

NATURALLY BEAUTIFUL

earth's secrets and recipes for skin, body, and spirit

DAWN GALLAGHER
TEXT BY MELANIE MENAGH

hatha yoga, which stresses strengthening, toning, and relaxation. Most yoga exercises focus on proper positioning of the body in various *asanas*, or postures, to strengthen and align the spinal column, thought to be the location of the *chakras*, or the body's centers of energy. Yoga improves strength, suppleness, and circulation; promotes relaxation; and increases range of motion, thereby reducing the likelihood of muscle strain (Bletcher, 52).

Yogis believe that breath is the bridge between the mind and body. *Pranayama* are specific exercises in which the practitioner breathes deeply, concentrating on the breath as it enters and exits the nostrils. This focus on breathing allows deep muscle relaxation, releases tension, and induces a tranquil state.

Slowly, gently expanding the entire area of the lungs reproduces the way the body operates during sleep or meditation. It's a signal that the body is in a relaxed state. Conversely, shallow chest breathing triggers the nervous system's "fight-or-flight" mechanism; it replicates a state of high stress. Short, through-the-mouth breaths put the body in a state of readiness for quick, decisive action. In this condition, the body reacts as if it is in an emergency state and produces stress-induced chemicals like adrenaline.

Yoga breathing techniques have been used by professional athletes to improve performance. By breathing deeply through the nose, oxygen is drawn into the lower lungs. The lower lungs contain more blood and have greater oxygen-exchange capacity. Therefore, oxygen, essential for muscle function, can be delivered in higher concentrations to fuel the muscles.

Benefits of Yoga

Yoga has been shown to:

- lower blood pressure
- increase energy
- relieve stress and mild depression
- increase balance, strength, and flexibility
- improve concentration and memory
- induce a sense of calmness
- improve hormonal function

(Harvard Health Letter)

