

The 10-minute workout!

That's yoga — a series of gentle stretching exercises which take a minimum of 10 minutes and which can improve our levels of concentration, reduce stress and give us a glowing face, writes Jyoti Ratan ...



Illustrations by Ashraf Ghori

ITNESS STIRS up mixed emotions. On one hand, we feel elated when we are told that regular exercise lowers the risk of disease and makes us stress-free. On the other hand, we feel a twinge of guilt when we cannot make time for the health club.

Fitness is generally associated with either a health club, 20 laps around a jogging track, riding an exercise bike or walking briskly for 20 minutes. All these exercises involve practice

on a daily basis. The exercises are strenuous, keep the heart pounding and chest heaving for about 15 minutes and eventually leave us more stressed out. These exercises are all well for athletic fitness and for people participating in competitive sports, but for those of us who have to either attend school or tackle a 9-5, a less demanding workout, like yoga, would be ideal.

Yoga involves a very moderate form of exercise schedule. It is a no-sweat, 10-minute approach towards a healthy and stress-

free life. It boosts the immune system, balances the body's metabolism and keeps the practitioner more fit. Since yoga can be practiced either in the morning or evening, it is very easy to find time for it and to integrate it into our daily lives.

Yoga can be taken up at any age. And the series of exercises burn up enough calories to help lose weight gradually and to control it. This moderate form of exercise also causes less anxiety, helps cope with stress, enhances the body's metabolism and

Can yoga help students?

It can, writes *Vinita Viswanathan*, after connecting with a few who took to it and discovered their powers of concentration receiving a boost ...

YOU'RE SUPPOSED to be studying for your exams, and all you can think of is Brad Pitt's latest hairstyle or how you'd react if you were to find yourself face to face with Liv Tyler on a deserted island! So, just how do you get that mind of yours to obey you? How do you prevent it from wandering and sticking to Einstein and Calculus?

Well, practice Yoga! Yes, go for it! Hey, I'm beginning to sound like Aunt Alice, am I not? Well, let's just say I've changed from a cynical teen to a believer!

There was a time when I used to think that yoga was practiced by a bunch of weirdos who were too lazy to work out in the gym. Not surprisingly, I was wrong...

Unlike working out in the gym, which leaves you exhausted and really hungry, yoga refreshes and relaxes you. All this I got to know when I connected with a bunch who had given it a try and had discovered that it works!

These people I spoke to, uniformly admitted to gaining extra stamina! Sadayini, 17, and just out of school, took to yoga nine years ago, as "my dance teacher insisted on all of us doing a few exercises". She says that it really improved her flexibility and increased her stamina tenfold. "I can go on dancing for as long as I choose," she says.

Dr P Kanchan, a yoga expert at the Yoga Center, Dubai, confirms this. "Yoga not only makes one more energetic, it enhances the physical strength of a person, and also increases the resistance power of a person."

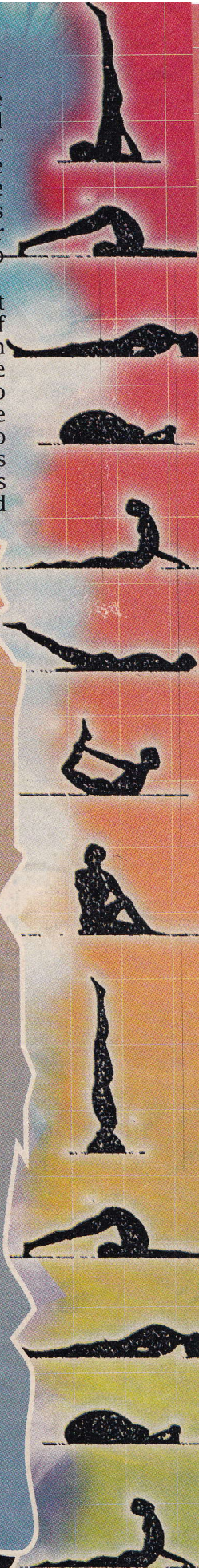
Yoga, Dr Kanchan says, is an internal experience. It is the only exercise that provides peace of mind to people, and his students, Natasha, 16 and Barkha, 16 vouch for that.

