

Yoga for Back Pain

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It is a fact that many people find their back pain alleviated or cured through the practice of Yoga. This article explains some processes of Yoga and considers Yoga practice in relation to a number of painful back conditions.

First, by Yoga practice here is meant the practice of Yoga postures (*asanas*). Although superficially similar to physical exercises, they differ from these as they are not mere repetitive movements: they involve a systematic, structured and intelligent way of moving the whole musculo-skeletal system. They also affect the psyche in that they develop confidence and physical and mental stability.

Yoga postures can be divided into groups according to type, such as standing, sitting, twisting, inverted and back-bending postures. With a varied practice these build a sound and healthy physique based on the harmonious alignment of the whole physical structure – bones, muscles and organic body. In ordinary life the limbs are limited in the range of movement required of them. While they function more or less adequately with a fair degree of misalignment, severe misalignment is incapacitating.

The harmonising movements of Yoga postures involve a number of actions:

Extension: Muscles are stretched so that joints can be straightened or flexed to their optimum degree. Using muscles strengthens them and improves their functionality.

Rotation: Where rotational movements are required, bones are deliberately turned with their muscles. This can only be done if the muscles are also extended.

Creation of Space: This is between bone and bone, as between the spinal vertebrae, or above and below a joint. In normal life joints become compressed, causing pain and stiffness. Once space is created, mobility is increased.

These various actions both increase the mobility of the limbs and joints and encourage the healthy circulation of blood to affected areas, with obvious beneficial effects. By redressing imbalances between overworked and underused muscles they relieve stress.

Let us now turn to some common conditions affecting the back. These vary considerably according to the location, nature and cause of the pain, and whether the pain is due to structural or organic problems. In the latter case the condition is likely to be complex and needs careful and expert handling.

Structural problems fairly obviously lend themselves to correction by Yoga postures. They can be divided into two broad types. The first encompasses congenital problems or those caused by growing too quickly, such as abnormal curvatures of the spine (scoliosis, kyphosis, lordosis). Under the second come problems create by continued bad posture or repeated movements involving strain. Sitting awkwardly, craning the neck for long periods and lifting heavy weights are well known causes of

back pain. Habitually carrying heavy bags in one hand or on one shoulder, particularly in childhood, develops a one-sidedness that can lead to back pain later.

If a person suffers generalised backache in the sacral, lumbar or dorsal areas, a series of standing poses and seated twists are extremely effective in giving relief. (*Trikonasana*, *Parsvakonasana*, *Virabhadrasana 1*, *Virabhadrasana 2*, *Ardha Chandrasana*, *Parivrtta Trikonasana*, *Bharavajasana* (on a chair), *Marichyasana* (standing)). Individuals are likely to find different postures particularly beneficial.

Other helpful postures are *Supta Padangusthasana* and *Utthita Padangusthasana*.

Repetition of these postures brings increasing relief. Repeated practice strengthens the back, often to such an extent that the problem does not recur.

For lower back conditions such as herniated discs and sciatica it is essential to realign the back and create space before beginning the strengthening process.

An important principle, wherever there is pain, is to stretch away from that pain. A great deal of pain is due to compression. Thus, by systematically extending and moving the arms and shoulders in various ways, lightness and relief is felt in the back. Examples of such movements are *Parvatasana*, *Gomukhasana*, *Garudasana* and *Namaste*. When the chest expands as a result of these stretches breathing improves, bringing an immediate sense of feeling better.

Another important point is to perform movements with an exhalation. Usually when pain is felt there is a tendency to hold the breath. This makes a person tense. We relax, and relax the affected area, on an outward breath.

A special Yoga boon to backache sufferers is found in inverted postures. Here the pressure of gravity is reversed and the spine can lengthen in an upside-down position. If there is pain these postures can be done with support, as for example *Ardha-Halasanana*.

The principles outlined above also apply in arthritic conditions such as ankylosing spondylitis and cervical spondylosis, and in back pain due to trauma or injury. Here, of course, great care must be taken and each individual's programme specifically arranged according to their capability and need. Sensitive observation and handling are required of the therapist, who must take careful account of the feedback given by the patient.

A great feature of Yoga is that it promotes self-reliance. Although the practices need a teacher's guidance initially (and continually for many people) they can be practised independently once the student gains confidence. This gives a tremendous psychological boost. Instead of relying on medicine or another person to remove pain, you learn to alleviate it yourself.