

# YOGA

## 4 EveryBody

Peace  
of Heart  
Heart Opening  
Asanas

# Emotional Rescue

Restore Balance  
Ease Anxiety

# Kids Yoga

# Chaturanga

Saved my Life



**Journeys through India**  
*Pilgrimages of Western Yoginis*

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# Chaturanga

SAVED MY LIFE

By Kimberlee Bethany

I have struggled with my self-image for most of my life. I started entering beauty pageants at eight, started modeling at ten, and earned \$300 an hour posing for a German catalogue at 14. I grew up believing that how I looked mattered more than anything else. When I was 15, a fashion photographer told me in one breath that I was the most photogenic model he'd ever worked with, and that I needed to lose 15 pounds from my hips if I ever wanted a serious career. It's fairly common that a casual remark can trigger an eating disorder in a vulnerable young woman.

I was a textbook eating disorder case. My family has a history of unhealthy dealings with food, including indulgent overeating, starvation diets, and (usually vocalized) poor body image. I was the only child of high-achieving parents, and perfection was my continual goal. At the age of 18, my childhood home fell apart—my parents separated, my mom had a nervous breakdown, and my grandparents both began to deteriorate in health. I went from a child to a full-time caretaker in a matter of months. Like most victims of eating disorders, my eating

habits and my body were the only part of my life over which I had control.

I've starved myself, I've counted calories relentlessly, and I've stuck my finger down my throat. I had a consistent routine of five hours of strenuous exercise per day, seven days a week. I went three years without menstruating and at my lowest point, I had only 92 pounds on my 5'4" frame. Even then, I thought my hips and thighs were fat.

I have practiced yoga since I was 12 years old, but the yoga books, with slim individuals whose ribs and hips protruded, were easy to misinterpret. I missed the forest of yoga's depth for its thin trees, and this ideal haunted me and added gasoline onto the fire of my own self-destruction. When I never grew tall, my modeling career stalled; my motivation for thinness suddenly transformed into a quest to become the "perfect" yogi who exercised complete self-restraint.

My mom eventually healed, and my grandparents passed out of the pain of infirmity and into the peacefulness of the other side. Suddenly, at 23 years of age, I was left



in an empty space with the freedom to create and control my life in more ways than just my food intake. I floundered for a little while, but the answers began to come when, in the spring of 2001, I walked into Island Yoga on Galveston Island, Texas. In that studio, I came face to face with the dragon of Power Yoga—*Chaturanga*—and I fell flat on my face. Anorexic thinness has no room for strength, and my tiny arms couldn't support my weight. Slowly, *Chaturanga*, Headstand, Downward-Facing Dog and Handstand became stronger motivating forces than thinness, and my image of myself evolved from how I looked into what I could accomplish.

"Yoga is about taking an 'I can' attitude," says Vicki Jones, a Yoga Alliance Registered Yoga Teacher in Homewood, Illinois. "I can" in yoga extends to 'I can' in life, and working toward goals. Taking a stand in yoga extends to taking a stand in life. This is only one of the ways that yoga fosters self-esteem: by taking a stand and extending that into life, we realize we can."

### Self-Esteem in a "Lookist" Society

Self-esteem is a global and relatively stable evaluation reflecting how positively we feel about ourselves. Some psychologists view self-esteem as the critical indicator of life adjustment and emotional well-being. In societies that attach importance and status to physical attractiveness, such as modern American society, self-esteem may be dependent on our perception of our physical selves. Unfortunately, we are a "lookist" society, and our cultural "lookist" values can seep into our thought processes and disintegrate our self-esteem.

In research on how perceptions may affect our lives, psychologists discovered that slim individuals were thought to be physically fit, attractive, successful, smart, and in control of their lives, while overweight individuals were viewed as lazy, sloppy, unattractive, and unable to

control themselves. In fact, "lookism" has such a strong influence in the workforce that when attractive and unattractive persons with equal qualifications apply for the same job, the attractive person is more likely to be hired. It's not just adults who are getting short-changed for something as unsubstantial as appearance: research shows that infants perceived as cute receive more nurturing from their caretakers and school teachers react more positively to attractive children than to unattractive children.

