

# Yoga Remedies for Body and Mind

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It is common knowledge that Yoga promotes health and well being. Having stood the test of time, this ancient subject is enjoying unprecedented popularity, no doubt because people feel the need to counter the pressures of modern living.

What is not so well known is that Yoga has very specific techniques that act on the body and mind to maintain efficiency and remedy ills. It can alleviate all sorts of health conditions, including back pain, aches and pains in the limbs, respiratory and circulatory problems, digestive complaints, menstrual and eliminatory dysfunction, problems of the throat, and memory and mood disorders.

In this article we give an overview of how Yoga deals with some different conditions: back pain, asthma, digestive problems and depression. We also look at how it helps the mind.

The tools Yoga employs are postures, breath control and sensory inhibition.

The practice of postures is an important feature of Yoga. Postures are not mere repetitive exercises; they involve a systematic, structured and intelligent way of moving the entire musculo-skeletal system. They improve muscle tone, circulation and physiological efficiency and build up strength, stamina and flexibility. They also affect the psyche, in that they develop confidence and physical and mental stability.

Breath control is a more advanced, subtle practice which must be based on the foundation of a regular practice of postures. It increases respiratory capacity and body tissue oxygenation. The breathing and relaxation methods are calming and very effective in relieving stress and emotional distress.

Control of the senses likewise is a subtle practice which goes with deep relaxation and breath control. The effect is to harness the energies of the mind, thereby increasing concentration and decreasing distracting thoughts and cravings.

Yoga can be practised by everyone, young or old, fit or unfit. This is because it is progressive, starting with simple methods and postures. As the postures can be done with the help of supports they are also suitable for the elderly and people with physical difficulties. There is no age limit for improvement.

## **Yoga Postures and Back Pain**

There are various groups of related postures which build a sound and healthy physique, amongst them standing, sitting, twisting, inverted and back-bending postures. In all of them a major aim is evident: that of creating a perfect alignment of the physical structure - bones and muscles - in whichever posture is performed. In everyday life the limbs are limited in their range of movement, and they function more or less adequately with a fair degree of misalignment. For harmonious movement, however, certain actions are required:

### *Extending*

Muscles, and later the bones, need to be stretched so that the joints can be straightened or flexed to their maximum degree. Using the muscles strengthens them so that they give better support to the bones.

### *Revolving*

Bones are turned deliberately to their full capability, where appropriate. This can only be done if the muscles are also extended.

### *Creating Space*

This is between bone and bone, as between the spinal vertebrae, or above and below a joint. In normal life bones are compressed, causing pain and stiffness. Once space is created, mobility is increased.

These various actions not only increase the mobility of the limbs and joints but encourage a healthy circulation of blood to those areas, with obvious beneficial effects. They also redress the imbalance between over- and under-extended muscles and over- and under-functioning inner organs. Similarly, they balance out the areas of the body which are under stress and those which are sluggish due to non or under-use.

Conditions affecting the back vary considerably according to the nature and cause of the pain, and whether the pain is due to structural or organic problems. If it is the latter the condition is likely to be complex and needs careful and expert handling.

Structural problems fairly obviously lend themselves to correction by Yoga postures. Again, these need to be divided into two types: congenital or caused by growing too quickly, such as abnormal curvatures of the spine, and those caused by continued bad posture or repeated awkward movements that strain the back. Sitting wrongly for long periods, performing repeated, strenuous movements at work, and lifting heavy weights are well known causes of back pain. Carrying bags or cases in one hand, particularly in childhood, causes uneven postural development which often leads to back pain.

The postures which are extremely effective for lower back pain or generalised backache are a series of standing poses and seated twists.

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. When the chest expands as a result of these stretches breathing improves and so immediately the person feels better.

It is important to perform movements with an exhalation. Usually when pain is felt the tendency is to hold the breath. This makes a person tense. One relaxes, and relaxes the affected area, on an outward breath.

Another boon to back pain sufferers is to be inverted, so that relief is gained from the pressure of gravity as the spine freely lengthens from base to top. If there is pain inverted poses can be done with support.

The principles outlined above also apply in more serious problems, such as severe arthritic conditions and back pain due to injury. Here, of course, great care must be taken to gear the Yoga programme to the individual's particular capacities and needs. It is helpful here to perform the postures against a support such as a wall. This allows movement without strain.

