

THE YOGA LUNCHBOX  
PRESENTS

*The Absolute  
Beginners'  
Guide to Yoga*

*What can yoga do for you?*

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# INTRODUCTION - ARE YOU READY FOR THE POWER OF YOGA?

Yoga is the science of life. It is thousands of years old, and with regular practice, yoga can bring you back into balance physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

What does this mean?

It means that no matter what issue you are dealing with in your life, yoga can help you manage it.

And increasingly around the world, the scientific and medical world is doing the research to back this up.

Spend some time digging around on the 'Net, and you'll uncover more and more studies, more research, more anecdotal evidence... there is no doubt that yoga works.

So what does this mean?

It means that if you are experiencing any type of ill-health – whether mental, physical, emotional or even spiritual, AND you're serious about taking responsibility for your own healing, then regular yoga practice will make a very real difference in your life.

So if yoga is such an amazing thing to do for your health, why isn't everybody doing yoga?

Yoga will make the biggest difference in somebody's life when they want to change, when they want to heal. As the saying goes:

*"You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make them drink."*

Of course, it's much more difficult to practice yoga regularly than it is to take a pill, or have surgery. And yoga is not a cure – it won't suddenly make you magically well. Often it works best in combination with the right medication and the right surgery and the right diet and the right lifestyle. If you're already working with a health professional, you want to talk to them about adding yoga to your health routine – not ditching everything else in favour of yoga.

My passion for yoga is partly because of the massive difference it's made to my health, physically, mentally and emotionally. But it's taken time, and it's taken persistence, and it's taken hard work. This is the choice I make because I value my health – it is one of the priorities in my life. Health leads to happiness in my experience, and with only one body to make it through this lifetime, I want to experience optimum health where I can.

I don't need all these studies to know what a difference yoga has made to the quality of my life. But many people aren't willing to give something a go unless it's been properly proven – why waste the time?

Yet I know that despite the fact that yoga works, and despite the fact that many people are suffering from all kinds of mental, emotional and physical issues, not everyone is going to suddenly start doing yoga, even when they KNOW it would transform their lives.

Why is this?

Why do we NOT do the very thing that will help us?

It comes down to one small little four letter word.

Fear.

When people know that yoga will help them but they choose not to practice they are living in fear.

Afraid to change.

Afraid to do something new.

Afraid of what other people might say.

Afraid of how yoga might make them feel.

I see this all the time when I talk to people. They talk about their bad back, or their bung knee, or their sleep problems, or their anxiety... I listen and I wait. I know I have an answer for them, but there is no point in telling them that answer unless they are actively looking for it.

And most people aren't. They are so stuck in the experience that they are having, talking about it, complaining about it, whinging about it... that they are not actually looking for a solution, they are just looking to be listened to.

That's ok. I can listen. Even while on the inside a part of me is screaming, "Yoga! You need yoga! If you want to change the experience you're having, do yoga!"

Because I know that I can't make you want to transform your life. I can't make you not afraid. That's a choice you have to make. It's a choice I have to respect.

So when you tell me about your pain and misery, yet aren't looking for a solution... all I can do is listen. (Except on my website – on my website, I can rant and rave all I like about yoga because it's my site and that's what it's for.)

In a very real way, my desire to relieve your suffering and misery by letting you know that yoga can make a difference in your life is entirely selfish.

It's selfish because I want to experience you as healthy and joyful and happy because when you are all of those things, it multiplies the amount of health and joy and happiness I experience.

If the person does offer an opening for me to make a suggestion and I mention yoga, immediately the list of reasons why it's not possible to do yoga come up. And it can be a big list.

**There's the "I've got no time" reason.** Well you know what? Turn off the TV, get up earlier, use your lunch hour... it only takes twenty minutes a day, three times a week for yoga to start making a real difference in your life. Don't tell me you don't have time, it's just an excuse. There is ALWAYS time in our lives for the things we make a priority.

**No money?** It just takes one book, or one DVD, or finding one Koha class, or accessing any of the free online classes available. Or even finding a yoga teacher and working out some kind of trade with him or her. I don't care how damn poor you are, if you really wanted to do yoga, you would find someone willing to teach you. If someone turned up on my doorstep and told me they couldn't pay me but wanted to learn yoga, what do you think I would say? Would I send them packing and tell them not to come back until they'd found some cash. Hell no! I'd admire their chuputz and I would teach them!

**No desire?** Hmm... this could be it. But if yoga can help you live a healthier, happier, more joyful life... then surely when you say you don't "want" to do yoga, you are also saying that you don't "want" to be healthy, happy and joyful? And maybe that's true.

Maybe that's what it's all about.

Maybe on this here planet, not all of us want to experience certain things, even when those things are as amazing as health, joy and happiness.

Maybe some of us enjoy being in pain, enjoy being in misery, enjoy whinging and moaning and telling our story to anyone who will listen. After all, transform yourself and heal the pain... what are you going to talk about?

Oh, one more reason I hear sometimes.

**Yoga's just not me.** What a load of bollocks. Whaddya mean, yoga's just not you? What does that mean? I'll tell you what it means. It means that you don't think you are the type of person who does yoga and you know you'll feel uncomfortable and out of place when you go into a class and you don't want to feel that way.

It means you've got a rigid idea of your identity in your head and you're holding on to that because it makes you feel comfortable. Well comfort is overrated. Comfort is like the frog in the pot of cold water sitting on an element who doesn't jump out as the water slowly heats because he's comfortable and the slow increase in temperature doesn't alarm him until he's cooked. Literally. That's comfort. Comfort is overrated. Comfort kills.

So... my challenge to you here is... if you've been thinking about doing yoga but something is holding you back... or you've done a bit here and there and not yet developed a regular practice, ask yourself:

What's holding me back from practicing yoga?

And when the first answer floats up...

Ask again... and again.. and again. Going deeper and deeper and deeper into yourself to see what the root core reason is that you are not practicing yoga.

For example:

- \* Why aren't I practicing yoga? I don't have time.
- \* Why don't I make time for yoga? I'm not ready to do it
- \* Why aren't I ready to do yoga? I'm afraid of how it might change me
- \* Why am I afraid of how yoga might change me?
- \* And so on...

See if you can get to the root of why you're not practicing yoga, even when you know it would improve the quality of your life. Is it fear? Is that what lies beneath?

'Cos if there ever was a time to get into yoga, a time to transform your life, a time to heal body, mind and spirit, NOW is that time.

Yoga will change your life. Are you ready?

# TOP ELEVEN REASONS TO START PRACTICING YOGA TODAY!

You have just ONE body to carry you through life from birth to death. This body is the only way that you can get around on our material world.

It's the only way you can perceive ANYTHING.

Because if you couldn't smell, taste, feel, see or hear... what would you be experiencing? (Pure consciousness, that's what. But that is another article.)

So how do you treat this wonderful personal transportation device of yours?

What kind of fuel do you give it? What kind of maintenance and tuning?

Bet you take it for granted – ignoring it's needs and then getting mad at it when it breaks down.

Well, part of taking responsibility for the fact that you manifest your own body, is looking at what YOU can do for this body of yours. You are in charge of it. Do you care about maintaining your one personal transportation device at it's highest functional level so that you enjoy this material life at it's optimum?

