

WellSpring

Yoga: The Body, Breath, Mind Connection

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In recent years, the significant increase in attendance at Yoga classes in Alberta and across Canada is remarkable. For example, over 500,000 Albertans will take classes in 2010 from over 400 teachers, both in urban and rural settings. These statistics suggest that many people are seeking and finding real benefits from practising Yoga.¹

Over two thousand years ago Patanjali, a great Indian sage, compiled the philosophical ideas of Yoga into 195 succinct statements. These statements are known as the *Yoga Sutras*, and their wisdom seems to be as relevant to people in the twenty-first century as it was during and before Patanjali's time. The *Yoga Sutras* come from the collection of works known as the *Vedas*, the oldest source of knowledge in India.

What's in This Article for You?

- Benefits of Yoga
- Understanding More About Linking Body, Breath and Mind
- Understanding the Meaning of Yoga
- Learning About the Three Dimensions
- Adapting Movements for Each Individual



Yoga is one of the six most important philosophical schools of India. Collectively, these systems of Eastern thought are known as *darshana*. *Darshana* comes from the Sanskrit root “*drs*,” which means “to see.”

An integral part of the practice of Yoga is the linking of the body, breath and mind. This article is primarily for readers who wish to understand this process and its benefits.

Benefits of Yoga

What does Yoga have to offer to people today? What potential benefits can Yoga offer to your clients, members, students and you?

In essence, Yoga offers various ways to help individuals improve their well-being and quality of life. The public seems to generally accept this fact and the fact that Yoga is a reasonably safe and proven method to improve one's health.

With the increase in popularity of Yoga in Western Culture, more research using Western scientific methods is being done on the benefits of Yoga. In 1989, the International Association of Yoga Therapists was formed. As an independent non-profit organization, its mission is to support research and education in Yoga. It publishes research findings in its *International Journal of Yoga Therapy*.

Yoga has shown the potential for: ²⁻⁵

- increasing muscle strength and flexibility
- increasing joint range of motion and decreasing joint pain
- improving bone health
- decreasing heart rate
- increasing the length of inhalation and exhalation and decreasing breathing distress
- decreasing back pain
- increasing concentration
- decreasing stress and anxiety
- developing the ability to manage mood swings
- decreasing sleep disturbances/insomnia

For many people, realizing some or many of these benefits is possible. Experience has shown that benefits are best achieved when the student/practitioner learns to effectively link or “connect” the body, breath and mind.

Understanding More About Linking Body, Breath and Mind

Asana, the practice of Yoga postures (also known as poses), is the form of Yoga most commonly practised in modern Western culture. There are many different styles of asana practice. They vary according to their primary way of doing the postures. For example, styles involve or concentrate on:

- moving through a sequence of poses
- staying in poses for a period of time

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- aligning the body according to the classic forms of the poses
- synchronizing breath with movement

As noted earlier, there are many common benefits arising from Yoga practice, including the physical aspects of Yoga, but Yoga is much more than a physical practice used as a prescription for reducing the symptoms of medical conditions. In Yoga, the key characteristic or goal is the *unification* of the actions of the body, breath and mind.

The purpose of this unification is to cultivate specific qualities or goals in each of these three dimensions (body, breath, mind) which ultimately creates a meditative state that leads to self-realization, or the realization of our true essence.

The means by which this unification occurs and by which its qualities or goals are achieved vary, according to the different styles of Yoga. The means discussed in this article are based upon Yoga in the lineage of T. K. V. Desikachar.

According to this tradition, the action of the body is:

- The movement into and out of postures and staying in postures for a period of time, e.g., moving from a standing position into a forward bend and then staying in the forward bend.

The action of the breath is:

- Synchronization of inhaling and exhaling with the movements into and out of postures, e.g., moving from a standing position into a forward bend as you exhale, then back into a standing position as you inhale. Breathing while in a posture is equally important, e.g., as you inhale coming out of a forward bend slightly, you can go deeper into the standing pose as you exhale.

The action of the mind is:

- One's *observation* of the body and breathing as actions happen. In this way, the body, breath and mind *converge* together to focus on the experience manifested when doing an asana. The convergence of these actions into a one-pointed focus is essential to getting the most benefits possible from doing Yoga.

Understanding the Meaning of Yoga

The word Yoga is derived from the Sanskrit root “*yuj*,” which means “to bring two things together, to unite, to meet.”

At the heart of Yoga is the understanding that there exists that which is in constant fluctuation (our physical condition, emotions, thoughts, and external objects) and that which does not change (our true essence).

The primary goal of Yoga is the realization of our true, inherent nature, and conscious *linking* with it. Our true nature is always present, but is often far away from our consciousness due to external responsibilities, demands or distractions, such as work, finances and family activities.

By learning to practice Yoga and to let go of unnecessary tension within our bodies, breath and mind, the link with one's true nature can be made time and again.

Learning About the Three Dimensions

In Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* the human system is divided into three dimensions:

- steadiness and relaxation in the body
- long and even flow of breath
- calmness and alertness in the mind

The cultivation of dual qualities in each of these three dimensions is considered essential to a Yoga practice or movement. The integration of the actions taken within the three dimensions facilitates the creation of the dual qualities in each dimension.

For instance, when a student moves from a standing position into a forward bend while exhaling, the contraction of the abdominal muscles during exhalation creates stability in the pelvis and facilitates a release of tension in the lower back and up through the spine. Lengthening the exhalation while moving into the

forward bend aids in developing a long, continuous flow of breath, while further facilitating steadiness and ease in the body. When the student pays attention or observes – that is, if they are fully present, aware of all that is happening and letting go of all distracting thoughts – this facilitates the cultivation of quiet contemplation.

A student's own observations are vitally important. The observations determine if the practice needs to be modified.

For example, if the student is aware of tightness in the hamstrings and lower back when in a forward bend, then they can bend their knees to reduce the stretch in the hamstrings and place their hands on a chair to help support the back. If the duration of the exhalation is short, the movement into the forward bend may be done in stages: e.g., move one third on the exhalation; pause, inhale; move another third on exhalation; pause, inhale; complete the range of movement on exhalation.



Adapting Movements for Each Individual

It's important to remember that practising Yoga can be tailored to work well for everyone. Whatever practice, pose or movement is being done, it can be varied or adapted for each individual, if needed.

The practice of asana, one component of Yoga, helps Yoga students/practitioners to:

- see and respect their present condition in their body, breath and mind;
- let go of any habitual patterns that cause physical discomfort, emotional disturbance, and mental agitation; and
- replace these patterns with ones that manifest physical comfort, emotional stability and mental calmness.

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As individuals living in a Western culture, it's exciting to discover that we can use techniques that were developed based upon a practical and useful Eastern philosophy, the *Yoga Sutras*. With practice and guidance from a qualified Yoga instructor, most people will realize some health or personal benefits from doing Yoga.

In Alberta, the field of Yoga Therapy is developing with the establishment of training programs like the Mount Royal University Yoga Therapy Program in Calgary. As a holistic approach to improving physical, psychological and spiritual health, Yoga can be complementary to treatments from other experts, such as allopathic and naturopathic doctors, massage therapists, psychologists, physiotherapists and chiropractors.

Over time, Yoga can facilitate self awareness and understanding, and ultimately help a person to know (see) their true self, in order to improve their well-being and quality of life.

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