

With Yoga to Health*

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"Your thoughts determine your life" – father Tadej

Yoga is not meant only for the ascetics who have given up this world and withdrawn to solitude. It can be practiced by the healthy and the ill, the young and the old. Yoga asanas (body postures) have a deep sense and value in the development of the personality, in physical as well as in mental and spiritual sense, unlike ordinary exercises that usually affect only muscles and bones.

Asana means a stable position. They are performed slowly, with relaxation and concentration and are very helpful when it comes to correcting a variety of defects. Nervous system, endocrine glands, inner organs and muscles are stimulated to function in harmony. The power of deciding and concentrating is developed and a person faces sorrow, anxiety and everyday problems in a much easier way, calmly and without panicking. They make the mind strong and the obstacles people are facing are turned into means for improving mental health. Animals used to be great teachers of ancient yogis, because they used to live in accordance with the nature, deliberated of sicknesses and global problems. Numerous techniques of yoga developed as the result of observing forest animals, which is the reason why they are called the position of tiger, cobra, dog, grasshopper etc.

Ranko Stoiljković, Bachelor of Law and yoga teacher with more than thirty five years' experience in practicing and more than ten years' experience in teaching. His first contact with yoga was extraordinary. He used to practice karate and was planning to study Faculty of Physical Education when, at the age of sixteen, he was diagnosed with pericarditis accompanied by extrasystoles and irregular heart rhythm. Due to serious health issues he was deliberated from serving military obligation and renowned doctors advised him to forget about karate.

- I was wondering why this had happened to me, a person so fond of sports. But, when you are facing a problem, you realise that it happened for a reason. It makes you use all your energy and overcome the obstacle. A person never faces the obstacle he or she cannot overcome, says Ranko. After six years of intense exercising, his heart problems disappeared,

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the doctors were surprised and he returned to karate and became a member of Serbian national karate team. He felt very honoured to enter such an important tournament in Japan, already as a veteran, and to be one of thousand participants from 39 countries.

There are several ways in which people can practice yoga.

Yoga as a therapy. A rather comprehensive approach that requires deep insight into the techniques in order to be effective, whether you are maintaining your health or trying to return it to normal state.

Yoga that improves mental and physical capabilities. It is a preventive method that leads us to an optimal health condition so that we can have a creative and successful life. Practicing should be done in a well aired room, whereas stomach, intestines and bladder should be empty. It is a misconception that a strict diet regime is required. It is important to take in the amount of food that is sufficient to eliminate hunger. Do not forget that you eat in order to live and not *vice versa*.

Yoga as a sport. Only makes sense if it is not opposite to the basic principle of yoga and does not develop your ego (the fundamental principle is that your ego should decrease). You should not be guided by the desire to prove yourself, which makes you think that, like in sport, the winner takes it all and the second one loses everything. Yoga is neither a competition nor a discipline that can be turned into business or a means to make you famous. We give our best and do not worry about the result. If we have not practiced well today, we will be better tomorrow.

Yoga as a way of living. Life philosophy changes radically by using yoga as a method to provide health. Often, sick people, especially those with serious diseases and carcinomas, have to change the essential approach to life, because, otherwise, they can hardly become healed. The majority of illnesses is of psycho-somatic character, which means that medical treatments are not sufficient. You should also pay attention to your thoughts, reject the negative ones and re-direct them by suggestion. Calm your mind and breathing. You have to forgive all the offences and bad things that happened in your life, you must accept them in order to become a better person.

Yoga as a spiritual discipline. Usually comes in the end, but sometimes spirituality is the thing that draws us. Yoga is not connected with any religion, but there are many religions using similar techniques in order to achieve the calmness of mind and body. India is considered the cradle of yoga, although there are some archaeological excavations in the USA and Scandinavian countries containing figures in yoga postures. It seems that yoga, as a unique culture, used to exist on several different places at the same time. It is hard to say that we are yogis. Even those among us who seriously practice yoga might only be on the way to become ones.

Although it might seem so at first sight, yoga does not include only practicing techniques, but also a group of attitudes and life principles. The final goal is to become closer to your true nature, to find peace in yourself and live in harmony with your environment. To improve your own qualities and become better to others, especially today, in the time of an increasing crisis of human relationships. It enables people to act in a relaxed manner regardless of circumstances. This can be seen in India, where I saw people who live in extreme poverty, who probably haven't eaten for days, only drinking tea but still walking around filled with contentment and tranquillity. Let us all try to be happy and satisfied with what we have, which does not mean that we should be eager to progress.

