

## Yoga for Addictions

In the search for self, the struggle with addictions creates a particularly intense hurdle to negotiate. Many in recovery are in the end recovering from the lack of self-esteem and self-love that precipitated their addictive behavior initially, and seek therefore to re-establish inner balance mentally as well as physically. The science of yoga has for thousands of years provided means by which to establish and build upon inner balance. Yoga means 'unity', of mind and body, of self with life. Thus the practice of yoga seeks to purify both the physical body and the mental/emotional faculty to bring balance to the individual by promoting strength, flexibility and internal cleansing physiologically, as well as seeking calm, focus and the replacement of external referencing with internal referencing for things like locus of control and self-esteem.

Yogic practices seek to realign the physical imbalances often created by abuse of chemical substances or behavioral compulsions, and actively calm related anxieties. Much research shows the efficacy of meditation as a therapeutic tool proven to lower recidivism (1). Yoga has been shown to significantly reduce depression often experienced in recovery; studies show its ability to counteract stress is unparalleled. Yoga classes create a positive atmosphere for growth and socialization in an optimistic, holistic and growth-oriented pursuit that actively turns self-defeating behavior into self-promoting behavior. Taken together, these effects create a formidable ally to sobriety.

Recovery often stresses the system holistically: the mind is stressed by being divorced from its most well known coping mechanism, the body by physiological and behavioral withdrawal, and the spirit by a deep sense of emptiness. One way yoga counteracts stress is through the stretching of muscles in asana which releases tensions often transferred to, and held in, muscles. Because the practice of yoga asana involves an awareness of the breath while performing asana, it not only creates mind/body awareness, but also forces the mind into the present moment in a way few activities do. This helps in experiencing the now, rather than regretting the past or anxiously anticipating the future. For many Americans, learning to live in the present is quite enlightening! Recent research clearly indicates meditation as an excellent remedy for stress-induced hypertension (2), and new studies on the use of yoga with post-war veterans suffering from PTSD produces notable reductions in stress and post-traumatic response in these individuals (3). Having secured a calm frame of mind, one is much less reactive, impulsive, and fearful.

There are profound physiological benefits to both asana practice (doing yoga postures) and meditation. One 1974 study shows convincingly that the release of stress and tension in the nervous system that results from these practices produces physical and mental well-being that is apparently responsible for a, "very encouraging reduction in drug abuse among meditators."(4). Another study found that meditators not only got healthier, they got younger: using physiological measures such as hearing acuity, near point of vision and blood pressure, doctors estimated that meditators with five years of experience were found to be an average of fifteen physiological years younger (5)! Yoga asanas have a tremendous cleansing effect on not only the internal organs, but also on the energetic systems of the body – the gateways we often associate with acupuncture. They also

stimulate the pineal and pituitary glands in the brain which in turn stimulate the endocrine, metabolic, digestive, circulatory and lymphatic systems to cleanse the body of toxins more efficiently. This cleansing promotes healing in bodies that have been pummeled internally by chemical substances and immoderate imbibing. Eastern forms of medicine, and even western naturopathy, agree that the body strives for physiological balance, and then is able to rely on its inherent healing systems – the immune system, kidneys, liver, digestive facilities, etc. This state of balance is brought on by stimulating the systems as mentioned, and by activating the parasympathetic nervous system – the relaxation response – which was meant to allow the body to direct its resources inward (rather than outward in fight or flight response) for the purpose of healing and regeneration of cells.

The practice of pranayam, (deep breathing), moreover, oxygenates the body approximately 80% better than regular chest breathing. This is significant, for what substance cleans and feeds every body cell more than any other? Oxygen. This includes brain cells often damaged by substance abuse. Deep breathing also stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, helps to internalize awareness and calms the mind. We often think of the physical benefits of yoga as confined to gaining flexibility and strength, but yoga asana also balances how the muscles interact with one another, lessening injuries and heightening coordination. Perhaps these are the reasons that the practice of yoga has been used for personal development for more than 5,000 years.

