



From *Root* to *Crown*:

How Yoga Benefits The Mind

BY COURTNEY TAIT

If you've tried yoga, you've likely experienced the sense of calm that follows a session of downward dogs, shoulder stands, and other stress-releasing poses. While improved flexibility and muscle strength are excellent reasons to embark on the yoga path, perhaps the greatest benefits of this ancient practice are what it can do for your mind. From easing depression to increasing clarity, reviews of a variety of yoga styles have suggested that the practice enhances one's well-being far beyond the physical realm.

So how does it work?

YOGA BRINGS AWARENESS TO THE BREATH Throughout our daily lives, most of us breathe shallowly, drawing minimal breath into the lungs rather than taking full, deep breaths, which are required for optimal health. While moving through yoga poses, an awareness of and attention to the breath is created, which helps to regulate the breath and bring fresh oxygen to the brain. Focusing on inhaling and exhaling in a smooth, even way brings a sense of relaxation to the body and mind.

YOGA UNBLOCKS YOUR CHAKRAS The body has seven energy centers called chakras, located along the spine up to the crown of the head. Chakra means 'wheel' in Sanskrit, and the chakras are points through which we receive and distribute life energy. Each chakra correlates with specific functions in our body and aspects of our being. Tension can block the chakras and lead to physiological, emotional, and spiritual imbalance. Performing yoga poses unblocks the chakras, so energy can flow freely.

ROOT CHAKRA The first chakra is the root chakra, found at the base of the spine. This chakra correlates to the feeling of being grounded. When it is in balance, you feel secure, stable, and connected to what's around you. When the root chakra

is out of balance, you may feel restless and anxious. Grounding yoga poses such as mountain, side angle, and warrior II help bring the root chakra into balance.

SACRAL CHAKRA The sacral chakra is connected with self worth, creativity, sexuality, and emotions, and is located below the navel. A balanced sacral chakra shows in a feeling of abundance and the ability to flow with one's emotions. When the sacral chakra is blocked, you might feel a lack of energy or be highly emotional. Yoga poses that move energy through the hips and lower abdomen, such as dancer's pose, help to unblock the sacral chakra.

SOLAR PLEXUS CHAKRA This chakra is found in the upper abdomen behind the stomach, and correlates with ego, confidence, and passions. A solar plexus chakra that is in balance will help bring about a sense of personal power and feeling of expressiveness. When out of balance, you may feel confused, concerned with what others think, or depressed. Sun salutations and abdominal strengtheners can aid in restoring vitality to this chakra.

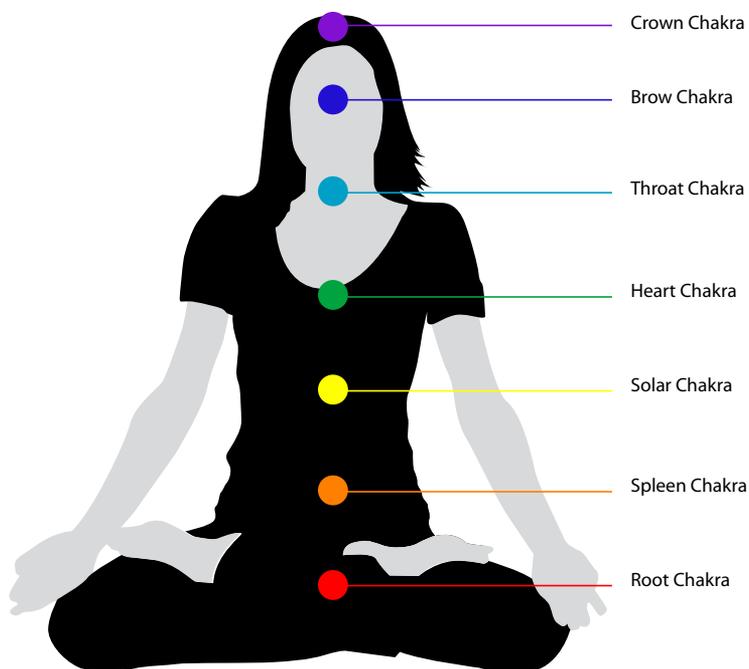
HEART CHAKRA The heart chakra is connected with harmony, peace, and the quality of love present in our life. It's the balancing point of the chakras, located



in the chest between the three lower and three upper chakras. An unbalanced heart chakra may show in physical signs such as sitting with your head forward and shoulder rounded. You may feel lonely, shy, or less empathetic than you wish. Chest openers such as shoulder stretches and backbends help us to lead with our heart.

THROAT CHAKRA This chakra is related to communication and inner truth, and is found in the throat, neck, and mouth areas. When the energy of the throat chakra is deficient, you might experience shoulder tension, teeth grinding, or a fear of speaking. Excessive energy in this chakra is revealed by an inability to listen. Shoulder openers and neck stretches such as camel, bridge, and plow poses can bring the throat chakra, and therefore your communication, into balance.

THIRD EYE CHAKRA Imagination, visualization, and intuition are aspects of the third eye chakra, located between and above the eyes. When this chakra's energy is blocked, your memory may feel fuzzy and you may have difficulty visualizing. An overactive third eye chakra can lead to headaches and difficulty concentrating. You can begin to bring balance to this chakra with forward bends, adding a cushion or blanket that presses on the third eye. Incorporating meditation into your yoga practice will strengthen your third eye chakra, making your perception sharper.



CROWN CHAKRA The seventh chakra is found at the crown of the head, and can be perceived as a halo that connects you with the spiritual world. Deficient energy in this chakra may reveal itself through apathy or an emphasis on materialism. If you feel skeptical about or lost in your connection to your spirituality, the crown chakra may need attention. While meditation is the most effective practice for balancing the crown chakra, inversion postures such as shoulder and headstands are also helpful, bringing about a sense of rejuvenation.

Tuning into how your mind, body and spirit are feeling can help you to get the most out of your yoga practice. Whether you wish to ease stress, enhance your mood, or increase your ability to focus, regularly practicing specific breathing exercises and postures aimed at your areas of need can bring lasting results. Once you learn which poses correlate with what aspects of your body and mind, you can practice them with more intention. This awareness will expand your ability to nurture yourself through yoga, bringing about greater happiness and overall health. ■