

## Yoga, my new therapy

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By Céline Lison

In only a few years, this 2000 year old discipline has become a real phenomenon. A success to the measure of the well-being it procures. Shall we give it a go ?

### Our expert

Dr Lionel Coudron, doctor, director of the Institut de YogaThérapie and author of the “Yoga thérapie” collection (eight volumes available, namely *Soigner la dépression, Soigner les chocs émotionnels et les peurs*, etc.), published by the Odile Jacob editions.



No need to know how to put buttocks over your head! If some of the three million people who practice it in France are looking to acquire more flexibility, others are looking for greater well-being and others even go so far as to use it as a complement to their medical care. Interesting, all the more since you can start at any age, even if you are stiff and have little inclination for physical activity. Gradually recognized by science, the virtues of yoga encompass the physical, emotional and psychological. A rather complete therapeutic ally!

### A magical discipline ?

Traditional yoga classes usually end in the same way: in silence, deeply relaxed, students gently open their eyes, a smile on their lips. In less than two hours (usually between an hour and a quarter and an hour and a half), they have completed a series of postures (asana, in Sanskrit), breathing exercises (pranayama) and relaxation exercises, and even a short meditation. From the very first session, the practitioners usually feel an immediate sense of well-being, hence the feeling of having experienced "something magical". In reality, there's nothing paranormal about it. Very concentrated - both on his/her inner feelings and on the gestures to be made - the student works on both body and mind at the same time. Gradually, tensions are released, energy flows. The "automatic thoughts", those that pass through us continuously, fade away. Hence the famous feeling of voluptuousness after relaxation.

### The Swiss Army Knife of prevention

Since the beginning of the 20th century, a succession of clinical studies have been conducted to measure the health benefits of yoga. And the results are quite positive! Thus, a regular practice would make it possible to limit the risks of hypertension, by decreasing arterial pressure and tension. In some cases, it would even be more effective than medication. Other research has shown that yoga has an anti-cholesterol effect. Indeed, its practice increases the production of high-density lipoproteins, better known as "good cholesterol". However, the latter carry the "bad" cholesterol to the liver where it is eliminated!

Doctor and yoga teacher Lionel Coudron insists on other benefits. “Balance postures, for example, "surprise" the brain, requiring its full attention. The body then secretes a brain growth factor that

maintains neural networks.” Through training, the ability to concentrate and memorize is enhanced, as is brain plasticity. Regularly during the course, the teachers draw the participants' attention to the well-being they feel. An awareness of the present moment, which contributes to developing feelings of joy, good mood, benevolence and gratitude: all sensations that can influence the proper functioning of our general system. Finally, when we start to move and take care of ourselves, we pay more attention to our lifestyle (sleep, tobacco, alcohol...). A “collateral effect” which is certainly not specific to the sole practice of yoga but which remains a positive element for the body!

### 3 tips to get started

- ✓ **Choose your type of yoga:** Hatha yoga is the traditional yoga, which is rather gentle, whereas Vinyasa (which is declined in Ashtanga, Power yoga, Bikram, Kundalini...) is much more dynamic and rather demanding physically.
- ✓ **Prefer live classes,** whether in a group or individually (more expensive but personalized) to books or videos, because if you get hurt, someone can intervene. But the most important element remains the choice of your professor ! His/her teaching must correspond to your personality. Do not hesitate to try out several classes before registering.
- ✓ **Respect your physical limitations.** One of the fundamentals of yoga is ashima, the benevolence and non-violence towards oneself. In other words: no hurting yourself to achieve a perfect posture. You should listen to your body (and not your mind)!

### A powerful painkiller

In Anglo-Saxon countries, hospitals often use this technique as a complement to medical care. In France, the discipline is timidly entering into medical establishments and practices. The Eaubonne hospital (Val-d'Oise, France) opened a yogatherapy consultation in 2012 to treat, in particular, lower back pain, chronic pain linked to illnesses and severe rheumatism. At the Saint-Louis hospital (Paris, France), breast cancer patients can take free yoga classes. Gentle stretching, rhythmized by the breath, helps them to reconnect with their body in a caring way. It is also a way to reduce joint pain due to hormone therapy, as shown in American studies. Breath control and meditation help to dissociate from negative perceptions, including pain. Nadine Cubialde, a liberal nurse in Chamonix (France) and trained in yogatherapy, deciphers one of these mechanisms: “Gentle stretching associated with breathing reduces the vigilance of the brain stem (a part of the brain linked to pain control, *Editor's note*). As a result, muscle tension is released and there is less pain.”

