

The Basics of Yoga

By Grace Greenberg, MS, MA

Determining a style of yoga to engage in comes with a prolific selection of studios, schools, colleges, institutes, ashrams, health and fitness clubs, as well as come-to-you instruction, DVDs and online instruction – well, it’s mind boggling!. Then looking at differences between styles, levels, and philosophies from Hatha, Ashtanga, Bikram, Vinyasa, and derivatives there of, like iron-yoga, a combination of weights with yoga principles – once again, intriguing. Before you begin, visit several classes in your area to choose which environment and type you’d like to begin your program. Schools have beginning levels that suit all physical capabilities for kids, athletes, health-conscious individuals, pregnant women, seniors, and challenged individuals.



Yoga is an ancient practice that symbolizes balance in every area of life.

A reputable source like Gaiam, the official site since 1988 for all things healthy and green, is your best bet for finding appropriate gear and props for taking yoga classes. It is meant for individuals and businesses interested in natural health, ecological lifestyles, personal growth, and sustainable commerce.

Background

First, know that yoga is a group of ancient spiritual practices of Hinduism originating in India 5,000 years ago and was practiced regularly around 500 B.C. referring to simplicity and meditation thought to lead to spiritual experience and profound understanding into the nature of existence. The practice of asanas or postures of Hatha yoga is the most common form of yoga in the western world. At the very basic level, yoga classes link body movement with the breath, which denotes a flowing dynamic form with postures and transitions from one pose or sequence to another with inhalations and exhalations.

Hatha yoga is a particular system introduced by Yogi Swatmarama, a sage of 15th century India, and compiler of the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, a treatise considered “a stairway to the heights of Raja Yoga,” concerned with cultivating the mind using meditation (dhyana) and achieve liberation. The asanas and pranayama (control of the life force) in Raja Yoga were what the Hindu Yogis used to physically train their body for long periods of

meditation. This practice is called shatkarma. The word Hatha is a compound of the words Ha and Tha meaning sun and moon and refers to the principal nadis (energy channels) of the body that must be fully operational to attain a state of meditation.

Hatha represents opposing energies: hot and cold (fire and water, following the same concept as the yin-yang), male and female, positive and negative. Hatha yoga attempts to balance mind and body via physical exercises of poses, controlled breathing, and calming the mind through relaxation and meditation. Structured poses teach poise, balance, and strength and are practiced to improve the body’s physical health and clear the mind in preparation for meditation in the pursuit of enlightenment.

Bikram Yoga (Bikram Parmar), also known as Hot Yoga, is a style developed by Bikram Choudhury and a Los Angeles, California based company. Choudhury claims that his method is the only true Hatha yoga practiced in the West, though this is not accepted by many other schools. Bikram Yoga is practiced ideally in a room heated to 105°F (40.5°C) with a humidity of 50 percent. Classes are guided through 26 postures and two breathing exercises. Classes last approximately 90 minutes. People of all levels, ages, and body types practice together.

What’s the difference between yoga and Pilates?

