



'This was not the yoga I knew'

Swami Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana, or SVYASA, in Bangalore, India, is a world class Yoga University. Becky Pritchard went there searching for tools to inspire people to practice yoga, and to find a way to break through the impenetrable walls of today's common ailments. What she learnt and came back with went far beyond yoga



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With so many of us feeling trapped within our own bodies from pain, anxiety, stress and disease, it is not always enough to tell someone ‘just start yoga’. Common ailments such as back pain can be immobilising and leave us feeling helpless. Over the years I have found myself frustrated at the common medical advice, finding it stagnant and repetitive. With the abundance of online opinions and our lifestyle choices, it’s no wonder we keep going around in circles.

I stumbled across SVYASA by chance and was intrigued by their mission “to combine the best of the East (yoga and spiritual lore) with that of the West (modern scientific research)”. My seven-day stay there was a true reminder that yoga is a journey of the self, through the self, to the self.

The Beginning...

I arrived at SVYASA hungry to learn. Shortly after arriving I wasted no time and dove straight into an afternoon lecture, followed by a spicy dinner and a prayer session, and before I knew it, it was lights out. But I was wide awake. The moment I arrived I knew this was going to be a challenge. The atmosphere, the people, the place – were all new to me. As I walked back to my room my emotions took a drastic and unexpected turn. I suddenly felt lonelier than I could ever remember. I was totally out of my comfort zone and overwhelmed at the thought of what I was doing here. I was shaken inside and could feel the adrenaline and panic.

After pacing around my room, fighting off bugs and a million thoughts, I got talking to my dad who had called to say hello. I couldn’t hold back and at 28 I felt embarrassed to be crying down the phone. But it was exactly what I needed. Getting it out of my system changed everything. In the space of 15 minutes my mindset had completely shifted. I realised how deluded the mind can get when encompassed by a stressful situation and overwhelmed with emotions.

I was confronted with the stress I was storing inside, following two months of pretty big life changes, that all seemed to surface that night. Many of us deny or ignore stress, not wanting to ‘give in’, to acknowledge or accept we are stressed until it manifests itself in a symptom we can’t ignore – either on a mental or physical level, in the form of pain or illness.

I realised I had to take control of my mind and accept the present moment and everything in it, including my irrational emotional state. The only thing I could change was my mind. I needed to go within to find the comfort I needed and finally it clicked that this is practicing yoga. I came back to my breath and started to relax, despite the fact that my feet overhung the bed though I’m only 5.4. I fell asleep. »



BY THE END OF MY STAY I realised how much we must take responsibility for our reactions; our reaction is our choice.

Pranayama and Meditation

With the previous night's emotional breakdown behind me, I couldn't wait for an hour of pranayama and meditation to re-establish my new mind set, and begin fresh. Finding 60 minutes for meditation and pranayama is more than a challenge on a good day at home, so I found this time very precious.

The hall would slowly fill up. Many had never practiced pranayama or meditation before but over the 7 days I felt the energy in the room change as everyone started to let go; the sounds of 'Om' became louder and more powerful each day.

I have always been a little shy with my 'Om' chants but not anymore! Starting with simple breath awareness, followed by sectional and Yogic Breathing, we would cleanse with Kapalabhati and Nadi Shodhana, and culminate in the powerful Bhramari (bee breath). This was the peak of the session for me. The vibrations were powerful and with closed eyes you could see the room through the vibrations, all of the energy reflecting and connecting.

Om meditation was guided next, using the Om to take the mind through the five stages of meditation – from random thought to focussed, then slowing the mind to stillness, and finding oneness. I found this technique particular helpful. I have never found sitting cross-legged a challenge but then again I don't think I have really sat for 60 minutes in one position. I was reminded exactly why the purpose of Asanas (yoga postures) is to prepare the body for sitting in meditation.

