

**Yoga - Mind, Body, Spirit**  
**Fad or Necessity?**

**January 16, 2015**

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## **Yoga - Mind, Body Spirit** **Fad or Necessity?**

*Namaste* - From the ancient Sanskrit which can be interpreted as "I bow to you". It has a spiritual significance of negating or reducing one's ego in the presence of another. Spiritual significance recognizes that the life force, the divinity, the Self or the God in me is the same in all. Acknowledging the oneness in the meeting of the palms, we honor the god in the person we meet. The bowing of the head is a gracious form of extending friendship in love, respect and humility. So, Namaste can be "I bow to the god within you" or "The spirit in me salutes the spirit in you". Very often, Namaste is offered at the beginning and/or the close of a yoga session.

**Yoga - Mind, Body, Spirit - Fad or Necessity?** I am not sure that we can call anything a fad that has been around for over 5000 years. When I googled Yoga, there were 450 million links. On amazon.com, 321,390 results - ranging from books to DVD and CDs, exercise equipment, clothes, teas, stickers for your car, and toys for your pets. So, I will remove one layer of uncertainty at least as far as I'm concerned. - it is NOT a fad! Although some of the current yoga programs that I found on-line might certainly fall into that fad category: and by the way, I am not making any of these up!

*Aerial Yoga*(using anti-gravity hammocks), *Cannabis Yoga*(reaching new levels of awareness through movement and marijuana), *Doga*( Sound Mind Body and Spirit with Man's Best Friend) - a big problem with that yoga program is getting the dog into the pose and then having the dog hold it, *Karaoke Yoga*(channel your inner rock star), *Equine Yoga*(find harmony with your horse through movement and breathing), *Mommy and Me*( Strengthening Bonds with Baby), *Nude Yoga* and my favorite, *Laughter Yoga* - now a world-wide movement with over 5000 clubs globally.

I'm not aware of any of these yoga activities being practiced in Fort Wayne - particularly the Nude yoga - but how many of you do practice yoga in some form?

Well, now we will all do some yoga. I have an ulterior motive in this exercise, I want you all to stay awake for the next 25 minutes or so. Don't worry - we're not going to try the laughter yoga!

Many people hold tension in their neck and shoulders, leading to stiffness, bad posture and tension headaches. Repeating the following neck and shoulder exercises increases flexibility and tones the muscles. Do them slowly and mindfully and keep your spine straight, your neck relaxed and your shoulders facing forward.

1. Bend your head forward, chin on chest, then back to original position

- 2. Bend the head to the right, then back to original position**
  - 3. Bend backward, then back to original position**
  - 4. Bend to the left, the back to original position.**
  - 5. Next, drop your head forward and roll it around in as wide a circle as possible - repeat in the opposite direction**
  - 6. Now, raise your right shoulder and drop it down.**
  - 7. Repeat with the left**
  - 8. Lastly, raise both shoulders at once, then drop them down again.**
- There, now we have a room full of yoga practitioners.**

### **What is Yoga?**

**I found that yoga has no simple definition - it is different things to different people. As one person put it, "yoga has no simple definition and that's the beauty of it". Those who first used the word yoga regarded it as a highly complex term. Their definition of yoga was expansive and not restricted to the bodily postures most of the western world associates it with, but rather, it encompassed a wide range of ways to connect with one's highest potential. The word "yoga" is derived from the ancient Sanskrit which means "to join" or "to yoke" The related**

meaning is "to focus attention" or "to use". Yoga is the union of body, mind and spirit - the union of your individuality with the divine intelligence that orchestrates the universe. The aim of yoga is sometimes said to calm the chaos of conflicting impulses and thoughts. The ancient sages compared yoga to a fruit tree -from a single seed grows the roots, trunk, branches, leaves and fruit. I will attempt to give you some history and overview of the many ramifications of yoga - mind, body and spirit - and then we can decide about the necessity part.

### The History of Yoga

To understand it better, we need to know what it has become as well as its roots and beginnings. Earliest archaeological evidence of Yoga's existence can be found in stone seals which depict figures of Yoga poses. The stone seals place yoga's existence around 3000 B.C.

Scholars, however, have a reason to believe that Yoga existed long before that and traced its beginnings in Stone Age Shamanism. Both Shamanism and Yoga have similar characteristics, particularly in their efforts to improve the human condition at that time.

For our brief foray into the history of Yoga, we can divide it into four periods: the Vedic Period, Pre-Classical Period, Classical Period, and Post-Classical Period.

