



# controlling Chaos

In this thought-provoking article yoga teacher and author Jane Wiesner explores why and how yoga can help us to let go and live a richer, more spontaneous life.

Yoga is not *just* a way of life  
– it can give you a way to truly *live*.

Cyclone photography courtesy of NASA.



A little stress may be a good motivator, but most of us worry far too much. Anxious and fearful, we try to control our environments – an impossible goal that only compounds our suffering.

According to endocrinologist, Hans Selye, the thing most people fear is not having control. Selye, a leading authority on environmental stress, suggests that a lack of certainty is the greatest cause of human stress. Selye's theory is particularly worrisome when we look at the connection, now recognised, between stress and illness. Especially, considering the uncertainties we face today – a world often filled with instability, conflict and crisis. Selye explains that stress can be a positive or a negative force. 'Eustress' ('good' stress) motivates us and drives our enthusiasm – it is life preserving. In contrast, 'distress' ('bad' stress) manifests as long-term anxiety and worry – it has a devastating affect on our health, contributing to an on-going sense of uncertainty. But, the good news is that even in a world full of uncertainty there is something we do have control over – our thoughts.

**ACCORDING TO THE WISDOM OF THE** ancient East, coping with stress is a matter of mind. Thousands of years ago a great sage called Patanjali brought together many teachings of yoga that were scattered through ancient texts and wrote them down in a very clear and concise form in a text that is known as the *Yoga Sutras*. Each sutra is a short passage that gives insight into the workings of the mind. These astute writings look at the things that motivate and *control* us with the ultimate aim of liberating our thinking. According to Patanjali, if you control your mind, you have controlled everything. Interestingly, psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud suggests we have little control over our mind and therefore, our impulses. To Freud, the motivating forces behind our thoughts

simmer below the surface of the conscious mind. Freud's work certainly provides an amazing insight into the things that control us, but nevertheless, his view of the human condition is reasonably bleak. Alternatively, Patanjali offers us hope. Freud and Patanjali would have had quite a meeting of the minds had they lived in the same era. One teaches that the mind is oceanic, something deep and boundless, overflowing with complicated obstacles that come in the form of repressed memories and unfulfilled desires. The other teaches us how to unravel the mind and see beyond these obstacles or *kleshas* (afflictions – emotional reactions) to a place of clarity and vision, a place that touches the peaceful gap between thoughts. Patanjali's approach is proactive; it heralds the wisdom of choice.

Not all of us experience fabulous health, wealth and success. Most of us deal with some form of stress. Yoga not only helps us to cope with negative stressors; it helps us to understand ourselves. It allows us to let go of the fear of uncertainty. At times, we all feel out of control and would welcome the chance to reduce the pressure we experience daily. It's hard to find time to unwind, yet according to Patanjali, we need to rest, reflect and relax just as much as we need the air that we breathe – it's up to us to take time for ourselves. Stress therapists, like Selye, teach that it is extremely self-destructive to live with our 'on' buttons constantly pushed in. Yoga can be our 'off switch'. Both mind and body benefit from the practice of *asana* (yoga postures) and *pranayama* (breathing techniques). Yogis experience the physical gains of the posture work and the subtle benefits of meditation; they embrace openness and awareness and learn to trust in the natural order of things.

In yogic philosophy, the best way to get some control back is to relinquish control. What does this mean? It means

that it is virtually impossible for you to control anything in your life if you yourself are being controlled by negative thoughts, especially the destructive

beautifully when he said that our greatest strength lies in our ability to understand our weakness. This doesn't mean we don't have serious goals and intentions, it just

sound 'Om' (Aum) on the outward breath. The breathing and the vibration will soothe and heal and release a positive chain reaction throughout the body-mind. (Be mindful of not overdoing breath work – it can result in lightheadedness if you are not well practised, so listen to your body and respond accordingly).

