



YOGA *for autism*

MATT GLUCK

Autism is a developmental 'disorder' (perhaps 'difference' is a better word) which usually appears in the first 3 years of life. It is a genetic, and in rare cases environmentally caused disorder of 'unusual' neural development, which occurs in approximately two people in a thousand. It is characterised by impaired communication and social interaction skills, repetitive behaviour (such as hand flapping and swaying) and limited interests or activities, hyper sensitivity and clumsiness. Disruption to their routines can lead to an outburst of anxiety, rage and even self harming. They are usually always occupied in motion, which focuses their energy yet keeps them isolated from their environment. Unable to connect, the autistic is often more interested in objects than people, which contributes to their feelings of loneliness and isolation. As well as unusual eating behaviour in about 70% of children with an ASD, there is often poor muscle tone and motor control which can lead to great reductions in self esteem and confidence. With the right care, partial and seemingly full recoveries are possible. This is largely due to the proven methods of integrative education, coupled with the unconditional love of both teachers and parents.

HOW YOGA HELPS

A few years ago, I worked for three years with several groups of Special Needs children at the Moselle School in Tottenham, London. This included students with autism. One thing I found interesting was that the sense

withdrawal most of us require to reduce our craving and attachment in the world is not quite so if you have autism. The autistic's awareness is already Self involved, yet their energy may require positive direction outwards to the world, in order for them to anchor meaning to their life. Sensory communication between teacher and student during practice is vital; the teacher acts as a mirror of love, displaying their willingness to enter the autistic world as an extension of their own. They connect with the student and not the label or diagnosis.

Working with animal and 'object' poses like tree, provides wonderfully stimulating interfaces. The use of touch, movement, social and verbal skills all involve the student multi dimensionally. Dance, singing, storytelling, game playing and massage can be interwoven, allowing students to open their heart to a group environment. Yoga asanas impart bodily awareness, self control, insight into the breath, the mind and its role in controlling the emotions. A growing practice introduces new and more challenging postures and sequences to develop the student's physiological and psychological functionality, concentration and integration. The brain learns new behavioural patterns (also using chanting, deep relaxation and visualisation), providing new and improved skill for internal and external relationship, while reducing stress levels simultaneously. Autistic students, used to the predictability of repetitive behaviour (such as lining up toy cars), thrive upon yoga's

positive routines. Students learn the signs of negative mood spiralling and outburst, so they can employ their yoga toolbox to remain calm and steady. Through yogic repetition, students develop discipline within the mundane and gain insight into Being, in which they find the one consciousness. This love opens us all up to each other, in order to heal the deep trauma. Where life may have been a barren plane of emotional unavailability, the seeds of opportunity now begin to rise - life and love burst outward, expanding and flowing through space-time.

A good teacher shares 'Being', allowing the student to find 'In-Tuition'. Practice is always enjoyable and inspiring, providing focus and calm. The use of the senses and tactile aids like props or image cards help the student share, allowing them to see all things as an extension of their deepest self. Practices synchronise cerebral function, stimulating the intellect. The awakening of a higher self further removes cognitive blocks which occur through 'unusual' wiring, as opposed to a lack of willingness to partake in the community.

Yoga provides the building blocks which reveal how the body and mind function on a level recognisable by each individual. The urge to turn and run away (e.g. from all the surrounding noise) is replaced by determination and the willingness to remain present and persevere. The breathing techniques and guided visualisation during yoga practice can open the student's mind to accepting situations and letting go of long held stresses and beliefs.

Practice can be as little as 'a tree pose in a queue', ten minutes each day and perhaps 30 minutes to an hour, once or twice or a week.

EXERCISES

Cerebral integration exercise: hold the opposite ear lobes and squat down (exhale) and stand up (inhale). This moves a lot of blood and stimulates the neural pathways in the brain to coordinate cerebral function. If squatting is too intense then do knee raises to chest. If you prefer to breathe out as you raise or stand up from the squat that's fine.

Cerebral and abdominal brain integration – rub the tummy and pat the head, pat the head and rub the tummy, being aware of your breath as you move.

- Ear, face, hand and foot massage to stimulate acupoints for the entire body.
- Practice simple mantras to train auditory skills.
- Asanas
- Chair pose – developing postural awareness and strength.
- Tree pose (developing balance, strength and focus)

in prayer position. Hold the ear lobe opposite to the standing leg with 1) the opposite hand, 2) same side hand and 3) hold both ears with opposite hands.

- Eagle pose – releases upper body and dorsal tension, develops strength and balance. Practice crossing the arms and massaging the ears for cerebral integration. Use the arms to 'fly the wings', inhaling raising, exhaling lowering.
- Stork Pose – For balance and strength and lengthening of the thighs, abdomen and back especially.
- Cat and Cow – forward and back bend cycle to mobilise and enhance spinal awareness, upper and lower body integration and improve breath to movement coordination. Students can also imitate the animal sounds; children love it and the adults do too when they let go.
- Dog Pose – downward and upward dog to develop bodily strength and spinal mobility and lung capacity.
- Snake, bow, locust, plough and shoulder stand; all to increase mobility, strength, balance and presence.

Pranayam

Ujjayi (Victorious Breath) – for calming centering, grounding and connecting.

Kapal Bhati (Shining Skull Breath) – Practice dynamic exhalations, the inhale is passive. Exhale 10 short breaths, inhale one full one. Alternatively, exhale a rapid breath, allow a pause and passive inhale, and then repeat 10 times. Pause and repeat a few more rounds.

Nadi Shodana - (Alternate Nostril Breathing) - for cerebral balance; Cover right nostril, then Exhale and inhale through left. Switch to the other side. Repeat the cycle for five minutes.

RELAXATION AND MEDITATION

Practice yoga nidra (yogic sleep) supine and also sitting up, as one progresses. Tune in to Ujjayi breathing, become aware of the crown- point, heart and abdominal connection. Be aware of the mind-space and allow meditation to arise. If disease and disorder have arisen out of human division, then such differences typical of ASD's serve to unite us again.

For more information about Yoga and Autism please contact Jo Manual at the Special Yoga Centre specialyoga.org.uk. For more information about Matt, Pranasana Yoga, coaching and private mentoring, visit pranasanayoga.com or email yogamatt@pranasanayoga.com

Matt's book and DVD's 'How To Breathe' are available from Amazon.