

Why Yoga Works When Diets Often Fail

Yoga offers the inner harmony and body awareness required to achieve a healthier approach to eating. All that, and a leaner, stronger body too.

By Laurel Kallenbach

Lanita Varshell is a round, vibrant woman with a zest for life, a joyful smile, a gentle voice, and a passion for teaching yoga to women with weight issues. But Varshell wasn't always this spirited or committed to yoga. Six years ago, she was incapacitated by fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue syndrome and could barely care for her two young children. Pain and exhaustion forced her to quit her full-time job. At 5 feet 3 1/2 inches and 240 pounds, she was a self-described "couch potato."

"I'd been obsessed with dieting since I was 10 years old," Varshell, now 43, says. "I had a history of joining gyms, then quitting. I'd diet, lose 20 or 30 pounds, then gain 40 or 50 back." Though she'd heard about a gentle yoga class in her area, she procrastinated for six months. When she finally got the courage to attend, the experience touched her on a deep level. "Doing the poses brought tears to my eyes. For the first time in my life, I made a loving connection with my body," she says. "Before that, my body was always my curse."

In the years since, Varshell has lost 30 pounds as a direct result of practicing yoga. Increased body awareness has changed her eating habits, and the inner quiet has helped her explore emotional issues she once buried by eating. "Yoga helps you love yourself regardless of extra weight or imperfections," she states. "I've let go of dieting—'die-eating' to me—and now focus on health. If I keep on the yoga path, weight loss will continue to happen slowly and naturally. Healing weight challenges through yoga is like taking the scenic route instead of the main highway. It's slower, but much more enjoyable and lasting."

Although still challenged with fibromyalgia, Varshell's health and energy have dramatically improved, and she runs her own yoga studio, A Gentle Way Yoga, in San Diego and La Mesa, California, where she teaches very gentle yoga, chair yoga for seniors, traditional hatha yoga, and yoga for super-sized people. Her yoga audiotape, *A Gentle Way*, disseminates her "gently-does-it" message. Many of her students attribute weight loss to their yoga practice, though Varshell reports that these students don't obsess about weight as they once did, even if they are still carrying extra pounds. "Now body/mind/spirit health is their—and my—primary focus," she says. "We've become committed to finding out what it means to be healthy—not just thin. Yoga has taught us to appreciate our bodies at any size."

Varshell's story inspires me, because I too struggle with my weight. Like her, I think yoga is a wonderful, holistic way to approach the underlying causes of excess fat, which are often a complex mix of physical, emotional, and spiritual issues. Of course, most people associate yoga with skinny, ultra-flexible yogis, not well-padded bodies with Buddha bellies. That's a shame, because people of girth need yoga as much as—or more than—anyone. For those who, like me, have a tough time with overeating, junk food addiction, unwanted pounds, and the shame that accompanies being less than svelte, yoga offers the peace of mind and body awareness required to achieve a healthier approach to eating. All that, and a leaner, stronger body too.

As my weight has crept higher over the past three years, my self-esteem has sunk lower, leaving me feeling depressed, inferior, and weak-willed. As I increasingly relied on food to bolster me through stressful or unhappy times, I lost confidence in my body, which seemed to betray me. My arches hurt, my back ached, I panted going up steps, I broke my foot. I knew yoga had helped me feel strong and relaxed in the past, but I was too humiliated to do it in such bad shape.

Finally, a few months ago, I started watching gentle yoga videos at home. I remember sobbing on the floor when my barely healed foot couldn't hold me in Downward-Facing Dog, so I quit. Weeks passed, and a friend invited me to a beginning yoga class. I went, determined not to expect miracles. After one class, something inside me shifted. Next thing I knew, I'd signed up for private sessions with the yoga teacher to work on modifying poses. At the same time, I started making dietary changes. After a month of doing yoga three or four times a week, my flexibility was returning, and I was ecstatic the day I held Tree Pose while balanced on my weak foot.

I'd been so excited about my new strength—which improves weekly—that I paid little attention to the scale, although I dropped a trouser size in a month. Part of my 15-pound weight loss resulted from all those fruits and veggies, but the experience taught me that yoga and other weight-loss measures are perfect partners. Making any lifestyle change is achingly slow, so what better way to practice patience than through yoga?