The two are Class 11 students of The Indian High School, Dubai, and have been learning and practicing yoga for about a month. Barkha says, "Yoga is really helpful, and it's very relaxing."

Natasha and Barkha practice for about an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening. Barkha joined the Center as she had asthma. She says that yoga has reduced her asthma problems and has also helped her lose weight.

Apart from these, yoga has also helped Barkha improve her concentration. "I used to be able to study for only an hour, and that itself was filled with so many distractions," Barkha says. Ever since she started yoga, she has noticed a dramatic change. "I can study for longer periods of time without my mind wavering," she says. Natasha seconds this. The two girls admit that they have started performing better at school.

So what is the connection between yoga and performance? Dr Kanchan puts it very simply: "If your mind is frustrated, you are not able to concentrate. A clear and calm mind can obviously concentrate longer and thereby retain more for a longer period." And yoga does just that — it clears your mind and gives you complete peace, thereby increasing your concentration and in turn, your memory.



The secret to a glowing face!

BREATHING exercises, which are an integral part of yoga, bring oxygen and energy to every cell, clean the body by burning waste products and expel toxins. They also relax the body and help it ward off chronic stress and insomnia. Treating ourselves to fresh air reduces stress, makes the body strong and healthy, and ensures a radiating personality and a glowing face.

Nervousness and irritability are the results of bad breathing. Breathing is not only supply of oxygen to the lungs but elimination of carbon dioxide.

—JR



improves concentration. There are no high expectations as in other exercises.

Although walking is an easy and moderate form of exercise, it is time consuming. Also, the blood circulation to the brain as during Yoga cannot be experienced while walking. The sudden burst of oxygen supply to the brain through the blood that can come about by doing yoga, has many positive effects, like improving memory and concentration (See box: Can yoga help students?).

Yoga dates back thousands of years as a science of life and health. It has evolved over the years according to the changing needs.

There are several myths surrounding it. The most common myth is that yoga is a spiritual way of life. Many think it is a Hindu religious practice; it is not so. Another myth is that a person who wishes to perform yoga has to follow a tough schedule involving complicated *asanas* (body postures). Yet another myth is that it is necessary to enrol in an academy or school run by a yogi to learn it — the

reality is that we can practice yoga even at home. Yoga is not a curriculum but a practical form of exercise schedule.

Yoga unlike most physical fitness regimes is not vigorous and exhausting. It is a simple series of gentle

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Sound mind in a sound body

THE importance of yoga as an aid to mental alertness, concentration and focussed thinking is evident. With a view to get students to practice yoga, many schools in India have made yoga a part of the curriculum.

Shri Aurobindo International Schools offer it as an optional subject. Not only do students avail of the facilities but parents are welcome, as well. Students start their day with a half hour morning session of yoga; they report experiencing a great feeling throughout the day. At Shri Aurobindo Centre of Education, Pondichery, yoga is a way of life. It is regarded as an essential ingredient of life, as breathing and eating itself. Students begin yogic exercises from the age of three.

In India, realising the many benefits of yoga, many schools have introduced it either as a part of the curriculum or as a co-curricular activity. Some of them are:

- The Kendriya vidyalayas
- Delhi Public Schools
- D.A.V. Schools
- Schools affiliated to the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan
- Chinmaya Mission Schools
- Mother's International School
- Springdale School, New Delhi
- Bal Bharati School, New Delhi
- Institutions affiliated to the St. Mira's Trust

Lessons in yoga are imparted along with meditation in most cases. The lessons are said to have curative as well as preventive benefits.

—Pratibha Umashankar

Of Candles, ploughs and fish

YOGA involves a series of asanas which if practised properly, can ensure a purposeful and healthy life. At the moment, they can ensure a marked improvement on the academic front. The following are some of the asanas:

Sarvangasana (candle posture): This asana involves an inverted stand. It requires very little muscular effort to perform it. It has considerable effect on the blood circulation and helps get rid of any blood stoppage in the legs and abdomen region and strengthens the stomach muscles.