As yoga is a mind/body approach to wellness, it is sometimes hard to separate the physical benefits from the mental/emotional benefits, since they are in some sense one. The stimulation of brain cells via deep breathing is mentally invigorating, the parasympathetic nervous system response creates calm in the mind, and the stimulation of the pituitary gland which regulates hormonal secretions has an effect on mood. Obviously, then, the practice of yoga asana and meditation has a positive effect on emotional life. In study after study, the results persist: psychological tests administered to control groups indicate that meditators show increased satisfaction, ability to adjust, and self-acceptance as compared to nonmeditating controls (6). Recent Stanford University research indicates conclusively that meditation techniques have been extremely helpful in reducing symptoms of anxiety, depression and pain management (7), each of which are significant obstacles to recovery.

Perhaps the most profound emotional effect, however, is the reduction of anxiety. Many yoga practitioners do yoga because it is above all calming. A calm state of mind is not only happier, clearer and more productive, it is more creative, less fearful, less impulsive and much more insight-oriented. In one study from 1978, researchers found that the reduction of anxiety in control groups taught meditation prior to discharge from inpatient rehabilitation was the single most significant therapeutic benefit, as this was found to be related to rehabilitation success rates (8). In meditation, one can calmly observe thoughts arising and passing away, and thus become aware of a deeper part of the mind that can control thought content. In learning to detach from thoughts, it becomes clear both that they do not ‘rule’ us, and that we are more than just our thoughts. If one can detach from thought, one can detach from emotion – watch an anger or a fear arise, and rather than

react, take the opportunity to study, wonder, accept, or laugh at that emotion, and *then* choose a course of action.

In combating depression, yoga asana offers the backward bends, which stimulate the adrenal glands that secrete adrenaline and norepinephrin – the stimulating hormones. Rhythmic pranayam (deep breathing) has also been proven to stimulate the secretion of positive neurochemicals like serotonin and other endorphins (especially in the periaqueductal gray area, or PAG in the midbrain, the site of the body's largest supply of opiate receptors) (9). A recent study at the University of Toronto showed conclusively that the use of meditative techniques as an adjunct to cognitive therapy halved the risk of relapse in patients with a history of three or more episodes of major depression (10). Additionally, the calm state produced by the practices of yoga and meditation, combined with clarity and a propensity for living in the moment, create a centering that counters rumination and supports detachment from downward-spiraled thought paths often followed by those who suffer from depression.

Further, the best-kept secret is that the deeper meditative states that produce alpha and theta waves in the brain bring the added benefit of a blissful emotional state as part of the experience. The relevance of this epiphany -- being able to feel euphoria naturally -- cannot be understated for those in recovery, who grieve the loss of euphoric states. This contains a revelation in terms of what's possible for the mind to achieve without external aids.

Finding, in fact, the heretofore 'hidden' possibilities in the working of the mind is one of the many ways the practice of yoga improves self-esteem, so integral, often, to problems with anxiety, depression and addiction. The awareness exercises of yoga asana teach us about the mind/body relationship – how we affect our bodies by how we 'talk' to them, how the way we use the body affects our mood. And all within an emotional framework in which we are encouraged to accept where we are today and gently and patiently seek change, inviting us to balance self-forgiveness with continued growth. Yoga nudges us to realize how much more there is to who we are than just our physical body, and therefore works actively against body obsessions and identification with external cues. Relaxation techniques use imagery, well documented to improve everything from sports performance to sales, to assert the peaceful beauty within. Meditation invites insight to the goodness within, inspiring thereby a sense of wholeness and inherent worth.

The format of group yoga classes creates a much-needed, healthy context for socialization. Many are the friendships I have seen blossom between students in my classes over the years, and many are the after class discussions that have stretched into hours. The difficulty in recovery of finding a new social framework is well resolved by a context like yogic practice and its interest in personal growth and holistic healing, wherein self-awareness, tolerance, compassion and peace are actively pursued. Movement, exercise, flexibility, peace, connectedness, endorphins, release of toxins -- what more could one ask for? Having a positive social environment, as all addictions counselors know, makes an incredible difference in lessening the possibility of relapse. Recent research that studied the addition of meditation to AA attendance shows that those

who also meditate increased the long-term effectiveness of AA 2.6 times, in effect, making it twice as effective (11).

