

Still young



WE HAVE ALL MET YOGA PROPONENTS WHO SEEM A FRACTION OF THEIR AGE. ELSA RABOLD, A YOGA TEACHER BASED AT MONTVILLE IN QUEENSLAND, IS AS ACTIVE TODAY AS SHE WAS 50 YEARS AGO.

AT 87, HER FLEXIBILITY AND VITALITY IS THE ENVY OF MOST PEOPLE SHE TEACHES.

ARE PEOPLE LIKE ELSA SIMPLY EXTRAORDINARY OR CAN THEIR FOUNTAINS OF YOUTH BE ATTRIBUTED TO A LIFE OF YOGA? EVIDENCE SUGGESTS WE CAN ALL GAIN A NEW ZEST FOR LIFE FROM YOGA, WRITES MIKE SULLIVAN. YOGA MAY EVEN HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY IN TREATING AND REVERSING THE DISEASES OF OLD AGE: OSTEOPOROSIS AND SENILITY.

Elsa Rabold is 87 years of age. But few people guess she is more than in her mid-50s.

There was a time when she had more endurance and was a little more flexible. But few people who take her yoga classes at Buderim and Montville can match Elsa, even though most are less than half her age.

Elsa practises yoga and meditation before dawn at least five days a week. "I'm pampering myself now," she says, not pressuring herself to rise so early each day.

"I've had several back injuries which were caused by my own carelessness." Through yoga, Elsa has overcome those back injuries, even though one of her falls would have left most people wheelchair-bound for years and possibly for life.

Without being told, no-one would guess Elsa had such afflictions to her back. Neither would they suspect her age, so full of vitality is this octogenarian.

"The benefit of yoga is simple. I'm 87 and my biological age has changed little," she grins. "Nothing has changed much at all – except I need a little more rest as I'm getting older..."

Elsa is up at 4am and usually to bed by 9pm, "...unless there is a stupid film on TV... I only watch SBS or the ABC – and sometimes I get caught up in a really good show..."

Elsa maintains a wicked sense of fun and humour, matched with a keen appreciation of life which she believes is greatly heightened by yoga.

Is Elsa just one in a million – or is she correct when she attributes her healthy longevity to yoga?

A YOGA LIFE

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that, as Elsa has found, yoga can improve your life while increasing your active lifespan.

This is more than just circumstantial. The benefits yoga has in fighting the onset of 'old age' are well regarded medically. Most doctors recommend "exercise" and, when pressed, will steer people in the direction of something that involves stretching, low-impact movement and weight-bearing movement. It's hard to look past yoga as a perfect blend of these things.

Old hands, like Elsa Rabold, will tell you that most people are attracted to yoga for these

Is Elsa just one in a million – or is she correct when she attributes her healthy longevity to yoga and a healthy diet?

very effective qualities – but they stay with yoga for a lifetime because of the breathing and meditative aspects that eventually bring a peculiar 'peace' to their daily lives.

"I do not use the word meditation," Elsa says. "I prefer to say, 'Let's move into stillness...' That's the essence of yoga.

"It means to de-tense... I teach people how to move into stillness. This is what we need. All of us."

One of the key benefits yoga delivers immediately is a concentration upon breathing. Yoga teaches you how to breathe 'properly' to exploit the inner strengths of your body.

MEDICAL EVIDENCE

Back in the early 1990s, noted American futurist, Clive Jones, confronted assembled leading lights of the Pacific travel industry with a fascinating prospect: What happens if your clients are living longer, healthier lives; able to travel beyond even 100 years of age?

Jones was talking about the overall medical miracle. Better food, better medical treatments and individuals taking more care of their bodies. But he was also talking about life-enhancing drugs and supplements.

His interpretation was that not only will people live longer by 2030, they will be healthier – effectively 'younger' – for a longer time. With more time on their hands, and able bodies – they will explore their inner and outer worlds with more passion and devotion.

Jones predicted the rise of health resorts and a corresponding rise in the number of people enjoying such healthy, peaceful pursuits as tai chi, yoga and meditation.

Evidence over the past decade suggests Jones was right, but the pace of change may be even greater than he predicted.

