

Yoga- More Than Just Stretching

Flipping through a magazine recently, I came across an ad for a remodeling company featuring a yoga pose that requires a lot of flexibility. Wheel pose is a deep backbend where just your hands and feet touch the ground and your body arches into an upside-down U shape. I interpreted this ad to mean that the company will literally bend over backward in trying to please their customers.

However, the ad reinforces a popular stereotype that yoga is only for flexible people. Yoga is so much more than just stretching!

Yoga is remarkable in its ability to bring the body into balance, which means that your body's loose parts become stronger and your body's tight parts become looser. Yoga practice helps to relieve chronic pain and tension while building strength to protect over-flexible, vulnerable joints.

Sometimes a new student will remark on how tight or inflexible they feel after their first yoga session, echoing the widely-held belief that yoga = stretching. Students look surprised when I share that it is preferable to be tight rather than overly flexible. Muscle tension is necessary to prevent straining the ligaments that connect bone to bone. Once a ligament has been strained enough it will not support the joint. Super-bendy people look great in yoga poses, but might eventually require surgical remodeling!

Over time excess flexibility can lead to overuse injuries because the joints and bones are working harder than necessary. Yoga injuries are on the rise as yoga becomes a popular exercise in fitness center environments. A gym might provide a flashy class by combining yoga with weights, Pilates or martial arts but doesn't provide the student a safe practice by teaching appropriate body mechanics and alignment.

The simple weight of an unadorned limb provides the perfect amount of resistance to strengthen your muscles, build a strong core, and cultivate just the right balance of strength and flexibility. The effort of your muscles in holding up the weight of your torso, arms, or legs provides the same strengthening effect as lifting free-weights.

Let's look at how Downward Dog (a classic yoga pose) strengthens the front of your body and stretches the back of your body. At first glance, this sounds as simple as the pose looks.

Once your hands and feet are in the correct position to rise, you will contract your abdominal, hip and leg muscles to lift your hips up toward the ceiling. From there you'll activate your chest, arm and hand muscles to bring your body into a pyramid shape. A secondary round of strengthening begins as you lengthen through your sides and discover how to activate the muscles of your pelvic floor to lift your hips higher. Rotation of your hip and shoulder joints stabilizes the pose so that you can stretch through the back of your body and discover your flexibility. These refinements lead to new discoveries and must have been the inspiration for the saying "*Another day, another Dog pose.*"



Often, a student's yoga goals are much simpler. Downward Dog might be a distant dream, but decreasing pain is a primary and immediate desire. Yoga is as effective as physical therapy in rehabilitating certain injuries.

A client came to see me who had been experiencing knee pain for nearly a year. After visiting the doctor to rule out serious issues such as ligament tears or torn cartilage, she requested the assistance of yoga to regain range of motion and strengthen her knee. After one session, she could walk up stairs with hardly any pain! She practices her individualized sequences daily for between 10 and 30 minutes and over four months has gained the mobility and strength to ride a bicycle, walk for longer distances, and get up and down from the floor without pain. Her progress in the poses improved as well; the newfound strength allowing her to deeply explore how each pose has enhanced her flexibility. She went from hardly being able to bend her knee without pain to painlessly practicing Child's Pose, a weight-bearing position requiring a fully-flexed knee.

The real flexibility that yoga creates isn't physical. Whether you practice yoga for exercise or therapeutics, you will soon discover that the practice provides for personal growth in a non-invasive and self-directed manner. Your practice of strengthening and stretching teaches you to be attentive to your inner resources not just during practice but throughout your daily interactions. When you are strong enough to lift into Headstand, you'll discover your physical strength supports the inner flexibility required to view your world up-side down.

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