

Yoga and Cancer

Julie Friedeberger

A new yoga class for people with cancer will be starting at the Yoga Therapy Centre in February. Having practised and taught yoga for many years I have always found it to be a source of strength, support and spiritual sustenance, and when I had breast cancer in 1993 it helped me to cope through the stressful period of diagnosis and mastectomy surgery. In the longer term, it has played a vital role in my healing.

Yoga is a holistic system for creating harmony and a balance of energies on every level of our being - physical, emotional, mental, spiritual. When this balance has been disturbed by serious illness, yoga can help to restore it. Through yoga, the qualities that can help us in dealing with a life-changing illness are encouraged to unfold. We all have these qualities within us, and yoga helps us develop them: the inner strength and resilience, the self-awareness and self-discipline, and the emotional and mental stability, which enable us to meet all of life's challenges and to use them as opportunities for growth and change.

How can yoga help people with cancer?

Cancer is an illness in which a weakened immune system has become inadequate to cope with the proliferation of damaged cells. Yoga is a powerful aid to healing, not least because it can help to strengthen the immune system, which it influences in various ways:

- through **relaxation** which alleviates the stress and anxiety which are so detrimental to immune functioning
- through **breathing** exercises which improve respiration, release tension and restore calm
- through **meditation** which develops the detachment and clarity that enable us to face our deepest fears
- through **physical** exercises which help to remove toxins and improve energy levels

These practices also help us to cope with the traumas that come with the diagnosis of a life-changing illness, which, as anyone with cancer knows, brings with it emotions that can be overwhelming: shock, fear, anger, guilt, anxiety and grief to name the most obvious. Having experienced them, I know the help that the simplest breathing, relaxation and meditation techniques can be in the difficult business of dealing with them. They can also be of considerable help in coping with the stresses of surgery, chemotherapy and radiation.

For anyone with cancer, yoga is a genuine source of empowerment - because it is something that you do for yourself. Here is more information about the techniques that will be introduced in the class, to help you decide whether they could help you.

Relaxation is possibly the most vital element in healing, because it relieves the stress that is so detrimental to the efficient working of the immune system. We will be learning to use simple relaxation techniques to allay stress and anxiety. In relaxation, muscles release tension, the heart rate and blood pressure drop, breathing and mental activity slow down, and tension and anxiety begin to dissolve. When body and mind 'let go' and surrender themselves to the stillness and peace of deep relaxation, healing can take place, because we are creating conditions conducive to the repair of cells. We are actively co-operating with our immune system and encouraging our inner healing forces to work for us.

Breathing exercises release tension, replenish energy, and calm the mind, nerves and emotions. Our emotions affect our breathing: when we are anxious, angry or frightened, it responds by growing shallow and erratic. The reverse is true too; our breathing affects our emotional state: deep, rhythmic breathing is both energizing and calming. By becoming aware of our breathing pattern and consciously, gently, changing it, we calm the sympathetic nervous system so that we let go of anxiety and stress, and restore calm and balance.

Breathing that is habitually shallow and restricted can make us lethargic and may contribute to depression and physical illness. Deep, relaxed, rhythmic breathing in which the lungs are fully utilized can help to avoid and overcome illness. We will be practising simple breathing and stretching exercises to restore the elasticity of the diaphragm and intercostal muscles and replace inefficient breathing habits with more healthful, life-enhancing ones.

Meditation isn't 'emptying the mind'. It is calming to the mind and emotions, but what makes it so is sitting still and allowing our thoughts and feelings to surface so that we can look at them instead of ignoring or repressing them. We will be using the basic meditational practice of breath awareness, a process that develops the clarity that enables us to look at the realities of our situation, and to acknowledge and accept them and the powerful emotions they give rise to. Once we can do that, we can let go of our fears and move on. Buried emotions trap our energy and create more stress; acknowledging them liberates energy and reduces stress, so this is a vital part of healing, and of coming to terms with cancer.

The physical exercises of yoga work in various ways on the internal organs and all the body systems, particularly the nervous system, as well as on the joints, muscles and ligaments. They affect breathing, posture, circulation, digestion and elimination, as well as physical strength, stamina and flexibility. We will learn a range of simple practices especially designed to help speed removal of toxins and improve energy flow. (Don't worry if you haven't exercised for years and are a bit stiff and creaky: it doesn't matter!)

About myself

I have practised yoga since 1970 and have taught since 1987. My teacher is Swami Dharmānanda Saraswati, founder and spiritual head of the Dharma Yoga Centre, whose teaching and teacher training diplomas I hold; I also hold the British Wheel of Yoga's teaching diploma. My teaching includes experience with older people and people with mental health problems. For the past seven years I have trained yoga teachers. My book, *A Visible Wound: A Healing Journey through Breast Cancer* was published in 1996 by Element. The tape that goes with it, *Breathe and Relax: A Way to Healing*, gives instructions for the practices which are described in the book and which will be the main focus of the class.

My cancer experience has left me with a deeper trust in the power of yoga to help us through life and a stronger commitment to passing on what I know of yoga through teaching and training - and, now, to those who are meeting the challenge of cancer.

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The classes will be held at the Yoga Therapy Centre, Royal London Homoeopathic Hospital, 60 Great Ormond Street, London WC1N 3HR. Telephone 0171 419 7195.