

PRACTICAL EXERCISES • NUTRITION • MINDFULNESS • LIFESTYLE & WELLNESS

# YOGA<sup>TM</sup> MAGAZINE

www.yogamagazine.com

ISSUE 250/ MARCH 2024

**REJOICE, RENEW, GROW**

LINEAGE IN  
**IYENGAR  
YOGA**

pranayama  
kosha

HEALING POWER  
OF **YOGA**  
RETREATS

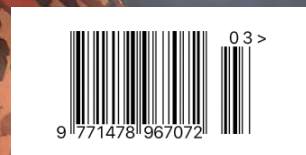
SOUL  
EMERGENCE

TRANSFORMATIVE

**KRIYA  
JOURNEY**

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- ✦ **PREGNANCY**
- ✦ **POSTPARTUM**
- ✦ **MASTECTOMY**



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Model: **Anané Vega**  
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# HOW YOGA CAN CHANGE YOUR BRAIN

Words: Lina Newstead, BWY Modules Tutor



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# In

the past, people knew more about the moon than they did about the human brain. But when Alzheimer's disease started making headlines, suddenly those once-dismissed issues of "senility" became urgent problems needing solutions. This sparked a flurry of research as scientists raced to unlock the mysteries of the brain and find ways to combat dementia.

One figure particularly interested in the mind's potential was the Dalai Lama. His fascination with how meditation affects the brain ignited a surge of scientific inquiry in the early 2000s. Studies, like the research led by the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2004, examined the brains of dedicated meditators, revealing remarkable changes in neural activity. These changes, marked by increased activity in areas controlling attention, emotion regulation, and empathy, highlighted meditation's significant impact on brain function.

As meditation gained traction, interest in yoga practices soared. Despite the common misconception today that yoga is solely physical exercise, its benefits are now proven to extend far

beyond the physical. With the aid of modern technology and functional MRI scans, we now can observe how regular yoga practice influences the brain.

## ENHANCED MEMORY

Recent research, led by Dr Helen Lavresky in June 2023\*, uncovered the potential of yoga and meditation to delay cognitive decline, a precursor to Alzheimer's. Lavresky's findings highlighted how daily meditation and yoga practice not only improved mental focus and resilience but also eased depression. It suggested that a simple, daily routine of yoga and meditation could improve brain fitness and memory.

The study discovered that people who practiced yoga and meditation regularly had more gray matter in key areas of the brain, like the hippocampus and frontal sections.

Gray matter is crucial because it helps with learning and memory.

## BREATH-BRAIN CONNECTION

Breathing exercises, like slow deep breathing, have long been believed to positively impact mental wellbeing. Recent research by Zacharo et al. in 2018\* suggests that slow breathing can change both cardiovascular and brain function. Slow breathing triggers receptors in our lungs, which then regulate muscle tone, heart rate, and lung health. This connection between our breath and body affects how well our brain and body work together.

In today's fast-paced world, the stresses of modern life often lead to shallow, rapid mouth breathing, disrupting our body's natural balance. James Nestor's book "Breathe"\* in



2020 highlights the importance of nasal breathing for regulating blood pressure, improving lung function, and enhancing sleep quality. He found that breathing through the nose filters, humidifies, and regulates air temperature, while also promoting the production of nitric oxide – a vital molecule that dilates blood vessels, improves circulation, and enhances oxygen uptake in the body. In contrast, chronic mouth breathing can lead to respiratory issues like infections, asthma exacerbation, and sleep disturbances.

## STRESS REDUCTION

During yoga practice, your brain releases chemicals like GABA, dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin, and endorphins. These chemicals help you relax and reduce stress.

GABA is a neurotransmitter or your brain's chemical messenger. It suppresses neural activity in order to prevent the brain from getting overexcited. It controls how much fear, stress or anxiety you feel. Studies show yoga increases GABA levels by 27%\*.

Happiness hormones such as dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin, and endorphins contribute to feelings of pleasure, wellbeing and reduced stress. Together, these chemicals help induce relaxation and contentment, which is why yogis often report feeling happier after a class.

In conclusion, research suggests that by integrating yoga into our daily routines, we can positively impact our brain health. Regular practice of yoga and meditation can improve memory, cognitive function, and emotional wellbeing.

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# HERE ARE SOME WAYS THAT YOU CAN INTEGRATE YOGA INTO YOUR LIFE:

## 1. KIRTAN KRIYA

One of the techniques used in Dr Lavresky's research is *Kirtan Kriya* meditation which involves hand movements, chanting, meditation and visualisation. According to Indian traditions, Kirtan Kriya is used to prevent cognitive decline in older people.