Keep in mind that achieving and maintaining a healthy body weight has benefits other than appearance, since excess body fat puts you at serious risk for a number of health problems. If your body fat percentage is greater than 30 percent for women or 25 percent for men, your risk of developing diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, and colon or breast cancer increases. So in addition to helping you feel better about yourself—which is crucial for those working to lose weight—yoga can inspire your commitment to better health. Besides putting me in touch with my body, yoga has made physical activity easier and more enjoyable. I'm motivated to add more cardiovascular exercise into my routine, thereby accelerating my weight loss and helping me reduce the likelihood of developing more health problems.

Emotional Evolution

There are many reasons why people feel powerless over food and gain weight. I use food as emotional comfort or to calm my anxiety. Sometimes eating seems the easiest way to feed unfulfilled inner hunger. Often, people rely on fast food to speed them through their too-fast lives. Many simply ignore their bodies' needs for nutrition and exercise. Regardless of the cause, yoga is an antidote for food oblivion—it slows us down so we experience the body and commune with the spirit.

If there are emotionally based reasons why a person eats unwisely, it may be that yoga—especially the relaxation—opens a channel for clearing those emotions. Varshell relates a student's discovery after shedding 20 pounds: "This woman realized through yoga how many emotions she stored in her body. She usually stuffed those feelings with food," she explains. "I'm convinced if you don't allow yourself to release emotions, they'll come out as rage, disease, depression, or excess weight."

Brian Vandoske, 36, of Sheboygan, Wisconsin, who has lost 40 pounds since he committed himself to yoga five years ago, believes he keeps it off because yoga nourishes his spirit. "The soul is a major piece of the puzzle for people struggling with weight," he says. "Those of us with extra pounds can go to Weight Watchers and deal with the nutrition issue, but we haven't dealt with the soul."

"Anybody who takes on yoga winds up facing the inner issues as to why they're overweight," Vandoske continues. "Since my father passed away when I was 6, I've used food as a security blanket." Working with a yoga therapist gave him tools to cope with that loss and his mother's death five years ago. "Now if I feel depressed, I go to the cushion and meditate. I've also developed a network of people to talk to," he adds. Every week he drives 50 miles to Milwaukee to a class taught by a yoga instructor who supports his efforts. "The diet industry has set up millions of Americans to fail," Vandoske says. "Fortunately you can never fail in yoga, which emphasizes accepting your body as it is."

Body awareness, an integral part of yoga, is crucial to weight loss. When I feel low, I crave an "out-of-body experience," which I achieve by numbing myself with M&Ms. But when I'm in touch with myself through yoga, it's easier to stay in the present, and I feel less need to escape. That's why Genia Pauli Haddon, the ample-bodied cocreator of the *Yoga for Round Bodies* videos, calls yoga "coming home to yourself."

"I never imagined myself doing yoga," confesses the instructor from Scotland, Connecticut. "I believed yoga was for skinny, human-pretzel types." However, Haddon's friend, Linda DeMarco, convinced her to try it. Soon they developed instructions for many postures to allow for the reality of a big belly, heavy thighs, and large breasts. And, without trying, they both lost weight. "Years ago, I gave up on diets and pills and accepted that I would always be heavy, so it was a surprise to find that because I loved doing yoga, I was losing weight," says Haddon.

"I think the pounds came off because I was in harmony with myself," she continues. "Through yoga I experienced simply being. Then, anything not in harmony naturally fell by the wayside. The change occurred not just in how much I weigh, but in my attitudes. I learned to be more patient by staying with a yoga posture. And I have a greater capacity to be with myself emotionally, even through painful times. As I learned to stay present through yoga, I used food less as a substitute way of feeling better. However, I didn't become a 'skinny-mini.' I'm still a short, round woman. And I like my body, largely as a result of my experience on the yoga mat."

Varshell echoes those sentiments. "Whether or not I ever wear size six or eight is no longer important to me," she says. "Long ago, I hated myself when I weighed 150, so I kept eating until I hit 180. I still hated myself at 180, so I progressed to 240. I knew I was headed to 300 pounds if I didn't change my perception that weight determined how successful or loved I was. I was waiting to live life until I was the right size. Now getting my body, mind, and spirit in harmony is a spiritual journey."

