

How Is Yoga Beneficial to People on a Path of Recovery From Addiction?

by [Tommy Rosen](#) | Oct 29, 2014 |



I come from a background of severe drug addiction (alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, freebase, heroin) and now have over 23 years of continuous recovery. My entry point for the profound shift in thinking that has taken place within me was Hazelden in Minnesota where I spent 40 days or so back in 1989. I went on to embrace the 12 Steps and they worked for me... to the point they are meant to work. The 12 Steps are really the first step to successful sustainable recovery and they are immediately rendered more powerful when viewed in this manner rather than as a be-all end-all solution to anything that life throws your way.

I tell people that my story is really a story of recovery within recovery. I first got sober and began a “one day at a time” approach to abstinence from drugs and alcohol. I worked with a sponsor to go through the 12 Steps and my life got significantly better. Yet, I would spend the next 10 years of my recovery still mired in addictive thinking and addictive behaviors such as gambling, smoking cigarettes and codependent relationships. So much was improved, but there was a long way to go before I was truly out of the woods.

It came in stages. In the first stage, I knew I needed to get sober, but had no idea how to nor did I necessarily want to. In the second stage, I had developed some concept of how to go about being sober, but still was not sure that this life was for me. This was a very slippery phase during which I was mostly thinking, “there has to be some other way.” Then something rather amazing took place. I had a series of nightmares in which I used drugs and felt tremendous remorse and shame. When these horrible dreams finally stopped after months, I realized that I actually wanted

to be sober, that it had become important to me. This was stage 3. I knew I wanted to be sober, but now I was concerned about whether I could sustain it long-term. There is fear in this stage and many people get stuck here. All this time I had been kicking and screaming. Now, I finally had something that I wanted to hold onto. Day by day, I continued to do the work and show up. Eventually, I woke up one day to the realization that I could not remember the last time I actually thought about using drugs or alcohol. I no longer desired to use nor did I have any charge around it. You might say I had become disinterested in drugs and alcohol. I was free. In my opinion, this is the hopeful result that people refer to as the miracle of the 12 Steps.

My 23-year relationship with yoga began the year I got sober for the final time in June of 1991. Yoga is a part of the reason that I was able to realize all that the 12 Steps have to offer and I believe strongly that yoga is indispensable in the treatment of addiction. Here are some ideas as to why...

Addiction Is Dis-Ease. Yoga Brings Ease.

Addiction is a state of mind and body where we feel distant from ease. Ask anyone who struggles with addiction if they feel “at ease” when they are not using their drug or addictive behavior of choice and they will tell you, “no”. It is precisely this lack of ease that compels a person to reach for something to try to feel better or to move them closer to ease. It makes sense that any practice that can bring ease to the body-mind system, which is productive rather than destructive will be a key ingredient on the path of recovery from addiction. The physical practice of yoga, along with breath practices, serves to detoxify the body and to calm the mind. Yoga improves circulation and lung capacity, it stretches and strengthens muscles, it helps to work out the organs and improves digestion and it regulates the nervous and endocrine systems. You will simply be more comfortable in your mind and body if you practice yoga. For this reason, I consider yoga to be a central and necessary component of recovery from addiction.

Addiction is fueled by a sense of Lack. Yoga Counters This.

We know that people who struggle with addiction carry a deep sense of lack. Something seems to be missing. An itch needs to be scratched. With acute addiction, one’s entire organism is caught up in a pursuit to fulfill needs that can never be met. This is true for active addicts as much as it is true for people in recovery until they have been able to work out the complex roots of trauma that drives their behavior.

In the body’s hierarchy of needs, breath is #1. We can live without food for weeks. We can live without water for days. But without breath (in yoga we use the term Prana or life force) for even 3 minutes, we get into real trouble.

The way that we breathe directly affects our emotional state and vice versa. When we feel anxious, worried, angry or stressed our breath becomes shallow. Interestingly, shallow breathing sends a signal to our nervous system that our core need is not being met. This reinforces a sense of lack, which creates tension and stress. For addicts in particular this is dangerous because it keeps us stuck in a somatic pattern that reinforces the illusion that we are somehow incomplete. It keeps us stuck in the forcefield of addiction if you will.

