

## **UC San Diego**

### **Summer 2014 - UC San Diego Health Journal of Nursing: The Unique Power of Nursing**

#### **Title**

Yoga and Mindfulness: Perspective of an RN Yoga Instructor

#### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4zp6s88f>

#### **Journal**

UC San Diego Health Journal of Nursing, 7(1)

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#### **Publication Date**

2014-07-01

Peer reviewed

# Yoga and Mindfulness: Perspective of an RN Yoga Instructor

By Christie Lane RN, CCRN, RYT- 500

People often ask, “How can you do that?” when I mention my plans to attend or teach a yoga class after working a 7PM to 7AM night shift in the critical care unit at UC San Diego Sulpizio Cardiovascular Center. Actually, I cannot imagine not doing it. My yoga practice is what keeps me going! In the beginning my practice grew out of an effort to conserve time and multitask by combining the many potentially time consuming things that are important to me- meditating, maintaining a peaceful and compassionate mind, keeping my heart and lungs healthy, stretching, building strength, and having some fun between the long 12-hour shifts that would otherwise take up all of my time and energy. What I discovered is that yoga also has an influence over the quality of nursing care I provide. Feeling energized, well rested, and happier to be at work because I am not neglecting myself affects my interactions with patients and fellow staff in a positive way. This is because yoga is really about relationships. Not only improving the one you have with yourself, but also with others. Physician Dean Ornish, a pioneer in non-drug, non-surgical reversal of heart disease believes that “the healing

power of love and intimacy- that is to say relationship- has a greater impact on our survival than genetic predisposition, lifestyle choices...or the use of drugs and surgery” (Jackson, 2010, no pg). The quality of our presence and how we show up for our patients is everything, and the practice of yoga can help!

Yoga provides us with space to move and breathe; giving us an opportunity to discover what really lies at the inner core of our heart and mind. It gives us a chance to experience the deepest truth about simply being, and to learn that we are not our thoughts. The Yoga Sutras, 196 small aphorisms on yoga, written by the Indian sage, Patanjali, begin by defining yoga as “the cessation of the fluctuation of thought” (Miller, 2007, no pg). We may come into a yoga class and be able to sit still for a moment, but find that our minds are still moving. Instead of judging ourselves for this incessant internal chatter, we replace our judgment with curiosity. In yoga we learn to watch and observe, becoming one with an underlying awareness that



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Christie is a certified critical care RN at UCSD Sulpizio Cardiovascular Center, where she is a member of the Palliative Care and Holistic Nursing committees. She provides health care staff with lectures on cultural and spiritual awareness in efforts to maintain and improve the quality of care received.

Christie first began practicing yoga in 2006 at Yoga Works in Costa Mesa where she became inspired to enhance her western knowledge of health as a critical care nurse with the philosophies of yoga. After completing the 500 HR Yoga Works teacher training certification Christie founded Guru Gita Yoga to empower people with more holistic ways in which to maintain & improve their physical & emotional wellbeing. She guides her students in the discovery of their own inner guru, a constant source of light & peace.

She has also studied and trained in the arts of dance, Kung Fu, equestrian horseback riding, and motocross. Having attending numerous workshops & retreats with Tim Miller, David Swenson, Richard Freeman, Erika Burkhalter & Gerhard Gessner, Christie teaches Vinyasa Flow Yoga with a solid foundation in the tradition of Ashtanga yoga.



is always there. This is a state of union with our higher self, sometimes referred to as pure consciousness. Wherever our mind is at any moment can be an object of meditation. Is there a pattern? Simply paying attention to what is happening inside, giving the mind room to rest, to sit with itself for a moment, opens up the possibility of having a different response, free of anxiety. This is not only beneficial for ourselves, but for the world that surrounds us. This underlying background of open awareness or pure consciousness allows us to give unconditional love and support, even to those who we may not know or understand. This is the true nature of an open mind. Yoga teaches that the part of our mind with no boundaries or preset limits, formed from past thought patterns, is the true nature of the self.

An authentic yoga practice begins with listening, a skill also essential to nursing. Listening gives people space to be who they are, just as they are, in the present moment. In yoga we listen to our breath. Ujjayi, the yogic breath, is done audibly so that we may hear its quality. Is it shallow, rapid, or forced? How do we want it to sound? Are we holding on too tightly to something? Where does that tendency come from? Do we take this amount of tension and force, or lack thereof, into other parts of our life? Asking these questions, and listening for the answers gives us the opportunity to make any necessary adjustments to our practice, be it to soften, apply less effort, take a rest, or respond with an increase in our effort or attention. Yoga's emphasis on observation, listening to our breath, focusing on a singly point of concentration, and attention to our alignment in poses brings about a certain steadiness of mind. We can be present, focused, still. This brings about inner spaciousness, where before there may have been a clutter of thoughts. Bringing this state of mind and skill into the practice of nursing allows us to respond to the needs of any situation. Alert and open to what is, a new dimension is brought forth. Instead of reacting to