## According to Patanjali, if you control your mind, you have controlled everything.

extremes of obsession and perfectionism. In other words, you cannot control your life when your unconscious mind is controlling you, making unconscious, unyielding demands. In essence, it comes down to choice. For instance, the next time you're stuck in a supermarket queue rather than getting anxious and annoyed practice yogic breathing and use the time constructively – consciously let go of the need for instant gratification – relieve the body of tension instead of creating it – choose to respond productively.

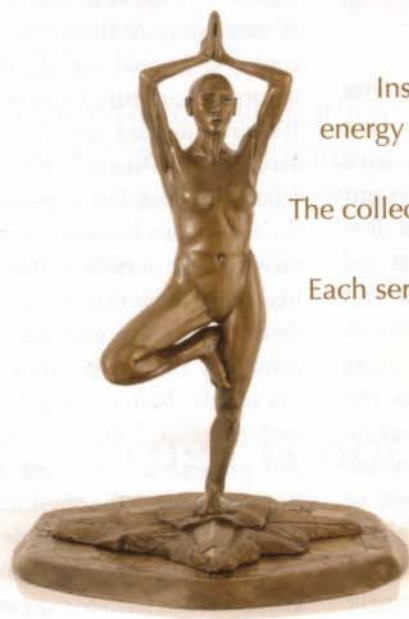
In reality, the more we *must* have control and hang on to the idea of perfection or gratification, the less control we actually have. Aristotle put it

means that we put them into a rational perspective. So, rather than demanding that things go our way we accept the universal principles of yoga practice and allow things to evolve naturally. We still apply the same amount of effort but without a rigid, uncompromising intensity. After all, yoga is about relieving tension. For example, rather than getting angry and frustrated because the traffic is slow, use a form of yogic breathing to instil a sense of calm and peacefulness. Breathing through the nostrils, slowly inhale to the count of three and hold, then exhale to the count of three and hold. Repeat five times. Alternatively, you could chant. Simply breathe in very slowly through the nostrils, then slowly make the

**IF PRACTISED REGULARLY, YOGA WILL HELP** you to overcome dissatisfaction. It will teach you to be in the moment so you can experience the true bliss of psychological freedom. What is psychological freedom? It is freedom from the need to control our environment, or, freedom from needing things to be a certain way in order for us to be happy. This kind of freedom is about being liberated from irrational fears. It doesn't dwell in the past or yearn for the future. It is very much about the present. Yoga can take you to this place. Yoga has the capacity to open your mind to infinite possibilities.

Like Patanjali, rational emotive behaviour therapist Albert Ellis believes

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that the frustration we experience in life – and subsequent feeling of uncertainty – is connected to our core beliefs. For instance, the need for perfection is linked to the belief that we are imperfect or that we need things a particular way for us to be satisfied. When we insist on being perfect, or while we demand to have this or that to make us happy we give up our personal power, shifting it to something or someone else. We fixate on an emotional or materialistic desire. Or, as Deepak Chopra puts it, we become object-referenced rather than being self-referred – our satisfaction and happiness become reliant on certain wants being attained. (I use the word ‘want’ deliberately as what we *want* isn’t always what we *need*.) In contrast, the quiet awareness of yoga practice frees us from the tendency to make uncompromising demands on ourselves and on others.

**ELLIS CLAIMS THAT HOW WE REACT TO** any given circumstance relates to our core beliefs. If we are overly emotional about a particular event it undoubtedly means that a negative chain of core

