

# The secret tool for ultimate life success

Yoga has evolved from a hippy hobby, to a yummy mummy obsession, to a modern mainstream outlet for stress. But it is so much more than downward dog. What if it could be a means for living a life of success in all areas? Anita Chaudhuri delves deeply into the eight limbs of this ancient practice to find out

**M**y yoga routine used to be so simple. Every Tuesday evening, I would roll up my mat, don a pair of trackie bottoms and my trusty *Tank Girl* T-shirt, and head off to the local community centre. Two hours later, I'd be back home, spiritually enlightened and ready for sleep.

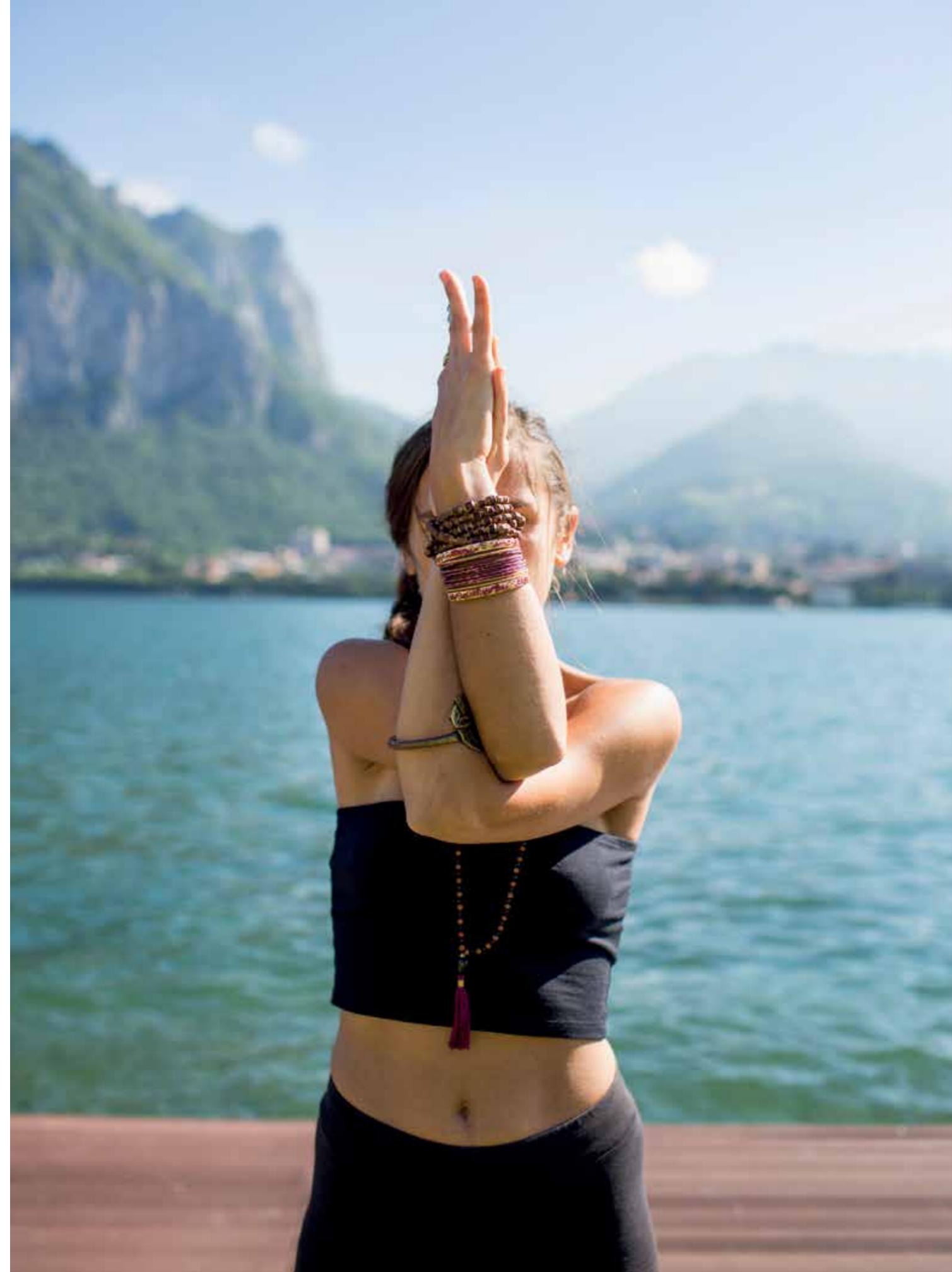
But that was before... Before yoga meant travelling to a far-flung retreat or the hipster studio way across town... Before the DKNY mat and the Lululemon 'Vinyasa to vino' tote bag... And long, long before the rise of the now obligatory 'yoga selfie'. Nowadays, going to a yoga class can be fraught with anxiety, even for an old hand like myself. Where *did* I leave my Manuka lotus tee? Oh no, I forgot to have a pedicure! Should I take my own yoga mat to the Kundalini workshop, or will that look a bit obsessive? I'm feeling a little creaky today, what if I can't keep up?