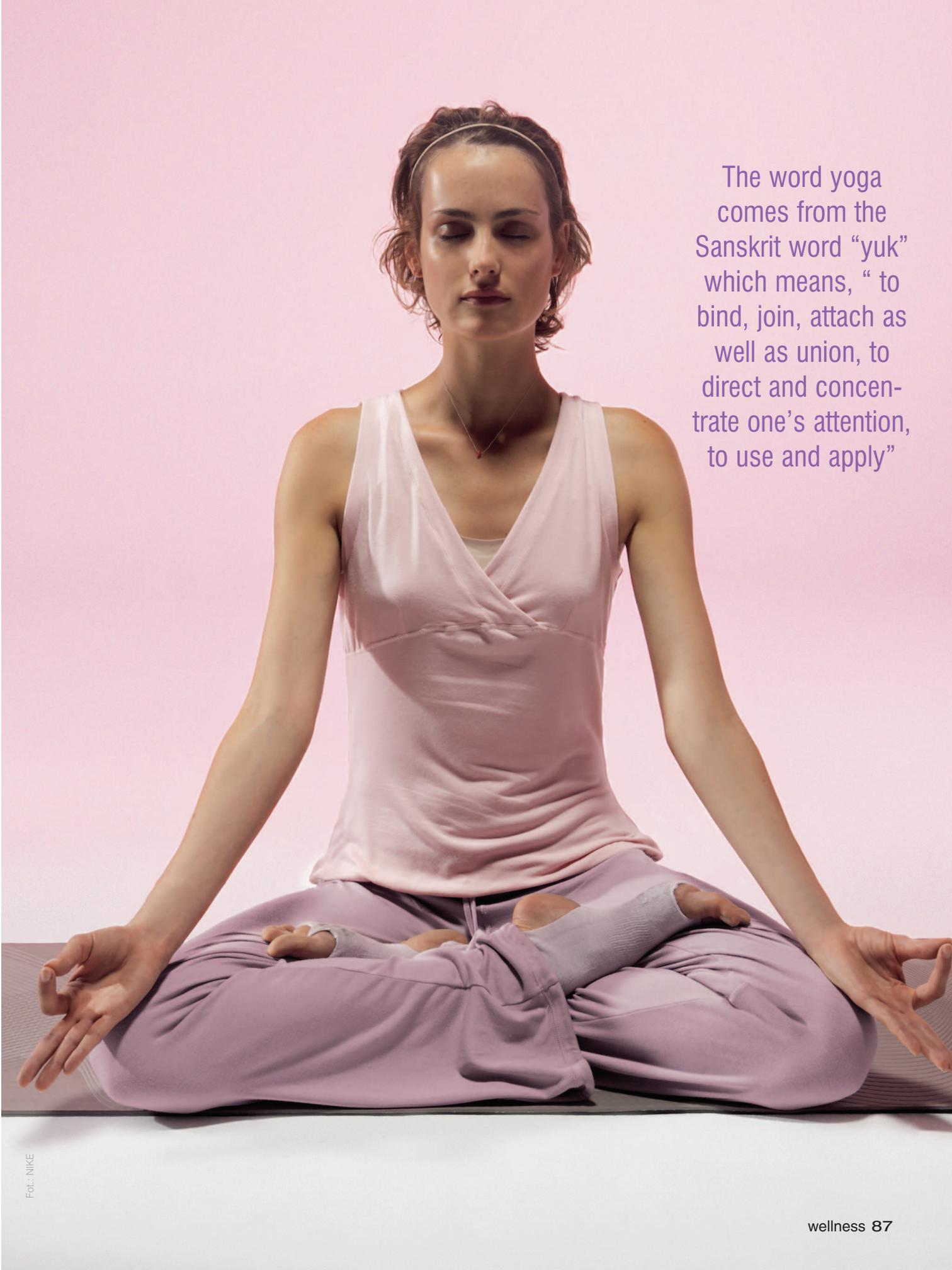
Yoga unites the mind, body, and spirit. Yogis view that the mind and the body are one and that if given the right tools and in the right environment, it can find harmony and heal itself; therefore, yoga is considered a therapeutic form.

It helps you become more aware of your body’s posture, alignment, and patterns of movement with more flexibility and helps you relax even in the midst of a stress stricken environment. In a peaceful environment, the body’s own weight is used for resistance.

Pilates has the same goals through a series of controlled movements. The major difference is that the Pilates technique incorporates work on the Pilates machines to strengthen the abdominals, improve posture, stabilize and lengthen the spine, improve balance and overall strength. Using Pilates creates longer, leaner, dancer-like line, working the whole body, emphasizing control, precision, and concentration in both the mind and the body. The focus is on

quality of execution not quantity of repetitions and exercises. Core stabilization, the premise for this exercise form, makes one stronger from the inside out. The low impact nature of Pilates makes it ideal for injury prevention and rehabilitation. Its six principles are concentration, control, centering, breathing, flow and precision, which train the body to move efficiently with minimal impact on the body. The balance between strength and flexibility creates a healthy, vigorous, and symmetrical workout for all muscle groups resulting in a leaner, more balanced, and stronger body.

Get the stretch from yoga and keep it by participating in Pilates. Strengthen your abdominals on the reformer and watch your poses improve. Join the breathing techniques of Pilates and meditative aspect of Yoga into your daily routine and see the stress of your everyday life begin to dissipate. Both techniques have established backgrounds. You will surely reach the goals you set up between you and a qualified instructor/coach.

A woman with her eyes closed, sitting in a meditative pose (Padmasana) on a dark mat. She is wearing a light pink tank top and matching pants. Her hands are resting on her knees in a mudra. The background is a soft, light pink gradient.

