

YOGA *for arthritis*

MATT GLUCK

The disease Arthritis derives its name from Greek 'arthro' (joint) and 'itis' (inflammation). There are over one-hundred forms of this assemblage of conditions that damages the body's joints. Millions of people around the world suffer with arthritis, the two most common forms of which are 'osteoarthritis' (degenerative joint disease) and 'rheumatoid arthritis' (auto immune disease). Osteoarthritis is age and lifestyle related, and may be induced by stress, insufficient exercise, being overweight and hormonal imbalance. Rheumatoid arthritis takes place when immune cells attack within the synovial membrane, which occurs between all of the body's joints. Both forms may be influenced by genetic information.

The symptoms in all forms of arthritis include varying pain levels (from mild to extremely severe), inflammation, joint aching and stiffness. Internal organs are often affected with rheumatoid arthritis, making life even more challenging. Lack of sleep and exercise due to fatigue tire the spirit as well as the mind and body. Inability to use the body fully brings challenges that many find heartbreaking, especially when flare-ups can be caused by activity 'intent' to alleviate symptoms. With rheumatoid arthritis there is also appetite loss and subsequent weight loss. In some cases the limits placed on the individual may lead to withdrawal from family, friends and social support, which make the experience even more restrictive and destructive.

HOW YOGA HELPS

Arthritis stiffens the body to protect it. Many respond to the painful process by reducing exercise. Yoga's elemental mix sustains and enhances joint oxygenation, nourishment, elasticity and tone. Practices edify us to look into pain, to ascertain its locale in the body-mind. Yogic exercise is mostly low impact and maximises 'bone loading', whereby chi is compressed into the bone marrow. This maintains and stimulates the production of healthy blood, which nourishes

the body and extracts impurities. This is ideal for arthritic students, providing the duration of weight bearing is sufficient to encourage blood flow; an excess could cause further stagnation and pain. All intersections are guided towards the full range of movement, which stimulates and mobilises joint fluid and activates the sinews and meridians. This lubrication eases symptoms and inspires the student to target different regions in the body. The mind's focused awareness turns to itself, revealing higher attention, whereby unconscious becomes conscious and the healing response is triggered.

To maintain or improve the current homeostasis or work attentively with severe degeneration cultivates tremendous confidence and resilience, enlightening deeper aspects of yogic philosophy. Physical restriction and debilitation act as guru to reality existing beyond the mind's impositions. Although there may be pain, suffering only arises in a mind conflicting reality's play. By welcoming pain, the mind and its re-actions step outside of one's 'story'. Rather than resist, yoga bequeaths the knowledge to harmonise with what 'is'. Routine grows out of this root, informing the student what to do, having learned the underlying principles 'of practice' through practice. Yoga can reduce arthritic symptoms and medicinal dependence, providing autonomy and opportunity for those who practice. Energy is regulated and conserved; movement of thought and mind are minimal, yet potent.

ASANAS

Start by limbering the body very gently. Isolate joints from the spine outwards. Repetition seeds experience and grows intuition. Observe the breath while targeting weaker/ painful areas, giving them space to be, as they are.

Keep movement simple so the body can reveal its nature. Practice combines repetition, listening and learning.

Depending upon one's condition, standing, sitting and/or lying practices are used. A wall or chair is used for additional

support; notice any resistance to this help.

Create small, gentle movements at the hips to circulate current, and shoulders to facilitate relaxation and remove stagnancy. Work with the existing range of movement for each joint, limb or extremity and how they move through flexion, extension, inward and outward rotation. Progress with larger movements of the limbs and study the results of your actions. The spine bends forward, backward, sideways and twists. Add to this balance stances, like the tree and inversions like the downward dog, plough or legs up the wall pose, (if the student feels these are realistic) and this covers all possibilities through which the body moves.

Practice educates us how to carry and transfer force through the spine and how this relates to the movement of fresh oxygenated blood which rinses vitality throughout the system. Organs remain nourished, tissues springy and joints oiled. Work towards the extremities and back inwards to the spine. Whole body movements like standing hip width apart, rotating the torso from side to side and allowing the arms to swing at the sides, encourage tremendous blood and lymphatic flow throughout. Use the breath-mind to locate/generate and direct warm current with steady awareness.

Poses like the serpent, locust and bow, (countered with a nice forward bend), trigger the spinal energy easily and so can be attempted gently within one's capacity. Whether supine, prone, standing, or sitting, all classical yoga postures reduce muscle atrophy, maintain elasticity and tone. As isolation and sensitivity skills improve, all facets evolve.

Stretch and contract the neck, wrists, hands, ankles and feet attentively. Where there is little or no movement, remain still and observe the breath and mind arising. Exercise the eyes (meridians), tongue (tendons) and gently clench and release the teeth (bones).

Mudras (gestures) such as 'reverse prayer' (prayer position behind the back or hold the hands, wrists, forearms of elbows together), combined with Bandhas (diaphragmatic breathing) and Kriyas (incorporating the movement or concentration of breath and mind) isolate and manipulate the pranic force, promoting balance.

All asanas and mudras produce a fabulous relaxation response in connective tissue which has stiffened and lost tactility. Regular self-acupressure massage and the use of props both help rebalance vital current.

PRANAYAM

Lengthen exhalations gracefully and become aware of the pause after the breath. Lengthen pauses comfortably by regulating a refined tension in the throat, which enables a smooth and effortless inhalation, below and behind the

navel. Exhale to prepare, pause and inhale; spiralling, flexing and extending the joints, limbs and digits, even adding a little tension to the movement to intensify. Direct the movement-breath-wave into the bone marrow. When exhaling, release and relax. This flushes out impurities and discharges stagnancy as oxygenated blood rinses in.

Then reverse; prepare with 'inhale' and do the exercises on 'exhale'. Ujjayi (Towards Victory) and Nadi Shodana (Nerve Purification) for balancing, stability, energy and relaxation, Kapal Bhati (Shining Skull) – very gently, for toxic purging, strengthening and relaxing and Sitali for cooling.

RELAXATION AND MEDITATION

Relax in Corpse Pose regularly, focusing on breath, body and all-inclusive mind. Inhale from tailbone to crown, exhale from crown through forehead, to palate and tongue down the front body to the tail. Repeat comfortably to stimulate the body's primary meridians. Pain is our teacher and may be unavoidable. My experience is that suffering is optional. Practice can trigger the symptoms of an illness. Rather than pray for a cure, pray for wisdom to accept the reality at hand. Illness is opportunity for growth, whereby we learn the meaning of detachment, from our effort as the doer and with the identification with the body as the Self. This awareness lifts the yogi to the heights of immortality.

Matt Gluck is a British Wheel of Yoga and Life Centre qualified teacher and mentor, helping yoga teachers in training. He has been teaching martial arts including Tai Chi & Qi Gong, and Hatha Yoga for 22 years. Matt teaches classes and mentors privately in Hertfordshire & London. For more information on contraindications, email yogamatt@pranasanayoga.com. The 'How To Breathe' DVD is available from pranasanayoga.com and Amazon.

