

# Yoga

## More Than Just Exercise



By Diana Salqan

Y

oga is a special form of exercise that has come to us from ancient Hindu texts dating back thousands of years. It emphasizes spinal flexibility and expansion between vertebrae. Practicing yoga increases blood

flow in the spinal cord as we twist and squeeze the spine. Thereby, we increase our capacity to heal not only our spine but also the rest of our body, working the muscles and opening up space around the joints. Specific postures also help restore the balance of energy in our body chakras, which leads to improved moods and better general health.

Yoga can be just a form of physical exercise. But it can also be a journey for self-exploration and self-discovery. It can serve as a tool that allows a person to meet themselves, and this is precisely how it was for me when I took my first yoga class at Farashe Center. By standing on the mat, I began to recognize myself simply as I am: physically, emotionally, mentally, and even spiritually – if you have the inclination to engage in this aspect of life.

For example, not being able to do a particular pose, or doing it better on one side than the other, prompted me to ask myself where these injuries or weaknesses came from. I realized that possibly, I had created them through incorrect posture or unhealthy practices. So in a way, these impairments are mine. Realizing that I might be their cause changed my entire perception of life. I began to understand that I can alter and affect myself positively, just as I had negatively impacted myself.

Change is possible! What a soothing idea to experience and adopt. Transformation is slow but possible. It is how pain lessens, tightness softens, or a muscle is toned and lengthened. It is how movement in life becomes more flexible, less stiff.

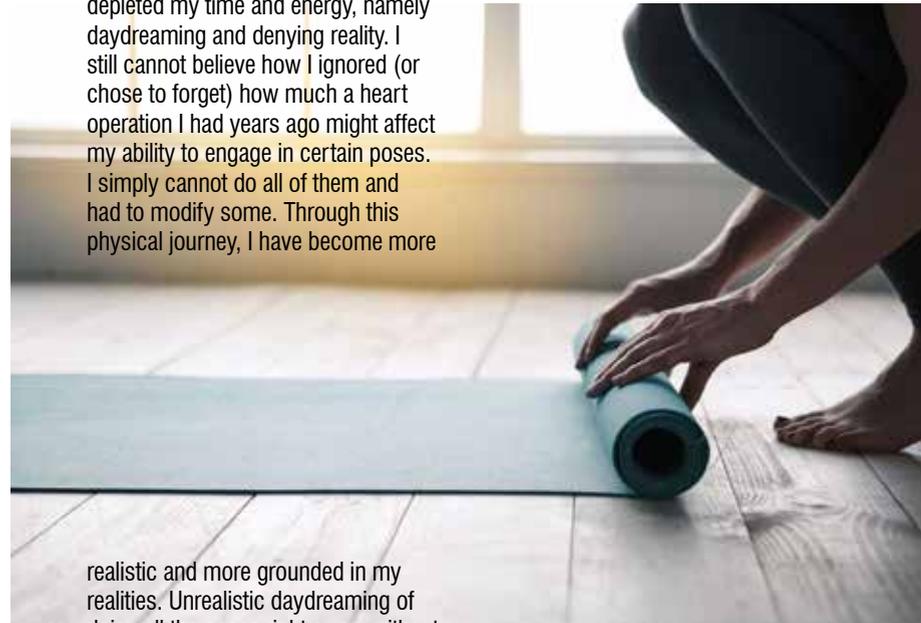
Indeed, change is possible to a certain extent, and this extent is conditioned by our contributions and circumstances. The more truthful and consistent your input is, the better the results are. It is a very ego-deflating experience to learn how much time and persistence one needs to improve a weakness, strengthen surrounding muscles, or properly align the body. Yet, it is possible! It is even possible to change not only your body but also your circumstances – by empowering your mind – much the same way as your body.

