

*Om sahana vavatu sahana bhunattu  
Saha viryam karavavahai  
Tejasvinavaditamastu  
Ma vidvishavahai  
Om shanti shanti shanti om*

Together may we be protected  
Together may we be nourished  
Together may we work with great energy  
May our journey together be brilliant and effective  
May there be no bad feelings between us  
Peace, peace, peace

# Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om

## Yoga Unifies the Mind, Body and Soul

—by Mary Alspaugh

**M**ore than 30 years ago, a young American housewife once beset with back problems and bouts of depression introduced the public to a fitness regimen that seemed too simple and too studied to be real exercise. The critics were skeptical.

Her name was Liliás Folan, and her PBS show was called "Liliás, Yoga and You." Intrigued housewives across the country began tuning in each week, joining this unlikely fitness instructor on their living room rugs as she urged them to stretch, focus, concentrate and breathe. By 1976, this odd form of body movement had a following that included Olympic athletes, seniors, children, business executives and even members of Congress.

The 4,000-year-old Hindu spiritual practice called yoga had finally gone mainstream in America.

Folan and legions of yoga instructors insist that yoga is not a destination but a journey. It's called a practice, a daily routine that stretches both the body and mind, and perfection in every movement is neither expected nor necessary. All agree it is most definitely *not* a religion.

### MIND, BODY AND BREATH

Virginia Williamson, the Punta Gorda Club's yoga instructor, has been practicing for about 18 years. Like most yoga initiates, she remembers being timid when she first began her own practice. "When I realized that I was actually able to do it — the postures — there was an epiphany. I thought, 'I can actually do this,' and there I was, just breathing through the poses, and doing the best I could," she said. "I loved it."

As the years passed, and as she attained her yoga instructor certification, the additional training and instruction "made me realize that there's much more to this than just the physical exercise. There's a whole spiritual aspect that can be explored," she continued. "But here's the good news: Yoga gives you the opportunity for endless spiritual study, if you wish. But you can keep it limited to the physical exercises. It's all up to you."

Like Williamson, Bonnie Yonker, owner and instructor at Punta Gorda's Yoga Sanctuary on Sullivan Street, agrees that yoga is both a science and a spiritual practice, but it's up to the practitioner to determine their personal yoga goals.

Yonker teaches Hatha yoga, which is the umbrella label for the many variations of yoga pursuits. All yoga is centered on various poses, or *asanas*, along with breathing techniques, called *pranayama*, that require the student to incorporate stretching, focusing and breath work. "Yoga is the discovery of how the mind, body and the breath all work together," she said.

"People usually come here for the fitness aspects of yoga, and there are many. What people don't realize at first is that all of yoga is a meditation. If you're in a particular pose, and you're completely focusing on holding that pose, you're in a meditation. Because meditation is simply the focusing of the mind on a single point," Yonker explained. "And though yoga has its roots in Hinduism, it's not a religion; but it can in fact enhance a person's own religious beliefs. It can help you connect to whatever higher source you ascribe to. Or not. It's your choice."

### IMPROVED HEALTH & WELL-BEING

Yoga as a physical exercise attracts people of all age groups, primarily because extreme athletic ability isn't required. A typical yoga session begins with students lying on their backs in repose during a brief meditative period. The instructor then "warms up" the students with a series of simple arm and leg movements, eventually advancing to seated and standing positions in a variety of yoga poses. Every move is slow, and every change of position is done in small, simple movements. Nothing is hurried, and, as Yonker said, "no one is competing with anyone else." ➤

"Even though we're practicing in a group, it's up to each individual to find out how a particular posture best suits their needs," she said. "It doesn't matter what the person next to you is doing, or not doing, or what you are able to do versus what they can do. That's not important. The individual works at what he or she is best able to do."

The typical yoga class ends with the students back down on the floor, usually again in repose, in a meditation period to complete the session.

Instructors agree that most people explore yoga as a means of improving their health and toning their muscles, with the more spiritual aspects of the practice becoming evident as the student progresses. Because it's an unintimidating form of exercise, even dedicated couch potatoes are more likely to give it a try.

It's also touted by many as a means of toning and stretching underworked muscles, increasing energy levels, helping to create better elasticity in the joints, improving overall flexibility and balance, lowering blood pressure, improving lung function, relieving stress and anxiety and, in general, promoting a feeling of well-being.

Many hospitals and clinics are now either recommending yoga or offering their own classes in the practice to help their patients manage health issues. Dr. Dean Omish, the renowned American cardiologist, has been a yoga practitioner for more than three decades and advocates yoga as an important component in his well-known nutrition and exercise program to reverse heart disease.

At the Y-Express on Kings Highway in Port Charlotte, yoga instructor Diana Donlon teaches the Yoga Strength class, designed for intermediate or advanced-level students. The purpose of the class is to work the student's core, or midsection and spine, "because that's where all the body's strength is located," she said.

Donlon uses postures with names like triangle, plank, boat, and dolphin to bring the body into alignment, all the time encouraging students to focus on their breathing techniques as they slowly work from one pose to another.

"It's the most phenomenal thing. These poses look easy, and as we go from static movement into more dynamic movement, from one pose to the next, before we know it, we're turning on our internal furnaces," she said. "It can be quite a workout."

Yoga, she explained, "isn't officially an aerobic exercise, but it delivers more oxygen to the body than aerobics because of the deep, rhythmic breathing you do for one hour. You're opening up the capillaries, manipulating the joints, and stretching the muscles, all at once." ➤





## THE EXERCISE FOR ALL AGES

Rosemary Slate is an astounding septuagenarian who herself offers at least anecdotal evidence that yoga may play at least some role in the quest for youthful flexibility and health. At 72, she is the Charlotte County YMCA's eldest yoga instructor, "but I feel like I'm 20. I really do."


Slate has been dabbling in yoga "on and off" for more than 30 years, but it wasn't until she found herself uprooted by a pair of hurricanes in Florida and Mississippi that she turned to her yoga practice to relieve her own stress and that of others after Hurricane Katrina.

"We had sold our condo in Charlotte County after Charley and moved to a small beach house in Mississippi. Six weeks later, Katrina hit and the whole house was destroyed. I ended up in Picayune, Miss., with my daughter, and about four months later began teaching yoga there," she said. "That's where my yoga really kicked in. At first, people didn't understand the benefits, but slowly they began to see how it was helping them, especially with all the stress of the hurricane's aftermath."

Back in Florida again, Slate joined on as one of YMCA's yoga teachers and is spreading the word to the community's seniors that yoga can indeed help restore their health, flexibility and attitude.

"Look, I've been lucky. I've been blessed with good health, but I would never be able to do what I do without yoga," she said. "Anybody can do this, anybody can find their way back to feeling better. They just have to get over their doubt. I have one 83-year-old woman in my class and she is absolutely fearless. She does as much as she can and has made real progress. That's what I want people to know."

Like the other instructors in the county, Slate believes that the meditative aspects of yoga can't be equaled, and that once people experience it for themselves, they begin to understand the power behind the practice.

"Everyone loves the postures," Slate said, "but it's the meditation at the end that sends them out the door wanting to come back for more." 

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**The Punta Gorda Club**  
2905 Tamiami Trail, Punta Gorda  
(941) 505-0999  
[www.puntagordaclub.com](http://www.puntagordaclub.com)

**YMCA (3 locations)**  
[www.charlottecountyyymca.com](http://www.charlottecountyyymca.com)

**Franz Ross Park**  
19333 Quesada Ave., Port Charlotte  
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**Edison College Branch**  
26300 Airport Road, Punta Gorda  
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**Y-Express**  
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