



Body, Mind & SOUL

With countless health benefits attributed to the sport, it's little wonder that millions of people all around the world practice yoga. We investigate the mind-and-body benefits of this sometimes gravity-defying activity. **Words by Yi-Hwa Hanna**

Decreased stress and anxiety, lower blood pressure, improved heart function, better circulation, better posture, stronger lungs and even weight loss: these are just a few of the effects that can be reaped from doing yoga—it's no wonder 20.4 million Americans practice yoga, up by almost 5 million from 15.8 million people in 2008.

According to the 2012 "Yoga in America" study published in *Yoga Journal*, yoga practitioners—also known as "yogis"—spend \$10.3 billion a year on classes, equipment, clothing, trips, media and other yoga-related paraphernalia. There's no denying that the popularity of yoga is increasing, dramatically, and that this trend doesn't look like one that's set to slow down anytime soon. Whether it's flexibility, body conditioning, physical fitness or peace of mind you're after, there's a discipline to suit everyone, with countless types of yoga out there.

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

Hatha, Vinyasa, Ashtanga, Bikram and Power Yoga are among the most popular, while Iyengar, Kundalini, Yin and Acro yoga have recently been gaining in popularity, with increasing amounts of workshops and seminars being offered around the Middle East. "There are many styles that have gained popularity in the world since people are drawn to them as a way of staying fit or losing weight," says Joumana Saber, a yoga teacher and owner of The Yoga Room in Dubai's Jumeirah Lakes Towers. "However, not all disciplines of yoga involve a physical (asana) practice. For example, Karma yoga literally means attaining union through action. It is as simple as acting selflessly or thinking in a certain way, without seeking anything in return. Every person has a preference, and you just have to find a style that benefits you and works for you."

"Yoga is not only about the physical practice," agrees Sandy Joy Rubin, a yoga, Pilates and Acro yoga teacher, Thai Massage Therapist and Co-Founder of

Phoenix Rising. "In fact, of the eight limbs of yoga, only one is physical—the rest are rules for living, moral codes, spiritual, or devotional practices, and so on," she continues, explaining: "Bhakti yoga (devotional yoga) for example is all about singing, dancing and celebrating life and doesn't require you to do any of the asanas (yoga poses). Yin yoga or Restorative yoga is all about letting go and surrendering into positions and holding them for a few minutes; these are designed to leave you energised and calmed simultaneously. [Whereas] Vinyasa and Ashtanga are strong practices that will really work the entire body and get you very heated and detoxed. Basically, there's yoga for every situation you can think of—the beautiful thing about yoga is that it's about practice; it's changeable with what you need and what is present for you right now. There's always a practice to fit the situation."

FEMALE-FRIENDLY

It's this very changeability that makes it so appealing to women—with all of the →

8 TO TRY

Want to try your hand (and other limbs) at a spot of yoga? Here are some great options:

1 ZEN YOGA

Offering everything from Ashtanga, Hatha and Vinyasa to Power, Yin and Acro Yoga, they also hold pre-natal and post-natal yoga classes. Visit www.yoga.ae

2 PHOENIX RISING

Loved for their Flying Yoga classes, they favour classes in the great outdoors and hold lessons in Dubai and Abu Dhabi's parks. Visit www.phoenix-rising.me

3 EXHALE FITNESS

In addition to various types of yoga classes, this women-only studio also offers regular workshops with international experts. Visit www.exhaledubai.com

4 URBAN OHM

Whether you're looking to relax or strengthen or opting for a group or private class, we suggest trying the outdoor classes at The Archive. Visit www.urbanohm.com

5 THE YOGA ROOM

With a main focus on Ashtanga yoga in its truest and purest form, they also holds regular workshops to deepen your understanding. Visit www.yogaroom.ae

6 TALISE SPA

If you fancy something a bit different, the "Full Moon Yoga" sessions on a beach by moonlight will be an experience you won't soon forget. Call 04 366 6818.

7 CLUB STRETCH

While this club is renowned for its Pilates lessons, it's also loved for its Bikram yoga classes. Carried out in a heated room, it'll flush out toxins, warm the muscles, increase flexibility, and leave you glowing. Visit www.clubstretch.ae

8 FRIENDS OF YOGA

The perfect way to meet other like-minded yogis, this non-profit organisation started by passionate local yogis offers free open-air classes held in different locations across the UAE with the help of volunteers and yoga teachers. Classes are held every morning throughout the year. Visit www.friendsofyogaglobal.org.

empty stomach, before you go on with your day. "No matter what time of the day you can attend a yoga class, make sure it's the same time every day. I recommend starting with three classes a week, and making sure you set realistic goals for yourself. Be patient; don't let your thoughts or buzzing cell phones distract you, and be present in the moment while you practise. Before you know it, you'll be practicing six times a week!" Joumana says. Both Joumana and Sandy claim that once you get started, progress will follow in time—you just have to be dedicated—and remember to include a rest day at least once a week. "Yoga is about the journey, not the destination," Sandy explains, insisting that practice is the best way to improve.

Joumana agrees: she says that while you'll see the physical, mental and emotional changes immediately, continual practice helps to build patience, resilience and mental and physical strength.

"Continual practice of yoga helps to build patience, resilience, and mental and physical strength"

PHYSICAL BENEFITS

While fitness experts claim that yoga alone isn't enough to help with a weight loss programme, doing yoga regularly along with other exercise such as cardio or strength training is a winning combination.

"Your body will become more toned, less stressed, more relaxed and defined," says Sandy.

Despite Pilates working in a similar way, lengthening and strengthening the muscles, Sandy believes yoga has more depth as it addresses aspects of your life that go beyond the physical. "For me this makes it stand apart and offers me a lot of sanctuary," she explains.

With toned muscles, improved cardiovascular fitness, a stronger body and increased flexibility and mobility, not to mention a calmed nervous system, the loosening of tense muscles, increased endurance and a sharpened focus, it's hard to ignore the benefits: "Focusing on

deep breathing throughout the practice of asanas (postures) is a method that produces internal heat that detoxifies and heals the body, making it light yet strong. This synchronisation with breath with movement results in improved circulation and helps release toxins from the body," adds Joumana.

HAPPY AND WHOLE

It's this breathing technique that leads to the joy that yoga brings, too: "The art of breathing fully and correctly is very valuable and often forgotten," says Sandy. "Just by experiencing this, you will begin to de-stress as your body gets a proper supply of oxygen. This oxygen is vital for your brain functions and also improves your mental state of being, bringing you calmness and clarity," she adds.

"Yoga teaches you acceptance, compassion, patience and to live appreciatively," says Joumana. It's this very whole-life wellness philosophy that makes it so appealing to the masses; this idea of achieving "zen" in our fast-paced, constantly stressed modern world. And if that inner peace can give us the ability to stand tall (or touch our toes), and grow into stronger, better versions of ourselves, there's all the more reason to make this ancient Indian practice a part of our 21st century everyday life. "Your body will be more limber, lean and efficient as an added bonus," says Sandy, continuing, "If you need flexibility in your body, perhaps you also need it in your mind. If you need strength in your body, perhaps you need more courage and strength in certain situations. Yoga literally means union: the union of body, mind and spirit, and the union of individuals into the community.

This practice will leave your body feeling amazing, your mind feeling calmer, and it'll give you a different perspective on things. Yoga has filled me with so much happiness, joy, and a deeper understanding of who I am." Joumana wholeheartedly agrees: "It is a holistic and complete practice for the body, mind and soul." ■