### **Yoga Postures and Asthma**

When the respiratory process is impaired, as in asthma, the practice of Yoga postures can help considerably. Of greatest help are poses in which the rib cage is supported in such a way that the lungs can expand without strain. There are two types of postures that achieve this: supine poses and inverted poses.

In supine poses the back rests on a bolster or higher support while the legs are crossed simply or placed in different positions. The bolster support allows the diaphragm to extend and the spine to relax so that the nerves become soothed. All this brings relief of tension and feelings of fear. Because of the shape of the bolster the chest expands and therefore the lungs open better.

Inverted poses also improve the expansion of the lungs. When the body is inverted the shoulders and upper chest have to be active in order to resist the compressive force of gravity. This makes the tops of the lungs open more. For asthmatics, whose breathing difficulties reduce their overall level of physical energy; these poses should be done with support. For example, Shoulder Balance should be done using a chair. With no strain at all the chest expands well and breathing becomes easier. There are a number of other poses which have similar effects.

Only when the lungs have been strengthened by these poses is it appropriate - in fact, safe - to attempt breath control techniques. To increase the capacity of the lungs it is most helpful to concentrate on inhalations.

### **Yoga Postures and the Digestion**

A sluggish or impaired digestion can be helped by Yoga practice. Digestive problems are often triggered by stress. Poor posture, where the organic body is compressed, is also a contributory factor.

Three types of Yoga postures are particularly beneficial: supine poses, forward bends and extensions and inverted poses. They work on the digestive organs and tract by extending them, massaging them and inverting them, giving both stimulation and relaxation.

In supine poses the front of the body is extended as the arms stretch over the head. As the intestines stretch there is more room for their peristaltic action and the downward passing of gas. The liver is decompressed, and this promotes its healthy functioning. In fact, one particular pose (Supine Hero Pose) is said to aid digestion to

such an extent that doing it for a mere 20 minutes after a heavy meal enables one to eat again!

When the trunk bends forward over the legs the abdomen becomes soft. In this way seated forward bends relieve tension which accumulates in the digestive system.

Inverted poses counteract the compressive effect of gravity of the body and alter the position of whatever is contained in the digestive tract. (This is why it is necessary to practice them on an empty stomach.) This helps to move material that is not passing along as it should and to expel blocked gas.

### **Yoga Postures and Depression**

Depression is a condition which affects both the body and the mind. A depressed person often has a slumped posture with a caved-in chest. Positive thinking, self-esteem, laughter and optimism cannot find room in this posture.

Even in cases where depression is deep-seated and medication is needed to maintain mental stability, Yoga can be a powerful tool that goes to the root of the problem and helps to sort it out.

The Yoga programme to counter depression consists of postures which invert the body, bringing a refreshing flow of blood to the head and those which bend the spine backwards so that the chest is expanded and the adrenal glands are stimulated. Both these types of postures build up concentration, will power and strength of the nerves. They also alter mood, promoting a positive frame of mind. In cases of severe depression, where lethargy and weakness of limbs are also present, the postures need to be done with support and under the guidance of a teacher.

The breath control technique of dividing the inhalation into stages is suitable for people who are depressed. It is not strenuous, and it increases the intake of air gently and effectively.

One of the most important features of Yoga is that it is an activity that is done by oneself for oneself. Although initially it has to be taught, once familiarity is gained with the postures it can be practised independently. This gives a tremendous psychological boost. Instead of relying on medicine or another person to remove pain, one learns to relieve it oneself.

However, Yoga is not primarily a system of healing. Its health benefits occur almost as side effects during the pursuit of its main spiritual aim.

The definition of Yoga, as given by the two-thousand-year old authority Patanjali, is the restraining of the mind. This is a definition in the realm of psychology. It stems from the recognition that consciousness has waves that fluctuate constantly according to moods, thoughts and desires.

In order to conquer the mind, Patanjali enumerated various practices which, when followed and mastered, lead to mental poise and inner harmony. The three practices

explained above - posture, breath control and sensory control - are based on a foundation of ethical conduct and a disciplined life-style.

As a result of these practices the mind becomes stronger and more focused and can engage in prolonged states of concentration and meditation. The goal of Yoga is said to be exclusive absorption in the soul; in this state of realisation the pure, spiritual soul is disentangled from the material world. This is the eighth and final aspect of Yoga.

Yoga philosophy notes that the mind is the controller of the senses; however, the pull of the senses can be so strong that the mind loses control.

