

The True Ethos of Yoga



By Bija Bennett

Yoga has, shall we say, a branding problem. Mention yoga to most Americans, and images of svelte women in sleek spandex—most often in physically challenging positions—come to mind. This isn't surprising given how frequently celebrities, influencers and trend-seekers—from hard-charging executives to famous trainers—tout yoga as their workout of choice to stay lithe, limber, strong, resilient and lean. But physical prowess is not the real purpose of yoga. In fact and function, nothing could be further from the truth.

A thoughtful reflection from one of yoga's most skilled practitioners that this magnificent, ancient practice is so much more than an exercise in fitness

While today most Americans turn to yoga as a form of exercise to improve strength, muscle tone and flexibility, we have misunderstood the true intent of this discipline.

For starters, let's talk about what yoga is not: It's not merely a form of physical exercise, or only for women, the young, the super-flexible or the super-fit. Yoga is for everyone, as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and more have noted, including older adults, children, the

physically challenged and all genders. More distressing is the fallout from these alluring images of high-profile yogis performing hard-to-master poses. Many people who could benefit immeasurably from yoga have misconceptions about this eternally beneficial pursuit. And they stay away.

While today most Americans turn to yoga as a form of exercise to improve strength, muscle tone and flexibility, we have misunderstood the true intent of this discipline. The original context of yoga was for spiritual development and to train the body and mind to self-observe and cultivate awareness, discernment, self-regulation and higher consciousness. In truth, yoga offers endless possibilities and options to protect our health, maintain how we feel and sustain our lives.

Why have we deeply misunderstood yoga?

A 5,000-year-old science, yoga focuses on a range of mental, physical and spiritual practices that include a philosophical mindset; a wide range of meditation, breathing and chanting techniques; foundational lifestyle skills; and psycho-emotional teachings. This helps explain why it has always meant many things to many people.

Yogic practice first came to the West in the early 19th century. By the 20th century revered teachers from India, notably Swami Vivekananda and later, Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, created order in the vast world of yoga scripture by sharing their insights and experiences on ways to best teach and practice it. Thanks to the efforts of these and other knowledgeable teachers, yoga traveled from the caves and forests of ancient India to the studios and gyms of the urban West. As that happened, yoga jettisoned many esoteric concerns about self-realization and enlightenment and incorporated elements of exercise and dance as well as bodybuilding routines from Indian wrestling to take the stressed-out world of today by storm.

Boosted by slick commercialization and the West's obsession with physical power and body image, the resulting hybrid of yoga is now a multibillion-dollar global industry and a highly respectable pastime synonymous with flexibility, extreme workouts and fitness. But in some ways, it has gone too far. Yoga was never intended to be just physical training meant for working out and generating sweat. It is not even primarily about exercise.

Instead, yoga was and remains an ancient, practical system for accessing, healing and integrating the body and mind. It involves our feelings, thoughts and emotions in addition to postures. Yoga is much more a state of mind than having to touch your toes. A truly authentic mastery of yoga involves creating an optimal state of health, wellbeing and extraordinary wholeness.

Ancient Science, Modern Results

The word yoga comes from the Sanskrit word yuj, which means to "join, link or connect." Yoga is the art of linking all parts—body, mind, behavior and emotions—to reach a new level of integration within ourselves. Yoga's most fundamental principles teach that all parts of the body and mind are interconnected. When we influence one part, we influence all others. Each time we attempt to link with any aspect of ourselves or our world, we are doing yoga.



5 Ways to Transform Your Body, Mind and Spirituality Through the Practice of Yoga

Use these five practices separately or in combination to foster healing and wellness:

1 Asanas (Body): Move your body to strengthen your skeletal system, spine, muscles and joints and to nourish physical endurance and flexibility.