In a society where the entertainment industry dictates our standard of beauty on movie screens and magazine covers, where airbrushed ideals crash against everyday realities, real people with everyday bodies and natural beauty lose, and the casualties often manifest in body image disorders. Body image has to do with our perceptions of how we look, with whether or not we're satisfied with our appearances. When we don't feel pretty in a society that promotes prettiness as the be-all-end-all ideal, we can end up with a body image distortion, which may cause unhappiness and depression. That's exactly what happened to me—whether or not I was pretty didn't matter; what mattered was that I didn't feel pretty.

*I came face to face with the dragon of power yoga—Chaturanga—and I fell flat on my face.*

I'm not alone. Body Image Disorders are far too common and they're on the rise. Back in 1973, studies showed that only 15% of men and 25% of women were dissatisfied with their overall appearance. By 1986, those numbers had risen to 34% of men and 38% of women, and by 1995, a full 48% of women were dissatisfied with their overall appearance. This unhappiness is heavily associated with problem behaviors, like eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia, and is often related to overeating and binge eating. Research suggests that as many as one in eight adolescents and college age girls may suffer from an eating disorder. Women who see themselves as fat are far more likely to binge eat than women who see themselves as "normal" weight. Adding insult to injury, heavier people who really need exercise in order to lose weight often avoid exercise environments, feeling they might be intimidated and judged by the hot-bodied gym crowd.

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## Breaking the Cycle

Although the recent spread of yoga has made it a trendy fad in fitness centers across the country, the “yoga body” has nothing to do with the spirit of yoga. True yoga, while good physical exercise, is about strengthening our minds and our spirits, not about how cute we look in our yoga pants. Exercising for appearance and weight management

reasons is strongly associated with body dissatisfaction, but exercising for reasons such as physical fitness, stress relief, or social interaction with other exercisers can improve our self-esteem. If we come to yoga for the “yoga butt,” our self-esteem might actually diminish, but if we come to yoga for the self-control and stress management that a spiritual fitness practice brings, our self-esteem might soar. “Yoga is a bridge between the mind and body that makes them work together in real harmony,” says Washington D. C. yoga instructor Kamal Sanghani. “This harmony makes one feel good about oneself.”

## My Happy Ending

I am a recovering anorexic. Just like an alcoholic, I’ll never be cured, but in the honest recognition of my illness I find the strength to be well. I no longer starve, I no longer binge, and I no longer purge. I don’t know what I weigh anymore, because numbers on a scale say nothing about who I am. I’m still not entirely happy with how I look, but I am happy with how I feel and who I am, and each day the mirror and society’s judgments lose a little more of their control over my life. Each day, I recognize a little more that the power I have is evident when I help my yoga students find a deeper peace and a deeper self-acceptance. Each day, I recognize a little more of my own strength in the work I accomplish and in the lives I help improve. Each day, I recognize a little more that my beauty isn’t reflected in my mirror, but in the way I live my life.

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## Symptoms to look for in someone you love

**Anorexia Nervosa:** An eating disorder characterized by a refusal to eat, even to the point of starvation. Symptoms: fear of being fat (regardless of how thin the individual is), extreme over-activity, obsession with working out, deep feelings of shame, negative feelings about appearance, problems with drug and/or alcohol abuse. 95% of anorexics are female. Signs: extreme underweight, cessation of menstruation and extreme weakness.

**Bulimia Nervosa:** The consumption of extremely large quantities of food in short periods of time (binging) followed by self-induced vomiting (purging), the use of diuretics or cathartics, or extreme exercise. Bulimics often appear to be of normal weight (or even slightly overweight). Signs: the individual regularly visits the restroom immediately after eating; erosion of the enamel of the teeth (from stomach acids due to vomiting); constant sore throat or swollen glands; yellowed skin; discoloration of the fingers may indicate self-induced vomiting.