

Yoga can help you learn to love and accept yourself, but only if you embrace the true meaning of the practice. **By Linda Sparrowe**

Making Friends with Your Body



Lauren Peterson began restricting her diet in her late teens when she danced with the Los Angeles Ballet. “The obsession with thinness was everywhere,” she remembers, “and like a textbook anorexic, I equated not eating with being good and being in control.” By the time she joined New York’s prestigious School of American Ballet, Peterson’s self-control had spiraled out of control, and her weight soon plummeted to 80 pounds. “I was scary skinny,” she remembers. So skinny, in fact, that even the ballet company noticed and asked her not to come back until she put on a few more pounds. She added 10 pounds to her emaciated frame and went on to dance a few more years before hanging up her pointe shoes.

Peterson credits yoga for helping her heal from anorexia, but in a somewhat ironic twist, this well-known Los Angeles yoga teacher says that asana was not part of the initial prescription. Instead, Peterson gravitated toward the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of yoga long before she took her first class and learned what it felt like to tune in to her body’s needs, without





By the Numbers

- 90** percentage of all women who dislike their bodies
- 90** percentage of all junior and senior high school girls on a diet
- 15** percentage of these girls who are actually overweight
- 66** percentage of girls who would rather be mean or stupid than fat
- 100** the amount (in billions of dollars) spent on diet products each year
- 11** the number (in millions) of cosmetic procedures (surgical and nonsurgical) performed in 2007
- 1** the place for weight concerns for women aged 61 to 92

(Compiled from the Council on Size and Weight Discrimination; the 2009 Glamour magazine survey; Medline)

judgment, and quiet her mind. Yoga helped her gain self-awareness and taught her how to pay attention to signs of hunger, and how to trust “it was appropriate and good to eat when I was hungry.”

A Body-Centric Culture

Peterson eventually ended up benefiting from doing asanas, but she agrees that a yoga practice that focuses primarily on the physical body can actually exacerbate any preexisting body issues. Yoga itself is not the problem, Peterson believes, “but the lack of authentic practice in asana classes may very well be.”

Yoga postures make up a small part of this ancient practice, but pulled out of context—in gyms, rec centers, and even some yoga studios—they can become little more than a means to sweat and stretch our way to a better, thinner, more “acceptable” body. “I teach in Hong Kong and Japan, and some teachers there tell me all their students want is a good sweat,” says Peterson, “so, reluctantly, that’s what they give them.”

While this emphasis on the physical seems to satisfy the casual yoga practitioner, it can make yoga inaccessible for others. Walking into a class full of flex-

ible, beautiful bodies outfitted in Lycra can have a demoralizing effect, especially for anyone who feels ashamed or self-conscious about her body. Liz Baqir, who says she’s been “fat all my life,” tried yoga a few times but didn’t feel comfortable in a class packed mat-to-mat with tall skinny women. Plus, she says, “I think my being there made them even more uncomfortable than it made me, and I certainly didn’t want people to feel afraid or freaked out about my size.” My friend Annie, who has arthritis, knows yoga would be good for her mobility, but she says she’s too stiff and slow to go to a “real” class without feeling completely embarrassed.

This “bastardization of yoga,” a phrase used by Melody Moore, PhD, a clinical psychologist in Dallas, TX, who specializes in treating women with eating disorders, keeps us in a state of being “not enough,” and tethered to whatever limitations we put around ourselves that we deem unacceptable. Yoga teachers, she says, have a great opportunity to create a safe place for their students to move beyond those limitations and experience wholeness.

Unfortunately, sometimes even yoga teachers can’t escape our culture’s obsession with the physical form. They also get sucked into the typical women’s magazine credo. If they could only lose 10 pounds, they’d be smarter, sexier, more accomplished *and* have their own DVDs and be models for the latest yoga fashions. Indeed, many say they feel pressured to look the part: healthy, glowing, and, yes, thin—an inspiring example of how yoga works.

Meagan McCrary, an Anusara teacher in Santa Monica, CA, says teachers, just like students, “reach the next level in our practice or our teachings and feel great; then something happens, and we get derailed and start beating ourselves up again.” For McCrary, whenever she gains weight she has trouble being around other yoga teachers—especially at large gatherings or workshops. That’s when those

“cute little outfits yoga teachers wear” make her feel worse, so she’ll reach for the looser tops to mask her “imperfections.” When yoga teachers put undue emphasis on their looks, they send a barely veiled message to the student, which says, “If you’re thin, fit, and flexible like me, you can succeed at yoga, too.”