Then the #1 choice you can make for your body is to commit to a regular yoga practice.

TODAY.

I don't care about all the reasons why you think you can't.

If you have time to watch tv, you have time to do yoga.

If you can breathe, you are physically capable of doing yoga.

If you have access to a public library, you have the resources required to do yoga.

If you have a space in your house that's 7 feet by 2 feet, you have space to do yoga.

If I had my way, daily yoga practice would be compulsory. Why? Because it would revolutionize our world.

(Never mind that the widespread practice of yoga in the Western world as a physical practice is surreptitiously opening many people up to the energetic world... myself included.)

So, here's the low down – why you need to start a regular yoga practice NOW.

## 1. Strength

I watch beginners walk into my yoga classes, including big, strong-looking rugby-type men and I watch when they can't even hold their own body weight in Downward Dog. Go figure.

I don't care how much weight you lift, I don't care how many sports you participate in, NOTHING will make you strong from the inside out the way that yoga does.

It builds a strength that you can use. Not a “limited range of motion strength” a la weight training, but an “all-body” kind of strength that is powered by Prana (lifeforce).

The kind of strength that means when you need to huck 2 metres of wood from A to B, you can do it, and do it without straining anything.

Or the kind of strength that means when you walk down a dark street late at night that mugger looks twice at you because something about your stride says “Don’t mess with her man.”

Yoga doesn’t just build muscle strength either. It builds strong lung capacity (I can beat my partner in a breath-holding competition any day, and men have 45% greater lung capacity than women). It builds strong bones. It builds a strong connections between mind and body (but more on that later).

If you want to create and maintain usable, all-over body strength for daily living, start yoga NOW.

## **2. Flexibility**

Yep, it’s a given, yoga makes you more flexible, and this is SO important!

Yoga means you can bend over and tie your shoelaces without straining anything. Yoga means you can look over your shoulder to reverse backwards down a 100 metre drive without wrenching your neck. Yoga means you can have a healthy range of movement at all your joints and so are far less likely to get arthritis. Yoga means that you can comfortably sit cross-legged.

Yoga means that when I accidentally lock myself out of the house, I can reach my bendy arm in through the cat flap and unlock the kitchen door from the inside.

If you’re bitching and complaining about how tight your body is , or thinking, I can’t do yoga because I’m not flexible, you definitely need to start yoga right NOW.

## **3. Balance**

Stand up, close your eyes, balance on one leg and pull the other knee up to your chest, and do this without wobbling. Yeah right... but you could...

Yoga works on your balance, it means I can stand on one leg in the slippery wet shower and extend the other leg out in from of me to shave my legs and it’s easy peasy. And fun. I like testing my balance, all the time, for fun. Because having physical balance in life makes me feel more balanced in other ways too.

It means that when I slip on ice walking down a hill I can catch myself before my arse hits the pavement. It means I probably slip far less than I would. It means I feel solid and supported on this giant spinning globe we call home. It means I am less likely to fall and injure myself!

If you’re worried about the cost of medical care, or the long waiting lists for hip-replacements, or of falling and no one finding you in time... you need to start a regular yoga practice NOW.

## **4. Rehabilitation**

You know that dicky shoulder you’ve got, that banged up knee, that tweaky back? You are going to have that for the rest of your life and unless you do something about it NOW, it will only get worse, and worse and worse.

If I can completely reverse the affects of degenerative disc disease and rehabilitate an L4/L5 fusion – think of what you can do!!!

Stop whinging about your aches and pains and DO something about them, start a regular yoga practice NOW.

## 5. Prevention

How'd you get that injury in the first place huh? I'll tell you one of the factors contributing to mine – I had horrendously tight hamstrings and hips, and this constantly pulled my pelvis forward, creating pressure on my lower back and on my discs and one day that pressure got too much and POP.

Yoga will PREVENT all those injuries and illnesses you are setting yourself up for right now because you don't treat your body like the precious vessel it is.

If you play any kind of competitive sport, and you're not already doing yoga... what are you thinking? Especially if you are involved in anything that involves leaping and twisting off high things. Like snowboarding, skiing, dirtbiking, mountain biking... yes all you X-Gamers need to be doing yoga. It will drop your injury rate and improve your recovery time.

And more than that – you'll start winning more. Until everyone else clues in and starts their own regular yoga practice NOW.

## 6. Internal systems

Yoga doesn't just work on the muscular-skeletal system. Nope, it's also working on the circulatory system, endocrine system, digestive system, cardiovascular system... yoga just works on your insides, full stop. It keeps the energy moving and everything working the way it should.

My partner came down with a nasty cold a few weeks back, didn't even want to kiss me, but I just told him. "Honey, I'm not going to get it, because I do yoga." He didn't believe me, but he kissed me anyway... and I didn't get the cold. I can't remember the last time I was sick. Yoga keeps your insides in tip top condition so that they can deal with everything before it gets to be a problem. And when health care costs and waiting lists are what they are... what's stopping you from starting a regular yoga practice NOW?

## 7. Awareness

It's hard to quantify this particular benefit, but lets just say that when you spend 90 minutes being aware of your breath and remembering to contract mula bandha... you start to NOTICE things.

You become aware, and things that once upon a time would have passed you by because you were too busy thinking of that hot guy on the train yesterday... you notice. Even if you are still thinking of that guy...

Yep, yoga tunes you into to the subtle energy of life. Maybe you even start to see auras. Any latent psychic gifts that you may have are likely to start showing up. It's like you'd been driving around with egg on your windscreen and didn't even notice... and now someone's cleaned it for you and you can lines on the road you didn't even know were there.

If you want to wake up to life, start a regular yoga practice NOW.



## 8. Clarity

Take that wily monkey mind of yours and focus it on your breath, your body, and a drishti for 90 minutes and you find it starts to calm down. Not so much jumping here, jumping there, thinking this, thinking that. The peace that you seek – that contentment you think the latest fashion or car or house or partner can bring you... it lives inside you, under that monkey mind.

Before yoga, your mind was like a wave pool, complete with random surfers, and who knew what was really going on under the surface? After yoga, your mind is like a pond in a Japanese Zen garden, fish clearly visible, rocky bottom clearly visible. Suddenly you're just perceiving and your mind is patiently awaiting your bidding.

Clarity... ah... worth starting a regular yoga practice right NOW.

## 9. Knowingness

This one is very similar to clarity – clarity refers to the state of your mind, clear and still like that Japanese Zen pool. Knowingness refers to what can be transmitted through the clarity – it's the bubble of inspiration floating up from deep within the pond. When it's like a wave pool, that bubble of inspiration is often lost, or confused with all the mess of bubbles created by the over-active mind. But when all is clear... knowingness can be perceived and experienced.

Knowingness is no longer having to call a girlfriend and endlessly debate whether or not you should go out with that guy because you just... well... KNOW.

And this is GREAT. Because no longer do you need to rely on external cues to know what to do (seeking to please parents, friends, family, society, that hot girl next door...) No, now you know your own heart, your own truth, and you KNOW what to do.

