



Yoga As Medicine: An M.D. and Yogi on How It Works

:: By Nina Zolotow

If you're looking for choices beyond drugs and surgery for a health condition or concern, you're likely finding that traditional western medicine isn't giving you many (or any) options. Most M.D.s aren't trained in [alternative therapies](#), but a growing contingent of M.D.s is more broadly trained in complementary and alternative medicine. And some are trained in yoga – a practice that's been emerging as a highly effective alternative therapy for many chronic health conditions and symptoms.



Among the most respected of these forward-thinking docs is Timothy McCall, M.D., is a board-certified specialist in internal medicine and a dedicated yoga practitioner. McCall has traveled to India and throughout the United States observing, training with, and interviewing the world's leading yoga teachers and therapists including his primary teacher, [Patricia Walden](#). He is the medical editor of Yoga Journal, and is the author of [Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing](#).

I talked with McCall about how and why yoga can offer real healing for common medical conditions.

Q. How does yoga work from a medical perspective?

A. Yoga – by which I mean a broad array of tools including asana ([yoga poses](#)), [pranayama](#), [meditation](#), chanting, service, etc. – has been shown in hundreds of scientific studies to benefit people with a wide variety of health conditions. [Yoga lowers blood pressure](#), improves lung function, relaxes the nervous system, cuts cholesterol, boosts immunity, and makes you more content, to name just a few documented effects.

Perhaps even more important, yoga is a methodology to change dysfunctional habits and attitudes into ones that serve you better. Patanjali wrote that [the key to success in yoga is regular practice](#) over a long period of time, and this idea is finding support in recent breakthroughs in neuroscience. We now know that the brain is capable of changing itself – of creating new patterns, new connections between neurons – and that the more you do something, the stronger those neural pathways become.

What led you to go from practicing primary care medicine to writing a book on yoga therapy?

I took to [yoga](#) from the beginning, even though I'm about as far from a natural as could be. A couple years into practicing yoga, I found myself disillusioned with medicine, or maybe my yoga practice was putting me in touch with the disillusionment that had been growing for awhile. At that time, profit-driven managed care was taking over, and the conveyor belt of care was getting sped up. It was stressful; you didn't get as much human contact with patients, and I felt the quality of care was being compromised, which added to the stress.

So I decided to concentrate on writing, which up to that point I'd been doing only part-time. Since I was still interested in healing, and getting more and more into yoga, it was kind of natural to shift my attention to [yoga therapy](#), so I set out on a journey of discovery, which I'm still on. *Yoga as Medicine* is one of the fruits of that journey.

My goal was to make yoga and yoga therapy accessible to the public, especially to people who might still be skeptical or think they're old or sick to do it. There's loads of research on yoga that most people haven't heard of; I thought could help bring legitimacy to the field. As a physician I'm also very concerned about doing yoga safely, so there's a big focus [in the book] on contraindications. Above all, I wanted to show that yoga is great way to stay healthy and relieve symptoms – and transform your life for the better, whether you're cured of what ails you or not.

Is there a difference between yoga therapy and taking a yoga class?

Absolutely. Almost any form of yoga can be great preventive medicine, and wonderful [stress reduction](#), as long as you're not doing things that hurt you. But yoga therapy, as I've

observed in my travels around India and the U.S., tends to be personalized to the individual. Even the masters who write books giving sequences for particular conditions don't actually practice yoga therapy that way themselves. They look at the person in front of them and come up with something just for him or her, and modify it over time in accordance with the student's changing needs. Since group classes are actually an invention of the last 50 years or so, in a way modern yoga therapy, which is often taught in small groups or one-on-one, is returning yoga to its roots.

You've recently been writing more about [Ayurveda](#). Why is that?

As a bit of a skeptical scientist myself, I wasn't initially sold on Ayurveda, but in the last few years I've started to figure out what a deep well it is, and how helpful it is if you really want to understand yoga. An Ayurvedic perspective is particularly useful for yoga teachers who want to better personalize their yogic prescriptions for individual students. I've been to India three times in the last three years to get treatments for my own health concerns and to study with an Ayurvedic master in Kerala. The guy is 77, and he started training at the age of four with his father and grandfather, who in turn were trained by theirs. He may be the most impressive physician of any kind I've ever met.

Any advice for yoga teachers or others contemplating getting more involved in yoga therapy?

I think yoga therapy is a great service to provide, that there's tremendous need, and that this field is about to take off. Baby Boomers are looking for safe, natural, effective therapies to help them deal with the chronic illnesses they are starting to develop. And with health care costs continuing to spiral out of control, one of therapeutic yoga's advantages is that once students make an initial investment in props and instruction, they can pursue it on their own for free.

While it could take a lifetime to get all the experience and [training you need to practice yoga therapy](#) at the highest level, just helping students to relax, breathe better and improve their posture can help them enormously, and you don't need extensive training for that. Beyond training, the most important requirement for prospective yoga therapists is to walk the path of yoga themselves, and that means a commitment to a personal practice.

You did a great job in *Yoga as Medicine* of featuring the work of teachers from a wide variety of traditions. Do you think it matters which style of yoga you practice?

Again, as long as you're not doing something potentially harmful, I think the fact that you *practice* is more important than *what* you practice. I've seen healing in pretty much every single system of yoga I've investigated. I do think that some styles come from deeper traditions, some train their teachers more thoroughly, and some are safer than others, particularly for those with serious ailments, so I definitely think it matters [which style of yoga](#) you do, and maybe even more important who you study with. But the beauty is that there are so many good choices that almost anyone can find an approach to yoga that will work for them and that they'll really enjoy.