Halasana (plough posture): This asana involves a forward bend. This compresses the neck, cleanses the thyroid, stretches the spinal column and massages the stomach (the rib cage is blocked the breathing is from the stomach).

Matsyasana (fish posture): This is a counter posture to the previous two exercises. It relaxes the neck. Also, it hollows the back and stretches the stomach muscles. The breathing is from the thoracic region.

Pashchimottasana (forward bend): This asana stretches the spinal column and the leg muscles and compresses the stomach. The breathing is from the chest.

Bhujangasana (cobra posture): This asana involves the bending of the spinal column backwards. In this regard, it is opposite to the plough and the forward bend. Whereas the previous asana stretched the back muscles, this asana contracts them. Also, this asana stretches the stomach and the chest. Breathing is from the nose.

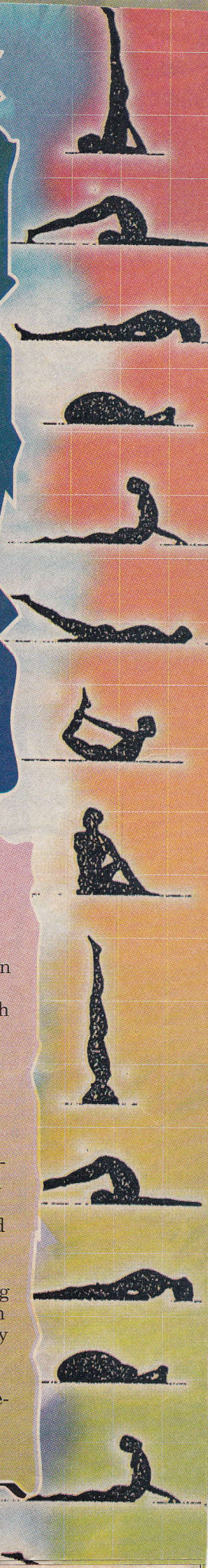
Shalabhasana (locust posture): This asana complements Bhujangasana. This asana contracts the muscles below the spine and legs.

Dhanurasana (bow posture): This asana raises the bust and the bottom of the back together. It arches the spinal column and stretches the stomach muscles. Breathing is through the nose by emptying the stomach and the chest off the air.

Ardha-matsyendrasana (spinal twist): This asana corrects the forward and the backward bending postures. The bending posture induces a spinal sensation in the muscles, intensifying the curvature. The twist of the spine in both directions balances the previous postures.

Shirsasana (head stand): The head stand helps circulation of the blood to the brain while relaxing all the muscles in the body.

All these exercises tone the muscles, stretch them gently and increase their elasticity. They harmonise blood circulation, enhance the body's metabolism and energise the body. They help lose weight and maintain the figure. —JR



Take it easy, relax!

IN this day and age, to learn to relax is very important. And relaxation is very much a part of yoga.

Relaxation releases tension and rests the system, conserves energy and lets off worries or fears. Tension causes much discomfort, drains energy, causes tiredness and ill-health. Even a few minutes of deep relaxation will reduce worry and fatigue.

Relaxation is a method of letting go, instead of holding on, of not doing rather than doing. As you relax the body and breathe normally, certain physiological changes occur and muscle tension reduces.



Food matters, too

A well-balanced diet complements yoga. If we take a little time and effort to set up a diet plan, the combination of exercises with a low fat, well-balanced diet will help keep the energy level high and body fit. Since diet plays an enormous role in the creation of toxins and waste matter, which causes cellulite build-up, a good diet is vital.

Bad diet will make us tired, out-of-sort and depressed. Skipping breakfast, snack lunches and instant dinners will not take us a long way.

Crash diets are a fad. Normally, the diets are not nutritionally balanced and do not give the body enough nourishment.