### Vedic Period:

**The Rig Veda, considered the most ancient of sacred texts, is the sacred scripture of Brahmanism that is the basis of modern-day Hinduism. Consisting of 1028 hymns which praise a divine power, the Vedas contain the oldest known Yogic teachings characterized by rituals and ceremonies that strive to surpass the limitations of the mind.**

### **Pre-Classical Yoga**

**The creation of the Upanishads marks this period. The Upanishads, the scriptures of ancient Hindu philosophy, describe the path of Jnana Yoga, the discipline of wisdom as a path to self-realization. Yoga shares some characteristics not only with Hinduism but also with Buddhism. During the sixth century B.C., Buddha started teaching Buddhism which stresses the importance of meditation and the practice of physical postures.**

**Later, around 500 B.C., the Bhagavad Gita ( Bhagavad means God and Gita means song - the Song of God ) was created - an eternal message from ancient India with lessons on how to live a moral life which formed the foundations of the spiritual practice of yoga. The central point of the Gita is this - to be alive means to be active and in order to avoid difficulties in our lives and in others, our actions have to be benign and have to exceed our egos. There are many wonderful quotes from this text. The following are a few of my favorites - they seem as timely today as when they were written, over 2500 years ago.**

***\*There is nothing lost or wasted in this life***

***\*A man's own self is his friend. A man's own self is his foe***

*\*Perform all work carefully, guided by compassion*

*\*We are not cabin dwellers, born to a life cramped and confined; we are meant to explore, to seek, to push the limits of our potential as human beings. The world of the senses is just a base camp; we are meant to be as much at home in consciousness as in the world of physical reality.*

### **Classical Period**

The Classical Period is marked by another creation - the Yoga Sutra (sutra means thread in Sanskrit). Written by Patanjali around the second century, it was an attempt to define and standardize Classical Yoga. Patanjali's Eightfold path of Yoga (also called the Eight Limbs) are:

1. Yama, which means social restraints or ethical values;
2. Niyama, which is personal observation of purity, tolerance and study;
3. Asanas or physical exercise
4. Pranayama, which means breath control or regulation;
5. Pratyahara or sense withdrawal in preparation for Meditation;
6. Dharana, which is about concentration;
7. Dhyana, which means Meditation;
8. Samadhi, which means ecstasy.

Patanjali believed that each individual is a composite of matter and spirit and that the two must be separated in order to cleanse the spirit - a stark contrast to Vedic and Pre-Classical Yoga that signify the union of body and spirit. His concept was dominant for some centuries and it was only later that the belief that the body as a

temple was rekindled and attention to the importance of the Asanas (postures) was revived.

### Post-Classical Period

At this point, we see a proliferation of literature as well as the practice of Yoga. It no longer strives to liberate the person from reality but rather teaches one to accept it and live in the moment.

Yoga was introduced in the West during the early 19th century. It was first studied as a part of Eastern Philosophy and began as a movement for health and vegetarianism around the 1930s. By the 1960s, there was an influx of Indian teachers who expounded on Yoga. One of them was Maharishi Mahesh, the Yogi who popularized Transcendental Meditation. Another was a prominent Yoga Guru Swami Sivananda, a doctor in Malaysia who wrote more than 200 books on Yoga and Philosophy and had many disciples who furthered his teachings. The most prominent of his works is his modified Five Principles of Yoga:

1. Savasana or relaxation
2. Asanas or proper exercise
3. Pranayama or proper breathing
4. Proper diet, and
5. Dhyana or positive thinking and meditation.

With such a rich history and belief system, you might suspect that yoga must surely be a religion. It does offer guidelines for living, encourages study of sacred



texts and facilitates communion with the "divine". Yoga can be a spiritual practice but it is not a religion because it does not dictate the nature of a God to be worshipped. It is not a religion in the form of ideology, dogma, belief systems or compliance. Though some yoga practices encourage meditation on a universal spirit which may even be called God, the nature of that God is left open to interpretation. Even atheists practice Pranayama meditation to clear the mind.

For most of us, our first awareness of yoga likely had its origin in the burgeoning interest in the 1960s in all things Eastern. The Beatles befriended Maharishi Mahesh and incorporated Hindu melodies in songs such as "Norwegian Wood" and "Within You Without You". It was a time when traditional values were being questioned and yoga offered an alternative set of values attractive to spiritual seekers.

In the 1980s, another yoga boom began when Dean Ornish connected yoga to heart health legitimizing yoga as a purely physical system of health exercises outside of counter-culture or esoteric circles unconnected to any religious denomination. Since 2001, the popularity of yoga in the US has risen constantly. The number of people who practiced some form of yoga had grown to over 20 million in 2011. I am sure that it is even higher in 2015!

