

Is Yoga Medicine?

Fifteen years ago, my esteemed yoga teacher and mentor was questioned by a fellow student regarding the benefit of practicing yoga. He half jokingly replied that yoga is like "snake oil", it's good for whatever ails you. His reply was met with laughter by all; it was funny, all right, but it was also tantalizing, suggesting as it did limitless possibilities for the yoga student.

In the years that followed, I have found that the practice of yoga offers a mental and physical space in which to discover one's previously unseen capabilities, as well as weaknesses. The various poses are demanding, challenging the student to develop strength and flexibility in parts of his body that have been weak and stiff for as long as he can remember. After my having demonstrated a particular pose, many a student has responded, "My body doesn't do that!". So my job as the teacher is to guide my students into that pose, encouraging them to attend to the new sensations they experience, as well as to observe their own reactions to the physical challenge. In this way, the student has many opportunities to know himself in a deeper way, even to see himself in a new light.

It is exactly this, this seeing oneself from a fresh perspective, which opens the door of healing and renewal. The adventure of the practice and study of yoga lies in its transformative power. I found this to be true for myself when I began my own exploration of yoga, but over the past twelve years that I have been teaching yoga, this truth has become more and more apparent to me. As I have enjoyed this wonderful position of teacher, I have observed many students experience new truths about themselves. Sometimes these experiences have been primarily physical; I am thinking about my current student who is 83 years of age. He now enjoys much freer movement in his shoulders, and is delighted by the degree of freedom he now has in his arms, neck and back. Perhaps even more often, as a class draws to a close, I see tension drain away from students' faces, their eyes becoming clearer and brighter, their skin taking on a healthier glow. They often do look younger, less burdened by the difficulties of their everyday lives. What is it about yoga that sets this endeavor apart from simple physical exercise?

The simplest explanation is that hatha yoga sits you down into the present. This present moment is the exact time and space, and in fact the only time and space in which you can fully live. As your body and mind meet in the concentration of doing a yoga pose you experience clarity, focusing your attention, muscles, bones, and breath toward experiencing the particular pose. Again and again, as you approach each pose, this capability to meet each sensation with awareness increases. This experience of harmony of body and mind then transfers to your everyday life; you are more alert to the beauty and wonder of life that has always been right before your eyes and in fact, available to all your senses. This is the magic of yoga.

Mary Frankos