

Pain and Yoga

by JoAnn Matray

When you read the title of this article you may come to a quick conclusion and think – yes yoga can be painful. Well that’s not the intent of this article. Much to the contrary the subject is how yoga can reduce pain or atleast help in dealing with pain.

About two years ago I started an episode of chronic pain. When the pain started I thought I had a ‘Urinary Tract Infection’ commonly known as a UTI. I was going on a cruise and I was desperate to go and to have a great time. I went to my internist and an emergency care doctor and left on the cruise loaded down with drugs that I thought would help. Well those drugs only seemed to make things worse and I had to cut short the vacation and come home because I was so uncomfortable and only strong narcotics would provide relief.

When I got home I thought it would only be a short time before my problem was uncovered through the miracle of modern medicine. I trekked from doctor to doctor to no avail. Over and over I was declared perfectly healthy and felt the general consensus was that I was better off on a psychologist's couch. So, I tried that too but I was still in pain.

I had practiced yoga for years on and off. I had loads of yoga tapes which I liked to do but weeks would go by when I forgot they existed. When I was in the worst of my pain I would sometimes lie on my couch in a fetal position and cry. Somehow that did something for me. Maybe it was just a way to wallow in my pain. Again, I would do yoga on occasion but not on a daily basis.

I finally found an empathetic internist who thought that my problem could be musculature. One of the many things she suggested was that I see my ‘yoga master’ for a personalized program. Well, I thought, that’s expensive and I have all these tapes so I started doing the tapes more often.

The more I did it the more I came to the realization that there were, for me, two distinct aspects of yoga. One was the exercise aspect and the yoga I did to sweat and to stretch. I stretched my glutes and my hamstrings and got some aerobic and muscle strength out of the deal. The other aspect I saw was the more meditative aspect of yoga. The height of this is lying on the floor doing savasana (often said to be the hardest yoga pose to hold) and getting into a state that is so relaxed that you truly feel serene.

I started doing yoga more and more and I finally did seek the advice of a ‘yoga master’ which was a wonderful treat. My yoga progressed from doing yoga tapes to finding a practice of my own and listening to my body when I did my practice. I never do the same practice two days in a row because my body is never the same two days in a row.

Over a period of a year and a half my yoga got more and more intense – not hard

but intense. I realized that there were days when I was in pain and after I finished my practice the pain would be less and I would be able to deal with it better. I was able to accept it more. The feelings of 'why me' became less and the feeling that this was just part of real life became more and more focused.

Sometimes my yoga was very aerobic doing Sun Salutations and other more rigorous flows and poses. Sometimes my yoga was more restorative and more meditative. That was when I found I got more relief from my discomfort. I would lie in a supportive pose and just BREATHE deeply in an out. Slow 'belly breaths' with my stomach expanding on the 'in breath' and contracting on the out breath.

What caused that relief? I think it was deep relaxation in my body causing the muscles in my pelvis and everywhere else to release. I stopped 'fighting' the pain and I just let it be. I was empowered by the fact that although nothing can be done for me according to the doctors, I could nevertheless do something for myself. I can have control over my body and my mind and I can make a difference in this cycle of pain.

There is nothing stronger than feeling that you can do something despite the odds. You don't have to lose your consciousness to drugs in order to have relief and be able to think clearly again.

I did get a prescription from my internist for pain and I did do many other things to try to relieve my pain, but the yoga helped more than anything else. Sometimes it just gave me something to do so I wouldn't sit at night and dwell on the pain. Other times it just made me more accepting of the pain and made me think of other things.

So, if you are suffering from any kind of pain consider yoga. You don't have to be physically fit to do it and you can even do it if you are confined to your bed or don't have the ability to get down on the floor.

Start with the main concept of yoga which is breathing. You are probably thinking 'I breathe all day long. What's the big deal about that?' Well what I am talking about is conscious breathing. Think about yourself breathing. Take a slow deep breath in and expand your ribs and your stomach. Exhale that breath very slowly. Do it for a few minutes and in the end see how you feel. Are you more relaxed? Do you feel better?

Now, if you can go a step further raise your arms with your in breath and lower them with your out breath. Do this four or five times and then just relax and enjoy the peace this will give you.

If you can, get a beginning yoga tape or a book. Try it a little with gentle poses that won't cause strain. Try a yoga class in your neighborhood. It all starts with breathing – just like life.