There are many yoga styles to choose from and it can get confusing. Some schools have turned general yogic terms into brand names. For example, there is what is

called Kundalini yoga, a style developed by the late Yogi Bhajan. The traditional meaning of kundalini yoga is the latent "serpent energy" stored at the base of the spine. However, the phenomenon of trying to liberate kundalini energy is not unique to Kundalini yoga. In our physically oriented culture, Hatha yoga is by far the most common yoga practice in the West and has become a generic term for a wide range of styles, including Anusara, Iyengar, Kripalu, and Integral. Complicating matters further, not everyone uses the terms in exactly the same way.

Hatha yoga works under the assumption that supreme control over the body is one path to enlightenment - a sort of spiritual fitness plan where balance is key. Attention to the physical is foremost in Hatha yoga: this particular type of yoga involves cleansing rituals and breathing exercises designed to manipulate the body's energy through breath control and body positioning.

The American College of Sports Medicine supports the integration of yoga into the exercise regimens of healthy individuals as long as properly trained teachers deliver instruction. The College cites yoga's promotion of "profound mental, physical and spiritual awareness" and its benefits as a form of stretching and as an enhancer of breath control and core strength.

Apart from the spiritual goals, the physical postures of yoga are used to alleviate health problems, reduce stress and make the spine supple. Yoga is also used as a complete exercise program and physical therapy routine. The following examples

are just a few of the health conditions shown by scientific studies to benefit from the practice of yoga.

There is evidence to suggest that regular yoga practice increases brain GABA levels. GABA stands for gamma-amino butyric acid - the chief inhibitory neurotransmitter of the nervous system and linked with relaxation and anti-anxiety. Since oral supplements of GABA do not cross the BBB (blood brain barrier) therapeutic strategies such as yoga involve improving the production of GABA.

The three main focuses of Hatha yoga styles - exercise, breathing and meditation - make it beneficial to those suffering from heart disease. Studies show that yoga may reduce high blood pressure, improve symptoms of heart disease, enhance cardiac rehabilitation and lower cardiovascular risk factors.

For chronic low back pain, Yoga for Healthy Lower Backs has been shown to be 30% more beneficial than usual care alone in a U.K. clinical trial and other studies support these findings. A research group from Boston University School of Medicine tested yoga's effect on low back pain. Over 12 weeks, one group practiced yoga while the control group continued with standard treatment. The reported pain for yoga participants decreased by one-third while the standard group had a drop of 5%. Yoga participants also had a drop of 80% in the use of pain meds.

**There have been an emergence of studies on yoga as a complimentary intervention for cancer patients. Yoga is used to decrease depression, insomnia, pain and fatigue and to increase anxiety control. In the 1970s, molecular biologist Jon Kabat-Zinn, now a professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, developed a program called, "Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction"(MBSR) and documented how it worked to ease pain, suffering and stress in cancer patients, bone marrow transplant patients and even prison inmates. His findings were so compelling that over 250 hospitals around the world now use MBSR to promote patient-well-being. And it is offered here in Fort Wayne by Jack Dyer.**

**Yoga has also been studied as a treatment for schizophrenia. Some encouraging but inconclusive evidence suggests that yoga as a complimentary treatment may help alleviate symptoms and improve health related to quality of life.**

**Implementation of the Kundalini yoga lifestyle has shown to help substance abuse addicts according to physiological questionnaires like the Behavior and Symptom Intervention Scale and The Quality of Recovery Index. Yoga has been shown in a study to have some cognitive functioning benefit.**

**I could have devoted an entire paper to the topic of yoga as medicine. In his book devoted to that subject, Dr. Timothy McCall writes, " If science is the modern world's greatest contribution to knowledge, than yoga is the gem of the ancient world. It is my belief that these two ways of knowing - which seem so different,**

even at odds with each other - can be reconciled, advancing our understanding more than either discipline alone. Combining the insights of these two great systems can result in the likelihood of better health, a reduction of bothersome symptoms and the relief of suffering."

When you think of a person who practices yoga, you probably imagine a individual of petite stature, most likely female, who is flexible enough to pull her legs over her head while she's flat on the floor. Although this type of person surely exists, as a yoga stereotype it no longer holds true. I said earlier that yoga isn't a religion. It is also not a sport. If you're not an athlete, you might find it quite appealing that yoga is not competitive. A sense of competitiveness is in direct opposition to the yogi's frame of mind - your practice is individual and unique to you. It is not a sport, however, many athletes searching for that "athletic edge", have discovered yoga.