Sa Ta Na Ma Mantra Meditation from the Kundalini Yoga tradition

Sa = the universe totality

Ta = life or creation

Na = death or dissolution

Ma = rebirth or regeneration

Hand Mudra (gesture):

Sa – thumb to index finger for wisdom

Ta – thumb to middle finger for patience

Na – thumb to ring finger for energy

Ma – thumb to little finger for communication

### THE PRACTICE

Repeat 3/6/9/12 times out loud

Repeat 3/6/9/12 times whispering

Repeat 3/6/9/12 times silently internally

### BENEFITS

**Physical** - activating pressure points that help energy flow along the meridians to the brain.

**Psychological** – quietens the mind

**Esoteric** - clears the subconscious mind & allows access to the high

## 2. UJJAYI BREATHING

Ujjayi breathing, also known as 'Victorious Breath' can have a balancing influence on the central nervous system.

### BENEFITS

It activates the parasympathetic nervous system, releasing feelings of stress, irritation, and frustration, and helps calm the mind and body.

### PRACTICE

1. Find a comfortable seated or lying position. You can also practice Ujjayi breathing while standing, but it's often easier to start seated or lying down.
2. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths to centre yourself.
3. Inhale deeply through your nose, filling your lungs completely.
4. As you exhale, slightly constrict the back of your throat, creating a gentle hissing or ocean-like sound. Imagine you are fogging up a mirror with your breath, but with your mouth closed.
5. Keep the sound of your breath steady and smooth, making it audible to yourself but not too loud.
6. Continue to inhale deeply through your nose, filling your lungs, and exhale with the same gentle constriction of the throat.
7. Practice *Ujjayi* breathing for several minutes, gradually increasing the duration as you become more comfortable with the technique.

Remember to listen to your body and adjust the intensity of the breath as needed.

### 3. INVERSIONS

Inversions like downward-facing dog require concentration, balance and coordination. This challenges the brain to adapt to new movement patterns and sensory input, potentially enhancing cognitive function.

#### BENEFITS

By reversing the gravitational flow of blood, it enhances the circulation to the brain, thereby strengthening the capillaries in the brain.

If you're a beginner or experiencing discomfort, you can modify the pose by bending your knees slightly or placing your hands on blocks to reduce the distance between the floor and your hands.

#### HOW TO PRACTICE

- Begin on your hands and knees in a tabletop position. Align your wrists directly under your shoulders and your knees under your hips.
- Spread your fingers wide apart and press firmly into the ground with your palms. Ensure that your index fingers are parallel or slightly turned outwards.
- Tuck your toes under, then lift your hips towards the ceiling, straightening your arms and legs. Keep your feet hip-width apart and parallel to each other.
- As you lift your hips, lengthen your spine by reaching your tailbone towards the ceiling and drawing your chest towards your thighs.
- Check that your arms are straight and your shoulders are relaxed away from your ears. Engage your quadriceps to straighten your legs, but keep a slight bend in your knees if needed, especially if you feel tightness in your hamstrings.



- Let your head hang freely between your upper arms, allowing your neck to relax. Your gaze can be towards your feet or your navel.
- Take slow, deep breaths while holding the pose. Focus on lengthening your spine with each inhale and deepening the stretch with each exhale.

Hold and Release: Hold the pose for 5-10 breaths or longer if comfortable. To release, gently lower your knees back to the mat or transition into another pose.

#### References

1. <https://www.uclahealth.org/news/new-understanding-power-yoga>
2. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6137615/>
3. <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/sunday/the-sunday-magazine-for-january-17-2021-1.5874646/how-we-breathe-has-major-impacts-on-our-body-james-nestor-has-recommendations-to-improve-it-1.5874681>
4. Yoga Asana sessions increase brain GABA levels: a pilot study - PubMed (nih.gov)

Want to find out more?

Lina will be teaching an online workshop on 'yoga and the brain' at the BWY Yoga Festival on Saturday 22 June. To book: <https://portal.bwy.org.uk/events/719>

**Lina** has been practising Yoga since 1975. Her practice is rooted in the Tibetan tradition and her Yoga teaching style is inclusive and therapeutic, emphasising the breath, relaxation and meditation. She has trained hundreds of teachers in her role as a Diploma Course Tutor and Gentle Years Yoga Teacher for the British Wheel of Yoga.







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