Though crash diets cause rapid weight loss, the consequences are a loss of lean body tissue (muscles) and a reduction in the body's metabolic rate. Both factors make it likely that we will gain weight once the diet stops.

Scientific research has proved that people who diet have poor responses, short-term memories and reduced attention span, which could severely affect academic performance.

Our body must have a well-balanced diet to stay healthy. It should consist of energy-yielding foods which are rich in fat and carbohydrates, body-building foods which are rich in proteins and protective foods which are rich in vitamins and minerals. Fat is required to keep the body in working order, although fat should be used sparingly, since it contains twice as many calories than carbohydrates or proteins. Carbohydrates are a source of energy and should be included in two meals a day. There are two types of carbohydrates — complex and simple. Complex carbohydrates in food release their sugar over a long period. Simple carbohydrates release their sugar quickly, as a result of which, there can be a sudden increase in blood sugar followed by a sudden drop. The primary source of complex carbohydrates are pasta, bread, rice, spaghetti, cereals and

potatoes. Simple carbohydrates are found in cakes, pastries and chocolates.

Protein is required to assist with the growth and the formation and maintenance of bones, skin, hair and muscle. Proteins should be included in two or three meals a day. Sources of protein are fish, lean meat, pulses, eggs, nuts, cheese, milk and yoghurt.

Vitamins are organic substances present in small amounts in food. They are required for carrying out vital functions in the body and also for helping in utilisation of proteins, fats and carbohydrates effectively.

Minerals form part of the body's structural component and act as catalytic agents in body reaction. Vitamins and minerals are found in vegetables and fruits.

We can treat ourselves to cakes and ice-cream two or three times a week in small quantities; complete deprivation leads to craving that results in bingeing. In other words, we can eat all the food we eat normally but the prime factor is to balance it and to have it in good proportion.

Experts agree that quick weight loss will not work in the long-term. The best way to lose weight is not by depriving ourselves of healthy eating but by making sensible choices of the food we eat. It is important to change our attitude to food. The following are some guidelines:

- Eat three regular meals.
- Cut down on high fat foods, full-fat milk, fried food, nuts, crisps, chocolates and red meat.
- Fill starchy carbohydrates with wheat bread and high fibre varieties, as these contain more vitamins, minerals and protein which are low in fat.
- Eat lots of fruit and vegetables that are rich in minerals and vitamins.
- Drink lots of water, at least five glasses a day.

Some people eat much more than others and do not put on weight as they have a more efficient metabolic rate (the rate at which our body burns up energy). Yoga can improve the body's metabolism. —JR

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stretching exercises based on different asanas practised while we breathe in a controlled way. This form of exercise does not help develop muscles but gently stretches and tones them. In yoga, the elasticity limit of muscles is gradually extended, which makes the body supple.

Even if the workout schedule is disrupted for a period of time, the body remains firm unlike working out in a gym where muscles develop, and once we stop, they go slack and we tend to look flabby and haggard.

Yoga does not consume our strength and energy but stimulates blood

circulation without causing fatigue. Yoga works systematically to balance and regulate our physical, emotional and mental responses.

We do not require any fancy equipment or gear to do yoga. Nor do we need grim determination or the 'going for the burn' attitude. Yoga is

In the open park ...

EVERY morning at 5.30, the park opposite Deira Cinema, in Dubai, is the scene of a most curious gathering of people; their purpose — to practice yoga!

Yes, people of all age groups, and hailing from various countries, make their way to the park at the break of dawn, to spend an hour together toning their mind and body.

