

A Response to William J. Broad's "How Yoga Can Wreck Your Body"¹

The word "wreck" conjures up images of chaos, mayhem, and destruction, an attention-grabber in itself but especially when coupled with the word "yoga," a practice that is very popular worldwide. This article was written by an award-winning journalist and senior science writer at the *New York Times*, a month before the release date of his book entitled *The Science of Yoga: The Risks and Rewards*. In discussing the risks and rewards of yoga, the article begins and ends with quotes by Glenn Black, a body worker and yoga teacher in New York. Among other things, Black says he studied with a legendary physical therapist but acknowledges that he has "no formal training for determining which [yoga] poses are good for a student and which may be problematic," but he does have "a ton of experience."

Safety in a yoga class obviously depends on who is doing what and when and how they are doing it. The practice of yoga consists of three essential components—the physical poses, breathing techniques, and mindfulness. Yoga poses done after adequately preparing your body through dynamic movements, along with an awareness of your own strength and flexibility, greatly reduces the probability of injury. The breath is another key ingredient: there are specific instructions for breathing that are associated with holding a pose as well as transitioning from pose to pose. Following these guidelines helps to ensure safety as well as effectiveness. And finally, practicing mindfully, aware of what you are doing as you are doing it, provides yet another layer of protection, even as it catapults the simplest of yoga poses to advanced levels. Skilled yoga teachers and yoga therapists are specifically trained to adapt yoga poses to the capabilities of each student, preserving the physician's Hippocratic oath of doing no harm, even as they serve people with chronic conditions or special needs. For example, Karl, a long-time student in our Seniors Yoga Class, remarked, "I am 94 and I began coming six years ago. It makes me feel wonderful, and I wish I had begun this practice 40 years ago." Judy, a cancer survivor, has been attending our yoga class at Alta Bates Comprehensive Cancer Center for years, and said, "This yoga class is one of the most healing experiences I've had after all the toxicity of treatment—surgery and chemotherapy. It is very important to me."

Realizing the tremendous healing potential of yoga, some of the best medical schools and centers of integrative medicine in the world are seriously studying the benefits of yoga. The National Institutes of Health have substantially increased federal funding for yoga- and mindfulness-related research in recent years. The National Cancer Institute has awarded millions of dollars to the MD Anderson Cancer Center to study the effects of yoga on cancer survivors, even as thousands of respected medical professionals are practicing yoga themselves and recommending yoga to their patients, as both prevention and intervention. The U.S. military is deploying yoga as a treatment for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), widespread in service members returning from combat. The mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) protocol, whose physical component is based on yoga, is offered in over 200 medical centers, hospitals, and clinics around the world. And that is just in healthcare. Yoga is also being applied in other major domains of social function, such as education and public safety. Yoga is being practiced in many schools and alternative schools and in juvenile halls and prisons around the country. A youth detained in Alameda County Juvenile Hall, where we have been conducting a daily yoga program for years, said, "Wow, if everyone did yoga, there would not be so much violence in the world!" The reason for the wide dissemination of yoga is simple: yoga is a powerful prac-

