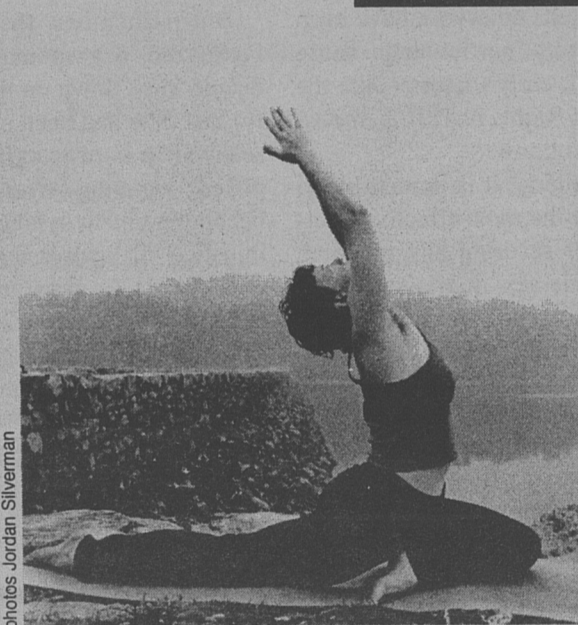
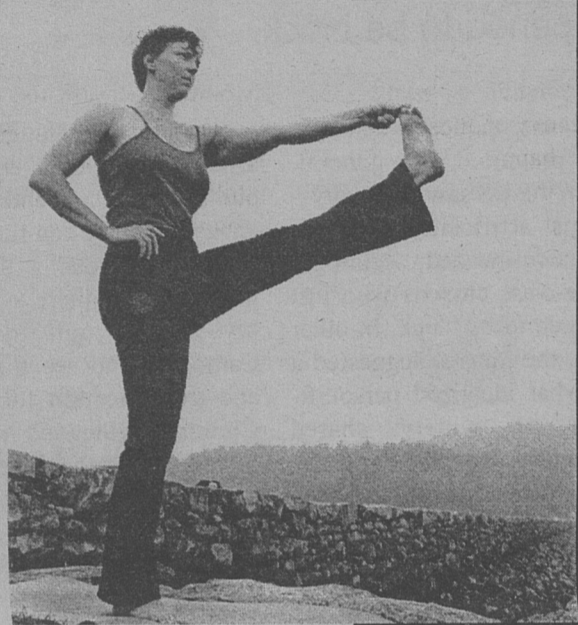
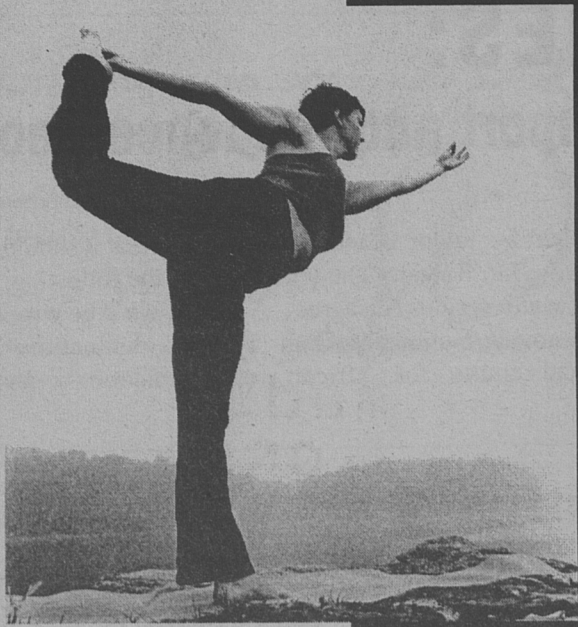


# YOGA 101



photos Jordan Silverman

BY HEATHER PEAKE

The word "yoga" comes from the Sanskrit *yug*, meaning "union" or "to join." It first appeared in the scriptural writings of the Far East, called the Vedas, around 3000 BC. While not a religion in itself, yoga has been a part of Hinduism for millennia. Only through the integration of body, mind, and spirit can one unite with the Absolute, or Brahman. Through meditation, exercise, chanting and conscious action, yoga seeks to join the self with Brahman.