I love this. When I'm having a moment of doubt and confusion... I hit my yoga mat, leaving the question behind, and ALWAYS (sometimes even on the mat) the answer becomes clear.

So if you are confused, anxious, doubtful or afraid – start practicing yoga NOW.

## 10. Union

This is WHY we do yoga. This is what it is really all about. Yoga means to yoke or unite. This can be interpreted as the union between mind and body via that breath, or the union between self and All that Is. When you do yoga, you break down your identification with ego-self, and you become aware of yourself as just one drop in a giant ocean of consciousness. No more separate and alone, but together and One.

And this ROCKS. Because when you are Part of the Whole, how can you ever be alone again? Yoga is coming home to Source, coming home to God, coming home to LIFE.

So what are you waiting for? Want to experience Oneness? Start practicing yoga NOW.

## 11. JOY!!!

If none of the other reasons gets you to a yoga mat... may this one be the temptress who wins you over.

When I do yoga, and I see my body move in ways I never thought possible, and I experience my

strength, my balance, my flexibility, my rehabilitated body, my more-injury-proof body, my awareness, my wonderful internal systems, my clarity, my knowingness and finally Union... I feel JOY.

It erupts out from within me and fills the room.

Traveling around this world in a body that is a pleasure to inhabit, that looks after me so well, that moves so well, that functions so well... it's pure joy!

And this feeds back, over and over again. I get joy from practicing yoga and expression of joy makes me want to do yoga. I celebrate my body. I am grateful to it. I am in AWE of it. (Did you know that when you slice your exterior covering open, it will self-repair!!! Never seen a car self-panel beat...)

Personally, I can't believe that there are so many people out there who have:

A) Never done yoga

B) Never committed to yoga or

C) Have a million and one excuses why they're not doing yoga.

You have ONE body. You create this body from the inside out. Regular yoga gives you enormous power to create the most highly functioning body you could ever dream of.

Do you want to be driving around in an old clapped-out rust bucket with the paint peeling and one wheel dangerously wobbly?

Or do you want to maintain this vehicle with all the pride and love it's due, maintaining and tuning it on a regular basis so it looks like it just drove off the show room floor?

Your life.

Your body.

Your choice.

I've already made mine!

# THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO YOGA: PART 1

Entering a yoga studio, or a yoga class for the very first time can be an intimidating experience. Everybody else looks so confident and relaxed and sure of themselves. They're all stronger and fitter and leaner and bendy as all hell.

But every single person in that room was once a beginner – including the teacher. What you're seeing is the result of yoga – there's been a lot of learning going on, and a lot of practicing. Me? When I started yoga, I couldn't bend forward and reach my knees, let alone my toes.

Yoga is all about practice, and learning – some of which takes place outside of the class and off the mat.

After all, there's no reason why you can't learn a few things before you head into your first class, because that's going to make you feel more confident, more relaxed and more sure of yourself.

## Turning Up

Wear comfortable clothes that are tight enough so when you're upside down in downward dog, your t-shirt's not falling down around your neck. There's nothing worse than having to keep yanking your t-shirt up as it falls across your eyes yet again.

Legs also go upside down, and wide, so wear pants that don't gape – baggy shorts just don't work in yoga!

Expect to have to take your socks off! Yoga is always done in bare feet.

Bring a warmer layer for corpse pose – the relaxation we do at the end of class.

Water is not a big thing for most yoga classes – except those in heated rooms. Do come hydrated though! Drink plenty beforehand.

Don't eat two hours before class – those weird bendy shapes do funny things to your insides as well as your outsides.

Come at least ten minutes early to your first class.

Introduce yourself to the teacher, say hi, ask him or her any questions. A good teacher should be available beforehand to connect with students. But sometimes, it does get crazy busy and the teacher might be dealing with a hundred and one last minute issues. If so, make time to have a chat to the teacher after class.

## On the Mat

Pick a student that looks like they know what they're doing and use them as a visual reference.

Choose a spot nearer the back of the room where you can still see the teacher, but you can also follow the more experienced students in front.

Stagger your mat with your neighbour's so when you open your arms out wide you don't whack into their arms.

Always be aware of where you are on the mat – top? middle? back? Use that student as a guide.

That way when you have to suddenly jump your feet back, there's mat behind you!

Never, ever push into pain. If it hurts, back off. If the teacher pushes you or pulls you and it doesn't feel right, let them know!

Yoga is not about being bendy, it's not about being strong, it's not about looking a certain way – it's all about being Present. And we get present by listening to our breath. It's the number one thing in class. So don't worry too much about whether or not you're doing the pose "right", focus your awareness on your breath.

Once you are Present, and you can maintain your awareness on your breath, you will find that your breath will effortlessly guide you in and out of the poses.

Never give up! If it gets hard, or you need a break, or you feel sick, or you suddenly want to burst into tears... get down on the mat in child's pose. A good teacher should always tell you this before class, and show you what child is. Once you're in Child, just breathe, and watch whatever's going on inside of you – thoughts, feelings, sensations... breathe and watch.

### **Other People**

Forget about all the other people in the room!

They don't care what you're doing, what you look like, what you're wearing, or if you just farted.

And if they do care, that's their issue, not yours. Tune them out, tune into your breath.

If your mind is racing with lots of thoughts along the lines of "You'll never be able to do this, this was a bad idea, you're the tightest in the room, you suck..." well forgetaboutit!

You don't have to listen to your mind anymore. Those thoughts don't matter. You're here to listen to your breath and be right where you are today. And if that is tight as all hell, well then that's ok!

### **The strange words**

Those funny sounding words the teacher keeps using to describe postures? Sanskrit.

It's the language of yoga, and is one of the oldest languages in the world. The sounds it makes work on harmonics – that is, the vibrations of the words cause specific results in the body. Pretty cool huh? That's why the OM sounds so damn good at the beginning or end of class – that sound is touching you on a cellular level.

### **More than just postures**

Yep, yoga is about more than just postures – there's eight parts in total that all come together to help you reach enlightenment.

Ok, I know, you just wanted a bit of a workout right? But even in your first class, you may come across these other aspects.

And that's cool – most people start yoga by practicing postures (asana). Classes often also cover breath work (pranayama) and meditation – which are two more parts.

You'll find that you feel so good after doing all of these three things that you'll get curious about the

other aspects of yoga – like yamas and niyamas. This is all about how you act towards yourself, and towards other people. It's stuff like being truthful and non-violent.

A great teacher will weave this into postures – after all, you want to be truthful about how your body is feeling and not push into any pain. You want to be kind and gentle to yourself – and definitely not violently force your body into anything.

Yoga is not a religion though.

Yes, there can be talk about God, or the Divine, but yoga doesn't ask you to believe in anything. Nope, it's all about experience. You do the postures, learn the breathing, learn meditation, treat yourself and others well... and one thing leads to another. One day, you might just experience God. Enlightenment. Bliss. Samadhi. Whatever you want to call it...

### **Ok, but what am I going to get from yoga?**

A great butt, toned thighs, less wrinkles... whatever! More important, what is yoga going to get from you?

Yep, think not in terms of what yoga can do for you, but what you can do for yoga.