Many people do not breathe well, meaning they have not developed the capacity to breathe deeply, to work their diaphragm and lungs. They also have not developed their core musculature,

which is necessary for proper posture, to support the heart and to allow the rib cage to expand and contract when breathing deeply. In fact, some people have been breathing poorly for so long that their rib cage has become somewhat brittle. They live in what yogis refer to as thoracic incarceration and could not take a truly deep breath even if they wanted to. Fortunately, this is a condition that can be worked out with diligent practice.

Vinyasa yoga is the primary form of yoga practiced in the United States today. Vinyasa simply means movement coordinated with breath, but all yoga emphasizes a focus on breathing. Through dedicated and sometimes strenuous practice, we develop a relationship with our breath. We come to understand that by focusing on and controlling our breath we can change how we think and feel. We can use the breath as a vehicle for entering states of meditation and also as a means of changing our emotional state and managing stress. By learning to do simple long deep breathing, which is accessible by almost anyone, we send a different message to our nervous system, namely that all is well and our core need is being met. This allows our body-mind system to relax and moves us toward healing, recovery and wholeness. Breathing well counters the sense of lack that plagues most addicts and is a precursor to a healthier life beyond addiction. I love the wonderful quote from Mary Oliver who asks, “Are you breathing just a little and calling it a life?”

Addiction is a Disease of Disconnection, Yoga is Union

The word Yoga means “union”. It refers to the union of mind, body and spirit. In a typical yoga class, a teacher might say, “Press down into your feet in such a way that you feel the earth press back up.” So I bring my attention to my feet, press down, and begin to feel the rebound of energy up through my body. “Breathe more slowly and deeply.” And I bring my attention to my breath. Wherever the teacher directs my attention, I learn to connect with that area of my body. In this way, yoga practice is the practice of connecting or re-connecting with my body. In active addiction, we have lost connection with our body. As we all are aware, addiction counters even our body’s main directive to survive. System override! So, to engage in practice that directs our mind to bring us back into contact with our physical self will move us toward a sense of union and be uplifting to our spirit.

In more esoteric terms, yoga also refers to the union of individual consciousness with Universal consciousness. Here we are talking about spiritual matters, which become very relevant to people who are pursuing theistic recovery paths such as the 12 Steps. Yoga and the 12 Steps work very well together. All over the United States we are seeing the advent of Yoga classes with a 12-Step component to them. Of particular note is the work of Nikki Myers and her Yoga of 12 Step Recovery (www.y12sr.com), in which people attend a non-denominational or universal 12-Step meeting followed by a yoga class. Experiences that bring together these two spiritual paths are proving very effective in helping people to achieve sustainable recovery.

Of course, from the yogi’s perspective, all addiction comes from the misunderstanding that we are somehow separate from each other and from all of creation. The path of yoga is there simply to liberate us of this illusion. Thus, while helpful to any Human Being, yoga will be of particular use to addicts who live in abject confusion and disconnection most of the time.

The Issues Live In Our Tissues

Addiction has its roots in trauma, which I define as any event that leaves undigested or unprocessed negative emotional energy stuck in the mind-body system. These stuck energies have to be processed out of the system or they fester. As the insightful saying reminds us, “our biography becomes our biology.” We only need to look at a person who has endured a lot of trauma and carries its residue and we will see the evidence of it written into their bones, skin, posture and the way they breathe and move.

At 12 years sober, all the trauma of my life, much of it self-inflicted, caught up with me and manifested in severe, chronic back pain. After a year of trying every alternative healing therapy you can imagine, I visited the good folks at Cedars-Sinai hospital, had an MRI and received their diagnosis and prognosis. I had severe degenerative disk disease and two herniated disks at L3-L4 and L4-L5. The radiologist and surgeon who reviewed the MRI told me they would have to manage my pain with drugs for the rest of my life and eventually we would have to look to surgery.