The best time to practice is in dawn (brahmamutra), when the atmosphere is cleaner in physical sense and the mind is liberated from the impressions of the outer world. This does not mean that you have to get up at dawn in order to practice yoga, but, when you see the effects, then you gradually begin to change your way of living, you go to bed when it really is time for sleeping (before midnight) and you get up earlier. In practice, a position is always followed by a contra-position, which allows your body to return to balance and avoid injuries (for example, back bending is followed by savangasana and halasana etc.). The order of asanas is also very important.

You begin with simple asanas, such as Sun salutations, standing positions, sitting asanas, supine positions and, at the end, prone positions. Afterwards, inversions and more difficult asanas are done. The inverse or inverted positions (shoulder-stand or savangasana, head-stand or sheershasana) are exceptionally good positions because they enhance blood flow in the brain, eliminate the tension and improve the functioning of hypophysis. Balancing postures are very useful for mental and emotional stability (different variations of standing on one leg). When you are focused on one focal point in front of you, it allows you to remain in a rather difficult position for a very long time. If you try to close your eyes, you will fall down. But, if you close your eyes and try to imagine that you are still looking at the imaginary focal point in front of you through your eyes closed, you can remain in the same position.

It is believed that each human being has "five bodies" (the Koshas or five layers of being): the wrapper (annamaya kosha), body made of energy (prana-maya kosha) body made of thought processes (manomaya kosha), the causal body (vijnanamaya kosha) and the body of spiritual bliss (anandamaya kosha). Yoga techniques have an impact on the body that is made of energy, that is vitalised, which affects the physical body. On the other hand, when we do physical exercises, the energy also affects our mental body, independently from physical exercises. Yoga improves energy status by impacting endocrine system because different positions gently press inner organs and stimulate their work. This is self-improving – you control this life force, this healing energy.

Awareness. Be aware of all those automatic activities that you perform during the day, so that you do not have to ask yourself whether you have locked the door or turned off the kitchen range. This is a specific brain training that prevents the development of dementia or Alzheimer's disease. The only thing that matters is the present moment and everything else belongs either to the past or to the future. During the practice, be aware of every breath and every movement. The more aware we are while practicing yoga, the stronger is its effect. Do not let yourself think about some other obligations while doing one thing.

Breathing. When we feel sad, mad, angry or happy, our breathing changes. If we choose the opposite direction and start calming our breathing, it becomes more regular and deeper so that consequently we gradually calm our mind. When you are facing a stressful situation, calming your breathing and mind allows you to take control over the situation. This requires exercise, but you can achieve a lot with correct breathing. During the practice, breathing is always harmonised with the movement and movement is in harmony with muscles and joints, without any struggling and in accordance with your capabilities. We always breathe through the nose.

Ancient yogis used to measure the life by the number of breaths we take and not by the number of years. If every inhalation and exhalation are prolonged, than our life will also last longer. Most people tend to breathe in a shallow and superficial manner, while only deep breathing purifies the lungs, providing better oxygen circulation and more life energy (prana). Prana is considered to activate our physical body through the energy canals (nadia). Ujjaj breathing, breathing with sound is very important and very simple to perform, because you are only supposed to follow the circulation of air through your throat. This calms your mind and, through contract points and carotid canals of the neck, regulates heart rhythm. Harmony is reached. Energetic canals are purified (there are 72,000 of them) and they are equivalent to meridians in Chinese traditional medicine. Nowadays, this is scientifically proved. After all, we cannot see radio-waves, but they still do exist.

Patience. The results cannot be expected to appear overnight. Yoga is effective, but it takes at least a couple of months of practice to make your body move and respond. You should never struggle too hard to bring your body to a particular position by force, but only do it while it feels pleasant. After some time your body will surprise you with its flexibility. For further recommendations see books: "The power of Present Moment" by Eckhart Tole and "Yoga for Beginners".

Moto: "The forces of the mind are like dispersed rays of light. When they are concentrated, they enlighten." Vivekananda