

Yoga for Your Back and Much More

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The main focus of this article is the benefits of Yoga, and primarily those benefits for your back. However, such a limited approach would be a great disservice to you, and disrespect to the great teachers who have handed down to us this wonderful and sacred discipline from over two thousand years ago. The value of Yoga is much, much greater than what it can do for your back, just as your true value is much greater than that of your back, or of any other part, for that matter! Nevertheless, I will start with your back. That is a good place to start, for your back is your primary support, and without a healthy back, your journey — whether it be to your office, a vacation spot, or your spiritual awakening — will be much more difficult and troublesome.

First, if you are someone whose back goes out more often than you do, do not despair! You are not alone: 80% of us will have a back problem sometime in our lives. Next to the common cold, back pain is the most common malady in the United States. In fact, low back pain is the leading cause of restricted movement and disability between the ages of 19 and 45.

Many people who suffer from severe back pain believe that their only resort is surgery. This is tragic, because the amount of pain one suffers has little to do with the efficacy of surgery. Despite extensive medical literature on unsuccessful surgery and evidence that repeat procedures rarely improve outcomes, there are numerous examples of patients who have had as many as 20 spine operations. What's more, surgery for back pain is twice as frequent in the United States as in most developed countries, and five times as frequent as in Great Britain.¹

What alternative do we have other than surgery? I have had an interest in that question for many years. During high school, I was already experiencing stabbing pain in my thoracic spine, caused by lifting weights improperly during training for football. I watched both of my parents suffer from agonizing back problems, including slipped and ruptured disks; and yes, both parents ended up on the operating table several times. So, it is no surprise that I sought ways to avoid the same fate for myself. A few months after graduating from college in 1969, I was introduced to Yoga: it was love at first stretch. With consistent practice, my back pain was soon forgotten.

My rewards from the practice of Yoga inspired me to share it with others, so I started teaching Yoga in 1974. However, in spite of the success I experienced with Yoga for my own back and the many years of teaching since then, I did not have 100% confidence teaching students with back problems until 1997. That is when I was introduced to the Svaroopa™ style of Yoga and its originator, Rama Berch. Since then, with hundreds of hours of intensive training under Berch's tutelage, and several years of teaching Svaroopa™ yoga classes, I am now firmly convinced and confident in the power of Yoga for healing even the most difficult back problems. I have seen many wonderful results. For example, many who had all but given up on their backs, as well as on themselves, have come to experience a new lease on life as a result of Yoga.

¹ Dr. Richard Deyo, professor in the departments of medicine and health services at the University of Washington, and a world renowned expert on low-back problems, told me that the best rate would be somewhere in the middle, where Canada and most of Western Europe are. Some of these statistics were discussed in his article, "Low-Back Pain," which appeared in the August, 1998 issue of the *Scientific American*.

Lorraine's Journey Back to Health

Take Lorraine, for example, who first came to one of my basic Yoga classes two years ago. She had spent the preceding two decades of her life in constant pain and discomfort. It started in 1979, when she was involved in a terrible automobile accident that almost took her life. She broke her neck in three places. Ten years later she suffered from a herniated lumbar disk, and a couple years after that, another disk ruptured. She also suffered from painful arthritis. Her doctors had told her that she would have to live with her pain the rest of her life. Her neurologist claimed she should be "permanently disabled." She was told she would have to give up all strenuous exercise. This was hard for her to take, as she likes to throw herself wholeheartedly into gardening, hiking, and other similar activities.

So, she resigned to *watch* her husband do the work in the garden. Whenever she did try to do some gardening, it would take her all day because she had to retreat frequently into her house to lie down and recover from the severe pain. When she hiked, she could only do one or two miles at most (on a good day), but only with frequent rest stops.

The first significant change Lorraine noticed was after about a month of classes when she took off for a vacation in Italy. She practiced Yoga faithfully each day of her journey (one thing nice about Yoga is that you can take it with you!). The results were almost incredible for her. In her words, "It helped me survive the physical strain of the trip. It worked beautifully. I never thought I could travel that distance."

The next significant event for her was a trip to Arizona, about a year later. "I was amazed at myself!" she reported. "I climbed vortexes [in Sedona] and hiked trails for miles through the Grand Canyon, and was extremely active in this manner throughout the day." Her doctors were refuted. This past summer she has also enjoyed vigorous activity in the garden again.

Not All Yoga Is Created Equal

I want to caution my readers here that many styles of Yoga exist today, and not all of them are appropriate for all people. People with back problems or similar vulnerabilities must be especially careful to choose a style of Yoga that is gentle and a teacher who is well qualified. However, many styles of Yoga are gentle and non-invasive, and that is why they can work so well for so many problems. Practiced regularly and gently, with precision and detail for alignment, Yoga helps muscles loosen and lengthen. This helps blood flow more easily through the muscles for healing and increased strength. Tense muscles, lacking adequate blood flow, are weak; relaxed, richly nourished muscles are much stronger.