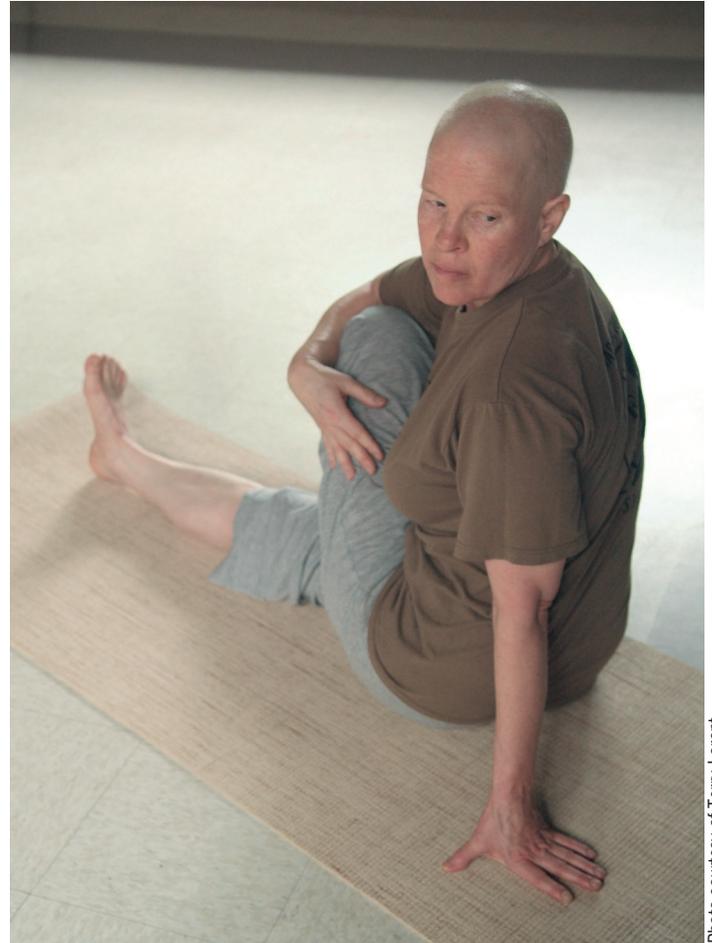


Photo courtesy of Terry Lorant

Student in *marichyasana*; Healing Yoga for Cancer class, Niroga Institute

tice whose benefits for physical health and emotional well-being far outweigh its risks. The latest diagnostic tools in medicine, the latest research in neuroscience and epigenetics, as well as the rigorous evaluation of yoga programs in clinical and community settings, are establishing the plethora of benefits derived from yoga on an irrefutable foundation.

Yoga is often recommended as a cost-effective intervention for many common chronic conditions (which take up 75 percent of the entire health care budget and cost us trillions of dollars annually), from cancer to cardiovascular disease, diabetes to depression, headaches to hypertension, and more. The International Association of Yoga Therapists, with over 3000 members worldwide, annual publications and conferences, and a substantial Digital Resource Library (DRL), is a storehouse of information and a referral source for the burgeoning field of yoga therapy.

Additionally, we are realizing that chronic stress and traumatic stress are endemic in our lives and in our communities, ravaging our health and well-being. We are learning that stress messes up our brains, disrupting our ability for attention control and emotion regulation, affecting everything we do! Educators are realizing that yoga could help prevent school failure and enable academic achievement, and they are asking for yoga to help students focus so that they are

ready to learn. Law enforcement officials are realizing that yoga could reduce recidivism, and are asking for yoga to help inmates with emotion regulation and impulse control and to provide them with life skills upon re-entry into the community. Corporate executives are realizing that yoga could help with global competitiveness and are asking for yoga to help leaders with personal and professional sustainability. Members of an international consortium of yoga organizations called the Yoga Service Council are serving thousands of people each week through yoga, transforming lives, and healing communities all over the United States and beyond, one breath at a time.

Even though Broad's article smacks of bias and sensationalism, the article does point to a significant challenge in the field of yoga. There is great inconsistency in the quality of education and training of yoga teachers and yoga therapists. The Yoga Alliance, an international registry of yoga teachers, has established standards for certifying yoga teachers, but it does not have the ability to ensure curriculum quality or compliance to these standards, resulting in plenty of poorly trained yoga teachers, many of whom are, in turn, training teachers themselves! There is wide disparity in the structure and duration of training programs, their quality of training content/curricula, and the range of faculty experience, and yoga-teachers-to-be often don't know how to go about deciding from the many options. And, with thousands of new yoga teachers unleashed on an unsuspecting public annually, yoga students are often confused at best and oblivious at worst. In an attempt to correct this situation, IAYT has been working on an international effort to formulate training standards for yoga therapists, but the issues around compliance will need to be addressed once these standards are published. At the Niroga Yoga Studio in Berkeley, where we rigorously train yoga teachers and yoga therapists in year-long training programs, experts regularly hold workshops on many common chronic conditions. We have had injury-free classes for cancer survivors, seniors, and many

other special populations for years, and we often get calls like this: "I am recovering from injury/surgery, and my doctor suggested that I do yoga. But I am afraid to go into a general yoga class; do you have any suggestions?"

There is something terribly wrong if a practice that is supposed to heal is causing harm to those who attempt it, rendering it worse than useless. There is something terribly wrong if yoga teachers and yoga therapists are not adequately trained to suggest appropriate modifications, adapted to the capabilities of every student. There is something terribly wrong if a practice that is universally applicable can only be practiced by the super-fit, and not by those that may need it the most. The solution is not to make the practice even more socially elite and culturally incongruent than it already is, but to dissolve these barriers through proper training of yoga teachers and yoga therapists, by master teachers who have diligently acquired the requisite knowledge, skills, and experience, so that the legacy of this ancient healing art and science can be transmitted from teacher to student and practiced for generations to come. **YTT**

Reference

1. Broad, W. J. (2012, January 5). How yoga can wreck your body. *The New York Times Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/08/magazine/how-yoga-can-wreck-your-body.html>.



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