



Yoga's Meditative Effects: What's Good For the Body is Good for the Brain

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A complete exercise program includes strength, cardiovascular, flexibility, balance and core training. Yoga can be a significant part of a complete exercise program, as it provides flexibility and balance training as well as certain aspects of strength and core work. However, there is another side of yoga that's beginning to get more attention recently - the meditative aspect.

Meditation means to “engage in contemplation or reflection” ... “a mental exercise such as concentration on one’s breathing” as defined in the Merriam Webster’s Dictionary. More specifically, and from the view of a practitioner, meditation is when the mind is made to be calm, putting aside the routine thoughts, worries and stresses of life. There are a variety of ways to meditate. The most popular way involves focusing on one thing, looking at a candle flame, repeating a phrase over in one’s mind, or listening to a calming sound such as the breath. [For a sample beginners’ meditation see below.]

The practice of meditation has long been known to have a calming effect on the brain. It is also suspected to enhance mental clarity and focus. Current scientific evidence supports the conclusion that when the brain is calm, hormones are released that benefit the body. These hormones reduce blood pressure and heart rate, increase the strength of the immune system, reduce risks of heart disease and stroke, and possibly risks of many other diseases and ailments. The link between meditation and physical health is clear - if meditation calms the brain, the body benefits.

So, how does meditation occur in yoga class? A beginner generally spends the first few classes trying to figure out how to get the body into the interesting and new positions that are being presented. Next, the focus often shifts to the discomfort one can feel when performing these poses for the first few times. So, to the beginner, yoga can feel anything but calming!

But, one should never judge yoga by the first few classes. After becoming more familiar with the fine details of how to execute the movements and sustain the positions, the yoga student can start to focus on the enjoyable parts of the yoga experience: the flow of the breath, the rhythm of the class, and the peaceful space that lingers in the mind while the body is suspended in a position. The experience is much like a runner’s high, where the body is flowing through the movements with ease, the breath is regular, and endorphins are in the blood stream evoking a feeling of euphoria.

Whether the mind is fully occupied with discovery of the poses, or not thinking at all except to hold the body in its position in space, these experiences and others in yoga class are forms of meditation. They take the mind away from the routine thoughts, worries and stresses of life, and place the focus on what is happening in the moment. Yoga gives the brain time to send messages to the body to produce calming hormones that have lasting, mental and physical benefits.



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Sample meditation for beginners:

- Sit comfortably on the floor or in a low chair.
- Close your eyes and relax all of the muscles of your face.
- Relax your shoulders, arms, and hands.
- Turn your palms up and place them on your lap.
- Start to pay attention to your breath – breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, let your jaw slightly open and your tongue relax to the floor of your mouth.
- Allow your breathing to become slower, and deeper. Listen to the sound of your breath and try to think only of that.
- As thoughts come into your mind, try not to let them linger for too long, and go back to listening to the breath as soon as you can.

Try to do this for 5 minutes at first.

- When 5 minutes becomes easy, increase the time to 10, 15, then 20 minutes. (20 minutes of meditation has been said to have as much benefit as a 2 hour nap)
- When you first start meditating, thoughts will interfere with your meditation frequently.
- As you get better at meditation you'll be able to focus solely on your breath without interruption for larger periods of time. At this point you may also start to notice subtle changes in your calmness and focus throughout the day.

It's recommended that you talk to your doctor before starting to workout. This is basic exercise information for the general public. If you have injuries or other physical limitations, this exercise may not be appropriate. A good rule of thumb: If it doesn't feel good- don't do it!

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