



Yoga – Uniting All Aspects of Your Life Incorporating Yoga Into Your Everyday Life

By Chris Covington, Editor-in-Chief, Cream No Sugar On-line Magazine, 3/17/2013

Yoga is an excellent way to incorporate a comprehensive mental and physical workout into your daily routine. CNS wanted to learn more about yoga so we reached out to Joanna Barrett of Joanna Barrett Yoga in the Boston area. She shared her insight and experience with us in a three part series on incorporating yoga into your fitness life, yoga for runners/walkers, and yoga for weight management. Thank you Joanna!

So whether or not you are considering yoga or are a long-time practitioner, we have good information for you.

Incorporating Yoga into Your Fitness Life

Q: What is yoga?

A: Most people think yoga is just a series of physical postures, but yoga also incorporates breath control, meditation, and the adoption of philosophical principals. There are many definitions of yoga, but the Sanskrit word 'yoga' literally means "to yoke" or "to unite." This connection is created within yourself, with others, and with the divine spirit (whatever that may be for an individual – God, the universe, a deity or religious figure). Yoga can be seen as a workout or a spiritual practice. Yoga allows us the power of choice, and has impacted millions of people across the world. The gift of yoga is the shared experience of becoming our true selves through committed practice. Each person's yoga will look different from their neighbor's. It is a personalized practice.

Q: What type of person would benefit most from engaging in yoga?

A: Everyone can benefit from yoga! There is no one size fits all, and that's why there are many styles of yoga. I have heard many teachers say, "If you can breathe, you can do yoga." There are very physical styles of yoga (such as Ashtanga, Vinyasa, Hot Yoga, Bikram, and others), as well as gentler forms of yoga (such as Chair yoga, Yin, Restorative, Slow Flow, and others). People with physical, mental or emotional challenges can greatly benefit from yoga. Studies have been done that conclude yoga is beneficial for those experiencing anxiety, depression, trauma, stress, or general chaos in their lives. Many people tend to find serenity, inner peace and healing in yoga.

Q: What are the benefits of yoga to health and fitness?

A: Yoga has many benefits: increases breath capacity, builds strength, increases flexibility, develops focus and concentration, creates an internal way of seeing things, help with balance, develops patience, staying in the present, accepting 'what is', cultivates gratitude, and better postural alignment.

Q: How would you recommend an interested person learn more about yoga and which style to start with?

A: I always recommend starting with a beginner class. Students can take any style they feel drawn to, but it is good to explore a variety of styles and teachers. Just because you don't like your first class, doesn't mean that yoga isn't for you. It can take a few classes to find the right fit. There is no one-size-fits-all. Once a student finds a class she enjoys, I suggest paying for a series of private sessions. I have had beginner clients greatly benefit from private sessions. It can help a student feel more at ease in the class, and practice the postures they may not be as comfortable with.

I also think a great resource to yoga is Yoga Journal (<http://www.yogajournal.com>), where they have a section dedicated to beginners and the basics, in addition to a wealth of information on the practice. Browsing through local studio sites can be helpful (just do an internet search for “yoga” and your city for studio results). Most people know someone who practices yoga. Reaching out to them to learn more is a great resource. Go to a beginner class with a friend or colleague! Talk to the women in your community to see what they recommend!

Q: How should one learn to practice yoga correctly?

A: Learning from a teacher is best, whether it’s a private session or in a class setting. I think students get the most out of their practice in these ways, rather than relying solely on a home practice with a DVD, online, or book. Teachers can correct misalignments and give cues that can help students get the most out of their practice. There are plenty of online resources that are very good. Some students may not have access, time, or money for classes at a studio. Online yoga classes are also very popular, so students can practice in their own homes when it’s convenient for them. My favorite sites are Yogaglo (www.yogaglo.com) and Yogis Anonymous (<http://yogisanonymous.com>), where they offer a variety of classes with master teachers for a small monthly fee. There are many sites out there, and students should feel free to explore. Students learn to practice correctly by practicing! Yoga is a way of life, and commitment to that practice is a commitment to your life.

Q: What if you don’t have a studio nearby? How can you practice at home?

A: If you don’t have a studio nearby, you can learn from several online sites for a small monthly fee: Yogaglo (www.yogaglo.com) and Yogis Anonymous (<http://yogisanonymous.com>).