And all that is assuming you can find a suitable class at all. The yoga landscape grows ever more baffling, in a sense, a victim of its own success. Long-established schools of yoga – Iyengar, Ashtanga and Hatha – have been eclipsed by crowd-pleasing gimmicks that have recently

included nude yoga, snowga, yoga with animals including doga (yoga with your dog), equine yoga and goat yoga (small goats use your cat or cow pose as a climbing frame), karaoke yoga and even 'rage yoga', in which you swear your head off in order to 'purify' your anger. Needless to say, this has created a good deal of confusion, particularly for those just embarking on their yoga journey.

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*Psychologies* Contributing Yoga Editor, Kat Farrants, agrees that the yoga industry's need to constantly reinvent itself is not helpful. 'I worry sometimes that people get so confused by all the different styles that they don't do any of them. "Keep it simple" is my motto,' she says. Farrants runs an online yoga studio, Movement For Modern Life. Although it might sound counter-intuitive to learn yoga from a video (I defy anyone to keep their eyes on a screen during downward-facing dog), she points out that yoga class sizes, particularly at gyms, are often so large that keeping an eye on the teacher, or getting any kind of individual attention, is unrealistic. 'It's much easier to stop and rewind at home than it is to stop a class. You're not listening to your own body if you're too busy trying to keep up. Yoga is a bespoke experience to heal you, and only you know what you need.' >>>



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>>> Hmmm, that sounds great, but are there any questions a person should ask to help them decide what style of yoga is right for them? 'I suppose I would look at it the other way around. It's not what yoga will do for me, it's what is it in my life that I need help with right now? Yoga is a tool that will give you that help. What is out of balance in my life? Am I stressed; does my knee hurt; am I out of shape; am I feeling lost? Go from there – rather than trying to shoehorn yoga randomly into your life.'

**ALL THINGS TO EVERYONE**

That yoga's popularity is on the rise is not up for debate. But, how exactly did something that was once regarded as a hippy-dippy alternative spiritual practice become so mainstream? The jumbled spiritual aspect of yoga, in particular, intrigues me. Peace mantras, incense, talk of 1,000-petalled lotus flowers and, most random of all, angel cards, are grist to the modern Western yoga teacher's mill. Ditto Ayurvedic diet tips and occasional forays into Vedic moon cycles. Yet, my Indian father, a secular Hindu, never practised yoga and professed to know nothing about it. Yoga seems to mean many things to different people.

According to *Yoga Journal*, yoga, when it originated in India, was a whole approach to lifestyle, including physical, mental and spiritual practices: 'Initially, the discipline of Hatha yoga – the physical aspect of yoga – was developed as a vehicle for meditation. The repertoire of Hatha yoga prepared the body, and particularly the nervous system, for stillness, creating the necessary physical strength and stamina that allowed the mind to remain calm. The word "hatha" has several translations. With "ha" meaning "sun" and "tha" meaning "moon", we have the common interpretation of Hatha yoga as "a union of the pairs of opposites".'

Divya Kohli teaches classes in London based on classical Hatha practice and philosophy, which includes meditation and breathing techniques, as well as postures (asanas) in each session. The child of Indian parents, Kohli grew up in the UK so has a 'blended' perspective on yoga's different traditions. 'In essence, yoga is really about asking yourself, in this moment, how you can be the best expression of who

you are. The beauty of yoga is that no one owns it, it's too old. Yoga has eight limbs, which are a metaphor for strands and, when you put them all together, that's yoga.'

These 'limbs' were originally presented by Indian sage, Patanjali, in the *Yoga Sutras*, the first texts that delineated yoga and its philosophy. These strands are equal, rather than a hierarchy, and they focus on: how you conduct yourself morally and socially in life (the first limb, yama); self-discipline and spiritual observance (the second limb, niyama); the asanas, or postures, are the third limb; breath control, pranayama, is the fourth limb; the fifth limb, pratyahara, is about turning inwards; which is separate from focus (the sixth limb, dharana); and meditation (the seventh limb, dhyana); and, finally, there is enlightenment (the eighth limb, samadhi).

I've often read that yoga means 'union', and previously assumed that meant a union of mind and body. But learning about the eight limbs made me realise that it's about uniting all the different ways we have of 'showing up in the world' and, after understanding that, yoga suddenly seems far more active than simply 'zoning out' on a mat for a bit and then forgetting about it until next week.

'The first recorded reference to yoga was "yoga of action", which means that your entire life was a yoga practice – all your experiences and challenges,' explains Kohli. 'Yoga happens when you try to engage with your life from a place of equilibrium with a steady mind; with mindfulness. You bring your fullest attention to a task, a feeling or another person without regard for what it will bring you. You don't focus on the fruits of your actions.'

**DISCIPLINE IS A FORCE FOR GOOD**

There has been a great deal of research into the health benefits of yoga – studies report everything from combating the onset of Alzheimer's disease with Kundalini yoga (University of California) and reduction of lower back pain (University of Maryland), to helping reduce exam stress (*The Times Of India*). Meanwhile, countless celebrities and Instagram stars demonstrate the impact on the body beautiful. But can regular yoga have other positive effects? Last year's major *Yoga Journal* survey revealed that yogis

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PHOTOGRAPH: PLAIN PICTURE

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>>> were 20 per cent more likely to give back to their local community than non-yogis, and were more inclined to live green, eat sustainably and enjoy mental clarity.

