

# MS and yoga



Picture: Liz West

Alison Potts



*No 15 Dhanurasana variation - the Sphinx  
Opens front body and chakras, works in between  
shoulders, works lower back gently*

To a person who hasn't got MS it's simple. You exercise to get stronger, fitter and have more energy. To a person with MS, it's a can riddled with worms. We've all been there - one morning's fantastic workout equals a week in bed. How often do health professionals say "Use it or lose it", failing to add, crucially, "Have you ever searched for the Holy Grail? That would be easy in comparison."

For years my search for an effective workout that would strengthen without sapping me has taken me to a frustrating cul-de-sac. Today, however, I am in a dramatically different place. I have stamina, energy and clarity I've not had since before MS struck. My body is getting stronger, fitter and more toned. Most importantly, after years of being engaged in battle with it, I am completely at peace with myself and my MS.

Six months ago, yoga came into my life and transformed it in ways I could never have imagined.

I have lived with MS for 20 years. I am a yoga novice. But already, it has brought sweeping, positive changes on every level - physical, mental and spiritual.

In fact, fitness and stamina are only by-products of yoga. The actual aim of the *asanas* - the poses or stretches - is to bring stillness to the mind and body and in doing so, render them open.

All the *asanas* are designed to keep our bodies as vital and open as when we were children, allowing the breath to flow freely, warming, nourishing and energising our internal bodies and giving us mental clarity. Yoga is all about becoming the breath (*prana*). The *asanas* are the tool that gets us there. In life, we tend to forget to breathe well. Stress, pain, fatigue and immobility all contribute to us hunching and tensing up, making our breathing shallow. I used to think MS was solely to blame for my problems with chronic fatigue. Now I know differently and I see how important good breathing is to health.

Something else I now understand is that thoughts and emotions are as fatiguing as physical activity. In yoga, once we have settled into an *asana* and set our pose, we are asked to move our minds away from our bodies and our thoughts and concentrate purely on deep yogic breathing. Then, something magical happens. Our bodies become lighter, they become immaterial - how liberating for someone with MS! - and, in this precious stillness, there is a lifting of fatigue, elevating of mood and an arrival of clarity.

I wouldn't believe it possible had I not experienced it. Many times I have failed to complete a gym session because of fatigue, but in six months of doing yoga, I have never missed a class, no matter how bad my MS. And however I feel at the start of the class, I leave feeling energised, alert and ready to face whatever I have to face.

Some of my experiences in yoga have been profoundly moving for me. I used to be constantly at odds with myself, as a result of living with my 'faulty' body. I set the bar so high for what I wanted to achieve and my health always let me down. After a while, that made inroads on my self respect. Everyone has an inner critic but mine was on fire. I saw my body as working against me - it didn't do what it used to do, it didn't do what I wanted it to do, it stopped me getting to where I needed to be, it



*No 10 Virabhadrasana 2 - Warrior 2  
Strengthens legs and arms, brings confidence and  
spatial awareness*

disappointed my expectations, it isolated me and made my life complicated in ways no one around me could understand.

Without me registering it, my mind was constantly shouting at myself.

Then in my first yoga class, I was trying to stretch myself further than my body felt it wanted to go and Penny, my teacher, said, "Don't push. Relax. Encourage yourself. Respectfully ask your body if it can go further. When you treat your body with encouragement, you find it gives. Treat your body like a child. You love your child unconditionally - you wouldn't judge your child, or punish your child. You just want to help them achieve their potential."

What a revelation. I do have a child and I would never push her the way I have pushed myself nor accuse her of failure when she has tried so very hard: it was a life changing moment.

We are individuals. We are all good at different things. Yoga reminds us the harmfulness of judging ourselves by internal pressures and social expectations. That's all ego and yoga isn't interested in ego.

Says Penny: "We all have a part of the body that works more harmoniously. Yoga asks for 80% effort, never a hundred. It asks you to give the best of what you have today.

"Physically, you set your bones in each pose to the best of your ability that day. You tell yourself 'I am going as far as I can today.' Then you have to let go. Yoga is about releasing tension and going into breath. And when you let go and back off a bit from a stretch, you often find you can do more. But first you have to accept the letting go."

The body compensates. I may have tight hamstrings that mean I can only move very slightly in a sitting forward bend, but my twisty intercostal muscles have inspired my teacher to say she has rarely seen such a twisty spine in all her years of teaching. Yoga has constantly surprised me. It has taught me my limitations are not where I believe them to be, that I can go further than I ever thought - but only by relaxing and backing off and then gently and respectfully requesting whether I can do more, accepting whatever answer may come with equanimity.

## As in yoga, so in life.

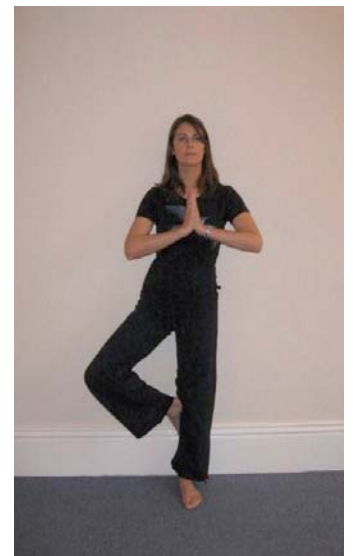
It's been good for me to be in a non judging, non competitive community of fellow yoga practitioners. At the beginning of each class, Penny checks for any problems which need looking out for and may require her to adapt the postures. Everyone has something. A bad back, a post-childbirth kink, sometimes a stressful period has rendered people ill or exhausted. I don't feel isolated, as I sometimes have, imagining myself to be among 'healthy' people, while I bear the burdens of this dizzyingly challenging condition.

In fact, it's important to speak up about any problems. I had been fine in every class until October when it got colder outside and the community centre cranked up all the radiators. After ten minutes I had turned to a quivering jelly, unable to attempt the *asanas*. I actually lay on my back and laughed. "I thought you weren't yourself!" cried Penny when I explained about heat and my MS.

"We are used to being told the details of people's illnesses," she says. "We need to know them so that we can make any adjustments to poses or bring in supports such as a wall for balance or blocks and straps to help suppleness."

At the end of the class, we put our hands together, bow to each other and say "Namaste," meaning "my soul to your soul." It's a sign of respect. It's an acknowledgement of the light inside ourselves and others. We're all equal. We're all amazing human beings. We're all connected.

*No 12 Vrkasana - the Tree  
Balances focus the mind,  
lengthens spine, and  
opens hips*



For more information on yoga and finding a teacher, contact  
The British Wheel Of Yoga - 01529 306851 / office@bwy.org.uk / www.bwy.org.uk