The word yoga comes from the Sanskrit word “yuk” which means, “to bind, join, attach as well as union, to direct and concentrate one’s attention, to use and apply”

When searching for a class and organization, keep these questions in mind:

Is the location registered with Yoga Alliance® or another accredited institution?

An RYT® designation is a symbol of experience, dedication, and commitment on the part of your teacher. Yoga offers tremendous variety and you may find you enjoy more than one style and/or teacher. Take the opportunity to attend workshops and seminars to broaden your understanding and expand your practice.



What do I look for when choosing a class?

- Think about what you hope to gain from your yoga class
- Do you want a vigorous practice that builds strength?
- Would you prefer a gentle, restorative practice to help you relax?
- Is meditation or a spiritual focus important to you?
- How do you feel about practicing in a heated room?
- Is yoga a cross-training part of a larger workout regimen?
- Are injuries, joint problems, or other health conditions an issue?
- Ask to observe a class before participating or enrolling. Most teachers and studios offer drop-in classes and some may allow you to attend a trial class, perhaps at a reduced rate, before committing.
- Health clubs often include classes in their membership fees so you can try yoga in a familiar setting. It's a good idea to spend some time trying different styles, different teachers, and different studios to determine where you feel most comfortable.

How do I choose a teacher? Is certification required?

Ask if they practice themselves and how often. Dedicated, committed teachers practice regularly four times per week. They should have been practicing yoga for at least three years prior to teaching to become effective teachers. They have certification requirements and are registered with Yoga Alliance or other approved organizations. Yoga Alliance among other governing bodies requires teachers to complete continuing education in order to remain registered.

Does the teacher have specialized skills?

If you have special needs or a particular health condition, you will want to seek out a teacher trained to work with your needs or condition. This may include prenatal yoga, senior yoga, and even kids where teachers are well-versed in the needs of their bodies for their age and conditions. The International Association of Yoga Therapists (www.iayt.org) is the professional organization for yoga teachers who focus on therapeutic practice.

What do you need to bring to class?

Bring water, a towel, and a yoga mat. Check out Gaiam.com, sporting goods stores, or the yoga school where classes are taught for appropriate gear and props..

How often does one participate in yoga classes?

Typically, a class can be from 60 to 90 minutes once per week, and you can do your own routine of sequences for as little as 10 minutes per day.

What are the benefits to taking yoga classes?

1. STRESS RELIEF:

Reducing harmful effects of overworked stress hormones including cortisol, which decrease the responsiveness of our immune system and increase blood sugar levels as well as blood pressure and heart rate. Related benefits include lowering blood pressure and heart rate, improving digestion and boosting the immune system as well as easing anxiety, depression, fatigue, asthma, and insomnia.

2. PAIN RELIEF:

Practicing asanas (postures), meditation, or a combination of the two, reduces pain for people with cancer, multiple sclerosis, autoimmune diseases, and hypertension as well as arthritis, back and neck pain, and other chronic conditions.

3. BETTER BREATHING:

Taking slower, deeper breaths helps to improve lung function and triggers the body's relaxation response.

4. FLEXIBILITY:

Improves mobility by increasing range of movement.

5. INCREASED STRENGTH:

Postures use every muscle in the body, helping to increase strength thus relieving muscular tension.

6. WEIGHT MANAGEMENT:

Reducing cortisol levels helps burn excess calories and reducing stress. Practicing yoga encourages eating more healthfully and provides a heightened sense of well-being and self-esteem.

7. IMPROVED CIRCULATION:

Because of various poses, yoga helps move oxygenated blood to the body's cells more efficiently.

8. CARDIOVASCULAR CONDITIONING:

Lowers resting heart rate, increases endurance, and improves oxygen uptake during exercise.

9. BETTER BODY ALIGNMENT:

Improves body alignment, resulting in better posture, helping to relieve back, neck, joint, and muscle problems.

10. FOCUS ON THE PRESENT:

Yoga is about focusing on the present, becoming more aware, and creating mind/body health.

Enjoy the improved coordination, reaction time, and recollection. Get involved in a yoga class because the benefits are phenomenal and the socialization factor is important while in a nurturing environment, too. ■

Further reading and resources:

Yogaalliance.org: Registry of Yoga Schools and Registry of Yoga Teachers; information about benefits of practicing yoga and other related topics
Internationalyogafederation.net: worldwide community
Gaia.com: Official site for its yoga and green living store
Iyengar, B. K. S. (1993). *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. Master E.K., The Yoga of Patanjali Kulapathi

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