Where yoga comes into the equation strongly is that it gives a great physical foundation for other pursuits – especially travel. People of adventure – even soft adventure – need to be in better shape to

achieve their pursuits: hiking, climbing, kayaking, dancing... even fishing and gardening.

Most people who attend yoga classes for more than six months agree that they have gained in balance and physical strength in such a way that they have been able to rediscover activities they thought they had lost forever.

For the frail aged, just being able to sit comfortably on the floor in various positions – and get up and off the floor with confidence – is a major breakthrough. It enhances the quality of their lives enormously.

ABOUT MIDDLE AGE

Let's get one thing clear: the yogic tradition considers your years after 50 to be among your finest for psychological and spiritual growth. You are reaching your peak after 50 and you should be doing so mentally and physically.

One of the world's foremost authorities on ageing – and the value of yoga in combating the ailments of age – is medical doctor Deepak Chopra. An endocrinologist and specialist in how people's consciousness affects their health, Dr Chopra puts forward a fascinating possibility in his book, *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind*:

"We need to change our idea of what ageing is," writes Dr Chopra. "If I know my biological potential is 130 years, then I don't consider myself middle-aged until I'm 65 ... One of the great principles of mind-body medicine is that expectancies determine outcome. If you expect to remain strong in old age, you will."

Dr Chopra is an advocate of yoga as part of a holistic approach to life and good health. Yoga is unique in the way it allows you to do something to yourself, for yourself.

Yoga is you getting active about your health. It is about developing physically and mentally with age rather than deteriorating.

HOW YOGA HELPS REVERSE AGEING

Yoga reverses the ageing process by moving each and every one of our joints through a full range of motion. It does so in a controlled, low impact and weight bearing manner.



ELSA AND RUSSELL
– TRIKONASANA

During weight-bearing exercise, your muscles transmit mechanical and bioelectrical signals to your bones. Your bones, naturally, thicken in response to this stimulation.

Claims that yoga helps prevent the onset of osteoporosis are well founded, because of this fact. Weight-bearing postures of yoga stimulate the bones to retain calcium and build.

The benefits of better balance through yoga also play a role in helping prevent falls in elderly people that fracture bones.

If a fall does occur, yoga reduces the amount of trauma experienced, because the body is stronger and more flexible – and possibly able to react more quickly to correct a fall. Stronger muscles can act to counteract and absorb the impact of a fall.

A major back injury in earlier years has not stopped Elsa, she still conducts yoga classes and has her own strict daily regime of stretches, postures and meditation or, as she terms it, "coming to stillness".

Her back injury was a result of a fall Elsa had 20 years earlier, when her Montville home was being constructed. She fell from the upper floor area down onto a carpenter's workhorse and suffered serious back injuries.

RIGHT: ELSA AND VERNA
– ARDHAMATSYENDRASANA HALF TWIST

BELOW: ELSA AND KATIE
– SALABHASANA FULL LOCUST

IMPROVING FLEXIBILITY AND STRENGTH THROUGH YOGA
CAN HELP STAVE OFF THE DISEASES OF AGEING,
ESPECIALLY CURVATURE OF THE SPINE.

Today, she laughs about the incident and the predictions of the doctors, which have proved wrong. She knows that without yoga she may indeed have become a victim to chronic back damage. She feels little pain.

"It's because I'm so flexible that I've been able to get through that," she says. Elsa credits a device she has at home which allows her perform yoga postures upside down as one of the best solutions.

How effective has it been in reversing the effects of that accident? Ask her neighbours who watch her climb trees, to this day, to collect avocados.

Yoga helped Elsa overcome her back damage in the same way that it helps stave off the most obvious sign of ageing: the shortening and curving of the spine.

A rounded back and spine – usually from years of being slouched over a desk – causes the chest area to become more concave and sunken and it causes shallower breathing. This, in turn, contributes to cardio-vascular problems.

Yet, maintaining the strength and health of the spine is at the core of good yoga.