Addiction by its definition bespeaks a life out of balance. At its base, the intention of yoga is homeostasis. Eastern philosophy and medicine believe that in a balanced state, the organism thrives. This philosophy teaches that when we have reached a balanced state mentally and physically, spiritual work can begin. Thus the benefits of yoga practice are, and were meant to be, incredibly generalized. In one study on self-development, meditators were found to experience more personal development than students usually do in four years of college, and this was particularly remarkable, since this study occurred in a maximum security prison where many inmates had grade school educations (12). Another study of one hundred and twenty skid-row alcoholics found that those who had been taught meditation while inpatient were, at the end of eighteen months, 65% abstinent, compared to 25% in the control group, and at six months, the majority of those taught meditation were still practicing meditation regularly (13). Thus the balance yoga imparts becomes more than panacea – becomes rather a guiding principal that steers both thought and behavior in healthy directions.

Yoga and meditation can be practiced either within or without a spiritual context. In its original intention, it was designed as a practice that would lead to spiritual awareness. But it need not be practiced for that reason or to that depth. Certainly it is most usually practiced here in the West outside of its spiritual context, and yet to great and enduring benefit. However, any spiritual focus, regardless of the specific religious orientation, can be deepened by meditative and balancing practices. The practices of yoga transcend the distinctions between religious contexts, offering a deepening of self that can be utilized to heighten whatever spiritual or religious path a practitioner adheres to, or need not have any spiritual context at all. For yoga is not a religion, but a philosophy of life and a science of mind. So no judgments of a religious sort exist in yogic practice or philosophy.

The twelve steps of AA recovery include a spiritual context and recommend prayer and meditation without giving any instructions for learning meditation. Yoga offers the optimum tools for learning such meditations through a systemized curricula that makes meditation easy to learn for anyone, and easy to practice. Remember that all meditative practices were built from the common root of yoga philosophy and practice, which have survived for thousands of years as a way to optimize health physically, mentally, and if you so choose, spiritually.

In the struggle to regain equilibrium that recovery entails, nothing could be a more natural ally than a system of holistic healing, self induced and self practiced, that brings balance, greater awareness, acceptance of self, personal growth and calm, lessens anxiety and depression and heightens self-esteem AND creates a positive social activity in an excellent, insightful context. In the bargain, studies over thirty years consistently conclude that meditation enhances recovery therapies and dramatically reduces relapse as well as diminishing anxiety, stress and depression. Furthermore, if we assume Maslow was right, and happiness lies in self-actualization, it is interesting to note that in a recent study on therapies that lead to self-actualization, meditation techniques yielded extreme

effectiveness, showing substantial positive gains in virtually every category of self-actualization, and in just two months (14)!

The Taoists say, ‘the wrong path is by its nature self-punishing.’ Though pain is often necessary to gaining a clearer path in life and recovery is certainly no exception, yoga gently cushions the struggle toward self-awareness by providing a context of compassion, and a set of directions for inward exploration without judgment, regret or anxiety. It teaches us to honor our bodies as the outward reflection of mind and spirit, and of our enormous potential. Instead of feeling powerless to overcome a substance or a compulsion, yoga highlights our innate ability to manage our thoughts, emotions and behaviors. By looking inward in meditation, yoga practitioners gather awareness of the workings of mind and personality, and knowledge is power. Many are the yoga treatises that speak to our responsibility for our own happiness, and the ways of learning to direct our thoughts and emotions – using our natural abilities to proactively seek calm, tolerance, detachment and compassion. From physical to mental to spiritual empowerment, studies consistently demonstrate that the practice of yoga and yogic meditation create the most formidable adjunctive therapy available. And in the bargain we learn to love and accept ourselves, paving the way for tolerance and compassion towards others, and thereby greater happiness.

#### ENDNOTES

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