- \* Can you turn up regularly and commit to just being on your mat for the duration of class?
- \* Can you commit to investing in your own mat to bring along to class?
- \* Can you commit to rolling out that mat at home between classes and just doing a little bit of yoga?
- \* Can you commit to taking your yoga off the mat and out into the world?

This is how you will benefit – the more you give, the more you get.

So forget about what you think you may get from yoga – all those benefits are already yours, instead focus on what it is you can going to give to yoga!

### **Where can I buy a great yoga mat and how often should I come to class?**

My first yoga mat came from The Warehouse, cost \$15 and lasted two years. It was likely made by a 9 year earning 12 cents an hour and supporting her whole family. I think I still have it though. Other places that sell mats include Kathmandu – good mid range mats that usually came with a carry case.

Lots of yoga studios also sell mats – yes, you'll pay more, but there's a reason for that. They don't have mass buying power, the mats are often eco-friendly and they're just much better quality than what you'll find in a chain store.

It's worth buying your own mat because it's a concrete commitment to yourself as a yoga student. This is it – you can take it anywhere, even if you feel like a bit of an idiot when you start carrying it around.

As for how often to come to class. Once a week. That's it. I'm so confident that yoga will get you hooked, that you'll find it really hard to only come once a week. Before you know it, you'll be double-dipping, then making three classes a week, pestering your friends to come, insisting your boyfriend get along to class...

Alrighty... that's a bit of a heads-up on the world of yoga. Enough to get you started and along to

## THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO YOGA: PART 2

Part 1 of this series in the Beginner's Guide to Yoga gave you a heads-up on things to be aware of before rocking along to your first yoga class.

You might have been to a few classes now and so have got your head around the right clothes to wear, how to fuel your body before and after class, how to position yourself on your mat and how to forget about what other people are thinking.

Now it's time to start investigating the process of posture (asana) a little more deeply. It's so easy to think that doing a pose right means looking a certain way in the pose. But that's not true at all.

Doing a pose "right" can happen even when you're not super bendy.

Take a look at that photo of me in adho mukha svanasana (downward dog). Not really Yoga Journal-pretty is it? Those bent knees, crooked feet, lifted heels and funny-angled arms... It's soooo not right, right?

But you know what? I am in the right alignment – for me.

- \* Because my hamstrings are tight, I can't straighten my legs without compromising the alignment of my spine or pelvis.
- \* A naturally long torso is also long, made even longer by the bent legs, creates the long, low angle of my arms.
- \* Plus I'm still working on even pressure through all four corners of my feet, it's not coming naturally yet – which creates those slightly crooked feet you see.
- \* Tight calf muscles mean my heels have plenty of fresh air underneath them too.

The asana is not all bad though – being aware of my limitations and working with them means my spine is straight, my pelvis is aligned, plus my breath is flowing freely. And that's where adho mukha svanasana really starts. In fact, that's where most asana start actually.

With the breath, and by extension, with prana... more on that in a minute.

A straight spine and aligned pelvis means that my breath has a clear line to move along and this is really important because it creates a free flow of energy up the spine, which is a big thing in yoga. It doesn't matter if you're in garudasana (eagle), navasana (boat), ardha chandrasana (half moon) or gomukhasana (cow), finding your breath in your spine is what helps to open into the posture.

Even in asana where the spine is bending, it's still important to find your breath so that the spine remains open, even while bending.

Imagine your spine is a garden hose. Bend that hose into a C-shape that keeps the air flowing through the hose. That's an open spine. Now bend the garden hose so it cuts off the flow of air through it. That's a closed spine.

In your first few classes, it really helps if you're aware that doing the pose "right" isn't about looking



like the teacher, or like Yoga Journal. It's about finding the openness of breath within the current limitations of your body. A good teacher will be able to guide you into asana variations that allow you to support your body wherever it is. Things like bent legs, or sitting on a block in seated asana, or sometimes even using a wall to support yourself in asana like garudasana or ardha chandrasana.

Now back to prana. See, this awareness of the flow of breath isn't just about oxygen though. It's about the flow of prana around the body... something your teacher may or may not mention, but it's happening none-the-less, and being aware of prana is something yoga is all about.

In fact, Shakti is the essence of Hatha Yoga – Shakti being an expression of prana within our bodies, like a river is an expression of water moving through the land. And Hatha Yoga being the yoga of physical postures, as opposed to say Karma yoga which is the yoga of our actions within the world. Yep – yoga is a big, wide world, and there's much to learn. But let's keep it simple right now and come back to prana.

So what is this Prana thing?

Prana is the Sanskrit word for life force, and it permeates everything in the entire universe. Shiva Rea says:

*Prana derives from the Sankrit word “pra” meaning “to fill”, added to the root word “an” which means “to breathe” or “to live”. It refers to the underlying source of prana as the substance of life most tangibly experienced through the one breath moving us all.*

I like that – the one breath moving us all.

In the human body, prana is kinda like an electrical force and it travels around on channels called nadis. There's like 72,000 of them, some big and thick like a state highway, some small and skinny like a country road.

Prana and breath are often seen as one and the same thing because enters the body via the breath – but they're not exactly the same. It does mean though that all that focus yoga has on breathing means you're getting more prana into your body. Plus the practice of asana purifies and strengthens the body so you're able to handle a stronger flow of prana. Just like 20,000 volts through a light bulb would blow the bulb, so too do our bodies have to be conditioned to receive higher and higher flows of prana.

When the body is all tight and weak, it's like those nadis have landslides blocking them, or they're all cracked and weak. Prana can't travel freely, so you're not getting energy to all your body's cells.

As you get stronger and more open, the nadis open up and more and more prana can flow freely along them. Your entire body becomes energised – which is one reason why yoga makes you feel so good.

So when you practice asana, it is about finding the alignment of the muscles, bones and organs which creates shapes that look a certain way.

Yet another way to think about it is rearranging your physical body around energetic lines so prana can flow freely.

It's the inside-out method of asana, as opposed to the outside-in method. Both of which end up in the same place.

Doing yoga from the inside out is what made my downward dog look like that. I was arranging my body around freely flowing prana. It doesn't look the way we think downward dog "should" look, but prana is able to flow along through my spine, and with time, my legs will gradually open up, and one day even my feet will be flat on the ground.

So doing asana "right" isn't so much about being perfect in the pose, but being perfect with where you are at in the pose – bent legs and all, so that prana can flow freely – starting with the spine usually and then moving out into the limbs.

At first when you practice, you may not be able to tune into the subtle sensation of prana in the body – but you can tune into the feeling of breath in your body. Make you focus finding your breath first in the nostril's, then in the lungs, and finally out into the spine, limbs and extremities and eventually you'll begin to discern prana flowing around your body.

Or maybe it's your body that begins to flow around prana.

Enjoy!



## WHY IT'S IMPORTANT TO BREATHE

I know, you're breathing already, automatically, all the time – about 25,000 breaths day.

But are you really breathing?

Stop right now.

Place both hands lightly on your belly. Exhale ALL the air out your lungs through your nose.

Now inhale (through the nose) slow and strong right down into your belly, pushing your hands softly outward.