Getting to Know You

So how can we all use yoga to move beyond these fixations and feel better about what we look like and how we perceive our physical form? By giving up the notion of yoga as a get-thin-quick routine and embracing the *whole* practice—*asana*, *pranayama*, meditation—on a much deeper level. Yoga is ultimately about transformation. But if you are looking to lose weight or feel better about any aspect of your body, embrace that concept carefully. People also go on diets to transform—the way they look, the way they eat—and by doing so, perhaps hope to be happier, more successful, or more beautiful.

Yoga transformation is different. *Asana* and meditation practices help you transform your *relationship* with your body, indeed, with yourself. Yoga teaches that you’re everything you need to be right now, says Moore; “you have all the answers inside you.” By setting an intention to be present to what *is*

(instead of a goal to shrink those hips no matter what), you become an ally with your body instead of an adversary.

Sarah F., an artist in New York City, agrees. As a young girl, she wanted to be a boy and felt deeply ashamed of anything that went against that notion—and very vulnerable. She alternately ignored and abused her body, preferring to live in her head. “What yoga eventually taught me,” she says, “is that in a very real way, it’s just me and my body in relationship, so we might as well learn to get along.” And yoga allows her to explore that relationship in a safe way.

Getting in Touch

Yoga comes from *yuj*, a Sanskrit word meaning “to yoke.” Instead of thinking of yoking as a way to force two things together, Chase Bossart, a senior teacher and the director of therapy and education at the Healing Yoga Foundation in San Francisco, suggests that you think of yoking as a way of consciously directing two seemingly disparate parts of yourself. Just as two yoked oxen must be encouraged to work together in a way that will move them forward without hurting each other, your body and your mind must join together—instead of opposing one another—to consciously affect change.

Working in concert with the breath,

the mind notices those things that support who you are right now, and lets go of those that don’t. In other words, instead of insisting you sculpt those thighs and lose that extra 15, yoga gives you permission to explore (and stop holding on to) things that don’t serve you—judgments, comparisons, old hurts.

Yoga, which focuses on the body from the inside out, can teach you to view and appreciate your body as a whole, not just in segments. It centers on strength, flexibility, balance, and breath, rather than on appearance. When you do a balance pose, for example, notice that you must rely on your *entire* body to hold you up, even those parts you can’t stand. Become aware of the strength of your arms, instead of the extra fat you normally focus on, and celebrate that strength. Engage your inner core, which Sara Gottfried, MD, a holistic gynecologist in Oakland, CA, generously describes as the space between the crown of your head and your pubic bone—not just your belly.

Marina S., a young yoga teacher in Madison, WI, who suffered from eating disorders as a model, says doing yoga poses forced her to pay attention to her body as a whole system. The first time she felt a sense of “aliveness” in her arms and legs, she realized “I am not just my arms or my legs. I am energy, I am

The Power of Prayer

The result of any action depends upon your intention. In other words, what you think about when you practice yoga will determine the result of your practice. So choose your thoughts wisely. Doing downward-facing dog, saluting the sun (*surya namaskar*), or standing on your head may bring you closer to enlightenment, but it could also take you further away. It all depends on your intention—what you are thinking about before and during your practice.

We live in the atmosphere of our thoughts, which are made of words. These words form the content of our minds, and our bodies reflect that content. Words are powerful tools. By controlling our thoughts through the words we say, either silently or out loud, we affect our bodies as well as the reality in which we live.

All yogis desire Self-realization, knowledge of who they really are. So before you practice yoga, lift up your heart and say either silently or out loud, *Make me an instrument for Thy Will. Not mine but Thy Will be done. Free me from anger, jealousy, and fear. Fill my heart with joy and compassion.* In doing so, your yoga practice will be infused with selfless intention. With sincere and consistent practice, eventually but inevitably, you can transform your body into a divine body, able to bring happiness and freedom to others. You will embody the deepest yearnings of your soul—to know God, to know your Self.