The Denver Nuggets, Philadelphia Eagles, and New York Giants have added yoga instructors to their staffs. Giant, hulking men holding steady in "crane" pose or stretching in "downward facing dog" are now a common sight in pro football training facilities. The following are a few athletes and teams you might not think would practice yoga: The New Zealand All Blacks Rugby team, pro basketball players, Shaquille O'Neal, LeBron James, Kevin Garnett, Kevin Love and coach Mike Kryzewski; Football players Tom Brady, Russell Wilson, Victor Cruz, Ray

**Lewis and Vernon Davis. Super Bowl coach Pete Carroll requires that his players take yoga classes during the season. They all credit both the physical and mental aspects of the yoga discipline as being extremely useful in their sport.**

**In an article entitled "Why Every Athlete Should Do Yoga" written by triathlete Rich Roll, he lists strength, balance, flexibility and mental control as positive benefits for the athlete who practices yoga. He writes," What does all this have to do with athletic performance? Everything. When you look at the highest level of sport, all athletes are incredibly talented. They all train hard.. So what distinguishes the Olympic champion from the also-ran? The mind."**

**He goes on, "Unrestrained by fear, free of negative thought patterns and laser focused, the champion athlete has enhanced dominion over his/her thoughts, able to leverage it's incredible power to focus entirely on the task at hand and remain totally rooted in the present moment. They visualize success so completely that it literally becomes a foregone conclusion. Much like a muscle, the mind can be trained. "**

**Consistent practice of the asanas (postures) followed with proper savasana (meditation) was the best way Rich Roll found to not only improve his sleep, reduce stress, quell negative mental chatter, and manage(and walk through) fear. He believes that yoga has made all the difference in helping him achieve some rather fantastical goals that seemed not only far beyond his capabilities, but almost impossible from any objective or logical perspective."**

**So, I think we can agree that yoga isn't a fad. Now - is it a necessity?**

**In my research and reading on this fascinating topic, I encountered many stories of people who had been helped tremendously by practicing yoga - clearly helped physically, mentally and spiritually. Martha Fenton, a free-lance writer and yoga practitioner writes at the end of her long list of why yoga is a necessity for her.**

**"Because, in the end, there's nothing like the feeling after class, when my brain is wiped clean and I can feel my cells dancing. I drift home, oblivious to the petty ego diversions I came in with. I try to imagine the incredible lightness of yoga, reverberating throughout my life, making me a better person, despite myself."**

**Who wouldn't like to experience that!**

**In yoga, it doesn't matter whether you approach it for fitness, stress relief, enlightenment, or healing. It doesn't matter how physically advanced you are, whether you are out of shape and inflexible, or an athlete extraordinaire. If you practice yoga, it will help you in whatever way you require. Though you may choose to blend a spiritual mind-set into yoga, it's certainly not required. Yoga is not a religion though it can complement and enhance spiritual development. The ideas and nonviolent philosophies in yoga can enhance any belief system.**

**In closing, I want to share my own personal yoga story with you. First - a confession - I am a yoga drop out!!!! For many years, I so very, very much wanted**

to be a yogi. I had been a marathon runner and not very flexible and I knew that yoga really helps with tight muscles. Moreover, I was attracted to the discipline of meditation and being in the moment - yoga encompasses that. Then after a bike trip in Thailand, I became interested in Buddhism and the emphasis on healthy mind, body, spirit. So I tried several yoga classes over the years and - darn it - it never took.

So, in my quest for healthy mind, body and spirit, I ended up finding Pilates which shares a lot of similarity with yoga and later began a study and regular practice of vipassana meditation - meditation can be an integral part of some yoga practices. As well, I value my Lutheran faith and Trinity English Lutheran Church. And as for the mind aspect, I count Quest Club as a plus factor there. So my path to enlightenment is not the yogic path - but what I have found and practice IS a necessity for me. I truly believe that there are different paths for all of us to find our way to health in body, mind and spirit. Yoga is not a panacea, but it is powerful medicine indeed for body, mind and spirit. Above all, yoga is a path. As an Indian yoga guru put it, "Yoga is 99 % practice, one percent theory."

In each of my three previous Quest papers, I have always included some music. Pretty easy to do with Steven Sondheim, Mary Magdalene and Andrew Wyeth - not so easy with yoga. However, in yoga, there is chanting. So, in keeping with my own Quest Club tradition, I would like to close this paper with a chant that is often used at the beginning or the end of a kundalini yoga session. It goes like this:



**Ong Namō Gurudev Namō** (*I bow to the divine teacher within*)

**Namaste**

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