Exhale again, all of that air. Inhale thoroughly. Keep moving your hands with your breath, up and down, up and down.

NOW you're breathing – this is abdominal breathing. It's the first way beginning yoga students are taught to breathe. As you read through this article, keep breathing down into your belly.

There are three main compartments to the lungs, and most of us spend all day shallow breathing just into the upper lobes of the lungs. That means that only a small amount of air is taken in – and the oxygen contained in that air has to nourish every single cell in your body.

But the best way to breathe is diaphragmatic breathing. A description of this is beyond the scope of this article, but this site has fantastic information. You know you're using a supported diaphragm to breathe when your lower ribs expand outward and your are breathing into your spine.

Breathe properly and you send oxygen flooding into every single cell in your body. Yep – your cells BREATHE. The air doesn't just come into your lungs, it's taken to every single cell in your body via your circulation system. Every cell in your body inhales the oxygen and exhales the carbon dioxide – a process called respiration.

Breathing is important because our cells constantly need a new supply of oxygen so they can produce energy – without this vital oxygen, cellular function is impaired, and damage or cell death is possible.

After all, you can live for weeks without food, days without water and how long without air? Maybe 6 minutes?

Air is the very essence of life.

And that is why in Vedic and yogic tradition, air is linked to Prana – the life force that flows through all living creatures – plant and animal. Working with the breath is called pranayama.

Yoga.net defines Prana like this:

*In prana, the root word 'pra,' meaning 'to fill,' is added to the root word, 'an,' ('to breathe' or 'to live') creating the new meaning 'the life that fills with the breath.' In other words the life principle in action.*

*Prana commonly translates as 'air,' 'breath,' 'spirit,' 'life,' 'life force,' 'energy,' 'subtle energy,' or 'the upwards moving energy currents within the body.'*

*Prana is a subtle form of energy. Prana literally means 'breathing forth' the universal life force.*

In my role as a yoga teacher, and as a Toastmaster, I notice how people breathe. A Toastmaster who is nervous and fearful may get up and take short, sharp breaths, or they may hold their breathe very tight. Or perhaps they barely breathe at all. Often, as a speech evaluator, I tell people to practice breathing properly when they speak. It slows speakers down, grounds them, and also calms the nervous system.

Because breathing is an automatic function, it's controlled by the autonomic nervous system – makes sense huh?

This nervous system has two parts: the sympathetic and the parasympathetic nervous systems. The sympathetic is the fight or flight system – it prepares the body for sudden stress by controlling physical things like our heart rate, the adrenal glands and our breathing. The parasympathetic system does the opposite – it prepares the body for rest, and also helps the digestive system work more efficiently to extract nutrients from our food.

When you are in a fearful situation, you can consciously shift the body into the parasympathetic system using your breath. This part of conscious living – paying attention to the physicality of your body, the heart rate, the sweat glands, the breath, and the adrenal glands, and shifting it via breathing. It's such a simple technique, and it's so powerful.

When you spend your entire day breathing shallow, short, sharp breaths, you are likely keeping your body in the sympathetic system, and this signals STRESS to the body. It's no wonder so many people feel stressed out – their breathing makes their body react as if they are. So they are.

Proper breathing is the heart of both yoga and meditation – without breath, you don't have a yoga posture. When I teach, I listen to the way my students breathe in the postures and I can tell how they are experiencing the posture – whether they need to back out, go deeper (and this refers to deepening the BREATH, not the stretch) or whether their mind is wandering.

Thousands of years ago, in the yogic text the Upanishads, yogis described their experiential understanding of the body via five layers, or sheaths. They called these layers kosha.

Shiva Rea explains it clearly in Yoga Journal:

*"According to the map of the koshas, we are composed of five layers, sheaths, or bodies. Like Russian dolls, each metaphorical 'body' is contained within the next:*

- \* annamaya kosha, the physical body*
- \* pranamaya kosha, the breath or life-force body*
- \* manomaya kosha, the mental body*
- \* vijanamaya kosha, the wisdom body*
- \* anandamaya kosha, the bliss body*

*From the kosha perspective, yoga helps us bring body, breath, mind, wisdom, and spirit (bliss) into harmony. Like a tapestry, the koshas are interwoven layers.*

*You would perish if your pranamaya kosha, or breath body, ceased to function. Throughout the day the breath body can go unnoticed and become limited in range, like a caged bird that forgets how to fly.*

*To experience the pranamaya kosha, contemplate the reality of how your next inhalation literally*

*circulates through your entire body through the oxygen in your bloodstream. On a physiological level, the layer of prana refers to your circulatory and respiratory systems, “the rivers of life flowing in you, as well as to the flow of feelings in your body.*

*As you increase the amount of oxygen in your body, this pranic body starts to come alive. The coordination of your inhalation and exhalation with the movements of your physical body, as in the Sun Salutations, is one of the ways in which the physical body and breath body become synchronized with the mental body (concentration and awareness).”*

Breathing is the most vital action we take in our lives, because it IS the essence of life for us. Yet it is also the most unconscious action that we take. For this reason, becoming conscious of how you breathe, and then deliberately directing the flow of breath and prana into your body is the single most powerful action you can take toward living a conscious life.

The reason people feel so amazing after a yoga class is not about the postures and the stretching and the moving. It's because they just spent 90 minutes paying attention to their breathing. It's because they have flooded every cell in their body with an abundance of oxygen and those cells are firing with energy. It's because they have consciously connected to prana – the life force that permeates the universe.

Whatever it is that ails you – whether it's an agitated mind, a dullness of body, an addiction to food or an inability to express emotions – simply starting to breathe properly can have a profound effect on your experience of life.

For miraculous stories about the power of pranayama (breath work), get your hands on a copy of Bri. Maya Tiwari's book *The Path of Practice*. She described several instances where prescribed pranayama dramatically shifted people's experience of anxiety, insomnia and depression.

Take a deep breath in now, and ride that wave into your body.

Follow it, feel it, experience it.

Your breath is the bridge between mind, body and soul.

Connect with your breath, and you can connect with who you truly are.

# HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT YOGA STUDIO FOR YOU

Been thinking about starting yoga for ages now but feeling overwhelmed by the range of classes, teachers & studios on offer?

Not sure of where to start?

Here's a few tips to get you off the procrastination flow and into the yoga flow.

## **1. Ask yourself what it is you are looking for.**

It helps if you know what you want.

Do you want a class that will make you sweat, will work you hard, and is consistent every time? Try Bikram.

Or do you want something that flows from one posture to the next with emphasize on the breath? Check out Prana Flow, or Vinyasa.

Are you an athlete looking to do some cross-training? Think about Astanga or Power Yoga.

Are you interested in chanting? Give Bhakti Yoga a whirl.

Or maybe you love the idea of pranayama (breath work)? Try an integrated class like Vinyasa Flow, or Kundalini.

Or do you want a class that just focuses on the physical side of yoga? Maybe you can find what you want at a gym.

## **2. Talk to the studios.**

Once you know what you want, go and have a chat to the studios available and see what they suggest to you. Pay attention to how you feel when you walk into each studio, and the way you are treated.