For my own home practice, I spend about 10-15 minutes in the morning moving through a few sun salutations, and then stretch on my floor to loosen up and get my day started. A short meditation may follow if I have time. A few passive, restorative postures at night help me to let go of the day and ensure a restful night’s sleep. Don’t tell my coworkers, but I sometimes move into Downward-Facing Dog or meditate for a short amount of time in my office! I also do a little chair yoga every few hours, stretching side to side and loosening up my shoulders.

Q: How often and for what length of time for each session should one practice yoga as a beginner? As an advance practitioner?

A: As a beginner, I think hour-long classes are about right to get started. Some classes are 1.5 or even 2 hours, but that can be intense for a beginner. To get started, I would suggest practicing once or twice a week, if they can. Getting into a regular practice is key for sticking with it. As a more advanced practitioner, a daily practice either with a teacher or at home is important. But there is no real rule of thumb here.

Q: What should a beginner not do?

A: A beginner should not worry about being a beginner! Rather than viewing it as a negative of what they should not do, I’d like to look at it from a more positive perspective first. A beginner should try to feel confident in her current abilities and accept where she is today. Be open to learning new things and taking risks are important traits.

We are all beginners when it comes to learning something new. A beginner should not try to compare themselves to others or push past her limit to get into a more advanced pose than she is ready for. A beginner should also not believe that what she wears is important – feel free to show up in sweats and a tank top. Brand name attire is not a requirement, and it will not make her a better practitioner. Over time, beginner will realize that yoga is a lifelong practice, and this is just the beginning of a transformative journey. A strong foundation in pranayama (breath practices), meditation, Sanskrit, anatomy, and philosophy will help advance the asana (physical practice).

Q: How is practicing at home different from practicing at a studio?

A: When practicing at home without the guide of a teacher or online video, a student has the freedom to listen to their body and move in ways that feel natural and organic. You are your own teacher and that allows for a lot of intuitive wisdom to emerge. Even five minutes of stretching can be considered yoga. When at a studio, a teacher can lead you through a new sequence that you haven’t yet experienced, give modifications and adjustments, and address any questions or concerns.

Q: How does one go about determining a studio and discipline that is right fit? What questions should she ask of herself and the studio?

A: Many people choose styles based on their personalities and fitness abilities, but it's good to also scale it down a notch, or challenge you a bit. There is no "one size fits all" approach. Browsing through local studio sites can be helpful to get a feel for the place and to see the styles they teach. Websites also have biographies of their teachers and schedules of their classes. Do an internet search for "yoga" and the city/town for studio results. Many offer discounts and deals for new students (ex. free first class, week-long unlimited specials, etc.). Many studio owners or teachers are also available to chat with someone who is interested in starting yoga but has questions or concerns. If you have an injury or ailment, you should always tell the teacher in advance of the class. Something serious may limit someone to the styles they can pursue. But there is a style for everyone!

Q: When do you know you are not a beginner anymore?

A: I believe we are all beginners, all the time. I may be able to do some postures well and move into more advanced variations, but I'm still working on more advanced ones. I am still a beginner at understanding philosophy and Sanskrit, even though I'm more advanced in the asana practice (physical postures). Just because a student can do a handstand or an arm balance, doesn't mean they are an advanced practitioner. That said, students can advance their practice by moving into deeper variations when they feel comfortable doing so. In a traditional sense, when a student is at ease with the postures and language, they are probably no longer considered a beginner.

Q: How should you advance your practice of yoga from beginner to advanced?

A: Regular and consistent practice is key. Most postures have advanced variations, and it's important to explore those, but to do so in a mindful and gradual way. When a moving into a posture becomes second nature, only then should someone move into a deeper expression of the pose. To prevent injuries, it's important not to go too far too fast. It can be helpful to take private sessions with an advanced teacher to work on the poses you struggle with. Individual sessions can be very useful for proper alignment and advancing to more challenging postures. After a strong foundational understanding of yoga and the postures, a student may want to challenge themselves by going to a more advanced-level class.

Joanna Barrett is a Boston-based vinyasa, yin, and restorative yoga instructor. She has a passion for sharing the physical, mental, and emotional benefits of yoga with her students in both public and private classes, and encourages them to listen to the intuitive wisdom of the body. Joanna is a Registered Yoga Teacher (RYT 200) through Yoga Alliance and a member of the International Association of Yoga Therapists. Her website is www.joannabarrettyoga.com