

The Spirit of Christmas Yoga

ALL PICS THINKSTOCK

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When we think about Christmas, for a number of reasons it often presents itself as one of the most challenging and stressful times of the year; however, just like our practice, Christmas can be a spiritual time. Although it is easy to get distracted and lost in the consumerism, pressure and faster pace. As a result of this, it is essential to move through this time from a grounded space so that the true teachings from our practice guide us through the challenges. The question is, as a result of this chaos, are we really missing the true meaning of Christmas?

Yoga is a way of life and a way of being, where the ancient teachings of yoga can manifest and be experienced on as well as off the mat. This may be a time of year where your regular yoga practice may find itself at the bottom of a long to-do list; however, it is perhaps the most important time to maintain your regular practice...and here's why.

De-stress this Christmas

For a variety of reasons, Christmas can often bring about an increased feeling of anxiety and stress, thereby resulting in increased levels of a stress hormone called cortisol, released by the adrenal glands. This hormone is only designed to be released for short periods of time and can, in small, short doses, have a beneficial effect on the body by increasing the pain threshold, and increase bursts of energy as well as concentration. However, when the

levels of cortisol are elevated and remain in the blood long term, they have negative side effects including increased blood sugar levels, increased appetite and subsequent weight gain, poor cognitive function and a suppressed immune system.

Knowing that this physiological pattern manifests as a response to external stressors, why do we continue to respond to this busy time of year in the same way and how can we make a change? More importantly, how can the ancient teachings of yoga support you on and off the mat this season and keep you feeling healthy, happy and stress free?

Yoga on the mat

Often, during this time of year, we tend to allow our practice to subside; however, this is the perfect time to maintain your regular yoga practice and give yourself the gift of time. When I started practising Yoga 16 years ago, I found that almost every school, albeit a few, closed during this time of year. Thankfully, this has since changed, and there are many schools that continue to offer a full or revised schedule during the Christmas and new year period. It may be beneficial to know the schedule in advance and add your practice into your diary so you don't miss a class. This will further support you to keep up your routine and momentum with your practice. It may also be a time of year where you may be travelling, so roll up your mat and take it with you so that wherever



you are in the world, you start your day with an invigorating, enlivening and grounding practice.

The quality required to maintain consistency of practice is known as *tapas*. *Tapas* can be literally translated as ‘self-discipline’, ‘effort’ or ‘internal fire’ and can be applied to all aspects of life such as learning something new or generating the effort required to make certain changes in your life. The effort you use when you engage *tapas* is directed toward cultivating new, healthful habits and breaking unhealthy ones and to practice conscious effort rather than experience habitual patterns.

In yoga, *tapas* is often seen as a commitment to your practice and identifying what you realistically can commit to on a daily basis irrespective of how long you practise for; consistency is the key, and whatever you choose to practise, whether that be *asana*, *pranayama*, meditation or contemplation – anything that inspires you, aim to commit time to your practice every day.

Tapas can also mean heat or inner fire, and when there is heat, there is energy and this is generated through the practice of *asana* and specific *pranayama* practices and is often present during times of personal transformation. Dedicating time to your yoga practice, doing what you can, and stepping onto your mat every day is a positive way to support you to stay centred and focused.

Asana is also a wonderful way of observing how the mind responds to the challenges of the body, thereby increasing your levels of awareness of how the mind responds to external challenges experienced in everyday life. The result of this is to build mental stamina so that we can strengthen the capacity to tolerate being with strong sensations and subsequently develop the skill of witnessing, which is one of the most important skills of yoga.

Yoga off the mat

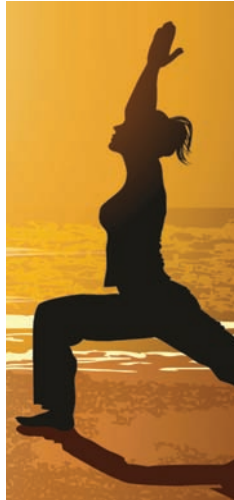
As your consistency of practice may have already revealed, the true teachings of yoga often come to life and have their most impetus off the mat. Traditionally speaking, this is where the true gifts of yoga manifest and often when they are most needed.

This time also presents as a wonderful opportunity for helping others, and creating yoga with others who may need your time, conscious presence or support. The translation of yoga often has many meanings, including to yoke, to unite, union etc., and is the perfect time to connect and reach out to others, taking the teachings of yoga and your practice off the mat and into the world.

Christmas also connects us to our deepest emotions, particularly as we are surrounded by those we love and care for the most, our family and friends, who are often thought of as our chosen family. It is a significant time of year, where we remember those that we have loved and lost, and celebrate in their contribution to our lives and how their teachings continue to live on in who we are and share with others.

Self-awareness and observance of the self – Svadhyaya

Christmas is commonly a busy time for most; however, it doesn't have to be stressful, and being



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present and mindful is one of the ways that stress can be alleviated through the practice of *svadhyaya* translated as self-study or self-observation. Through this practice, we learn to recognise that the happiness we seek externally is already within us, and through the commitment of consistently questioning or reviewing the pattern of our behaviour and why we respond to particular situations and/or people will not only give us the opportunity to raise awareness of that response but to also choose an alternative response that is more in line with our own truth and what we need in that moment.

Happiness is our true nature, and through the practice of *svadhyaya* we establish a way of being that includes introspection and further takes us along the path of identifying who we truly are as individuals and why we have formed these sometimes unhelpful habitual responses.

Author Stephen Cope believes that “*svadhyaya* is the skilful and systematic investigation of how things are, and when you practise self-observation, you begin to uncover and address the unconscious patterns governing your life”. When you can notice and not judge what you are doing and how you are feeling in every moment, you open a window to empathy for yourself and gain the stability you need to extend to others.

The art of living in moderation – Brahmacharya

The art of living a moderate life is an incredibly challenging practice in our modern Western culture as we are constantly encouraged by a ‘do more and then do more’ attitude. The reality is that the practice of wanting, wanting, wanting is not only exhausting, but it is always guaranteed to leave you feeling unsatisfied.

The festive season is also usually a time where we may be more inclined to indulge in an excess of food and drink. This is a great opportunity to observe your habits towards food and drink and identify if your choices are healthy or unhealthy and applying *tapas* to make the right choices for you. This provides the opportunity of avoiding excess in all areas of your life and instead focusing on establishing the practice of balance and moderation.

The purpose of practising *Brahmacharya* is to keep us focused on our true purpose in life.

Make the change

There is empowerment in the recognition that the external stressors of life, highlighted during the festive season, are continual; however, the recognition that we have the tools and the capacity to change how we manage that stress opens up a freedom of choice and awareness that we are powerful enough to manage the stress in a positive way so that they contribute to our lives as opportunities for growth rather than obstacles. In that new way of being, we then take ourselves back to the true teachings of yoga awareness, connection and the ability to live the teachings of yoga throughout the ebbs and flows of life. **NH**