is no competition!