the situation, we can merge with it.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart is often quoted as saying “The silence between the notes is as important as the notes themselves” ([http://www.bookbrowse.com/quotes/detail/index.cfm?quote\\_number=349](http://www.bookbrowse.com/quotes/detail/index.cfm?quote_number=349)). As nurses we often feel the need to fill the space, maybe with action, answers, or solutions; but allowing for silence is grounding especially for a patient who is suffering. Not always doing something can feel strange to us. We may think that we are being distant, lacking compassion or acting in an uncaring way; but the truth is that we are able to relate at a deeper level, beyond thought and emotion. One evening I cared for a woman whose cancer had spread throughout her body. Although she had already been given her ordered dose of pain medication she woke during the night with terrible spasms of pain racking her body. She told me that she had never experienced the pain as being so severe. Having already given her the maximum dose of pain medication ordered, I paged the doctor on call. At that moment I felt somewhat useless, and then I remembered the significance of being present so I simply stood there at her bedside holding her hand as she wailed in pain. I did not speak, I did not move except to occasionally touch her head. I did not run from her room to escape the misery of her moans; I remained

silent and still. The violent spasms of pain subsided shortly after additional doses of medication were given; but it was my presence that she repeatedly thanked me for, not the drugs. She told me how grateful she was that I had stayed calmly by her side. It can be very trying to witness the suffering of another, but that presence has power. In that moment, in the stillness of presence, there is a coming together; there is true love and compassion.

The Yoga Sutras teach us that the poses are to be done with relaxed effort. The goal is to be “*sthira sukham*,” stable and comfortable. By using the body we can practice looking more deeply within ourselves. At the same time we are honoring the body and caring for it, improving our circulation, digestion, elimination, coordination, strength, and flexibility. We turn, twist, and stretch the body like kneading a piece of dough, attempting to extract insight and truth. Working like a mirror, we are shown the truth of exactly where we are physically, mentally, and emotionally while learning to let go of our expectations, our attachment to results. How do we respond to poses that require us to balance, using only one point of contact with the earth, bending us forward and backward, and inverting our bodies upside down? Are we able to maintain a relaxed state of mind? Tim Miller, one of the first

Americans certified to teach Ashtanga Yoga by its founder, Pattabhi Jois, says yoga is “designed to be confrontational” (Miller, 2007, no page). According to Miller (2007), “...the great masters say there are only two experiences in life, fear and love...” and love is described as letting go of fear. The act of facing our fears makes us more spacious inside and builds confidence. This process of releasing our fears and expectations can help us to avoid disappointment and develop patience, another quality that nurses must embrace. Can we be fully present with others while letting go of our expectations? Yoga teaches us to use our breath, coming back to it again and again, using it as an anchor to keep us grounded. The quality of our breath is a reflection of the state of our mind. Richard Freeman, a famous yoga master, likens the mind and breath to “two fish swimming in tandem... [when one] vibrates, the other does so equally... if we can control one of the them, then we have a handle on the other one” (Freeman, 2002, no pg).



Studying the science of yoga, Chris Streeter of Boston University, found evidence that suggests an increase in thalamic gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), a neurotransmitter that improves a person’s ability to stay calm while analyzing data (Davis, 2012). Streeter’s study showed a positive correlation between yoga and the subjects’ ability to remain alert, but with a relaxed state of mind, while problem solving. In addition to relaxed alertness, yoga may contribute to the ability to achieve deeper insight into a situation due to increased right brain activity, which is associated with higher levels of creativity. According to Eckhart Tolle, “All creativity comes out of inner spaciousness” (Tolle, 2008, no pg). Research has shown that yoga can decrease serum cortisol levels related to its ability to decrease stress. Brain waves are slowed from beta to alpha, even showing traces of theta waves, which are thought to indicate an opening into our unconscious mind where true creativity is thought to arise. The increase in thalamic GABA levels decreases anxiety and improves mood. Stress, on the other hand, can diminish the quality and effectiveness of everything we do.

Nurses often instruct family members to get rest and take care of themselves so that they will be able to care for their loved one. This holds true for us as well. Michael Carroll, author of “Awake at Work,” says that it is important to take time to appreciate the intimacy of a personal ritual, whatever that may be. Taking time to “pause and fully appreciate our lives on the spot...an intimate moment of simply being,” before beginning our hectic day (Michael, 2004, pg 183). Yoga has been shown to decrease lethargy and improve the quality of sleep, mental stamina, emotional balance, and a positive sense of self. Whether through yoga or another form of daily practice, it is important that we allow space for ourselves so that we are able to give our best to the care of others.

Evidence of how well we understand ourselves lies in the quality of our relationships with others. We are a social

species, and being able to connect with others in a positive way affects our mood and enables us to feel better about ourselves and the lives we lead. Nurses should not underestimate the benefit that a good patient-nurse relationship can have. The positive intention to be present increases the power we have to promote healing. With patience and love we are able to tune in to the oneness of ourselves with others. The tone of our voice, a moment of eye contact, and a simple gesture can all speak volumes even in silence. “The foundation for greatness is honoring the small things of the present moment, which are always small and always simple, but concealed within it lies the greatest power” (Tolle, 2008, no pg).

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