

## **Yoga Therapy and how it can help Migraine**

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**Red Cow Moran Hotel, September 18<sup>th</sup> 2005**

I want to spend a little time today speaking about yoga and its therapeutic benefits, especially for migraine. I myself have suffered from migraine in the past, so I have a very strong empathy towards the condition.

Primarily the style of yoga that is practised in the west is called Hatha yoga. Thousands of years old, it has evolved with medical practices in the west, in the past fifty years more so than any other time. Yoga itself is a therapy by nature because it focuses on the holistic well being of the individual. So when we come into yoga classes for instance, what we are looking at are the benefits of stress management through breathing and relaxation techniques. We're also looking at increasing our flexibility and bringing greater balance into the body and the systems of the body, primarily the nervous system.

Primarily there are many different styles and types of yoga, so in Yoga Therapy Ireland for instance, what we focus on is a very practical or general type of practice. It's not about wrapping your leg around your head or not about standing on your head or turning upside down and doing cartwheels in the middle of the class. It's beneficial for anybody at any stage, any background and any age. We look at what we can do for the individual, creating a specific practice to develop a maintenance program that will support your system.

Breathing exercises in yoga are used to help calm the nervous systems. Our day-to-day activities can produce stress-related symptoms in our lives. So we all know that the triggers of that can cause more migraine.

In essence, we actually start our day stressfully. How differently it would be if we could actually wake up with a bit of time to open our eyes, to stretch a little and find a comfortable position to roll over into in bed. Our days are full of stress, throughout our work day and even coming home again.

First, we're going into traffic, by the time we get home we are so exhausted by the ordeal, maybe all we can do is merely grunt at our partner, give our kids a quick hug and then try and make a dinner before we collapse into bed. Now if we have one day like that in our week, we call it a challenging day, but how many of us have that on a daily basis? Many of us will experience that general level of stress every day. What you need is some time out when you can get back in touch and reconnect to your own needs, physically, mentally and emotionally because for every feeling, emotion we experience during the day, there is a real response in our bodies.

You can imagine just sitting there and thinking about something even for the briefest moment that stresses you out, maybe thinking about a deadline at work that you are not going to fulfil or an exam at school or the neighbour that you just can't get along with. If you think about that long enough, you will notice your breathing pattern

changes. All of these things are building up a stress response. Your breathing changes, your posture may change because you are having an argument in your heart or your head about something. You may get a defiant posture that you are standing in and you are not even aware of it.

On the other side of that if you bring yourself back to a very happy memory or something that you are looking forward to, everything changes again. Your body physiologically responds to your thoughts, to the joy of your feelings and your breathing starts to relax - your body changes due to the information that it is being fed. Yoga is about taking time out from the day-to-day information that we feed our bodies without allowing for the recuperation needed. If you come into a yoga class for instance you have an hour for yourself. Even if that is just for once a week, how precious that time becomes.

### **What is a yoga class?**

In a general yoga class it is a mind body process and a mind body connection. In a basic class, I always teach for about an hour and a half. We settle in with a full body relaxation from head to toe usually lying down in a posture known as the corpse.

When we're lying down in the corpse, you're taken through a self-connection of relaxation, mainly just starting with the muscles, from head to toe. Can you relax your scalp muscles, have you ever thought about your scalp muscles? Can you relax the hair molecules around your scalp? Can you relax the facial muscles around your jaw, the facial expressions and from head to toe...?

Yoga connects the physical parts of our body and eases the stress from our day out of our body, by something as simple as tensing and releasing.

Most migraines and headaches are based on constriction and dilation, creating an imbalance or overflow of blood up into the head area. So in relaxation, if we work from head down, we are hoping to release the tension of the body almost like liquid running through our bodies. Through the muscles, out through the extremities and right down to the soles of the feet. That's usually how a yoga class starts. So you can immediately let go of your day, erase its imprints and then move on safely into exercise.

### **What are the exercises involved in yoga?**

Classes usually involve breathing exercises that are used to detoxify and distress the body by focusing on longer exhales. If everybody right now just closes their eyes even for a brief minute and if you just think about taking a deep inhale, now exhale through your mouth...we're going to do that one more time and I just want you to listen to that sense of silence that enters the room during the exhale. Everyone again, just swing around in your chair and take a long relaxed exhale through your mouth...Listening to that stillness, listening to that silence that comes around you can also be a silence or a stillness that comes from within you, so taking a long yoga exhale can be like a five minute holiday and we learn over and over again through class practices how to lengthen our exhales and to calm our breathing.

In calming our breathing, our body is naturally going to take on board that information and change its responses. Exhaling and learning to breathe in a very relaxed fashion is wonderful pain control. Research and studies have connected nasal practices are very similar to yoga techniques.

You can see that what we put into our bodies, whether it be the tradition of food or the tradition of action, it will create a very real result in the balance and harmony of our system. I would recommend that when you are investigating a yoga class or you're talking to ask for a gentle yoga class. Make sure that it's not too dynamic or too gymnastic because that would produce an awful lot of heat in the effort of what you are doing. There are a lot of heating and detoxifying results, yet at the same time, it's not necessarily what we want to look for in regards to a strategy for maintaining a condition such as migraine.

Having, living and working with migraine so that you may have the best quality of life for yourself is about learning how to keep things calm and keep things cool. It's here in the head area and neck area, sometimes triggered across the thoracic area. So if we have the pain.

Things as simple as the remedies that are often used in the tradition of yoga, such as wrapping your eyes gently in some gauze, it's no different than taking a cold face cloth and dipping it in some lavender, cool the eyes and cool the temple area. Gentle pressure is quite cooling on the circulation coming up into the head area and very relaxing for the tiny little muscles in the eyes.

How often have you concentrated on looking at a computer screen or trying to listen very intently to somebody or you found yourself actually squinting to pay attention? Just like a telescopic lens, we want to focus on something, we reach out to it. The practices of yoga involving rest and recuperation allow us to come back within.

Taking balancing poses and standing poses like a tree that we have all seen before. Not that it's very physically challenging at all, but very challenging to our mind. To stop looking at all the distractions, the internal distractions. Balancing postures are very beneficial to us because they calm the mind and by the nature of gravity and standing we help to get everything flowing back down through our extremities.

The main benefit that you will receive is the stress management levels. There'll be a huge reduction in the stress because:

**Number one:** You're giving time to yourself that you may or may not have had time to do in your day to day life.

**Number two:** You are focusing on a mind-body connection that deepens your breathing and releases the tension in the muscles of the body.

**Number three:** When we reduce our stress levels the nervous system can do what nature intends for it to do and rebalance itself from all of the stress-related activities in our life. The nervous system is automatically meant to gear up the fight or flight

syndrome. We very rarely have a chance to wind down after we've been geared up all day.

*Cara Chotiner is currently a Tutor for Yoga Therapy Ireland. Yoga Therapy Ireland's focus is the therapeutic aspects and benefits of Yoga for all. They train their teachers to a very high standard and have had a link with the Migraine Association of Ireland now for a number of years. If you would like to access a Yoga teacher in your area, please check out the Yoga Therapy Ireland website - [www.yogatherapyireland.com](http://www.yogatherapyireland.com)*