



Yoga: NOT For Human Pretzels Only

By Jennifer Kaufman

Madonna swears by it and Time magazine featured a cover story on the practice. Yet, despite yoga's increasing visibility, it is shrouded in mystery. Some people imagine followers of yoga as turban-clad mystics contorting their bodies into impossible shapes while chanting "ommm." However, yoga is easily accessible and benefits both the body and the mind.

What is yoga? According to the American Yoga Association website (www.americanyogaassociation.org), yoga is a system "built on three main structures: exercise, breathing, and meditation." There are many schools of yoga the most popular being Hatha Yoga, which combines physical postures with proper breathing techniques. The postures are intended to strengthen and stretch the body while improving posture and aiding balance and flexibility. Deep, unhurried breathing helps aid these postures by providing oxygen throughout the body. Meditation focuses the mind and relaxes the body. Though yoga is not recommended for weight loss, the flexibility gained through yoga aids in weight loss activities like running, biking, and aerobic dance.

Almost anyone can do yoga, but it is best to check with a doctor before trying any new exercise. Joining a yoga class is a great way to get acquainted with yoga. There are many yoga studios throughout the Milwaukee area and most health clubs and local YMCAs have yoga classes. There are yoga classes for beginners as well as those more advanced in yoga teachings. One of the privileges of going to a class is having an instructor who can

guide you through the postures and breathing.

However, if you feel uncomfortable practicing yoga in front of people or cannot find a class convenient to your busy schedule, I suggest purchasing a video and doing the exercises at home. There are yoga videos for the novice as well as advanced practitioners. There are yoga videos for breast cancer survivors, senior citizens, and children. There are yoga videos that concentrate on total body conditioning, stress relief, increasing energy, and flattening abdominals. One of my favorite videos is Yoga Remedies for Natural Healing featuring the "rock star" of yoga instructors, Rodney Yee. This video features yoga solutions to back pain, stress, fatigue, indigestion, and headache.

Most yoga sessions start with a set of gentle warm-up exercises. You will need to focus on your breathing while doing these exercises. After warming up you progress to the yoga postures. These postures usually are held for a few seconds and are repeated usually three to four times. Some postures are quite simple like bending over from the waist or shoulder rolls. As the session goes on the postures become more complex. The goal is not to contort your body into a pretzel, but to mildly stretch the muscles of your body while breathing deeply.

When doing yoga wear comfortable stretchy clothing. Go barefoot because socks or sneakers may make you slip. I highly recommend investing in a "sticky" mat to do the exercises on rather than a towel or regular

exercise mat. Sticky mats help you stay balanced while protecting your body from the floor. Sticky mats can be purchased at any yoga studio, sporting goods store or a mass-merchandise like Target.

Yoga's accessibility and lack of elaborate equipment were two of the aspects that hooked me on yoga. Since I began my yoga instruction at Seven Stones Center for Wellness, I have benefited from yoga both physically and mentally. Practicing the postures has alleviated my back pain that had plagued me for years and has kept me flexible well into my thirties. Deep breathing helps me relax, focus, and relieve the stress from both school and work. I often practice deep breathing before I give a presentation to reduce nervous tension. While hunched over my desk at home working on homework or while preparing a report at work, I take a mini-yoga break to stretch my muscles and clear and focus my mind. In the few years I have been doing yoga I have realized it is not the domain of celebrities or something briefly noteworthy in a news magazine. Yoga is part of my life and as natural as brushing my teeth.

I always find it interesting to talk to other practitioners of yoga to find out how yoga has affected their lives. Deneine Powell, the director of Seven Stones Center for Wellness and a certified yoga instructor with the Himalayan Institute, summed the practice of yoga this way: "It's everything. It's my breath, my relaxation, my spirituality, and my existence."