Are you listened to? Are you attended to quickly? Do you feel good in the studio? Be mindful that some studios will lock the doors when there is a class on, so it pays to call ahead of time and check when an appropriate time is to drop in. Ask for a tour of the facilities. Take away a timetable so you can read it in more depth.

## **3. Talk to yoga-loving friends.**

Recommendations are always good – find a friend who's judgment you trust and ask which teacher and classes they like, and find out why. Get them to take you to a class. It's always more fun, and less threatening, to start a new activity with a friend. It helps with motivation too if you're going with someone else.

## **4. Work out what times will suit you, and what budget works for you.**

Sometimes the studio or teacher we choose comes down to convenience, so it helps to know when you would be likely to go to class and how much a class is worth to you.

Don't think of the money you spend on a class as the same as spending money on entertainment,

think of it as investment in your health and well-being. A regular yoga practice can help rehabilitate injuries and prevent new ones, and can also provide relief from certain conditions, and prevent new conditions from developing. How much is your health worth to you?

But do be mindful in committing to a year's membership when you've never really done that style of yoga before. Try starting with a beginner's offer – most studios will offer some kind of deal on your first few classes. Or try a ten pass. Then, when you know what you really love, dive in and get the best deal by committing to a year.

## **5. Try, and try, and try again.**

The best time to think about joining a studio is when it first opens, because usually they will offer free yoga for a period of time so you can check out the classes, and they often offer discounted joining specials.

So jump in and try as many classes as you can, with different teachers and different styles until you find something you like. You may discover you love classical hatha yoga, but the teacher doesn't quite speak your language, so find another teacher.

Each teacher brings something different to a class, and appeals to different people. Just because your friend raves about a particular teacher, it doesn't mean you too will love him or her.

## **Which leads on to... 6. Pay attention to the teacher.**

If you've never done yoga before, it's hard to know what a great yoga teacher is like, compared to a not-so great yoga teacher, because you have nothing to compare against. Each teacher will have a different style too. Some teachers like to physically adjust and correct their students, while other teachers prefer to give verbal corrections and adjustments and let the students find the pose from within.

Regardless of their style though, what great teachers all have in common is that they 'see' their students. They notice when alignment needs correcting, and when breathing is strained. They see where students are tight, and where they are weak.

A great teacher is responsive to the needs of his or her class, and doesn't recite the instructions for each asana by rote, instead paying attention to what needs to be said in that moment – even in Bikram, which is known for its tightly scripted class. A great Bikram teacher can work off the script, and still be responsive to the needs of individual students.

If, after trying a smattering of styles and teachers, yoga still doesn't grab you... than maybe it's not for you at this point in life. But don't write it off for good either – we change every year, and yoga is such a transformative practice, you may find that down the track, it does appeal to you.

Obviously as a teacher and serious addict I am completely biased, but if you don't like yoga, do yourself a favour and try one class a year, just in case you do change your mind... and then you'll understand what I'm raving about all the time!

# WHY YOGA IS THE BEST DETOX DIET YOU CAN EVER DO

There is one simple action that you can take to detox your body and maintain your ideal body weight with ease.

Practice yoga.

Yep. That's it – the best detox diet you'll ever do.

Regular practice of yoga will solve all of your weight and toxic body issues.

Here's how it works.

Practicing yoga is about paying attention to the breath.

The breath is the bridge between the mind and the body.

When you are aware and conscious of your breath, you are able to tune into the subtle signals of your body.

And when you tune into the subtle signals of your body, you can hear what your body really needs and you can immediately feel the affects of what you put into your body.

In this way, using conscious awareness of the breath, yoga practice trains you to get out of the mind, and down into the body. It trains you to eat according to your internal signals, not the external commands of diets and magazines and well-meaning friends.

Instead of avoiding foods because you think you shouldn't eat them, you choose not to eat them because they just don't feel right to you.

Instead of eating foods because you think you should eat them, you eat them because they feel good.

And when you avoid foods that feel bad and eat foods that feel good, excess weight falls away and your body naturally cleanses itself.

It truly is that simple.

Learn to listen to your body, learn to hear what it's truly saying, and you will never, ever have to diet again.

But be warned. There are some side affects to being in-tune with your body.

You won't be able to consume excessive amounts of alcohol anymore because even while you're drinking that fourth glass of wine or third martini, you can taste how toxic it is and you just won't enjoy it anymore.

Your favourite comfort foods just won't be satisfying anymore. Oh you'll buy the Tim Tams, the Moro bars or the orange chocolate chip ice-cream, but when it comes to eating it, it just doesn't taste good. You might manage a bite or two, and even enjoy it, but the "I've had enough" signal is so strong, it's impossible to override it and overeat.

You'll start craving greens. And fruit. And legumes. Not because they're "good for you", but be-

cause they taste and feel so damn good when you eat them. You'll struggle to eat pizza and burgers and pastries because they make you feel sick.

You may even struggle to keep weight on and have to find high-fat foods that your body likes in order to maintain a healthy weight – options like avocado, nuts, cheese and even butter. Yes, butter tastes better! Imagine that – struggling with maintaining a high-enough weight instead of a low-enough weight!

Being in-tune with your body in this way changes what you put into it so you're less likely to poison it with toxic food choices.

But yoga also helps your organs to function at their maximum capacity, meaning that you become far more efficient at eliminating toxins as well. Your body is able to extract higher levels of nutrition from the food you consume and you'll find that this means you need to eat less. Your appetite naturally diminishes.

With all of this going on... you don't even have to think about your weight. The ideal weight just happens naturally for you.

And it's not just that yoga will give you a great body, it's also that yoga will give you a body you love – because sometimes these are two different things.

Sometimes we have to learn to love our bodies just as they are right here and now first. Then, from this starting point, we find that our body naturally evolves in the best possible expression of who we are because we listen to what we need to eat and when we need to eat.

Some of us will end up curvy earth goddesses.

Others will be lean, strong fire goddesses.

And yet others will be lithe water goddesses, or dainty air goddesses.

Connecting to what you need to eat based on who YOU are through yoga allows the diversity of female (and male) beauty to shine forth as it is, not as it is supposed to be.

So ditch the diet for good.

Start practicing yoga.

Eat what feels right.

And let your inner Goddess shine forth naturally.

## HOW TO STAY YOUNG FOREVER WITH YOGA

It's the Holy Grail of Modern Life, the never-ending quest for the elusive fountain of youth. That potion or procedure or diet that will keep one looking and feeling young forever.

Pity the poor celebrity, faced with growing older in the glaring light of public scrutiny, forever surrounded by images of themselves as a younger, brighter star.

But it's not just celebrities that fight the ever-advanced march of time. Regular citizens like you and I pour millions of dollars into highly-touted solutions to the aging process. Creams and lotions, potions and pills... there's always a scientific breakthrough around the corner complete with new technical terms and spiffy diagrams that show exactly how the nano-whatzits are attacking the aging process and making you young again.

But does it all work?

A quick glance around at the folk you stand next to in the pharmacy queue, or sit next to in the beauty salon, or work-out beside in the gym will give you a ready answer.

No.

