



YOGA AND ITS HEALING POWERS

By Beth O'Brien, Ph.D.

Most yoga practitioners experience sensations of spiritual centering and inner peace. Those who are challenged with injuries, illness or chronic pain also find that yoga helps their conditions. For some, the results may be curative: an aching back that is no longer sore, a tight shoulder that is tension free, or a headache that disappears. For others, healing may mean simply feeling the best that is possible at the moment, even if symptoms are still present.

Wendy Jones, a dedicated yoga practitioner and certified massage therapist, deals with the challenge of having arthritis in her joints. She recently described to me the therapeutic effects of yoga: "My yoga practice has changed my life in many ways. I have strengthened my ability to persevere and follow through my daily life challenges by learning how to do the same on my mat. The patience and self discipline it takes to make it through a yoga class make me realize that I have what it takes to tackle anything that may come my way. Yoga has helped me form a closer relationship with myself and in turn, I take better care of myself; regular yoga practice keeps me feeling good, and detoxifies and increases blood flow to my sore joints. I have only seen improvement in my condition since I have been regular with my yoga and it's the best 'pain medicine' there is!" Ms. Jones reported that sessions with yoga therapist Ena Burrud have contributed extensively to her well being. She continues to practice the techniques she learned from yoga therapy.

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— Wendy Jones

The key to a healing practice begins with listening to one's body. Increased body awareness is one of yoga's many gifts to those who practice regularly. Individuals with health issues are often listening, but it may be challenging to focus beyond what is wrong with the body and what doesn't feel well. Yoga teachers encourage participants to identify those moments when one is not in pain or when one isn't suffering. Donna Farhi, in her book *Bringing Yoga to Life*, suggests we ask ourselves the following questions: "What am I doing right now that leads me to this pain free experience? How exactly am I standing that gives me relief? At what point did I begin to feel ease? And, can I enjoy this pain-free moment, however brief a respite?"

RoxAnn Hunter experienced such a pain free moment. RoxAnn had convinced her granddaughter Danielle to try yoga. She and Danielle live in an A-frame 1890's farmhouse, and after continually hitting their heads on the dormer ceilings while doing yoga poses, they sought more space and enrolled

in my studio yoga class. RoxAnn experienced a transformative moment during my Chakra balancing yoga workshop. RoxAnn wrote:

We signed up for Beth O'Brien's yoga classes and Chakra workshop. The yoga studio she uses is very Zen-like, and Beth's calming and intuitive character was icing on the cake! Both my granddaughter and I were feeling the positive effects yoga was having on our bodies. I didn't know about Chakra before this. That is to say I knew about there being some kind of energy flow throughout the body, but didn't know all the terms or just how it all worked.

Due to a car accident injury my body doesn't do what it once did. I am unable to do certain poses and need to modify others. I did the best I could. Periodically I'd look over at my granddaughter and she was doing very well.

The final pose, Savasana or Corpse Pose, I couldn't lie on my back. Modified to lying on my side I went into a resting state. After a little while I felt my granddaughter's gentle nudge on my shoulder and, using my hand, I motioned "not now." A few moments later I felt a second nudge and I gave the same "not now" wave of hand. Then a third nudge followed by her whispering "Grandma Meme" to which I not only gave the "not now" wave but whispered a "Not now! Sshhh." Well, the fourth nudge included her whispering in a more attention getting tone: "Grandma Meme you need to LOOK!" Grumbling to myself because I wasn't ready to be disturbed, I put my glasses back on and looked up to find the workshop was OVER!! Oh, aahhh, ummm—well, I guess this means I really do need to get up, huh? We laughed!!

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Western Medicine hasn't been able to. I do feel that we need a blend of both treatments, but it felt good not to be in a comatose state from taking the pain medication prescribed to me. I walked out of the studio as if I was in a dream floating on air afraid to pinch myself to find it wasn't real, but it was real and I was reaping the benefits!!

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It is important to pursue a yoga practice that best suits the individual person given where they are in the healing process. Some days one's body may feel up for an energizing routine, and other days a gentle

practice is exactly what is needed. Yoga holds a unique place among many treatment modalities: It encourages practitioners to be receptive to the body, develop compassion for health challenges, and then move on, opening oneself to life's joys as well as difficulties.

Beth O'Brien, Ph.D., is a registered Hatha Yoga teacher and licensed Psychologist. She teaches vinyasa yoga classes in Fort Collins. Are there ways yoga has made an impact on your health or your personal life? Your comments are welcome!

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