—By Sharon Gannon

The Yoga Project

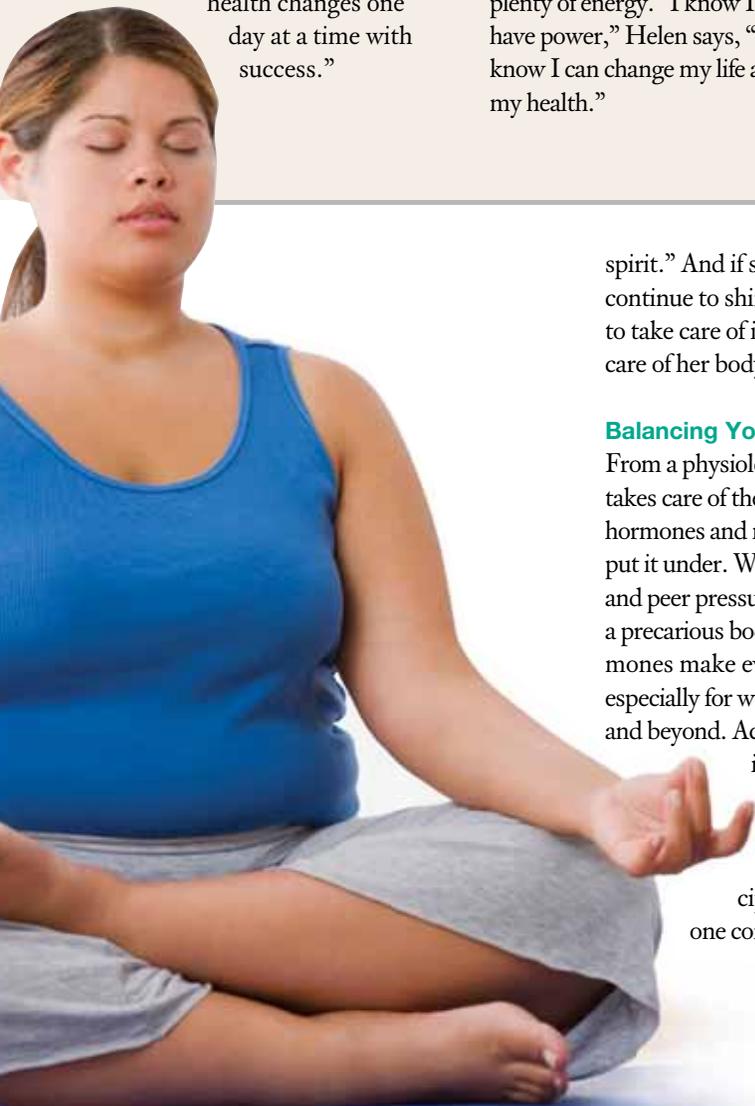
In the spring of 2011, four women wrapped up their participation in a study called Living in My Body, conducted through the Yoga for the Larger Woman program at The Yoga Project in Portland, OR. With guidance from yoga instructor Vilma Zaleskaite, each participant developed a daily practice, beginning with five minutes and incrementally progressing to a full hour by the end of the year. The changes these women experienced were varied and profound, and go far beyond what happened on the mat.

Linda B., diagnosed at the beginning of the project with type 2 diabetes, found that by listening to her body she could substitute a healthy diet for her sugar and junk food habit. She brought her glucose levels down and now manages her diabetes without medication. She rarely feels the constant back pain she used to experience, has increased flexibility, and can walk much farther than before. Linda says, “I can make health changes one day at a time with success.”

Helen S. entered the project suffering from extreme depression, insomnia, and fatigue. Midway through the year, she was diagnosed with rectal cancer and underwent surgery and radiation treatment. She has no doubt that yoga helped her get through the cancer treatments with minimal side effects. During the course of the project, her depression decreased to the point where she was able to stop taking antidepressants. She now sleeps better and has plenty of energy. “I know I have power,” Helen says, “I know I can change my life and my health.”

Regina R. has spent thousands of dollars on professional healers to help her recover from child abuse and a gunshot wound to her abdomen. She estimates that by joining the Living in My Body program, she saved \$12,000 in one year alone. Thanks to yoga, her belly, which she once considered a “dead zone,” is more alive. Her digestion and elimination function better now, and her stress level has decreased. “My practice provides a place of healing if I get overwhelmed,” she says.

Janet W., overweight all her life, suffered from years of gastrointestinal problems, resulting from two earlier bypass surgeries. She severely limited what she ate in order to avoid bouts of extreme pain, nausea, and vomiting. Since developing a daily home yoga practice, Janet says that she rarely has “gut attacks” any more and has expanded her food options. She’s also become more accepting of herself and others. “I feel I can rely on myself more to make better choices,” Janet says, “choices more in line with my integrity and beliefs, instead of just shutting down to experiences.”



spirit.” And if she wanted that spirit to continue to shine, she says, she needed to take care of its expression by taking care of her body.

Balancing Your Hormones

From a physiological standpoint, yoga takes care of the body by balancing the hormones and mitigating the stress we put it under. While societal imperatives and peer pressure obviously contribute to a precarious body image, fluctuating hormones make everything so much worse, especially for women in their 40s, 50s, and beyond. According to Gottfried, who is also a yoga practitioner and the director of the Gottfried Center of Integrative Medicine, a precipitous drop in progesterone contributes to the disordered

relationship perimenopausal women have with their bodies. High levels of cortisol, the stress hormone, Gottfried says, block progesterone receptors, preventing progesterone from doing its main job, which is to soothe. “When we don’t feel soothed,” she says, “we feel reactive.” Several studies corroborate what most yoga practitioners instinctively know: yoga lowers cortisol levels and balances the nervous system.