To elaborate deeper on this point: some physical weaknesses may come from nonphysical elements or from the equivalent of mental shortcomings or misunderstandings. For example, my yoga practice had two flaws that depleted my time and energy, namely daydreaming and denying reality. I still cannot believe how I ignored (or chose to forget) how much a heart operation I had years ago might affect my ability to engage in certain poses. I simply cannot do all of them and had to modify some. Through this physical journey, I have become more

realistic and more grounded in my realities. Unrealistic daydreaming of doing all the poses right away, without giving my body the proper time, may have contributed to my injury. Thus, unrealistic motivation was one of my mental weaknesses.

Others might have traits such as lack of motivation; they don't want

**The concept of surrender is found in many faiths and is also a truly Islamic life concept. The mere verb associated with the name Islam means surrender.**



to bother. Perhaps they see the long road ahead and don't want the pain of trying. Others may not be able to appreciate the value that lies in embarking on a different path and the



■ Yoga at Farasheh.

rewards it will bring. Each one of us has a weakness. Again, finding the balance between who you are and how far you can go is a monumental step. So, a human being needs to be open to both work and surrender, the balance of which is the art of living.

My second fault was overworking. A right shoulder injury I had certainly originated from years of incorrect posture coupled with hauling a heavy bag to work, carrying my two chubby little boys, and doing lots of housework. As a result, my back muscles were very sore. At one point, they hurt so badly that it felt as if I was carrying the burden of the whole world on my right side. But the reason why I worked so hard and overloaded myself was that I was raised that way. I needed to please and feel validated. These days, poor posture can be blamed frequently on texting and phones, but it is also a story of the heart.

When you practice yoga long enough, you know the connection between the heart and the shoulder. You also realize that the remedy can sometimes take a lifetime. Carving out that space around the shoulder to let it heal translates into carving out time for yourself, giving yourself time – on the mat and beyond – to breathe and reflect. If you are lucky, or if it is meant for you, you will recognize the original wound the ego tries so vehemently to ignore or deny. But it is there; we all have one (or two).

Seeing the mental and emotional equivalents of your physical weaknesses, which in my view are intertwined, seeing those limitations inside out is a humbling exercise. You spend time with yourself on the mat; you nurture yourself just as a mother would, just as mother nature takes care of the earth: unconditionally. You probably will learn to love yourself unconditionally as well.

Coupling yoga and breath allows an even deeper feeling of the body and soul. Moving with the breath, noticing how the body moves, calls for our full concentration at any moment in time. Such concentration on the moment in time is an excellent mental and spiritual exercise.

If you furthermore add meditation to this journey, a whole new dimension is revealed, as the spiritual aspect of yoga allows you to get in touch with your soul. Focusing on the breath, the line of energy we have in common with all of nature, shrinks the distance between the body and the soul, between the physical and the nonphysical. The echoes of our breath that resonate within us may whisper to us echoes of our soul. When we are humble enough to admit that we exist simply because of our breath, then many material things will become less momentous or meaningful.

One breath after the other: that is life. As God's compassion allows me to breathe, I can thank him. Surrendering to my breath and to silence, the most powerful language that ever existed, is a truly spiritual endeavor. Life is a journey towards God; at any time, at any place, and for any reason, it can end. The soul lingers on, but the body perishes. Meditation allows the practitioner to sense the more significant aspects of life, some of which we as humans have not even begun to fathom. Such aspects play out in different ways in our lives and we have no control over many of them, such as being born in a certain place or into a particular family. Meditation may allow us to gain wisdom so we can better understand a situation. It can help us find peace in wearisome circumstances or despite difficult conditions. Or we may be given a moment of bliss that transcends pain and suffering.

**The word yoga means union between the mind, body, and soul.**

Grateful for what I have, I feel where I am through my breath. And as I take my next breath on the mat to evolve for the better, I dedicate my efforts to myself and to others as well. That is yoga.

*Diana Salqan is a blogger, translator, and educator. She holds an MPhil degree in European literature from Cambridge University, UK, and has taught English language, reading, and writing for more than ten years at Birzeit University. Since 2015, she has developed a wide range of interests; she received training in different forms of yoga and yoga philosophy, meditation, and evolutionary astrology and is now a yoga teacher at Farashe and part of its community. Farashe is a charity-based yoga center in Ramallah that tries to reach out to the community and stands for "selfless service."*

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