

YOGA

People have spent lifetimes studying one small aspect of yoga. In this article I have about 800 words. I won't attempt to cover all the myriad aspects of yoga; I will explore what yoga means to me and to three local yoga teachers. Hopefully, some readers out there will be inspired to explore more deeply for themselves.

I put off writing this article because I knew that the minute I let yoga back into my life, it would nudge me to begin looking at my own mental and physical health. I was right. After one yoga session and a few attempts at deep breathing, I decided to quit smoking.

Next, I started asking myself several specific questions: Can I ever achieve the balance and the calm, bright attitude these women exude? Is it yoga that makes them so energetic, without being frenetic? If I start doing yoga regularly, will I become so calm I can never meet another deadline?

To have these questions answered, I spoke with three local yoga instructors: Pat Hammond of the American Yoga Association, Shivan Sarna of Shivan's Yoga Studio and Terry Wagner, a yoga teacher who also practices zen shiatsu. Now for the answers, as I see them.

First, anyone who thinks yoga offers instant results and a life of constant bliss is going to be disappointed. The benefits of yoga don't happen overnight—and life will always have problems. But for those who persevere, yoga has undeniable physical and mental rewards. "Yoga helps people on a physical level for strength, endurance and flexibility, as well as aiding the central nervous system. The breathing involved with hatha yoga helps with focusing and concentration," says Sarna.

Does that put yoga in the same class as physical exercises such as aerobics, running or weight-lifting? Wagner stresses the benefits go deeper. "Yoga is more than just stretching; it actually helps to change your body on a cellular level. When you start to get more oxygen in your tissue it feels good. You want to give your body more things to keep that feeling, instead of depleting all the oxygen supply with cigarettes, alcohol or caffeine."

What about the spiritual side of yoga? All three instructors referred to the yogic quest as a spiritual path. Does this mean a life of sainthood, of total commitment to yoga? Not necessarily. How far one travels on this path is completely a matter of personal choice.

"The spiritual aspect of yoga is a personal decision, and 99 percent of the people in our classes are not interested in that, in the beginning," says Hammond. Her organization starts with a practical approach to yoga, not wanting to scare anyone with its mysterious elements.

The instructors spoke of yoga as a means for people to achieve their destinies—not by changing what they are, but by giving them power to become more fully what they are.

"Yoga is like electricity. You can plug in a hairdryer or a lamp, but you can't expect the lamp to dry your hair or the dryer to light up your room. Each has its particular function and the electricity will run each one of them," says Hammond.

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unique individuals. Yoga contributed towards making these instructors the beings of energy and light they are today, but not by changing them into something they're not. They are very much themselves—alert, warm vital human beings—walking contradictions to the notion that the spiritual and physical sides of human nature must always be at war.

"Yoga is about balance," says Sarna, adding that yoga can be seen as many things: a means of stress management, a way to learn to focus or concentrate, or, for those who choose, a spiritual path. "There's no one path for everybody, yet yoga is often referred to as a science. Helping an individual along on the path isn't a matter of guesswork but of knowledge. According to Wagner, the problems people have to work through have very specific symptoms and causes.

"A problem in a specific area has precise physical, mental and emotional manifestations," she says. "For example, a block in the lung meridian can cause an over-anxious and hyper-emotional state; getting concerned after taking on too much work; becoming too anxious over fine details and being unable to relax and breathe deeply; lack of spirit and motivation; and exhaustion and lethargy."

That's an apt definition of my mental state when I first started this article. But, after two days of no cigarettes and some yoga, I'm moving up the chain, getting more energy and spirit, and breathing a little more deeply. I feel good.

—Emily Leinfuss is a freelance writer who is currently writing a series of short stories.

YOGA: The word Yoga means *union* or *joining*, and is from the Sanskrit root "Yug." The Sanskrit word "hatha" implies balance: "ha" means "sun," "tha" means moon. Indian literature and traditions referring to yoga can be traced back over 3,000 years. There are many systems of yoga—each providing different ways to unify the various aspects of the human being. Yoga is not a religion. As linguistics helps a person better understand his own language, yoga helps a person understand his own unique spiritual path. The yogi (one who practices yoga) knows that all paths lead to the same goal.

courtesy Shivan Sarna

Pat Hammond is an instructor at the American Yoga Association where instructors teach classical yoga—a combination of hatha yoga, breathing and meditative techniques. The American Yoga Association, 513 S. Orange Avenue, Sarasota, FL 953-5859.

Shivan Sarna is a practitioner of hatha yoga. This form of yoga uses physical poses to explore the inner structure of the body, mind and spirit. Hatha yoga works on strength, flexibility and endurance of the muscles. It also works on strengthening and toning the organs, glands and nervous system. Youthfulness is not a prerequisite for participation in a program of hatha yoga. The student progresses at his or her own pace with benefits derived even in the beginning stages of practice. Shivan's Yoga Studio, 4141 S. Tamiami Tr. 925-9642.

Terry Wagner teaches hatha yoga according to her zen shiatsu perspective which says that human beings have an energetic current flowing in a sequence that corresponds to the major organs and systems of the body. She gears her classes and the yoga postures to balance the energy flow. Anabasis, 1084 S. Briggs Ave., Sarasota. 924-5743