

Women's Health

Divine Bliss VS Hot Body

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Can yoga really deliver a toned physique – or just inner peace?



It's supposed to be the most killer yoga class of my life. That's why I travelled to India, to an ashram – an ashram! – on the banks of the Ganges where cows wander the roads, not far from where The Beatles hung with the Maharishi. An ashram with a yoga studio whose enormous windows face the foothills of the Himalayas.

But after 90 minutes, I'm left thinking one thing: yoga in India sucks.

Yoga was calling to me over the past year – calling to me more than any of the other fitness classes I've ever taken. Even though I know all that heart-amping spinning is good for me, the experience is misery. But yoga? I love it. I love the cosy vibe of the studio. I love not wearing shoes. I even love being told to “breathe through my eyeballs” and “fluff my armpits”. Mostly, though, I love yoga because of how it makes me feel: lighter, taller, more balanced, less

homicidal. It pushes me to try insane twisting, bending, balancing moves with my body. Without fail, I leave my class thinking, “I'm a freaking rock star,” which is the complete opposite of what I think when I leave spin class or an hour on the cross trainer: “I never want to go back.”

So, here I am, in a roomful of ashramites in flowing frocks. I am where yoga started thousands of years ago – sitting on my purple mat, legs crossed, eyes closed – hoping to find the ultimate yoga experience so I can quit the gym for good without sacrificing my fitness.

“Stand up,” commands a voice from the front of the room. I open my eyes and see a very small Indian woman standing on a platform. She's wearing a hot-pink tracksuit.

“Reach to the sky,” she says. I reach to the sky.

“Touch your toes,” she says. I touch my toes.

“Now,” she says, “do that 21 times”.

This exercise is followed by lunges, 21 on each side. Then opening and closing the eyes – 21 times. Then swivelling to the right... then to the left. Twenty-one times. Sure, my heart rate is up and I'm sweating. But this is not what I envisioned when I planned my yoga pilgrimage to India. I feel like I'm exactly where I don't want to be – in a gym counting the minutes until this torture is over. Have I travelled all this way for a workout that is inherently no different from a step class?



Hatha care

Several clicks on the computer could have saved me the trip. A few years ago, the American Council on Exercise gathered together a bunch of healthy young women who hadn't exercised or done yoga for six months. They were split into two groups: one group did nothing; the other did hatha yoga for 55 minutes three times a week for eight weeks. Hatha classes are generally mellow: five minutes of relaxation and breathing, 10 minutes of sun salutations, 35 minutes of various yoga postures, and five minutes relaxing on your back in the aptly named corpse pose.

The researchers found that although the yoga did boost strength, flexibility, endurance and balance, it barely raised either the women's maximum heart rate or their VO₂max (that's the

amount of oxygen a body converts into energy during each minute of maxed-out exercise – the higher the number, the fitter a person's lungs). In other words, it did nada to boost their cardiovascular fitness.

"The yoga wasn't intense enough," says John Porcari, the exercise physiologist who led the study at the University of Wisconsin's Human Performance Lab. To improve or maintain heart health, the Australian Department of Health and Ageing advises doing at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity, like walking, most (preferably all) days of the week. Ideally you'll also do regular vigorous activity, like running, for greater health and fitness benefits. Hatha is definitely not vigorous; and it seems it barely counts as "moderate-intensity" either. A study in *The Journal of Strength & Conditioning Research* found that hatha yoga raised VO₂ readings only half as high as walking did – meaning you'd have to do a whole lot of hatha in a week to meet the aerobic goals.

Power on

So hatha doesn't exactly challenge your heart. Vinyasa flow yoga, on the other hand, is more cardio-friendly because you move quickly from one pose to the next. I've been in vinyasa classes where I've had to mop my sweat off the mat. I've held Warrior I (basically a runner's lunge with your arms in the air) and felt my heart pounding against the inside of my chest. If that isn't vigorous activity, I don't know what is.

And vinyasa, like hatha, has another benefit: the chilled attitude it encourages – let go of your expectations, forget about your to-do list, stop fantasising about confronting the guy who cut you off at that stop sign – is also said to be vital for heart health. Studies by the internal medicine specialist Dr Dean Ornish, who pioneered the use of yoga in cardiac rehab, found that the relaxation benefits of yoga are just as important for the prevention of heart disease as the fitness benefits of cardio. Typical exercise classes like spinning and step do not include "lie on

your back and relax for five minutes” as part of the exercise. (And not once has my spin class instructor ever massaged my temples. I’m just sayin’.)

But if you love yoga and you want a truly serious workout, you need to up the intensity so it’s more like power yoga, in which you warm up by moving at warp speed through a series of postures and then go on to other complicated poses that you either hold for a long time or do again and again. In another study at the Human Performance Lab, Porcari and his researchers found that 50 minutes of power yoga burned 1005 kilojoules – about 390 more than hatha – and catapulted the heart into the coveted aerobic zone (60 to 85 per cent of your maximum heart rate). Better yet, a study from Adelphi University in the US found that power yoga can burn up to 38kJ a minute. Hellooooo.

So, it looks like I may be able to ditch my gym membership after all.

Trainer tactics

Now science has shown that certain styles of yoga – vinyasa and power especially – aren’t all breath and no brawn, serious trainers (you know, the ones with clipboards in their hands and a string of letters after their names) are starting to recognise that it has serious fitness cred. They no longer consider it just “wimpy stretching”.

“Yoga is a totally viable form of exercise,” says strength and conditioning specialist Mike Mejia, co-author of *Scrawny to Brawny: The Complete Guide to Building Muscle the Natural Way*. If Mejia, who’s been a trainer for 20 years and swears by circuit training (bursts of exercise with little rest in between to raise your heart rate) gives yoga the seal of approval, then I should be golden. Flow (vinyasa) yoga, Mejia says, is a lot like circuit training; that’s why he regularly incorporates it into the strength routines he prescribes his clients. “But yoga does have one significant shortcoming,” he says. “It’s not intense enough to raise your metabolic rate” (that is, the number of kilojoules your body burns at rest). And as a girl who wants to lose a few kilos, I could use every single second of the post-workout kJ burn that comes with more hardcore aerobic exercise.

The good news is, I don’t need to do a heap of the aerobic stuff. Mejia suggests a spin class here, a brisk walk there, some hardcore vacuuming. But for the most part, I can leave that techno music where it belongs – at the gym – and go to the yoga studio, where I belong.

Then, when people ask me why I look so good (because, in my fantasy mind, they’re going to ask me all the time), I’ll be able to say: “I do yoga.”