Because if it worked, none of us would have wrinkles. We'd look young forever. And as the glossy women's mags are keen to show us week after week, even celebrities age (Brad Pitt – how could you!), wrinkle and sag. Time halts for no woman, nor man.

Yet it is possible to stay young forever. Sri K. Pattabhi Jois did it – still teaching yoga as he approached his 90s. Krishnamacharya succeeded. So too did Iyengar. In fact, spend any time in yogic circles and you will notice that while yogis still have wrinkles, they still sag... there is a youthfulness and vigour about them that belies their age.

Yoga keeps you young.

And it keeps you young in the only way that really counts – on the inside. Yet when you're young on the inside – young organs, young joints, young nervous system, young outlook – you also look young on the outside. You glow, from the inside out.

Because what does it mean to be young?

Does it mean that you have a smooth, wrinkle-free, expressionless face that hasn't changed in twenty years?

Or does it mean that you leap out of bed in the mornings excited about what adventures you might encounter today?

Does it mean that people mistake you for your daughter?

Or does it mean that you can get up on the mountain with your daughter and spend the week snowboarding?

Does finding the fountain of youth mean you never have to grow up and face the reality of life?

Or does finding the fountain of youth mean that you face the reality of life with childlike wonder?



This is what it really means to be young – it's the way you look at the world, it's the way your body moves, it's your willingness to embrace the new and step outside the comfort zone.

Yoga works on all these aspects of youthfulness – and more. Watch yogis (like David Swenson down below) practice and you can see that our bodies age not because the years roll on by, but because they become accustomed to the range of movement that we put them through.

As Suza Francina says in – *Our Changing View of Aging: With Yoga, the Body Remains Open and Flexible*

*“ The accepted view of the aging process has been one of stiffening, rigidity and closing down. Without proper exercise, the body contracts and we lose height, strength and flexibility. As a result, our natural free range of motion is restricted so daily activities become difficult and in some cases impossible.*

*Yoga exercises reverse the aging process by moving each joint in the body through its full range of motion-stretching, strengthening and balancing each part. Most popular forms of weight bearing exercise contract muscles and tighten the musculoskeletal system, adding to the stiffness that normally settles into the body with the passage of time. In our youth-oriented culture, obsessed with thinness, we tighten the muscles to make the body look firmer.*

*What is much more important, however, especially as we grow older, is opening and expanding the body so that the aging process is tempered.”*

If you really want to know how “old” you are – don't look at your birthdate, nor even the number of grey hairs or wrinkles you have. Instead, see how bendy your spine is – in yoga, age is measured not in chronological years but with the saying:

*“You're only as young as your spine.”*

This means when I started yoga back in my mid-twenties, due to the rigidity to my spine (couldn't touch my toes – could barely touch my knees!) I was actually closer to 70 years old. Thank goodness I started yoga then! Now with my spine opening up, I figure I've reversed the aging process so much I'm in my late teens again – at least, that's how old I feel!

Remember, our spine contains more movable parts than any other part of our body. It's connected to our pelvis, our legs, our arms and our head. When the spine gives way, it's often at one of those connection points, and the agony and stiffness carries through to the rest of our body. But when you can still bend forward with ease to put your shoes and socks on, bend sideways to retrieve a magazine off the ground or bend backwards to stare up at the stars – you're still youthful.

And no matter how old you are today, you are never too old to start yoga. The day you start yoga is the day you stop the hands of time ticking by. Betty Eiler began yoga late in life, but it didn't stop her from completely changing and opening up her body. She says:

*At age 52, for the first time in my life, I did the Splits (Hanumasana), and at age 55 I did a mid-room, Full Arm Balance (Adho Mukha Vrksasana), dropping back to the Upward Bow (Urdhva Dhanurasana). I am also comfortable doing the Lotus in Headstand (Pindasana).*

Or as Beryl Bender Birch, one of the founders of Power Yoga in the United States says:

*“I'm still getting better at my asana practice, and I just turned 60. I don't know when I'll begin to go backward or get less proficient at asana. Maybe when I die?”*

One of the best yoga asana for reversing the aging process is headstand (Shirshasana).

Amongst other things, it is claimed the regular practice of headstand can even turn gray hair back to its natural colour because of the increase blood flow to the hair follicles. In fact, mastering headstand and being able to hold it for hours per day is said to halt aging altogether, and induce enlightenment.

But, as with all yoga, headstand is a powerful posture that needs to be worked into slowly, and with proper guidance. Unless you did extensive gymnastics when you were younger, and are used to being upside down, it's not a posture to try at home by yourself.

Closer to home, an example of the way that yoga keeps you young is owner and teacher at Wellington's Hot Yoga NZ, Lou Cassella. At the age of 65, he is an inspiration and proof of yoga's ability to keep you young.

So if the advancing years are making you reach for the potions and pills, and you're don't look too closely at yourself in the mirror anymore, and it feels like your body is beginning to betray you... now is the time to start yoga.

It's not a miracle worker.

You will still have wrinkles.

You'll probably still have grey hair.

But with yoga, you can keep your body in the best possible health. You can keep expanding your comfort zones, and the range of movement possible for you. Like Betty, you may find yourself able to do a headstand or handstand even though you long ago passed forty, or fifty (or even sixty!)

Finally, one last piece of inspiration – David Swenson.

He did start practicing yoga when he was 13, so he's got a head start on most of us. But for those of us who still think that creaky knees and dodgy ankles and bad backs are just about the passing years, David shows us that it's not the years passing but what we do with them that really matters.

Me, I'm looking forward to growing older, because with every passing year, my body gets more fluid, more open, and even stronger.

# WILL YOGA GIVE ME A GREAT BODY?

The short answer is... YES.

The more interesting answer is that as you practice yoga, your perception and understanding of what a “great body” is will change.

And even more interesting... the concept that happiness is reliant upon creating specific circumstances (i.e. when I lose weight I'll be happy, when I win the lotto I'll be happy, when I find my perfect partner I'll be happy...)... is revealed to be an illusion. What this means is that whether or not your body is “good” ceases to matter, because you're happy and content anyway.

But right now, those of you who are looking to begin an exercise practice that will improve the condition of your body don't care about that. Nope – you just want to know, is it worth investing time and money into yoga to get what I want?

I'm here to tell you, yes it is. Absolutely. In fact, despite the fact that I do no other serious exercise and eat whatever I want... at 33 years of age I am in better shape than I have ever been. And it's all down to yoga.

Yoga will give you the very best body you could possibly have for your body type if you practice regularly.

Can't put it any simpler than that - here's how it works.

The practice of physical yoga, or asana, works far more than just your muscles. It doesn't just lengthen and strengthen – although it does that super well. Yoga, because of it's mindful attention to the breath amongst other things, works every single system in your body – it works your body from the inside out.

I don't want to list off all the ways that yoga can improve your body based on what I've read, or even what other people have told me. No, I'm only going to tell what I have experienced myself, as I know these improvements to be 100% true and possible.

And I'm sure other readers will use the comments to share how yoga has changed their body.