Even soul journeys, however, can be bumpy. It can take a lot of courage for a substantial-sized person to try yoga. "Years ago, I bought a 'beginning' yoga video in which this toothpick of a woman demonstrated the Wheel," says Sherry Kreis, a size 20 woman from Denver. "I took one look at her bending over backwards with her little hip bones sticking out, and thought, 'My body will never do that.' I was so intimidated that I never even watched the rest of the tape."

However, a year ago, Kreis started yoga at the urging of her friend Kate Chapman Sharpe, another woman trying to lose 30 pounds, and the two have stuck with it together. "It took guts to walk into that first class," Sharpe says. "Because the teacher had a soft voice I couldn't hear from the back of the gym, I realized I was going to have to stand in front and let go of my inhibitions about somebody looking at my butt. So, I told myself, 'It doesn't matter what I look like. What matters is I'm trying.' "

Over the months, as Sharpe and Kreis toned their bodies, they've realized there are yoga benefits beyond how you look in your jeans. "Last year my husband suffered a stroke and heart attack," says Sharpe. "Without yogic breathing, I couldn't have remained level-headed." She's reaped other rewards as well. "When I began yoga, my teacher said smoking wouldn't interfere with my yoga, but yoga would interfere with my smoking. I'm finally at the point where I'm willing to quit," she vows. "I think yoga might eventually interfere with my love of chocolate and rich food in much the same way."

When you practice yoga, you develop a deeper relationship with your body, which eventually translates into more controlled eating. After a yoga class, you feel better, because your soul is happy, your energy is moving, your mind is clear, and you're tuned in to yourself, says Suzanne Deason, a Marin County, California, teacher who developed the video *Yoga*

Conditioning for Weight Loss. "In this relaxed state, you're more likely to fix something nourishing rather than grab the first food you crave," she notes. Deason remembers one woman who attended class five times a week, eventually losing 35 pounds. "She told me that yoga helped her body feel so much better that she stopped eating foods that weren't good for her," she says.

And yoga works where diets often fail. "Yoga—unlike dieting—is not about depriving yourself to look a certain way," Varshell observes. "Instead, it helps you enjoy every movement and savor every bite of food you take. Yoga is about going deep inside and discovering who you are right now. Yoga helps you accept yourself at any size, looking lovingly and realistically at how you got where you are today, without blame or shame."

However, shunning diets doesn't excuse a person from eating well, Varshell points out. "We all must take responsibility for our food choices," she says. "To feel good, you need to implement balanced, healthy eating habits." She distinguishes between being on a diet—a regimented program—with choosing good food. "A friend who's dropped 20 pounds says yoga has helped her with 'loving discipline,'" she explains. "We usually think of discipline, especially diets, as punishment. But the word 'discipline' is actually from the word disciple. In yoga we become disciples, people willingly, excitedly following a new way of doing something to enhance our way of life. By regularly practicing yoga, your habits and choices improve, and you begin living consciously."

Yoga for All Shapes

Besides nurturing self-acceptance, yoga offers physiological benefits. "Yoga may not bring you to the point of burning off that last 10 pounds," admits Deason, "but you do experience muscle toning. Standing poses in particular tone and trim your legs, hips, buttocks, and abdomen, while developing stability and strong muscles. Building the large muscle groups increases the muscle-to-fat ratio, which speeds weight loss since muscle burns calories quickly."

In addition, yoga increases energy and circulation, which contribute to overall well-being. "Yogic breathing oxygenates your body, helping your metabolism function at a higher level," Deason says. Vinyasa, with its fast-paced, continuous motion, raises the heart rate, though not to the extent of cardiovascular exercise. However, Deason warns that focusing solely on burning calories misses the point of yoga.

The cardinal rule in yoga is to honor your own ability, no matter what your weight is. Driving yourself too hard is an invitation to injury and discouragement. "Stay true to who you are, just tickling your personal edge—the place in a pose between what you can do easily and where it becomes more difficult than is safe," says Haddon. "In yoga, you receive the full benefit by respecting your own level of comfort, ability, strength, and flexibility. You undercut the process if you start comparing yourself to somebody else."

Gentle yoga is essential for someone of substantial size. "I teach people to work slowly and softly, so they succeed, rather than becoming more frustrated than before they started," says Naomi Judith Offner, whose video *Gentle Yoga with Naomi* is a good guide for those of us with round bodies. "It's when people fail at exercise—when they don't feel comfortable in a class—that they go out and eat from frustration, stress, and anxiety."