While I had been sober all that time from drugs and alcohol, I was still stuck in the dis-ease of addiction. I had not yet learned that in order to truly free myself from my past, I was going to have to go deeper into the tissues of my body and release the energies that were stuck there. The 12 Steps, along with cognitive and behavioral therapies, were very helpful, but I needed something more. Through a very strange set of events, I ended up at the office of a man named Guruprem who would become my life teacher. He was a Kundalini yoga teacher, and it was through these powerful teachings and practices that I found precisely what I was looking for.

Kundalini Yoga, among its many other benefits, helps to detoxify and rebuild the systems of the body. It gets very deep and can move energy unlike any other thing I have experienced. Each week, I would meet and practice with Guruprem at his office and he would teach me the techniques I needed to move out of the emotional and physical stuck-ness I had been feeling. In about 90 days after we started our sessions, my back pain went away and I have never looked back. No drugs! No surgery! Something else would happen over the next few years of practice. I would come to know what it felt like to heal so deeply as to experience the feeling of being free of all addiction.

Addiction causes fluctuations of the mind. Yoga calms fluctuations of the mind.

Anyone who has experienced addiction can relate to the idea that when caught in its grasp, one feels preyed upon by one’s own mind. Through every conceivable thought-form, addiction makes itself known. Often our minds are at us even before we get out of bed in the morning. We haven’t yet opened our eyes and the vulture is already right there on the headboard. Indeed, addiction causes a powerfully negative form of mind fluctuation or disturbance. In the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, the classic text, which describes the path of yoga, there are 296 sutras or aphorisms that illuminate an individual’s journey from suffering to liberation. In the second sutra, Yoga is defined as “the calming of the fluctuations of the mind.” The rest of the document serves only to explain how this can be achieved. The path can be summed up as follows: Aspire to live a disciplined, ethical life. Bring the body into alignment and health. Learn the secrets of the breath. Meditate and be free.

To read this important text is to mine pure gold for people who struggle with addiction. There are

so many parallels and mutually supportive perspectives between the 12 Steps and The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, not the least of which is that the goal of each spiritual path is to end the “mind fluctuations” and connect a person with a “Supreme Being” or “Higher Power.” And for those people who are not pursuing a spiritual or theistic path of recovery, the physical practice of yoga as well as its ethical foundations will be of benefit to all.

Practicing Yoga Makes You Naturally High.

I champion the idea that there is nothing wrong with wanting to “get high”. The problem is that our methods are destructive. I encourage anyone in recovery to seek out natural highs often. And one doesn’t have to look any further than one’s yoga mat.

I’ll never forget my first experience of a 90-minute Vinyasa yoga class. It was very challenging, but I loved it. At the end of class, the teacher directed us to lie down, relax completely, and let the full weight of our body rest upon the earth. This was savasana or corpse pose. The feeling was electric — energy humming through my body. I felt like blood was pouring into areas of my tissues that it had not been able to reach for some time. It was relieving and healing. It was subtler than the feeling from getting off on drugs, but it was detectable and lovely, and there would be no hangover, just a feeling of more ease than I could remember. I felt a warmth come over me similar to what I felt when I had done heroin, but far from the darkness of that insanity, this was pure light — a way through.

I cannot stress what it meant to experience that in my early recovery and to realize I could feel that feeling without any negative side effects. It was a revelation and it has served me ever since.

Conclusion

While I do not consider yoga to be a replacement for a program of recovery such as the 12 Steps, I have found it to be a critical part in a person’s overall approach to treating addiction. In my work over the years with more than a thousand people in recovery, things tend to go better with a comprehensive approach where yoga is one part of that approach. Therefore, I feel strongly that yoga should be a central component of recovery treatment. There is no downside to it. This is purely a short- and long-term gain proposition. I do realize that many treatment facilities now feature yoga classes as part of their offering. This is a great step forward. However, most counselors and rehab directors I have spoken with misunderstand yoga’s importance and relevance and see it merely as a form of working out. The path of yoga is complementary to the path of recovery from addiction. In my experience, it decreases the likelihood of relapse and increases one’s enjoyment of life. And after all, the point is not to just survive addiction. The point is to thrive in recovery.

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