Here's what's happened to my body since I began to practice yoga regularly:

**1. Yoga has meant I have lost weight and now maintain my ideal body weight with ease** and no thought necessary – no dieting, no restrictions on food. I eat what I want when I want. In practice, because my system is more sensitive and I am more tuned in to what things really feel like, I don't WANT to eat crap because it makes me feel like crap. It's not about discipline – I just don't enjoy processed icky food anymore. Oh, I still love chocolate – in small doses. I love cheese. I enjoy a glass or two of wine. There is nothing I won't taste or sample – but I can feel when I have had enough and I stop there. When I do crave food, it's the good things in life – like asparagus, or corquettes, or salad. (Yes, a salad craving has become normal for me!)

**2. Yoga has improved my lung capacity** – yoga is not thought of as a cardio workout, but because you are mindfully breathing, taking long deep breaths, your lung capacity will improve. Plus, if you practice pranayama, it will definitely improve. I notice it when I'm walking up hills, or climbing stairs. I can always breath with ease, and it just feels like my body is able to extract oxygen from the air and get it to every cell in my body far more efficiently than it could when I was in my early

twenties and working out on the treadmill. I would love to have my lung capacity tested, just to see the numbers on paper, but you know it in yourself when you're breathing easy and damn if it doesn't feel good.

**3. Yoga has improved my flexibility enormously** - this is the obvious improvement from yoga. When you practice regularly, your body will open up, enormously. When I first started, I couldn't sit on the floor with my legs out straight in front of me. In real life, this meant that I was unable to bend over to tie up my shoe laces. I had to find somewhere to sit and awkwardly hoist my foot up close enough to my body to reach. Not a good look when you're only 25! Now even small actions, like turning around to look behind me when I reverse the car, are graceful and easy.

**4. Yoga has improved my balance.** Balance ties in with strength and flexibility, and it's improved just as much. In practice, it's hard to quantify what improved balance means in my day to day life. But I know it means I am far less likely to fall over and hurt myself – something that matters a lot as we age and our bones get more brittle. Plus if I feel like jumping up on to low walls and walking along them just for fun because I can, I have no qualms about it. And that's a cool thing.

**5. Yoga has improved my concentration.** This is something I've noticed at work – when I'm given a task to do, no matter how long and onerous it might be, I can just switch my attention on to that task and stick with it until it's done. This is a huge advantage when doing things such as proof-reading long documents such as briefings to incoming ministers (BIMs). My concentrated attention means I notice things too – I'm just more aware of everything that is going on in my immediate environment. If I had to rely on my brain or concentration for work, I'd definitely want to be practicing yoga.

**6. Yoga supports my health** – it's fantastic. Number of sick days I've had in the last five years? Can't remember – maybe less than a handful. It's a standing joke in my household – when a bug comes through my partner will be hit for three or maybe five days. I'll get the condensed version and feel a bit off colour for maybe 6 to 12 hours. Health is one of those intangible assets that we don't really notice or appreciate until we don't have it, but it's definitely worth practicing yoga and building it up.

**7. Yoga means my stress levels are zero.** Yep – not much bothers me anymore. Stuff happens still, but all the worry and anxiety and freaking out that I used to experience in my twenties has gone, gone, gone. Regular practice of yoga, pranayama and meditation has brought me to a place of surrender. This is one of the niyamas – isvara pranidhana. It's a place where you are no longer concerned about trying to control life, and make happen what you think needs to happen in order for you to feel good. Instead, even though you may experience struggle or discomfort, you know that whatever happens is perfect. So you go with it. I could lose my job tomorrow and I wouldn't stress out about it. I might still experience some fearful thoughts or feelings, but I wouldn't allow those thoughts and feelings to take me over. No matter what happens, I know I am supported and I am loved. And that is a very cool thing to know!

**8. Yoga has made me strong – very, very strong.** The beauty of yoga is that it works every single muscle in the body. Bicep curls may give you a large bicep... but what about all the other little muscles in the arm? Yoga strength is being able to hold yourself up in inversions, and in arm balances. It's sitting deep in Warrior II for a long period of time and finding a place of grace and lift. It's coming into Warrior III and feeling like you're superman. It's not just strength of body either, it's strength of mind. Yoga teaches us to stay with the discomfort, to sit with the awful feelings. When you do this enough times, you begin to realise that discomfort and even pain do not touch the core of who you are. It's possible to go to a place of peace within even while your feelings, thoughts or physical sensations are uncomfortable. I've been fortunate in my life not to ever experience any physical violence, or torture, or even prolonged pain (beyond that of my spine) but I imagine that if

I ever needed to... yoga will have given me the strength to endure. And that's a big thing.

**9. Yoga means I can now hold a tune.** At least, I can sing and feel good about doing it and I think I'm in tune :) Yoga encompasses chanting, and if you're doing Bhakti Yoga (the yoga of devotion), it also encompasses Kirtan. Kirtan is a call and response jam session with instruments and sanskrit chants and it absolutely rocks. I've only recently started adding Bhakti Yoga to my practice, attending monthly sessions with Satyananda Yoga here in Wellington, but I never thought I'd feel so damn good about opening my mouth and singing. I look forward to it every month, and have started getting together with a few yogi friends on the weekend to do kirtan just for fun. I think it might be the next big thing, and I can't wait until the next Wellington Satyananda Kirtan session on November 29th (leave a comment if you want to know where and when).

**10. Yoga means I love my body, inside and out.** As a hyper-critical, perfectionist teenager and young adult, I wanted the perfect body. And I worked damn hard to get it. In doing so, I was completely missing the fundamental truth that my body was already perfect. In fact, my body was an amazing feat of biology that was housing my soul and doing a great job in moving me from A to B. There was little appreciation for it at all! Instead, if I looked in the mirror, my gaze would go to those bits I "hated", and I would obsess over what I could do to "fix" them. I mean, give me a break! Talk about self-absorbed and narcissistic.

Now however, I have a new appreciation and wonder for my body – I feel so blessed. I can run, and walk, and jump, and leap, and twirl, and twist, and sometimes I even feel like I could almost fly, if I could just sort out a superhero costume that worked :) But seriously, my mindset has shifted, and when I look in the mirror at myself now I grin. I appreciate what is there, because it won't be there forever. I will age, and my body will change, and there may come a day when I struggle to make it to the bathroom. So today, when my body is 100% fit and fighting, damn it if I won't appreciate it and love it for the miracle that it is.

Of course, in shifting to this mind space where I love my body, (yes – yoga WILL give you a body you will love!) I realise that it's not actually having a great body that we want. We just think it is. What we truly want is to look in the mirror and feel AWESOME about ourselves. We want to be able to walk down the street with a bounce in our step and a glow on our faces. In our upside down way of seeing the world, we believe that we have to control our external circumstances in order to create this feeling and these thoughts inside of us.

But that's not true – and practicing yoga will help you to understand this. Practicing yoga will give you a good body, not JUST because it changes and reshapes your body, although it does do this. No, practicing yoga will give you a good body because it pierces your illusions and pulls back the veil of maya to reveal that you already HAVE a good body. In fact, you already have an excellent body. It's just waiting for you to see it, appreciate it, and celebrate it.

And if you don't believe me, then get thee to a yoga class and see how your perception of your body shifts after regular practice. Let me know in a year or two if I was right.

Enjoy the yoga!