There are more than a dozen branches of yoga, each with a different philosophical path to the Absolute. Raja yoga, for example, is the path of physical and mental control. Jnana yoga is the path of knowledge — some call this the hardest discipline. Bhakti yoga is the path of devotion. Karma yoga is the path of action. Tantra yoga, now associated with sex, is actually the path of uniting the masculine and feminine aspects within us all.

The divisions between all the various practices are sometimes hard to find; they tend to interlink and overlap. When most of us think of yoga, we are thinking about Hatha (pronounced "hatta") yoga, which some see as the introductory study for Raja yoga. "Ha" is the Sanskrit symbol for sun, and "tha" for moon. These represent the positive and negative forces of life; Hatha yoga is therefore the yoga of balanced force. Through body positions called *asanas*, breathing techniques and meditation, Hatha yoga seeks to enhance the *prana*, or life force.

The *prana* enters the body through the breath; so much attention is paid to controlled breathing techniques. The body has to be a worthy host for the *prana*, and the various exercises seek to perfect the functions of the muscles and organs. The mind has to be quiet and calm to

receive the *prana* — thus the emphasis on meditation. To practice one aspect and exclude the others is to lose balance, and lose, in the process, the full benefit of the yoga experience.

Today, yoga therapy is being used to help people with ailments as diverse as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, chronic fatigue syndrome, asthma, carpal tunnel syndrome, cancer, infertility, migraines, depression and AIDS. It is not a cure for any of these problems, but it can promote healing and improve the effects of traditional therapies or shorten recovery time.

You don't have to be sick to reap the benefits of yoga. Regular practice can significantly reduce the general stress and anxiety of daily life, making you more resistant to sickness or disease. Increased flexibility and coordination reduces the likelihood of chronic muscle problems or fractures.

As with many alternative therapies, researchers aren't sure exactly how yoga works physiologically; studies are now underway at the National Institute of Health's Office of Alternative Medicine. Obviously, many of its positive results involve stress reduction and enhanced body awareness. Any kind of moderate exercise releases endorphins, the body's natural painkiller. But the critical factor may be yoga's emphasis on breathing awareness.

Respiration may be a reflex, but that doesn't mean we do it effectively. Most of us breathe shallowly, in through the mouth, filling only parts of our lungs. Yogic breathing draws air in through the nose and fills the diaphragm, the dome-shaped sheet of muscle attached to the lower ribs. This better oxygenates the blood, simultaneously energizing the blood and calming the mind. Once this becomes a habit, its impact is ongoing.

There's no standardized certification for yoga instructors, although some professional organizations do certify members, and any reputable health club will make sure their instructors are well trained and up-to-date. When shopping for a class, ask if you can observe a session first, and see if the instructor has a style you're comfortable with.

Sessions generally last 45 minutes to an hour. Most begin with some gentle warm-up exercises, followed by controlled breathing routines. This loosens the body up for the postures that make up the bulk of a yoga workout. Ranging from neck-rolls to elaborate poses, the idea is to stretch the muscle groups and gently compress the organs in a specific sequence. Class usually ends with a period of meditation.

Ideally, you should plan to attend classes at least once a week. Your instructor might also suggest exercises you can do on non-class days. Some can also give you nutritional and lifestyle advice that can help you towards maximum health.

And if you don't want to take classes? Especially for beginners, it's probably best to work with an instructor to make sure you're moving and breathing correctly and safely. That said, there are numerous videos for every skill level. Try to preview tapes before you buy, because just as there's no universal standard for instructors, there's no rating system for exercise tapes.

A cautionary note: consult your doctor before beginning any new exercise program. People who have had recent back surgery or injury should not undertake yoga until fully healed. Likewise, you'll want to check with your doctor if you have high blood pressure, arthritis or heart disease. Also, be sure to tell your instructor of any physical problems, because you may need to avoid certain postures. ▼

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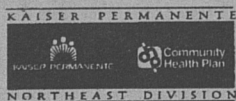
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