Most backaches are due to muscles being overworked in some way. These muscles do not need to be challenged or even stretched so much as they need to be released and relaxed. Svaroopo Yoga induces these muscles to let go and teaches students how to move and sit properly so that they may continue to be strain free. A good example of this is Jane, who has practiced Svaroopo Yoga with me since I first introduced it to my classes. She had been suffering from back problems and was told by her doctor that the next step to her pain relief would be surgery. Jane reports that after several years of Yoga practice, her lower back pain has been eliminated, and that: "...even after hours of driving or sitting in one place, the muscles remain relatively relaxed and return quickly to being flexible; that is, pain free." (She also gratefully shared with me that "menopause would be hell without Yoga!")

Another student, Kathy, also testified to how Yoga has helped her become more aware of herself in a therapeutic way: "I try to practice Yoga throughout the day by sneaking in stretches and breathing. I catch myself breathing too shallowly, can feel when my muscles are tense, and know that I am not relaxed as I could be. I was never aware of this before." As a result of her increased

awareness and responsibility to herself, Kathy says that she now experiences “the feeling of inner calmness” for the first time in years.

Yoga works powerfully, and its effects last, because it brings change gently and gradually. Yoga is not meant to be an overnight cure. As Carl Jung once said: "Things seldom happen overnight except in dreams." Changes in the body that do happen too quickly, usually "snap" back quickly, too. Many people with back problems are experiencing the result of years of poor posture or body mechanics, or as in Lorraine's case, years of pain and tension induced by a specific physical injury. In any case, their tensions and imbalances have become deep set. Poor posture can force back muscles into constant contraction to compensate for imbalances. This makes the muscles prone to spasm. Similarly, injuries can induce "protective" contractions that lead to spasms. To expect immediate transformation from such maladies would be unrealistic.

Rama Berch suggests that for the number of years you have been suffering from a problem, you need that many months of Yoga to heal it completely. I shared this concept with Lorraine early in her practice when she was still having some difficulty. Given that her accident was 19 years before her Yoga practice began, I told her she would need about 19 months of Yoga to heal. I had expected her to become discouraged hearing this, but she was actually elated: she told me she had never been given hope before. Now, considering the results, the formula has been substantiated.

Unlike Lorraine, some students notice significant changes immediately when beginning Yoga, as I did 30 years ago, and still do. For example, Shari had recently suffered a whiplash in an automobile accident. She came to a yoga class as a last resort: she was beginning to think she would have to live the rest of her life depending on painkillers. By only the third class, however, she was already experiencing almost complete freedom from pain.

A Way Back from Pain, Fear, Anxiety

Most of the people who come to my back classes have suffered a great amount of pain in their lives. One common denominator among them is that they seem to be fettered by fear. It is understandable: every change they had ever known before had been associated with more pain, and so they were afraid to try anything new. (As with Shari, many of them had come to my class with reluctance and in desperation.) This is unfortunate, because inactivity is probably the worst recourse for back pain, as has been substantiated by studies in recent years. Doctors used to prescribe bed rest as the standard therapy for back pain, but most have since changed their ways.

Getting back to fear, the paradox about fear is that it actually magnifies pain. As Mary Pullig Schatz, MD states in her book, [Back Care Basics: A Doctor's Gentle Yoga Program for Back and Neck Pain Relief](#): "In any painful situation, there are two main components that determine how much pain you perceive: the basic pain and the pain that is superimposed by your reaction to the basic pain. This superimposed pain comes from the feelings of fear, helplessness, and uncertainty that are generated by the basic pain."

Schatz explains further that when the pain occurs during exercise, the reaction of fear causes the muscles in the area to tighten up, and so pain increases, along with the likelihood of injury. This only confirms people's fears. So, the fear prevents them from exercise, and lacking the circulation that exercise could bring, their body becomes more stiff and sore.

The beauty and power of Yoga, and what distinguishes it from rehabilitative exercise, is that it is more than just physical: it involves your whole being. You are taught to breathe in a relaxed, deep way and to focus your mind meditatively, and in so doing, fear dissipates. Learning to regulate the breath and exhale more deeply creates instantaneous physiological as well as psychological healing. In the words of Jnoni Chapman, RN, the former executive director of the International

Association of Yoga Therapists:² "You decrease the amount of carbon dioxide in the blood, which triggers the brain to relax the nervous system. You also allow the body to eliminate the physiological effects of anxiety, such as the buildup of lactic acid, which tightens muscles."

Furthermore, the mind-body interaction goes both ways. When the muscles relax, as they do in Yoga practice, the mind becomes more tranquil. Barbara Brown confirms this in her book, Stress and the Art of Biofeedback: "... anxiety and relaxation are mutually exclusive. That is, anxiety does not, cannot exist when the muscles are truly relaxed."