Poor posture and the degeneration of the spinal column is the basis for a range of medical problems that are exacerbated by age. Restrictive breathing and poor circulation contribute to blood and nervous disorders and may impact vital organs and interfere with good digestion and excretion. The problems compound the longer they are allowed to go on.

OUT WITH OSTEOPOROSIS

Can yoga really combat the onset of osteoporosis. Can yoga strengthen bones that seem destined to become more brittle with age?

Medical studies recently have found good results in building bone strength in the age through the use of weight training. Weight-bearing exercise is a proven way to fight osteoporosis. Simply, the signals to the bones are that growth and calcium retention is required because of the regular 'work' they are having to do.



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Yoga is often discounted in this field because it is seen as simply 'stretching'. Some people regard it as no more than a good way to prepare for more aerobic physical activity.

But as Elsa Rabold and others will attest, some of the most effective weight-bearing exercise you can do is in a yoga regimen.

Yoga is one of the few exercise systems in which weight is borne steadily and for long periods by both the upper and lower body.

Weight-bearing yoga postures stimulate the skeletal system to retain calcium, especially in the arms, legs and spine. Yoga is based on the axiom that our bodies are meant to be used.

Inverted weight yoga, such as that used by Elsa Rabold to help overcome her back damage, works on the bones, tendons and muscles in a way that straight weight lifting cannot better. Poses such as the headstand and handstand work on the bones of the arms, wrists and hands in a natural, invigorating manner.

Yoga also works to keep your joints young. The principle here is precisely that which Western medicine has espoused for many decades.

We all know that when a joint is injured, the recommended method for rehabilitating it is for the therapist to move the joint as far as possible in each 'normal' direction until pain is felt. As therapy progresses, the range of movement increases until pain is felt less and gradually disappears. This is known as Passive Range of Motion.

The patient then moves on to the next stage of making those moves themselves as exercise and without assistance. This is called Active Range of Motion. The principles are the same for yoga.

LOOK AT IT ANOTHER WAY

Inverted postures made a big difference for Elsa Rabold, but the reasons behind the effectiveness of such yoga postures are not readily appreciated outside the yogic sphere.

Simply put, going inverted means your muscles are pushing against gravity in an unusual way, adding to the effectiveness of weight-bearing exercises. But there are other, hidden benefits.

Posturing upside down changes the way your blood flows, especially in the important areas of neck, chest, throat and the lungs. Some claim that blood flow is improved to the sinuses and the ear-nose-throat area becomes more resistant to infection. It is also said the thyroid glands benefit from the improved circulation.

With age, we are told, comes a gradual hardening of the arteries. One clear effect of this is that the blood flow to the brain must decline – and at age 65 it may be a third of what it was at age 25. Western medicine accepts that reduced blood flow to the brain brings on senility and treats this as a degenerative and irreversible disease.

Yogic inverted postures are an effective way to increase blood flow to the brain. It lets gravity do the work, bringing the brain below the heart and allowing circulation to the head and upper body to increase without putting strain on the heart.

...it's being more alive, still.

When the body is completely inverted, blood flows more easily through the veins to the heart from the legs and abdomen – without strain. It also helps relieve the pooling of blood that occurs in the legs from everyday standing.

Of course, not everyone can perform inverted exercise straight away, so many yoga instructors introduce the benefits to students in simpler ways, such as lying with their legs vertical against a wall. As strength and confidence grows, so does the inclination to try greater means of inversion, for most yoga students.

Unusual as some of the positions are challenging, the benefits of yoga act to increase people's eagerness to move into new postures. Eventually, they seek out the postures in yoga that may help their specific ailments.

And, over time, they discover they are regaining movement and stamina that they thought was lost forever.

Best of all, according to people such as Elsa Rabold, they find that marvellous peace and stillness that extends mind as well as body.

For Elsa Rabold, 87, gently stretching and carefully breathing, in conjunction with a healthy diet allows her to greet each new dawn on her balcony at Montville.

It's not a case of still being alive – it's being more alive, still.

YOGA POSTURES

THAT HELP YOU STAY YOUNG

1. Downward facing dog
2. Upward facing dog
3. Triangle pose
4. Bridge pose
5. Tree pose
6. Legs up the wall pose