

“I would love to try yoga, but I’m not flexible and everyone in class will be better than me.” “I’m not looking for a new religion.” “Isn’t that a stretching class?” There is some truth and some myth in all of these statements. These are the common threads that run through the minds of many potential yogis and yoginis. So, here is a brief explanation of what yoga is and how you (yes, you) can take that first step into class at any time.

“Yoga” as we practice it here in the western world often (although not always) refers to the *Hatha yoga* tradition. What does that mean? *Hatha* (pronounced ha-ta) is a Sanskrit word which literally means “physical” or to “force.” Breaking the word down into *ha* the masculine and *tha* the feminine, together we have a balance of opposites. *Yoga* derives from the Sanskrit word “yuj”, which means “yoke” or “union”. *Hatha yoga*, therefore can be translated to mean the union of opposites through physical practice.

Yoga is *not* a religion in itself. Some yogic philosophy has been incorporated into religious traditions, but the practice of yoga is not religion in itself. It is a path to controlling the mind through movement and breathing. The physical practice of yoga—what we see in our local gym or studio—is simply a practice developed to prepare the body for meditation. The use of movement and breath quiets the mind and readies the muscles so that the mind can be clear and conscious to meditate. Finding a comfortable position for the physical body while the mind is quiet—perhaps for hours—is not easy. Yoga practice facilitates meditation.

Yoga is also not just a stretching class. Your flexibility may change with your yoga practice as you become more fit. In each class we incorporate strength and stability through movement and breath. Each instructor teaches class in his/her own style. Some may focus more on strength, some more on flexibility...both are integral to yoga practice.

Who will you find in a class? Surprise! Students range in age from children to elders and everyone in between. Strength and flexibility vary greatly, too. Some students can do headstands and move into positions that don't seem possible to us mere mortals. Others cannot touch their toes even if they bend their knees. This means there a place in class for *every* body. Keep in mind that if you can breathe, you can do yoga.

Beginners and students of all levels are welcome in class. The most important aspect of yoga is to listen to *your* body. Some days it will say, "I feel great, let's try that backbend." Other days it will say, "Please take care of me, I don't feel so well." The goal is to be able to hear, interpret and honor all of the messages your body sends you. Only you can hear them.

Yoga is offered at multiple gyms and studios in Anchorage every day of the week. In Girdwood yoga can be found at Our Lady of the Snows in the Meadows Community Room on Tuesday and Thursday evenings from 6-7pm. Join us to find *your* place in class.

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