### Move, eliminate... stress !

This is one of the most well-known aspects of yoga: it plays, very effectively, on stress, anxiety, depression and the nervous disorders that result from it. Our way of life over-activates our sympathetic nervous system (the one linked to action) to the detriment of the parasympathetic nervous system, which puts us on “pause”. Wellness activities such as yoga help to rebalance the whole system and, in doing so, act on the mind. Neuroscience has shown that certain postures stimulate the brain's "calming" circuits. Others, such as extensions, boost the sympathetic system. A paradox? Not

really. After thirty seconds of immobility in this position, the level of cortisol (a hormone that is a marker of stress) drops. The brain therefore experiences this rebalancing movement as a “training”: it can thus better resist stress in real life situations. In addition, this type of movement is known to boost self-confidence.

Karine Barbeau, a psychologist in Marseille (France), has largely verified the virtues of breathing exercises: “Anxiety and negative thoughts are always related to the past or the future. In yoga, we return to the present moment, notably by focusing our attention on our breath. Relaxation is immediate and it is the first step to regain control over emotions, especially in the case of depression.” Sleep disorders, sometimes stress-related, can be regulated by regular practice. Research carried out in 2010 on patients in remission from cancer showed a clear reduction in their fatigue and an improvement in their rest, after only eight sessions spread over one month.

### **A playing card to cure oneself**

It is difficult to list all the disorders for which yoga would be beneficial. Irritable bowel syndrome, for example. This disorder, which manifests itself as stomach aches, bloating, constipation or diarrhoea, has been studied. Affected "guinea pigs" played yogis twice a week. After a month and a half, a clear regression of their symptoms (comparable to the effects of walking) was measured. Better still, the impact lasted for two months after the experiment had stopped. However, after six months, there is no miracle: if the practice is not continued, the benefits disappear.

Osteoarthritis of the knee also seems to benefit from yoga. Forty minutes of daily practice for three months proved even more effective than therapeutic exercises at the same pace. The sensitivity of the joint, the ability to bend and walk are improved.

### **Sessions for a good back**

Would this age-old discipline go so far as to relieve the "evil of the century"? A team of Indian researchers investigated the question by comparing the lower back pain of two groups. The first group performed "classic" sports exercises, while the second group followed Iyengar yoga, a physically demanding form of yoga in which the postures are held for a fairly long time. The results? Both groups have seen their suffering diminish and their quality of life increase. But the painful feelings of the yoga group were twice as reduced as those of the others. Perhaps because, as Cécile Delorge Martel, a physiotherapist and yogatherapist in Toulouse, says, “Yoga is not a sport! There is no competition. We seek above all well-being, taking care not to hurt ourselves! Above all, without realizing it, we do both physical work at the osteo-articular level and psychic work at the level of the vegetative system. It is globalized.” With so many arguments for him, yoga has not finished making emulators.

## Exercises to be practiced without moderation

### Pandiculation

Tensions and thoughts automatically fade away.

1. Inhale, raise your arms in a V and stretch, opening the chest, shoulder blades tightened.
2. Keep your lungs filled as long as possible (without losing your breath).
3. Exhale while opening your mouth wide, sighing (if possible while yawning), release the arms.

### Nadi Shodana (alternate breathing)

This posture soothes the mind. Sitting on a chair or cross-legged, the back straight, use the thumb and the ring finger to close the nostrils.

1. Right nostril closed with your thumb, inhale slowly through the left nostril.
2. Maintain your lungs full for approximately 10 seconds (without losing your breath) and closing both nostrils.
3. Close the left nostril with the ring finger and exhale slowly through the right nostril.
4. Inhale through the right nostril, left nostril closed.
5. Maintain your lungs full, closing both nostrils.
6. Close the right nostril and exhale slowly through the left nostril.

Start again at step n°1 and execute 6 to 8 cycles (for beginners). Progressively, you will be able to execute this exercise on longer periods, up to ten minutes.