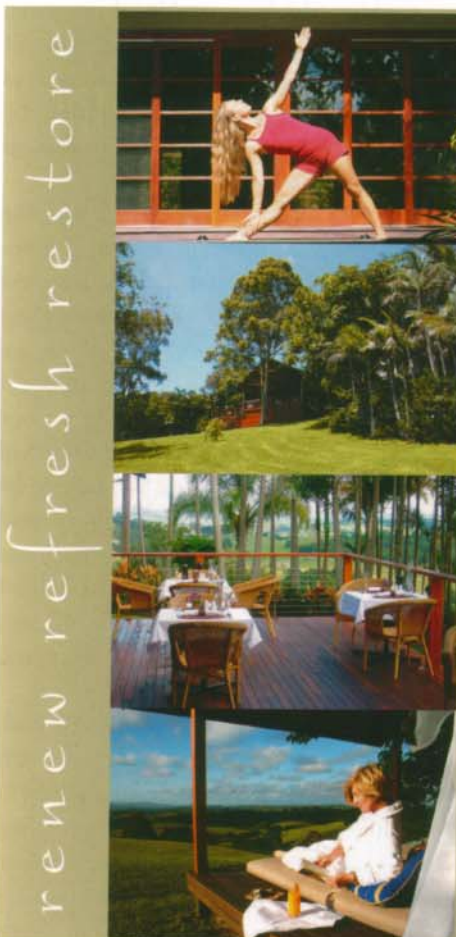
beliefs has been activated such as “I must be accepted by others” because, if “I’m not acceptable to others” it means that “I’m not perfect” and if “I’m not perfect” then “I’m not good enough” so, “I must be no good”. In this case, the primary core belief is “I am no good” or “I am worthless”. In other words, we take our basic desire to be acceptable to others and we unconsciously twist it into an irrational demand for self-perfection. Thankfully, the principles contained in the *Yoga Sutras* suggest mental and

Quantum theory suggests that the observer affects the outcome of what is being observed. So, when we participate actively in something, we influence the outcome. Interestingly, this view can be linked to karma (action) yoga, in that our choices ultimately determine the outcome of our lives. According to quantum physics, when we walk through a door whatever is on the other side of that door will change forever. This paradigm suggests that there is a way we can have some control over life – perhaps all it

## Patanjali’s approach is pro-active; it heralds the wisdom of choice.

physical exercises to shortcut this kind of destructive thinking cycle, such as meditation techniques that encourage an ‘observer-awareness’ thought process – *chitta vritti nirodhah* ‘the restraint of the modifications of the mind’. These techniques help us to accept ourselves rather than judge ourselves harshly.

takes is an awareness of the way we interact with our environment and how respond to other people. Rather than stubbornly trying to force things to be the way we want, yogic philosophy suggests that we let go of our obsessions and allow the universe to guide our choices; we just need to listen to our intuitive inner voice.



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Yoga gives us the chance to do something to improve the status of our health by operating on much the same principles as quantum physics. It allows us to participate in the outcome of our wellbeing by providing us with practical ways of moving energy through the body-mind, giving us ways to direct our thoughts on a more positive level.

in tension for too long, the blood flow is restricted, causing inflammation and pain, and the area ceases to function properly. When the tension is released and the positive flow is restored the area reverts to its normal, healthy function. Hence, one of the goals of yoga is to release any tension held in the body-mind and restore it to a balanced state. You can try this for

and meditation) it engages the parasympathetic response and helps to reduce the tendency to hold tension in the body.

## Aristotle put it beautifully when he said that our greatest strength lies in our ability to understand our weakness.

The principles behind yoga practice suggest that when the body is held in a state of tension for too long it is unable to function as it should. Over the centuries, many have speculated on the concept of 'tension' in relation to mental and physical health. Science explains the effects of tension in the body through the fight or flight response (general adaptation syndrome). When the body reacts to a threat – whether physical or emotional – its natural state changes. It moves from the parasympathetic division of the autonomic nervous system (homeostasis/balance – body-mind free to function with optimal health) to the sympathetic division of the autonomic nervous system (the SNS), an active state in which biological changes manifest in response to threat. The sympathetic response of the autonomic nervous system reacts by speeding up the heart, increasing the blood flow, stopping digestion, pumping the body full of adrenaline and changing the status of various other functions in the body to prepare it for action – to fight or to take flight.

**ACCORDING TO YOGIC THOUGHT, IF THE** body is held in this active state too long it creates blocks in the flow of *prana* (energy). To understand this, think of the body as an energy field – the muscles, organs and tissues all part of a moving vibration. When the energy becomes restricted, blocks occur and there is a decrease in the function of that part of the body. For instance, when muscles are held

yourself by lying down with the eyes closed and mentally moving through the body (feet, legs, hands, arms etc.) squeezing the muscles tightly and then relaxing them with the outward breath. You will note that the body responds by feeling soothed. (Avoid this practice if suffering from high blood pressure or heart disease in which case a less dynamic relaxation method is recommended).

