

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

“Yoga is a gateway to happiness in mind, body and soul. It’s a path worth taking.”

yoga

BY ANNA RABHAN

The ancient origins of yoga, the many related philosophies and traditions and the various associated purposes mean that any attempt at a simple definition of yoga would be inadequate. In fact, Webster’s dual definitions of yoga as both a “Hindu theistic philosophy” and “a system of exercises” demonstrate yoga’s multifaceted nature. Its many iterations began at least as early as 400 B.C., though many argue origins of 5,000 years ago. However, what most people are familiar with as “yoga” these days is Hatha Yoga, first described in the 15th century, which focuses on purifying the body in order to purify the mind.

There seem to be as many motivations for practicing yoga as there are forms. The American Yoga Association (www.theamericanyogaassociation.org) states that there are “over a hundred different schools of yoga.” There are those, of course, for whom yoga is an integral part of their spiritual philosophy. There are also those for whom yoga is a means by which to become aware of and better manage the connection between the mind and body. This connection is something we all experience; in the *Yoga Journal*, Dr. Timothy McCall cites the examples of salivating at the thought of a delicious meal or the stomach butterflies one feels before an important presentation. Yoga practitioners simply seek to become more aware of the connection and its implications and, at times, to control either the mind’s or the body’s reactions. There are also those individuals who find yoga relaxing and who use it to relieve stress. And, finally, there are those who enjoy the physical benefits, which include, among many others, increased flexibility, improved balance and stronger muscles.

“Instead of thinking about my worries of the day, I focus on what I’m doing and holding the posture.”

Much of the explosion in yoga’s popularity is due to these physical and mental benefits. Local food and lifestyle blogger Dawn Hutchins (www.floridacoastalcooking.com) has been practicing yoga since childhood. She says, “I do yoga because I call it my ‘meditation in motion.’ Instead of thinking about my worries of the day, I focus on what I’m doing and holding the posture. I have gained more lean muscle and actually get into a target heart rate for cardio burn while becoming more relaxed and focused.” Through scientific studies, Western medicine is beginning to gain an understanding of the mechanisms through which yoga benefits the practitioner. These range all the way from the more obvious lowering of blood pressure through breath control and improved circulation to the less obvious. A study reported in the journal *Psychosomatic Medicine* in 2010 showed that women who regularly practiced yoga had lower blood levels of the cytokine interleukin-6. *PsychCentral*’s Senior News Editor Rick Nauhert, Ph.D., says, “IL-6 is an important part of the body’s inflammatory response and has been implicated in heart disease, stroke, Type 2 diabetes, arthritis and a host of other age-related debilitating diseases.” What’s more, the regular yoga practitioners in the study had lower inflammatory responses to stress. In other words, their physical stress-response mechanisms functioned better.

There are a number of yoga studios in town with qualified, trained yoga instructors and classes to help you achieve your goals, whether physical or metaphysical. Mandarin’s Yoga Den (www.yoga-den.com) has been in operation for 10 years and is Yoga Alliance-registered. They provide everything from basic classes to Power Yoga and a version of hot (Bikram) yoga, which is practiced in a heated space to increase perspiration. They also provide teacher training. Ananda Kula (www.ananda-kula.com), on Herschel Street, is a large studio that offers many levels and varieties of yoga including meditation, kids yoga, prenatal yoga and more. They also offer a host of other services such as Pilates, reiki, acupuncture, reflexology and massage. There are, of course, many other studios throughout Jacksonville, from Downtown to the Beaches.



An interesting option is CW17’s new morning yoga show, *The Willow* (www.yourjax.com/thewillow). The half-hour show airs every weekday at 7 am. It follows a very intimate format, with a simple black and white stage set and only the host, the Willow, in front of the camera. The Willow guides the audience through a series of poses, while also providing observations and encouraging affirmations about such things as balance and becoming who you want to be. Viewers can also connect with the Willow on Facebook at www.facebook.com/sunrisewiththewillow. Executive Producer Kevin Porter says, “*The Willow* will become as much a part of the viewer’s daily routine as a morning cup of coffee. Each morning, she will instruct the viewer in traditional practice, as well as more cutting edge postures, while instilling positive life changes.” The show seems particularly useful for those who want to begin their day in a positive, invigorating way. There are also guided yoga classes available through community centers, community education programs and neighborhood association programs. For those with some experience who prefer a more solitary, yet still guided, practice, there are videos and online content that one could use at home. Having experience with yoga helps in determining the type, level and quality of such material.

Since Hatha Yoga styles focus mainly on exercise, breath control and meditation, there really isn’t any required equipment. It is helpful to have a yoga mat to provide a cushioned surface. Two other basic pieces of equipment, helpful, but not essential, are the strap and the block. The strap is simply a long piece of material that can be especially useful for beginners who are not very flexible yet, for holding certain poses for extended periods of time or for those who can’t quite reach in poses involving grasping the hands or wrists. The block is a 3-by-9-inch piece of pressed foam, cork or wood. The block can be helpful to not-so-flexible beginners who need a bit of height to help open up certain poses. It can also be helpful to more advanced practitioners who need some extra stretch-length to increase flexibility.

Whether you use yoga to kick-start your day, relax after a stressful week, get more defined biceps, become more present in your life or attain deep levels of spiritual awakening, yoga has something to offer everyone. Your fitness or ability level or how much time you have on your hands doesn’t matter nearly as much as your willingness to be open to the experience. As the Willow says, “Yoga is a gateway to happiness in mind, body and soul. It’s a path worth taking.”

Please email your questions, comments or suggestions to anna@eujacksonville.com.