How do Yogic practices act on the senses and therefore the mind? Some of the practices, such as the injunction to ethical living and personal discipline, have a clear connection to psychological factors. However, postures and breath control appear to operate on a physiological level. What is the relationship here between body and mind?

We shall look at postures, breath control and sensory control in turn.

### *Postures*

The postures involve physical actions and as such have physical effects such as flexibility and muscle tone. However, they also have a direct result on the subtle systems of the body, the endocrine and nervous systems, and regularise the secretion of hormones. Different poses and sequences of poses have different effects.

#### (1) The stimulation of the pituitary gland

The pituitary gland is the 'master' gland, controlling the adrenal cortex and the thyroid. It plays a central role in integrating the nervous and hormonal system. It is situated at the base of the brain in line with the space between the eyebrows. Head-Balance is the pose which activates this. Its effect, therefore, is as much mental as physical. The brain becomes refreshed and energised. Overdoing head-balance or neglecting to do the poses which have the opposite effect of calming the mind can produce irritability.

#### (2) The stimulation of the adrenal glands

The adrenals are situated at the top of the kidneys. The postures which work on the adrenals are backbends and twists.

In back-bending poses the anterior spine, which faces inside the body, is extended as the back is made concave. In so doing they stimulate the adrenals to produce adrenaline, thereby encouraging both physical and mental agility. Back-bending poses produce a sense of exhilaration which can be seen in the face. This is related to the release of adrenaline and endorphins. In the long term they strengthen the nervous system.

The adrenals are also activated in twists. Again a concave action is required, but it is coupled with an axial rotation of the spine. These actions together produce freedom of movement in the spine and a concomitant relaxation of the neck muscles. This releases tension in the brain.

### (3) The stimulation of the thyroid gland

The thyroid gland is situated in the throat, on either side of the windpipe. The poses which help regulate this gland are the Shoulder-Balance and associated poses. It is important in these poses that the neck and throat are not compressed or constricted in any way. This is why the shoulders are raised on a support such as a set of folded blankets. These poses have a calming effect. The mind becomes peaceful, and the thought process, if not completely arrested, is slowed down. The eyes, ears and other sense-organs become quiet.

### **Breath control**

Breath control involves techniques for training the inhalation, exhalation and the period of retention in-between. It deals with the physiological process of breathing and with the management of energy in the body.

In practising breath control the basic sitting position is one of dynamic stillness. The trunk is held erect with the spine straight and chest lifted. The head is taken down towards the chest. This quietens the front of the brain, which is usually active with thoughts. The heart centre is lifted up. Breathing is done either through open nostrils or with the fingers of the right hand placed carefully on the nose where the nasal bone begins. Their job is to manipulate the flow of breath. Breath control can also be done lying down.

Different breath control techniques have different effects: for example, concentrating on inhalations combats depression as it exercises the lungs and stimulates mental energy. By means of exhalations, blood pressure can be lowered. This is because during exhalations one lets go of tensions. However, the overall effect of breath control practice is serenity.

### **Sensory Control**

Sensory control involves withdrawing the senses from the objects that stimulate them.

The Corpse Pose is aimed specifically at calming the sense-organs. The eyes are trained to rest in the sockets, and the ear passages are relaxed so that the eardrums are not disturbed by external sounds. The nostrils are relaxed so that the breath flowing in and out does not alter their shape. The tongue is rested on the floor of the mouth and tension in the mouth cavity is released by keeping the lips only just touching. The skin, which embodies the sense of touch, is relaxed and made to lie softly on the muscles. Through watchful awareness the senses can be maintained in this withdrawn state for prolonged periods.

The deep relaxation which the Corpse Pose brings cannot be attained without the regular practice of other postures. These stretch and re-align the body and improve the circulation of blood and oxygen, and in so doing, release tensions which have built up over the years. By the same token the practice of breath control is also necessary, as it deliberately encourages the tranquillisation of the senses.

### **Motivation**

It might appear from the above that postures, breathing techniques and sensory control automatically purge the mind of distractions and bring about equilibrium and calm. While they are certainly powerful agents, they are not all-powerful. The body is not designed to control the mind, but to subserve the mind. Motivation is a crucial factor. If the purpose of practising Yoga is physical benefit, that is the level on which effects will be felt. Physical alignment in a pose will not automatically bring mental balance. If practice is undertaken for mental or spiritual gain, that intention will determine the results. Harmonising heart with mind and mind with body is the key to achieving the goal of Yoga - inner peace.

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