The Yoga Classes

Far from the trendy yoga studios of Dubai, there were no mirrors, frosted glass or patterned yoga pants in sight. A man in a wheelchair was brought in and another man in front of me looked like he was in pain as he used the wall for support. Husbands would support their ailing wives, holding hands and trying to keep them motivated.

The feeling of love and the desire to get better was powerful in every class. It had a very 'hospital' feel about it, which made me a bit uncomfortable. Though yoga has always been my comfort zone, this was a new experience. My ideas of yoga got a reality check, replaced with the humble realisation that this was not the yoga I knew and that these people were in pain. They were not there to touch their toes or to look better, but to get better.

The women practiced in their vibrant saris with their gold bangles and long braided hair, just doing the best they could. Undistracted by anyone around them, there didn't seem to be much ego in the room. You could see them listening to their bodies, something that is easy to lose sight of at home when practicing in a busy class of strong yogis.

SVYASA separates treatment into 7 sections – Respiratory and Cardiology, Neurology, Back Pain, Arthritis, Digestion, Diabetes and Promotion

of Positive Health. The yoga classes in each section are all based on the same technique of stimulation and relaxation. Each asana is followed by a relaxation period of a few breaths, before the next begins. All asanas were simple to follow, with most attention focussing on breath and speed coordination rather than alignment. The intention is to stimulate areas not often used, to bring fresh nutrients, oxygen and blood.

At first I really doubted how this could make a difference to anything, but after a couple of sessions, and finally having the courage to approach some of the patients, I could see it was clearly working. Many patients were delighted to talk about how their condition had improved and mostly about how relaxed they now felt. All were keen to discuss the effect it had on their mind and stress levels; each spoke with excitement and genuine gratitude. It was clear people were learning more than physical postures. Regardless of the medical section the focus was the same – relax the body, slow the breath, calm the mind.

The Healing

Disease is a warning sign that we have become unbalanced; it's telling us we need to change something in our lifestyle or thinking. Disease creeps in when we lose our awareness. SVYASA remains true to the ancient practice of yoga but continues to bridge the gap to modern science, as someone who is artistic but scientific, and this is what I loved the most about SVYASA.

The aim of the laboratory remains that of 'understanding the biology of yoga at multiple levels – physical planes to more subtle planes of existence with the aid of the best technology available to mankind'. Proving that yoga practice is the key to health, bringing balance, insight and understanding. My time there gave me a new appreciation of the universal and natural laws that operate in our bodies and the world we live in.

Unlike western medicine (which often treats the symptom and not the cause) SVYASA focusses on the multi-dimensional layers of our existence. Our five koshas are defined as the physical body, energy body, mental body, wisdom body and the bliss body. When there is a disturbance in any of these sheaths all are affected because all are connected. Today we often only seem to take notice when the symptoms show up in the physical body and usually only treat it there.

As someone who is pain-free and considers herself 'healthy' it was a wake-up call to reflect beyond my physical state and to mentally heal myself during this journey as my comfort zone was tested. All treatments focus on turning inwards to find the root cause and provide the tools to recognise and deal with the demanding situations we all face. This concept shifted my ideas towards common ailments and illness, and how yoga can be used to help.

My personal experience that week was largely about recognising that stress doesn't always have to come from a demanding job, hectic family life or financial issues. It is all around us – the traffic, the food, our memories, emotional attachment, anger and fear. By the end of my stay I realised how much we must take responsibility for our reactions; our reaction is our choice.



A woman practices Alternate Nostril Breathing (Nadi Shodhana) as she sits peacefully by herself

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Looking back at my emotional breakdown on the first night, where part of me felt like leaving and checking into a hotel spa, I am grateful to have had my comfort zone challenged in a way that changed me. I would never have gained all that I did in one week had I been in a picturesque yoga retreat on a beautiful beach.

What I learnt and have come back with is far beyond yoga. I reconnected with the basic principles of life – pain, discomfort, people, connections, energy, will power, joy and compassion. I let go of the ideas in my mind, ideas about my body and ideas about yoga. ✨