Both Gottfried and Moore recommend that women of all ages practice yin yoga, which Moore says, “allows the body to release tension and facilitates a space for emotional expression.” In this style of yoga, participants hold poses long enough to calm the body and to notice and tolerate the emotions that come up and move out, without trying to move away from or anesthetize such feelings.

Looking Inside the Heart

A disordered relationship with ourselves goes beyond the physical body and into the emotional realm. Seane Corn, a world-renowned yoga teacher and director of *Off the Mat and Into the World*, didn't suffer from eating issues, but she bottled up and stored away her emotions—unexpressed shame, guilt, and vulnerability—behind an impenetrable wall of tension. “I was addicted to that tension,” Corn says. “It became my survival. It was familiar, and a much easier

the spin cycle of judgments, shoulds, should nots, and what ifs. Placing our attention on the breath can bring us even more in touch with our emotions. Noticing that the breath happens all by itself, naturally—and that they don't have to force it or try to control it—gives many eating-disordered women their first lesson in letting go. For others, just learning how to breathe properly proves to be a great stress reliever. Gottfried, who encourages all her patients to meditate at least five minutes every day, says when she

own with a teacher who can help them navigate their unique challenges.

Sally Pugh agrees. She teaches yoga for large women in the San Francisco Bay Area. Liz Baqir signed up and loves yoga now. “I get a lot more out of yoga in an environment where I feel comfortable,” she says. Pugh offers suggestions that empower her students to find what works for their own bodies, and gives them the individual attention they can't always find in a crowded, one-size-fits-all class. “I have no preconceived ideas of

WHATEVER YOUR STRUGGLES, WHATEVER ISSUES YOU HAVE ABOUT YOUR SELF-IMAGE, YOGA SHOWS YOU HOW TO TRUST YOUR OWN BODY AND ITS ABILITY TO TEACH YOU WHAT'S BEST FOR YOU.

place for me to go to than vulnerability. I know who I am when I'm in control.”

But she couldn't control her emotions, or anyone else's, so she just repressed her emotions and avoided situations that could conceivably provoke conflict. It took a lot of yoga to “break down the armor in my physical body before I felt anything,” she says. Then one day, while practicing pigeon pose in class, she felt the tension dissolve and her emotions flood to the surface; tears came and, surprisingly, she felt liberated.

Yoga became a mirror for Corn to see herself more clearly. “Yoga doesn't bypass the pain,” she says, “but it does help us interpret that pain a bit differently.” Just like some women use food to “numb out,” Seane used tension to divorce herself from her heart. Now, as a yoga teacher, she encourages her students to release their tension through asana and meditation so they can listen from their hearts, “move toward surrender,” and embrace who they really are to themselves and to one another.

Quieting the Mind

Practicing mantra meditation or pranayama connects you to your breath—the bridge between body and mind—and quiets your mind long enough to stop

meditates she pays attention to and is guided by that “still quiet voice in the back of my heart. It rarely tells me my thighs need a four-mile run. It simply tells me to sit still.”

A Conscious Choice

A disordered body image isn't always about weight, of course. Dede C., a graphic designer from Vermont, remembers the time she was in a yoga class practicing handstand and her shirt came up, revealing a huge scar on her belly that she hated and felt ashamed of—a result of multiple surgeries. Her yoga teacher told her she was beautiful. “But my scar,” she said. “Your scar is beautiful, too,” he said. “It's a part of who you are.”

Whatever your struggles, whatever issues you have about your self-image, yoga shows you how to trust your own body and its ability to teach you what's best for you. Teo D. credits yoga for helping him heal from the trauma he experienced living as a female and never feeling comfortable in his own skin. Now, after gender transition, living as a man and teaching yoga to kids in the Boston area, Teo says yoga “brought him to his authentic self.” He believes the practice can help other trans people, too, but feels they need a class of their

what my students can and can't do,” Pugh says. She encourages them to feel the energetics of the pose, and ultimately to find that place inside where they feel calm, happy, and accepting.

As Sally, Teo, and Liz know so well, yoga provides a way for us to work together in community and to understand that we're not alone in our struggles. Doing yoga, Liz says, “in a nonjudgmental room full of women just like me, is both comforting and liberating.”

Eve Eliot, a yoga teacher in the Hamptons, says that after a lifetime of drug abuse and disordered eating, going to yoga every day gave her the lifeline she needed to heal. “The discovery of how it feels to live in a breathing, pulsing body has left me no choice but to fall in love with myself over and over again.” Ultimately, yoga challenges us to keep showing up for ourselves every day. As Eve can attest, the inner strength you find through yoga will help create a close connection between your body and your mind—and your heart. ■

Editor in chief Linda Sparrowe is the author of several books, including The Woman's Book of Yoga and Health with Patricia Walden. She co-leads yoga and meditation retreats for women with cancer at Shambhala Mountain Center and Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health.