In Yoga practice, your mind and body work cooperatively to create a calm space and a healing perspective. From there, you can observe your sensations and situations objectively, and respond to them more prudently. Instead of reacting and falling into the vicious cycle of fear, tension, pain, and more fear, as Schatz outlined above, you can rise to a victorious cycle. Your mind becomes less reactive and critical. You acquire a sense of control instead of helplessness. Better yet, you learn to accept life as it is, rather than resisting it. With acceptance comes the highest form of healing.

So, though you might turn to Yoga for the reasons most people do — to relieve back pain and other physical problems — you are bound to get more than you bargained for. A good Yoga teacher, knowing that physical fitness is a natural outcome of the practice of Yoga, also leads her students toward better mental fitness. As a result, they develop a strong and flexible body while also developing the mental and emotional "muscles" needed to handle stress well.

The Ultimate Way of Managing Stress

Yoga's ability to relieve stress, which is the second most common reason people turn to Yoga, is particularly relevant for healing and preventing back problems. Recent studies have determined that 95% of commonplace back ailments are triggered by the psyche, not by physical abnormalities or by heavy lifting. Back muscles tense up in response to emotional stress. Tensed up too long, as noted earlier, they start to hurt. The same mechanism causes tension headaches.

I think of Yoga as the ultimate, revolutionary stress management tool because it reaches the core of our being — not just the muscles and inner organs, but the spirit within us, our true Self. Why is that important for stress management, or for any healing, for that matter? Because the negative effects of stress usually arise when we feel overwhelmed or powerless, and we feel overwhelmed and powerless when we have lost connection with the infinite power that resides at the center of our being. The second verse of the first chapter of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, perhaps the greatest classical text on the philosophy and psychology of Yoga, defines Yoga as the stilling of the modifications of the mind. The next verse explains that when the mind becomes still, the power of our true Self in the depths of our being is revealed to us. As when the surface of a pond is disturbed, the ripples prevent us from seeing into the depths of the pond, so when our mind is rippled with so many thoughts and worries, we cannot sense the depth of our own Being. That eventually leads to distress.

Chiming in from the West, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote this about the treasure of a quiet mind: "Quiet minds cannot be perplexed or frightened, but go on in fortune or misfortune at their own private pace, like a clock during a thunderstorm." An interesting side note: one of my students, a health nurse who counsels people with eating disorders, once shared with me that she noticed all her clients uniformly lack any inkling of what it means to have a calm or peaceful or centered place within. "The only way they had ever been able to live with their problems is through escape into food, exercise, and substances."

² A division of the Yoga Research and Education Center.

When we experience our center, that inner calm, or God, or the spirit within us, we are transformed, and our suffering ceases. In the words of Deepak Chopra:

“There exists in every person a place that is free from disease, that never feels pain, that cannot age or die. When you go to this place, limitations which all of us accept cease to exist. They are not even entertained as a possibility. This is a place called perfect health...”³

Back Toward Wholeness

The third most common reason people turn to Yoga is spiritual hunger. Mother Teresa once commented that the physical starvation in India is nothing like the spiritual starvation in the West. Yoga helps us develop a compass that points to True Self, bringing us a sense of direction, connection, and wholeness.

Attaining wholeness is no easy task in a culture that seems to be doing everything it can to make us feel lacking. Watch a few minutes of commercials on television, for example, and see if you feel whole and complete! The messages attempt to seduce us into believing that we will not be happy (or beautiful) until we buy (fill in the blank with any of the following: a brand of beer, snack food, clothing, perfume, expensive automobile, ad infinitum).”

Ironically, an increasing number of advertisers are using Yoga itself as a prop to sell their products. In the past year, Yoga poses or classes have been featured in ads selling everything from skin cream, to HMOs, to Internet business solutions. A few years back, Chrysler ran an ad for their Jeep Cherokee in several publications, featuring a page full of silhouetted figures doing Yoga postures, with the name of the posture written below each figure. The caption for the entire gallery: “The Eight Principal Postures for Achieving Relaxation and Self-Discovery.” Looking more closely, you see one of the figures is a seated driver, and that posture is named “The Jeep Grand Cherokee.”

In a culture that promises happiness for everyone through materialism and excess, but where, for so many, only misery and discontentment are realized instead (and add to that the suffering brought upon the Third World as a result of American excesses), Yoga is more than a promise: it is an answer for living respectfully with the stresses and absurdities of our modern world. Yoga brings us back to our senses: our senses of Dignity, Wholeness, and Spirit. In so doing, Yoga not only brings health to our backs (and other body parts, as well), but also brings us back to true Health.

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³ Deepak Chopra, *Perfect Health: The Complete Mind/Body Program for Identifying & Soothing the Source of Your Body's Reaction*, Harmony Books, 1991