Zephyr Wildman is one of London's most sought-after yoga teachers. She grew up in America with a 'yoga fanatic' mother, but didn't take up a serious practice herself until she was diagnosed with early-onset osteoporosis in her early 20s. 'Creating discipline definitely gives us more skill and better tools to be able to navigate life,' she says. 'If we can commit to a practice that creates a core quality of stillness and self-reflection, it will give us a sense of resolve. We will become more clear about what is blocking us from being able to see, and live life in the way that we wish.'

Wildman studied with renowned teacher, Rod Stryker, whose work focuses on what's known as The Four Desires, based on the ancient Indian text, *The Upanishads*. 'Ultimately, human beings are yearning for four things,' explains Wildman. 'Dharma (to know your purpose in life), artha (the tools to support life, such as income), kama (beauty in the form of music, art, nature or sexuality) and moksha (spiritual liberation). If I have all of these basic desires met, I have a clear understanding of how to conduct my day, and where and how I need to move.'

### THE JOURNEY, NOT THE DESTINATION

Although Wildman's life may appear starry, she has navigated her share of ups and downs. Her first husband died of lung cancer, leaving her to bring up two daughters alone in a foreign country. 'For me, yoga practice is like a prayer. I set an intention to heal myself, or to release that which doesn't serve me, or to find clarity or resolution. Whatever my intention is, I do the physical practice. Then, I sit in meditation – to listen, to hear, to become quiet enough to experience that dawning of knowledge.'

One of the most difficult things to explain to someone who's never done yoga, is the impact of controlling mind, body and breath together. It's a bit like tapping your head and rubbing your stomach at the same time – it requires such focus that your mental chatterbox is finally forced to shut up. People who haven't practised yoga will often say things such as, 'I'm not flexible/That looks too difficult'

but, personally, I have discovered that practising the skill is actually the whole point. 'Yoga is meant to create some grit in the oyster,' agrees Wildman. 'When you react against difficulty in your practice, so you learn how to respond to difficulties in life.'

### ABUNDANCE IS THERE FOR THE TAKING

Wildman also encourages her students to use yoga for transformation and success. 'Yoga allows people to feel as if their life is abundant; to feel that they have success that's not necessarily monetary, nor about societal approval, instead, to see life in terms of their four basic desires being met, and developing a sense of gratitude about that. Abundance comes from a change in perception (rather than the "compare and despair" of social media). And, when we do a regular, disciplined practice, we start to become more accountable and responsible for our thoughts and emotions, the things that highly influence how we perceive life. By moderating the breath, by evening out the speed bumps, we can actually change the way that we feel, think and behave in life.'

Farrants agrees that yoga can create greater happiness and sense of abundance. 'The trick to life is making better decisions. If you're able to connect with your true self, quieten the logical mind and get to the real source of who you are as a person, you will find that each decision you make is aligned with others, and is the right one. You'll discover that you naturally have the right conversations with the right people and go to the right places. That is what it is to live in flow.'

Ultimately, Farrants believes that yoga creates possibilities in life. 'We all know that if you try and meditate straight after coming home after a busy day, it's impossible to settle. But, if you try after an hour of yoga, it becomes attainable. Or, you may start out feeling you'll never be able to do a certain posture but, over time and with practice, you can do it. More possibility. Yoga creates new things and, when you combine the movement with the breath, that's transformative. It really does open up life. Things start to change within you, and that's where the alchemy and magic happens.'

Now, where did I put my magic carpet?

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## Three guiding principles

Experts, Divya Kohli and Zephyr Wildman, identify the cornerstones of a successful yoga practice, as the novice begins the journey towards the release of stress, transformation and enlightenment

**1 BE CONSISTENT.** Whatever style you choose, stick with it. 'Developing a yoga practice is a bit like building a successful relationship,' says Hatha yoga teacher, Divya Kohli. 'The "juice" of yoga can only really come from consistency and commitment. If your teacher and style of yoga changes dramatically every week, you won't build on what you already know, in order to grow and explore your practice. Persistence, patience and humility bring a sense of grace, just as with any relationship.'

**2 IF IN DOUBT, BREATHE OUT.** Taking a breath can change the way that you view things. 'Yoga gives people more resilience to discern between "this is me reacting" versus

"this is me responding" to any given situation,' says yoga teacher, Zephyr Wildman. 'Remember, it's OK to have emotions that we label "undesirable", as long as we don't pass them onto someone else!'

**3 DELAY GRATIFICATION.** 'Yoga teachings have shown us that the best way to evolve the mind is by delaying gratification,' says Wildman. 'Next time you have a free moment, don't browse social media or put on the car radio – sit with your feelings. Learn to get comfortable with being idle in the moment. The more time we spend being OK in our own skin, the better we are able to be there for a friend going through tough times, to be of service to someone in need, or do our best creative work.'

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