

## YOGA'S PLACE IN THE BUSINESS WORLD

Yoga is not decades or centuries old but is a millennia old tradition. It has survived the ages for two reasons; first, it has the capacity to evolve and adapt to the changing times, and, second, the human condition has not altered much in the thousands of years that yoga has been around and the practice remains as relevant today as it was when it originated.

Yoga has not ceased to be beneficial in the modern age but has become more so. Yoga is not an eastern practice for those seeking an alternative lifestyle. It is a universal practice that has the potential to radically transform your life. Even two thousand years ago when Patanjali enunciated the *Yoga Sutra* the idea of yoga was to provide a way of being based on ethical principles, physical strength and good postural alignment, deep breathing and meditation. A lawyer having such a way of being would stand in good stead.

### Physical Effects of Business Work

What are some of the effects that being employed in the business world have upon our bodies and our minds? We spend a lot of time seated, working at desks and, increasingly, at computer keyboards. In a seated position our sacrum (the fused vertebrae at the base of our spines) curves under our bodies excessively. This flattens out our lumbar spine (the low back where the spine ought to curve inwards). The abdominal muscles become slack. To look at screens or papers on desks in front of us we typically incline our heads forward. This action flattens out the cervical spine in the neck. Again, this portion of the spine ought to curve inwards. Our shoulders tend to wrap forward. Our chests become narrow and the muscles of the chest concentrically stressed. Our shoulder blades are drawn away from one another and the muscles of our upper back become strap-like as they are eccentrically stressed. Prolonged sitting also tends to shorten the hamstrings in the back of the thighs.

The upshot of all this is that when we stand up we look like a question mark. The question is, what can you do about that?

Being in the business world generally requires that we dress for business. But business shoes are often not particularly good for our feet. The floors we stand on in business environments are often quite hard and unforgiving. Simply being in shoes a lot, and high-heeled shoes are especially bad, tends to squeeze the toes together forcing the metatarsals (the long bones in the feet) out of alignment. Bunions can be a painful and unattractive consequence.

### Mental Effects of Business Work

Much of business life involves working to deadlines. The contracts that lawyers handle are littered with time limits and obligations based on time constraints. Litigation is ordered according to timetables. We operate under pressure of having to do work within a limited amount of time and one file's deadlines pay little heed to another file's deadlines such that we are often operating under a state of too much work to handle comfortably within the available time.

Much of lawyers' work involves assuming the burden of resolving the problems of our clients. We have expertise that our clients lack in making things happen, in overcoming obstacles such as regulatory requirements and in resolving disputes. The stakes are high for our clients and the pressure on us to achieve the right result for them is considerable. Perhaps our client stands to be unjustifiably convicted of a crime. Perhaps a child will be placed in a dangerous home environment. Perhaps our client will lose their livelihood.

On top of our own life struggles and concerns, carrying the burden of our clients' difficulties can result in chronic feelings of stress and anxiety that impinge upon our ability to relax and to enjoy our time away from work. Comfort foods, alcohol and zone-out activities like watching television are some of the means by which we endeavour to escape the challenges of our work. These are what might be termed white sugar activities having short-term satisfaction without the depth or sustenance of more meaningful releases from work. The question, again, is what can you do about that?

### **Benefits of Yoga Practice**

Yoga is a means of finding relief from the adverse consequences of our work, both physical and mental. As a physical system of exercise, yoga is designed to align our bodies as they ought to be such that we can stand in a balanced and comfortable way with our joints stacking vertically and our heads held high. Yoga brings strength to our muscular bodies as well as correctly aligning our skeletal bodies. By stabilising and strengthening our joints and increasing the range of mobility in our joints, yoga lets us move freely. Participating in sport for leisure, playing games with our children or even simply standing up or getting out of bed need not be an occasion of physical strain.

Yoga is a practice involving deep breathing. The actions in a yoga practice are coordinated to the practitioner's breath. In power vinyasa yoga ("vinyasa" is a flowing action in which one pose naturally evolves out of another) there is an action for each inhale and an action for each exhale. The practitioner drops deeply into their breath and moves at a sustainable pace. Just as a metronome sets the pace for a piece of music, so the practitioner's breathing sets the pace for the movements of the body. This deep awareness of one's breath has a soothing, meditative quality to it. As we focus our conscious mind on our breath we exclude from consciousness the other thoughts that seek to take our equanimity from us. If nothing else, the hiatus from worrying about our work that yoga practice gives us is a great benefit in and of itself.

The mental calmness and clarity that yoga practice confers becomes something we can access at any time of stress. Instead of breathing less in moments of stress or anxiety, we cultivate the ability to slow down and to breathe more breath per breath. As we do so, time seems to slow down. We become less reactive and instead find a balanced, considered way of responding to the challenges of life.

### **Hamish Kenworthy and Apollo Power Yoga**

I practiced law for a decade in the 1990s. I rue the person I was in that period. I rue the way I responded to pressure and to other people. After I left the practice of law I became a house husband. In that role, just as in the law, there were many frustrations. It was not until I was introduced to yoga that I began to acquire the tools to better respond to challenges and difficulties.

Yoga's physical demands appealed to me. I had played rugby, cricket and golf for many years and after retiring from rugby had taken up long distance running. I was surprised to find in yoga a practice that had some cardio element and that was strengthening and energising. Not all types of yoga are the same but in power vinyasa yoga I found all those dynamic physical elements. I also discovered that I was nowhere near as strong as I had supposed. In power vinyasa practice I could raise my heart rate, burn calories, energise and align my entire body and calm my mind all in a low-impact way. The lessons I have taken from yoga I wish I had known earlier in life. Rather than disliking myself and trying to put others down to put myself up as I once did, I am content in myself. I am better able to establish some critical distance between myself and outside issues and concerns.

I have trained with renowned yoga teacher Baron Baptiste and have become New Zealand's first, and only, certified Baptiste power vinyasa yoga teacher. At the studio I have opened in the central city, Apollo Power Yoga, I offer power vinyasa classes, both all levels and power basics, and slower moving, more gentle practices called power restore. All styles of yoga allow the practitioner to find ease even in the face of challenge and to learn to relax with the world around them. For every body there is a yoga practice and every body was made for yoga. At Apollo we have a starter package where your first fortnight at the studio costs only \$20.00 – a great way to immerse in the practice and become familiar with it.

### **Flexibility**

A word that seems to immediately spring to mind when people speak of yoga is flexibility. Yoga is not about flexibility. Yoga allows people to become more mobile and recover ranges of movement that have been lost over time. The thought, however, that you need to be flexible to perform yoga is a fallacy. It is like saying you are too thirsty to have a drink of water to say you are too inflexible to do yoga. The greatest flexibility required is attitudinal – to get past the stereotypes and open up to the possibilities of a yoga practice. Show up as you are, rather than as you think you should be, and let that be the starting point for your growth.

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