If you have difficulty bending, kneeling, or lying on the floor, start with very gentle yoga that can be done in a chair or in bed. Light stretches and attention to the breath leave you feeling deeply relaxed but invigorated. Once you're comfortable with gentle movement, you can try other levels, using modifications and props. For instance, a series of asanas—including the classic Sun Salutation—can be done in a chair or with a chair for support, says Nischala Joy Devi, author of *The Healing Path of Yoga* (Harmony, 2000). "My goal is to help people benefit

from yoga without injury or strained muscles," says Devi. She also notes that size is not a measure of flexibility. "Many people with a few extra pounds are incredibly flexible," she says. "Conversely, many thin people are quite stiff."

Modify the Poses

No matter how well-meaning a thin yoga teacher is, she or he has probably never experienced yoga as a person of girth. That's why it's important for you to know your abilities and keep your practice safe—but just challenging enough—for you.

Common concerns for us heavy people include reaching arms above our heads, folding into a forward bend (and being able to breathe once we're there!), sitting cross-legged, holding a pose for a length of time, and experiencing back and knee strain due to added weight around the middle. But in yoga there are always solutions. Place a bolster under the knees to alleviate back strain when lying down; when seated cross-legged on the floor, fold a blanket under your rear. If you can't reach your arms around your knees to pull them to your chest when lying down, a belt will extend your reach.

"You don't have to sacrifice a posture if your body doesn't bend like a pretzel," Haddon says. "But be sure to honor both the posture and your own body." Her advice is to err on the side of caution. For instance, if your weight stresses your lower back, proceed slowly, with awareness. "If you gently and gradually work into postures such as Cobra and Boat, you can strengthen your back," Haddon says.

Balancing poses require special attention. "People of substance run a greater risk of spinal injury in inverted balancing poses and should avoid them," Haddon says. When a heavy person does Headstand, she or he needs considerably more muscle power to correct a slight wobble than a lean person needs to correct the same degree of imbalance, she explains. (Tree Pose, on the other hand, develops balance and is safe for full-sized bodies.) And take credit for your own strength. "It amuses me to think the weight I'm hoisting in Plank is equivalent to what those buff guys in the gym are bench-pressing," says Sharpe.

Props can help you fully benefit from yoga, compensating for tight joints, limited flexibility, or arms that don't reach around an expansive body. Vandoske considers himself the king of yoga props—he routinely packs a pair of blocks, two straps, two sandbags, a blanket, and a mat when he heads off to the studio. "Props get me to a level in a pose where I feel comfortable and can improve," he says. "The key to success in yoga for anybody carrying extra weight is to modify. Accept where you are and don't be afraid to experiment with modifications."

Often, a pillow beneath the forehead can make it easier to settle into Child's Pose, or a strap can help open the hips and hamstrings. Don't worry whether modifications are kosher. "Yoga is about being comfortable," says Devi. "The definition of asana in the *Yoga Sutra* is 'a comfortable and steady pose.' But the word used for 'comfort' is *sukha*, which also means 'happiness.' If what you do brings happiness, then you're doing real yoga," she adds.

Practice Brings Patience

"Yoga involves so much stretching," says Sharpe. "There are downward stretches, side stretches, intellectual stretches, and emotional stretches." Indeed, both processes—learning yoga and losing weight—require patience and perseverance. A yoga practice takes time to cultivate; likewise, unwanted pounds won't disappear overnight.

Because it fuses spiritual with physical practice, yoga offers a path for self-discovery and self-acceptance. Through it, I'm more attuned to my needs and feel better physically and emotionally.

No, yoga won't always keep me from noshing on nachos.

Yet I respect myself more than before I started yoga, and I'm more likely to acknowledge my successes: small ones like holding Downward-Facing Dog for four breaths instead of two, big ones like taking a meditation break instead of a cookie break.

In time, yoga can transform you and your body. With work and years of yogic practice, Varshell has overcome illness, improved her relationship to eating, polished her self-image, and shed pounds. "Now I see food as a way to love and nourish my body, rather than hide from my emotions," she says. "Holding a pose long enough to feel muscle after muscle let go and melt into the floor touches me in a way that ice cream never could."