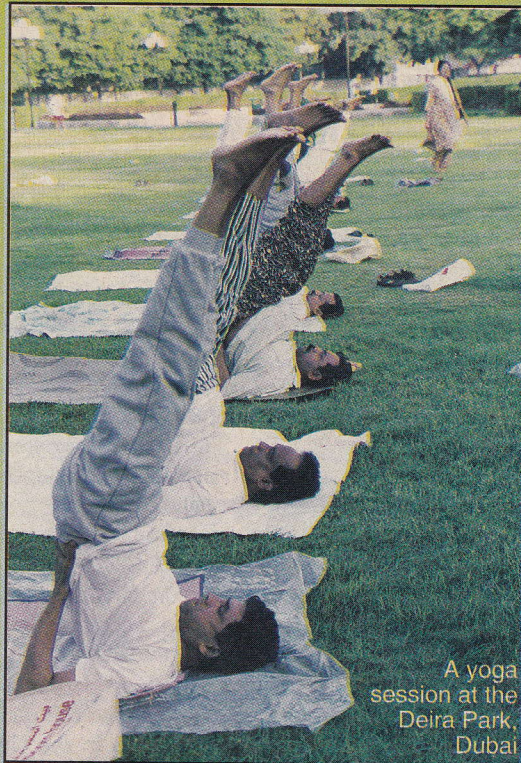
They seem to be in perfect harmony with their surroundings as they follow their mentor K.B. Madhavan, an unassuming businessman by profession but a yogi by choice, who teaches them not for money but as a social service.

Mr Madhavan — who is from Bombay, India — convinced of the salutary effects of yoga, started practising it, eight years ago. "I used to practice it for my personal benefit," Mr Madhavan said. "Then, my guruji (teacher), K.B. Rai visited Dubai from Delhi. He liked practising yoga in the open air. When he used to go out early in the morning for his session, it caught the fancy of joggers and health buffs. Soon, many voluntarily joined him. Well, the trend continued even after he left after his brief visit. I took over."

Mr Madhavan is not the only person to teach yoga as a social service; in the Sharjah Corniche (between the Holiday Inn and the Sharjah Souk), Suman Suneja, an electrical engineer with his own business in Sharjah, leads a group of yoga enthusiasts for an hourly session, that also starts at 5:30am. Mr Suneja, who hails from New Delhi, takes his students through various postures of hatayoga, Pranayama and Laughing exercises. "Everybody leaves with a good laugh," he said.

Mr Madhavan feels strongly that youngsters stand to benefit by practising yoga. "For youngsters, a healthy mind and body is important as they are growing," Mr Madhavan said. "Yoga improves their powers of concentration, memory and gives extra energy needed for all activities. It brings about an overall positive change in their personality."

Currently, out of an average of 30 people, about six school-going students attend the morning sessions at the



A yoga session at the Deira Park, Dubai

MUKESH KAMAL

park. Mr Madhavan's youngest disciple is just six, and the oldest is 63. It is not just age, though. "I have disciples from different backgrounds and nationalities ... Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Filipinos, Mexicans, Americans..." he said. "As far as possible, I try to be there at 5.30 sharp so as not to disappoint all of them."

—Pratibha Umashankar

(Mr K.B. Madhavan (04-828668) and Mr Suman Suneja (06-740093) teach yoga free of cost. (Also see box: *Just in case ...*)

effortless, and it has basic principles that include proper relaxation, exercise, controlled breathing, a balanced diet and meditation.

Yoga is not a treatment for diseases; it is a practical and effective way to maintain good health. Regular practice helps in the healthy functioning of the

body and mind, and the techniques are designed to maximise good health and vitality. It brings harmony and relaxes the mind and body.

Where, how, when?

Yoga should be practised in a well-ventilated room or, if possible, in the open air. Practising every day in the same place and at the same time, conditions the body to react satisfactorily to the asanas.

Yoga must be practised facing the east. In this direction, the magnetic field of the body is in harmony with the magnetic field of the earth.

Yoga can be practised either in the morning or around sunset in the evening. It is easier to make a success of it in the evening than morning. The body is less supple in the morning due to the long hours spent lying still overnight. However as statistics reveal, people who exercise in the morning are more likely to be persevering with the fitness programme than those who opt to do the exercises in the evening. —JR

Just in case ...

... you want to attend
Yoga classes:

Abu Dhabi: EDUSCAN, 02-768782

Ajman: Symphony Institute, 06-426322

Dubai:

• The Yoga Health Center, 04-523451

• International Educational Institute (only during summer break), 04-360635 —PU