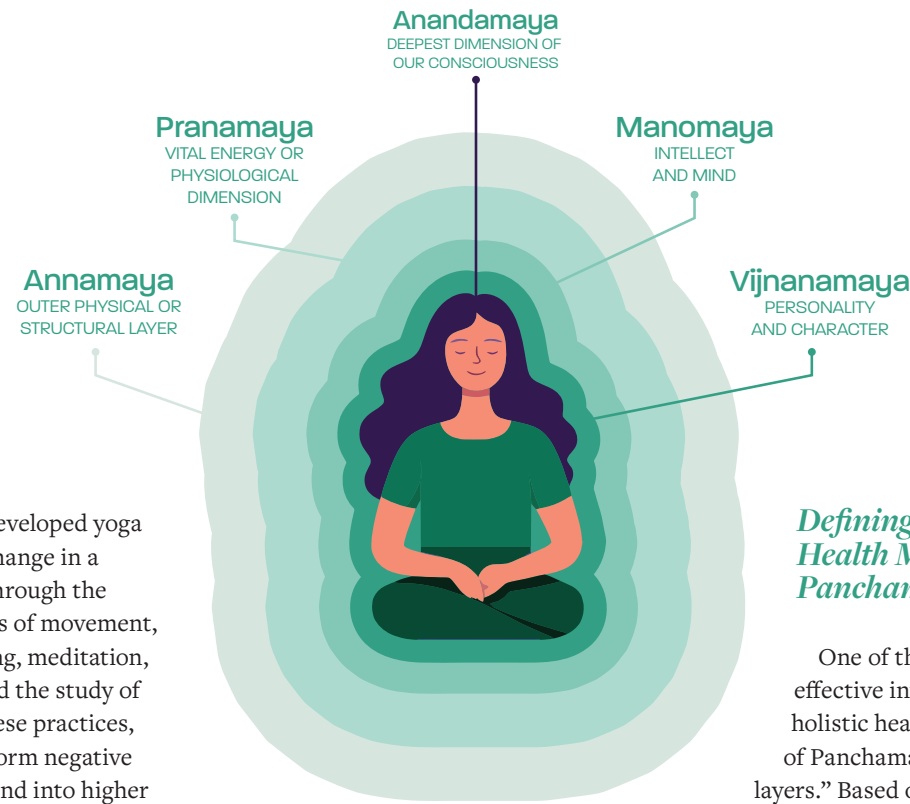
2 Pranayama (Energy): Consciously breathe to generate vitality, refine and develop your physiology, and to activate or relax your body and mind.

3 Chanting (Mind): Find creative ways of vocalizing sound to support learning, memory, concentration and emotional balance.

4 Meditation (Behavior/Character): Meditate to help build healthy relationships, develop character and sustain your focus on an object of attention.

5 Personal Ritual (Spirituality): Combine your practices to create a daily ritual that promotes personal transformation and brings you a sense of purpose, inspiration and joy.





Defining the Whole-Health Model of Yoga: Panchamaya

One of the earliest and most effective integrative systems of holistic health today is the model of Panchamaya, meaning “five layers.” Based on the explorations of the Indian Vedic seers, or rishis, the teachings of yoga acknowledge a broader view of the human being. Rather than seeing the body and mind as a set of biochemical processes, the Panchamaya model defines the human system as a collection of five integrated layers ranging from material to subtle. Like the petals of a rose, all layers of ourselves unfold from within one another—from the outer physical or structural layer (*Annamaya*), to our vital energy or physiological dimension (*Pranamaya*), to the intellect and mind (*Manomaya*), to our personality and character (*Vijnanamaya*), to the deepest dimension of our consciousness (*Anandamaya*).

A comprehensive system for self-development, Panchamaya is more relevant today than ever before. It provides a full spectrum of integrative therapies, based on each layer, to help us deal with our everyday issues—from anxiety and stress to depression and fear. Using the dynamic interplay of movements, sounds, rituals, meditations and breathing techniques, these five powerful yogic therapies or practices (see sidebar) are designed to target and heal each aspect of who we are.

Ancient yogis developed yoga to affect overall change in a person’s system through the various techniques of movement, breathing, chanting, meditation, personal ritual and the study of texts. Through these practices, we learn to transform negative qualities of the mind into higher states of clarity to promote overall physical and emotional wellbeing.

Strong evidence-based research shows that adding these mind-body and self-care practices to our daily lives can beneficially impact a diverse range of health responses—from energy, aging and immunity to sleep, happiness, family relationships and even sex. New clinical trials on stress reduction demonstrate that people who adopt yoga-based therapies reduce their perceived stress levels and improve their ability to respond to stress in a big way.

A comprehensive review of the literature on yoga found that it is a relatively safe and effective option for anyone interested in therapeutic lifestyle changes to improve wellbeing and help manage issues such as hypertension, back pain and overall mental health. Notably, 84.7% of participants in a national survey on yoga stated that practicing it reduced their stress levels, while 67.5% stated that practicing yoga made them feel better emotionally. What many don’t realize is that yoga is actually a collection of ancient and often scientifically substantiated practices that came into being for exactly these reasons—to deal with the difficulties, demands and stresses human beings have faced in their daily lives for millennia.

Illustration by Alison Farone



UNDERSTAND THE WELLNESS ECONOMY

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Why Yoga is More Important Now Than Ever Before

Yoga is wildly popular—but is it really that good for you? Those who have perceived yoga as a tough workout that is beyond their physical capabilities, or not relevant to their needs, would think it is not. But the real answer is a definitive and indisputable yes, no matter your age, physical limitations, body type or ability. “It really is as healthy as people say,” the *New York Times* proclaimed this past April in “Yoga for Skeptics.” Beyond physical exercise, its proven benefits abound—from reducing stress, depression and anxiety to improving sleep, physical fitness, balance, strength, aching backs, mental health, mood and more.

Moreover, it can improve brain function. “If you look at the brains of people who have been practicing yoga for a long time, you see that the regions of the brain that are responsible for decision-making and problem-solving...are better developed,” Dr. Neha Gothe, a professor of kinesiology

and community health at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, told the *New York Times*.

