

one transcends the senses and when the mind and intellect cease to function."

— YOGA TEACHER SWAMI VISHNUDEVANANDA

WHAT IS YOGA?

Yoga is a Sanskrit word meaning "union." Its practice, with the distant goal of merging the ego (or "I") with the supreme one-ness or unity of the universe (or God), comprises three facets: postures, controlled breathing and mantras (prayer-like affirmations).

Any one of the three may be practised separately, but only by combining these exercises designed to develop body, mind and spirit, can the yoga adept attain the higher stages to which he or she aspires.

Yoga philosophy also stresses purity of the body, through washing of the body inside and out with pure water, through cleansing diets of fruits and light vegetables and through fasting.

The combination of purifying the mind and body "aims to remove the root causes of all diseases," the late Yoga teacher Swami Vishnudevananda said, "not to treat its symptoms as (Western) medical science generally attempts to do. It preaches a sane and natural manner of living which, if followed, will benefit everybody."

POSTURES AND POSES

The Hatha Yoga postures are designed to increase the body's strength, elasticity, oxygenation and stamina. As the student progresses, stretching and relaxation permits the joints to become more elas-

tic, and the postures to become more extreme. Lifetime yoga adepts can twist their bodies into positions which are nothing less than contortional, with no apparent discomfort.

There are 84 postures in two main groups – meditative poses and "cultural" poses. Twelve basic postures are usually taught.

In practising meditative poses, the student maintains one position for an extended period of time, while attempting to clear the mind of distractions and to focus it on one point. Cultural poses, on the other hand, are designed to stretch, exercise or develop specific joints, muscles or organ systems. To the uninitiated, the postures may appear impossible.

BREATHING Yogic breathing or "pranayama" trains the student to control the "prana," or universal energy manifest as breath. Pranayama training involves learning to use the nostrils,

rib cage, diaphragm and abdominal muscles independently to control the depth and completeness of breathing, and timing the ratio of inhalation vs. exhalation.

Advanced yogis are also said to be able to share "prana," or healing energy, with an ill patient, in a process analogous – perhaps identical, except in

name – to the chi kung healer's sharing of "chi."

Meditative chanting of "mantras" (mystical syllables or names of God), assists the student in controlling the breath and awakening his or her own spiritual energy, another manifestation of "prana." Eventually, the adept may be able to transcend the physical limitations of the body and, as Vishnudevananda wrote, "(be) no longer bound by or limited by time, space or causation, and all is joy and internal bliss itself."

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