Dr Ian Gawler, the author of *You Can Conquer Cancer*, refers to a prolonged SNS response as a state of "unrelieved or unresolved tension". Once upon a time, our stressors were external (the caveman fleeing a predator), whereas today our stressors are often internal (worrying about our kids, our love life, the mortgage payments, our jobs). Many of our problems are dealt with in the mind rather than by physically confronting what threatens us, so we don't generally have the physical release that fighting a battle or running away offers. And because our stressors are dealt with in a mental realm they are often prolonged, hence there is no resolution to the state of physical tension brought on by the fight or flight response. So, we hold on to the stress, and ultimately the tension in the body. What happens when we remain in a state of tension for too long? What happens when you wind a violin string too tight? The same can be said for the body-mind. If we are constantly tight we are in danger of snapping – becoming angry, anxious, depressed or ill. But if we practise yoga daily (asana, pranayama, relaxation

**IN REALITY, WHEN WE DEMAND CONTROL** we get chaos. Our demands hold us rigid. Alternatively, yoga teaches us to let go of the need for control so we can just *be* in the moment, completely liberated – free. Yogic philosophy is about living in the moment and therefore, shedding the negative emotional prompters that interfere with our homeostasis (balance). Admittedly, living in the moment or 'now consciousness' is not an easy thing to practise in a world full of sensory seductions and lifestyle demands. We seem to be shunted and shoved from obligation to commitment and consumed by responsibility and worry. For most of us, stopping to smell the roses is just a dream. Work commitments, financial pressure, worry about our kids... there are so many things that create pressure in our lives that it is no wonder we tend to develop negative mechanisms for coping. We look for diversions to provide some relief. For example, overeating, smoking, gambling, drinking or taking drugs are all temporary forms of escape – methods of 'self-soothing', an unconscious attempt to alleviate the stress of frustration by substitution. Freud refers to this as 'displacement'.

Ask yourself this: When was the last time you sat in a quiet room (without the telly on, without a snack) fully aware, totally conscious, happy just to be in the moment? Unfortunately, we often crave external, sensory stimulation and it can become a substitute for our peace of mind. Today's high-level visual stimuli means that we are bombarded by temptation – the marketing behind 'retail therapy' suggests that we associate our happiness with 'products'. But it's a mistake to rely on the external world for happiness. When we do, we relinquish control of the mind.

The ability to experience full, sensory awareness of simple pleasures is at the core of the yogic philosophy – being fully aware, fully human and living in a state of genuine realisation is the aim of the yogic way of life. A child's spontaneous laughter reflects our innate

potential for happiness. When our thoughts are unclouded and clear, free of illusion (*maya*), we can experience a true sense of being. If we let our lives become too serious (all about control) we forget how to laugh.

**YOGA IS THE BEST WAY I KNOW TO TOUCH** what psychologist Abraham Maslow refers to as 'peak experiences' – joyous and creative feelings of expression and satisfaction. Yoga is not just a way of life – it can give you a way to truly live. Yoga teaches that it is only when the mind is unrestricted or unhindered – free of fear – that liberation is achieved. In other words, by practising yoga you can experience joy and feel completely alive. Yoga will give you systematic ways to achieve peace of mind, through asana, meditation, pranayama and self-reflection. Yoga has the power to transform your life physically, mentally and spiritually.

Controlling life will always be problematic, but you can control your thoughts and actions through the mindful practice of yoga. And ultimately, you can control your own happiness. In a

way, yogic philosophy is a paradox. It teaches that you will only find control when you completely let go of the need for control. Regardless of life's complications, you can take comfort in the simplicity of yoga. Trust this ancient art that is so rich in practical wisdom and I am sure that, as you experience more of what yoga has to offer, you will find that, for you too, 'yoga is ecstasy'.

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