But the benefits are unparalleled for aging—a state of being every one of us experiences. Our bodies, needs and interests change as we age, and yoga practices can be adapted to embrace and improve these changes. Yoga, which is backed by a profound body of knowledge, experience and substantiated benefits, can help us not only navigate life changes with grace and resilience but can also keep us healthy and cogent as we age—and that’s a hard proposition to turn down.

Yoga has the potential to positively change us in many ways—to strengthen our bodies, focus our minds, deepen our emotions and bring us joy—depending on our intention and the practices we choose to embrace. But no matter how you practice, you can reap all the benefits and more! To paraphrase the legendary yoga therapy master T.K.V. Desikachar, the success of yoga does not lie in the ability to perform postures but in how it positively changes the way we live our life and our relationships. ◉

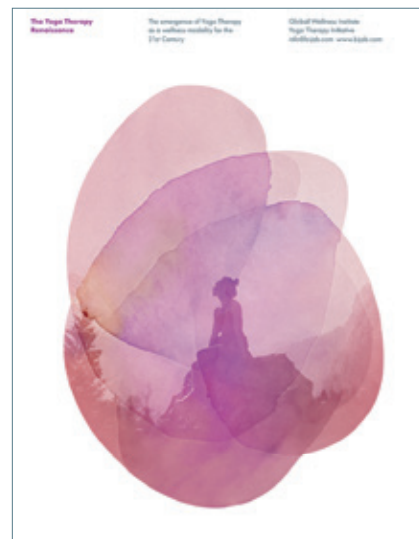


Do you really understand the power of yoga?

People think of yoga as merely separate positions to be mastered. But its purpose is not only for physical fitness. In fact, yoga isn't even primarily about exercise.

‘The Yoga Therapy Renaissance,’ a comprehensive new eBook by Bija Bennett - author of ‘The True Ethos of Yoga’ - explores a deeper understanding of how yoga’s holistic therapies impact a diverse range of health responses—from energy, aging and immunity to sleep, happiness, family relationships—even sex!

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BREATHING LESSONS

The simplest definition of yogic breathing, or pranayama, is “to be with the breath.” But what makes pranayama practices unique is that your attention is focused on your breath rather than your body. Yogic breathing exercises teach you to use your breath intelligently and be conscious of how and why you breathe. You deliberately control your breathing cycle by regulating one or more of its four phases: exhalation; hold or suspension with empty lungs; inhalation; and hold or retention with full lungs. In each practice, you simply modify one or more of these four phases and combine them in relation to one another. It’s simple—yet not always easy.

Try this: THE WHISPERING BREATH

The effects: This controls and deepens the flow of your breath, brings your attention inside, focuses your awareness, relaxes your body and calms your mind.

To begin:

- When you practice breathing you can breathe through your nose, your mouth or from the back of your throat.
- Whisper the word “Ha” and listen to where this sound originates in your throat; this tells you where your breath is coming from. Now, close your mouth, breathe through your nose and create this same soft whispering sound when you breathe from the back of your throat without vocalizing.
- It should sound smooth and light, like a rushing sound. Keep this sound going softly when you inhale and exhale with your mouth closed.
- Feel the sensation of the breath in your throat rather than in your nose. Breathe slowly and deeply and listen to the sound of your breath. Do not force it in or out, just keep it smooth.
- This technique helps you to stay focused and attentive, invigorates and calms your body and allows you to extend, lengthen and deepen your breathing during anything you do—working out, walking, running or simply sitting and breathing.
- Repeat The Whispering Breath for 8 to 10 breaths.

Try this: PROGRESSIVELY LENGTHEN THE EXHALATION AND HOLD

The effects: This calms, reduces agitation, anger, anxiety and fear.

Note: The length of inhalation is unequal to exhalation and is used to create a relaxing effect. This breathing exercise is traditionally practiced in the evening or to calm your system.

To begin: (follow the breathing sequence in the chart below)

- You may prepare your body first by moving a little or practicing some yoga postures, placing an emphasis on your exhalation.
- Follow the breathing sequence in the chart below to progressively lengthen your exhalation and the suspension of your breath.
- As you gradually lengthen your exhale and repeat each part of the sequence

Inhalation	HOLD	Exhalation	HOLD	Repeat
8	2	8	2	x4
8	2	10	2	x4
8	2	10	4	x4
8	2	10	6	x4
8	2	12	6	x4
8	0	8	0	x4



for four breaths, you will begin to feel a relaxing effect in your body and mind.

- Longer holds may evoke strong emotions and lengthening exhalations and holding your breath after you exhale—even slightly—can be very challenging.
- After exhaling, you will feel empty. Observe how you feel practicing this and use it as a guide. Modify it however needed.

If you have time, rest at the end of your breathing practices. Be still for a while without getting up and make a gradual transition into your next activity.

Breathing offers yoga’s greatest benefits. When practiced with sincerity and attention, it offers substantial healing powers. Best of all, anyone can consciously breathe regardless of age, skill level or condition. If you train yourself in one area only, make it your breath. It’s foundational and offers significant and accessible lifelong benefits.