

CHAPTER CONTRIBUTED TO 2005 BOOK 50 THINGS TO DO WHEN YOU TURN 50

By Jonathan Fields

Feeling a little achy as you head toward the half-century mark? Waking up several times in the night? Having trouble falling asleep? How's your blood pressure? Stress level? Self-image? The wear and tear of the first 50 years of life on our bodies only threatens to make the next 50 less than ideal.

But give me about three hours of your time a week, and I can guarantee you'll feel better.

No, it's not a pill, not a therapy, not a procedure. It's yoga, an ancient Eastern practice now being recognized as an outstanding adjunct to modern medicine in terms of keeping you fit, healthy and centered.

If you're like most Americans, though, yoga conjures up visions of double-jointed 20somethings putting themselves into impossible positions and chanting.

I've got news for you. Yoga today is about as mainstream as apple-pie. Even small, rural communities sport yoga classes, and in large cities like New York they're as ubiquitous as dry cleaners. And all those health benefits—your doctor may even prescribe it for you! Heck, some studies even show that yoga can help people with diabetes better manage their blood sugar.

So come along with me as I give you three user-friendly answers to three fairly giant questions: What is this thing called yoga? Why do I absolutely need it in my life? And, most important, how do I begin?

What is Yoga?

Asking a yoga teacher what yoga is a bit like asking a physicist what space is, but here's my best shot. Yoga is both a system of daily practices and a philosophy of living that originated some 5,000 years ago to liberate folks from suffering and unify them with their true "Selves," aka "enlightenment." The word "yoga," along with all those other funky words you saw at the bookstore, comes from the ancient Sanskrit language.

“Yoga” actually means “yolk” or unify. Classically, enlightenment is the end to the yoga means.

The reality, though, is that most people, especially in the U.S., begin with the more accessible daily physical practices of yoga in search of simply feeling better, stronger, and calmer, and shelve the quest for enlightenment for a next life.

There are many different schools and styles of yoga, but all have certain common elements, including the use of postures, breathing exercises, and meditation. Postures are practiced to strengthen, cleanse, and heal the body. Breathing exercises deepen the cleansing effect and help balance energy in the body. And meditation is amazingly powerful at stilling the mind and bringing you back to center.

Why Do I Absolutely Need Yoga in My Life?

Yoga is the ultimate one-stop lifestyle solution! It can help you:

- Reduce chronic stress and better handle situation-specific stress.
- Strengthen every muscle in your body.
- Burn calories (certain styles of yoga) and manage or lose weight.
- Improve your flexibility and ability to do more in life.
- Promote good posture and decrease the incidence of back pain.
- Enhance concentration, clarity and mental focus.
- Improve balance, both on and off the mat.
- Add something fun and joyous to your day.
- Increase your confidence and creativity.
- Sleep better and longer.
- Provide a great community of friends.
- Manage depression, anxiety and blood pressure.

How many of those items can you check off as part of your life now that you're hitting 50?

Ongoing research suggests that yoga may also help reduce your risk of diabetes, heart disease, obesity, intestinal and various other disorders, and soooooooooo much more!

OK, OK, I Get It. How Do I Begin?

First, lose the excuse that you are too old, too tight, or too weak to do yoga. You do not need to be young, flexible, or strong to begin. Strength and flexibility will come over time and, who knows, maybe you'll recapture a hint of youthful effervescence along the way!

The simplest way to start is with the postures. If you haven't exercised in some time, it's a good idea to check with your physician before beginning. Regardless of your level of fitness, starting with an introductory workshop or program that teaches the basic postures in an interactive format is always a plus.

Now, how do you choose your particular flavor of yoga? Here are brief descriptions of the major schools of posture or "asana" practice as a guide:

- **Iyengar** – High-level of attention to precision alignment, use of props, long holds. Best for those seeking therapeutic results or treatment of specific conditions.
- **Vinyasa/Power Yoga** – Students "flow" from one pose to the next in a dance-like rhythm, tied to the breath. Dynamic and often challenging. Best for time-crunched people seeking a complete cardio, strength and flexibility workout in a meditative flow.
- **Ashtanga** – Similar to vinyasa/power yoga, but usually refers to a specific, fixed sequence of very highly physical and dynamic postures that are held for a shorter time. Best for those looking for a highly challenging, cardiovascular pace with poses that may take years to move into.
- **Restorative** – Very gentle, supported poses with lots of tailoring to individual need. Best for those seeking a more peaceful, accommodating practice or those recovering from injury or illness.
- **Hatha** - Hatha is actually a term encompassing all of the physical practices, but these days it has largely come to signify a gentler, more centering approach to the practice of postures. Best for providing those who seek an all-around gentle-to-moderate balancing experience.

- **Anusara** – Similar to Iyengar, emphasizes alignment and precision with a bit more flow. Best for those who seek a physically challenging experience with less movement and a lighter feel than Iyengar.
- **Kundalini** – Emphasizes more breathwork, freestyle movement and student interaction. Best for those who seek a more “offbeat” energy-based, intimate and interactive experience.
- **Integral** – Gentler posture practice with strong grounding in breath, meditation and study. Best for those seeking a more traditional experience with more chanting, study of scripture, and meditation.

If it is within your means, working with a private teacher is a very powerful way to study. It allows for an experience completely tailored to your needs, abilities and limitations. Because there is no national licensing requirement for yoga teachers, the best way to find a qualified private teacher is through referrals and references. Be sure to ask, as well, about the teacher’s approach to postures, chanting, breathwork, and meditation, and make sure you “jive” with the instructor on a personal level.

If you can’t find a teacher through referrals, try the Yoga Alliance (YA) teacher registry at www.yogaalliance.org. While many great teachers are not registered with YA, it does provide a place to start.

For many of us, classes are a more realistic option. The list of yoga options above may help you choose the best approach. Or you may want to explore a number of classes to see which type you are more drawn to. It is always a better idea to begin with an experience that you believe may be too gentle and then move to a more intense one if you want.

One last word on chanting. Chanting, in yoga, is not about religion, but about community and a more universal sense or spirituality. It is often done as call-and-response. Different classes and teachers may integrate chanting into the class experience or strip it out. The essential yoga chant is the sound “Om”—which represents the sound that unifies all.

Chanting can be very intimidating for people who are new to the practice. If you’re not comfortable chanting, you may sit in silence or search out a class or teacher

who doesn't chant. Before completely abandoning chanting, though, try sitting in silence and maybe joining in occasionally. I cannot tell you how many students have told me that they were terrified of chanting at first but now love it.

Most importantly, as you begin your exploration, take a long-term perspective and move into it with a sense of humor and lightness. There will be many stumbles along the way but, approached with a smile, they will become giggle-stops along a path to a far more fulfilled place in your world. And, just as important, you will feel—physically and emotionally—ever so much better!

Namaste (“The light in me honors the light in You”)

About the Author

Jonathan Fields is the founder/director of Sonic Yoga, one of Manhattan's premier yoga centers, and the featured instructor in a series of nationally-acclaimed yoga DVDs and videos. Jonathan is regularly featured in the media, including *Self*, *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Fitness*, *Yoga Journal*, *Yoga International*, *Outside*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times* and many more. Unusually seasoned at 39, Jonathan has shared wisdom and guidance beyond his age with thousands of students, from 16-year old ballerinas to 40-something movie-stars to 65-year old breast cancer survivors. When he is not teaching, writing or speaking about yoga and life-empowerment, he can be found blissfully dancing around his living room with his wife and 4-year-old daughter.