

Chapter 7

Spiritually Energizing Your Body

Topics in this Chapter:

- * Appreciating your body's natural intelligence
- * Understanding the benefits of physical practices
- * Experiencing the power of your breath

Have you ever really thought about what your body is? Is it you? Is it a part of you? Does it represent you properly? Does your body do what you want it to do, or does it make you do what *it* wants to do? Is your body the boss or a tool of your soul? Is your body a big mass of blood, flesh, bones, fluids, and other components, or is it a temple of God?

This chapter helps you to contemplate these questions and suggests some practices that can help energize your body.

Taking Care of Your Body Temple

Even though your spiritual essence exists beyond your physical body, the body is nevertheless very much a part of spiritual awakening. Your body is the temple within which spirit dwells; it is the tool through which your spirit paints and expresses its glory into this world.

Don't Forget

The spiritual reason to keep your body healthy is to keep your body and mind clear and energized so you have the stamina to focus on higher spiritual matters. A healthy body allows you to sit comfortably for meditation and enables you to enjoy spiritually elevating physical practices such as yoga, dance, and martial arts.

In your body, you experience the three-dimensional world. Yet, while living in the body, you also grow into a spiritual recognition that you are more than the body; you are the soul. While living in the body, you grow into the realization that you are much more than just your body.

Adding spiritual touches to physical activities

Spiritual Wisdom

Let them praise his name with dancing.

—Psalm 149:3

Physical practices help to calm, focus, and strengthen the energy in your body, bringing its vibration in harmony with your higher nature. Physical practices for your spiritual journey include tai chi and other martial arts, hatha yoga poses, Zen archery, breath exercises, and spiritual dances from nearly every religious culture and traditions.

By maintaining a spiritual focus in your mind and heart, even nonspiritual activities can be spiritualized. You can do everyday activities, such as playing sports, gardening, cooking, taking care of your children, working at your job, or walking the dog, with a spiritual approach.

Consider

You can also infuse spirit into usual physical exercises by adding spiritual touches. For example, you can turn an ordinary walk into what is called a *japa walk* by repeating a mantra as you walk.

Japa is a Sanskrit word for the practice of repeating a mantra — a potent spiritual word or phrase — over and over again. People who practice mantra repetition often synchronize the mantra repetitions with their breath's inhalations and exhalations.

To go on a japa walk, you coordinate your mental mantra repetitions and breath together with your footsteps as you walk with a peaceful, energetic, and steady pace. With a japa walk, your entire body, mind, and spirit are walking together in harmony, infused by the power of the mantra.

Different religious traditions offer different mantras, names of God, or scriptural phrases that can be used for a japa walk. Jewish and Arabic traditions call these sacred phrases *zikhr* or *dhikr*, which translate as “mind protector.” Some mantras are longer verses, but for the purposes of a japa walk, you may find it best to use shorter phrases that can be easily repeated in your mind and synchronized with your steps. You can also come up with your own positive phrases in your native language. Here are some holy words and phrases from different traditions that can be used in a japa walk:

- **Buddhist:** Om Mane Padme Hum, Om Vajrasattva Hum, Buddha, Quan Yin, Avalokitesvara
- **Jewish:** Shalom, Elohim, Adonai, Ehyeh Asher, El Shaddai, Ha Shem, Shekinah, Barukh Ata Adonai, Ruach Elohim, Moshe Yeshua Eliahu
- **Hindu:** Om, Shivo'ham, So 'ham, Hare Krishna, Om Sri Ram Jai Ram Jai Jai Ram, Hari Om Tat Sat, Om Shanti, Sat Nam, Aham Brahmasmi
- **Islamic:** Allahu Akbar, Bismillah Al-Rahman, Al-Rahim, Ya-Rahman, Ya-Salaam, Ya-Mutakabir, Ya-Ghaffar, Ya-Fattah, Ya-Hafiz, Ya-Sabur
- **Christian:** Jesus Christ, God, Holy Spirit, Amen, Ave Maria, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph

Consider

You can also repeat positive mantras and words while doing various physical exercises and efforts, including household chores and other tasks that don't require a lot of mental decision-making.

Your body is a precious gift

Some spiritual sages have said that even the gods and angels long to take form as a human being, suggesting that it's only the human body, heart, mind, and soul that can experience the unknowable, supreme reality in a tangible form.

The Indian poet Surdas asked: *"This human birth is like a precious diamond. Why have you let it go to waste?"*

Remembering your physical needs

Sometimes spiritual people get so focused on the spirit that exists beyond the external world that they don't take good care of their bodies or physical needs. I'll have to raise my hand and admit to occasionally taking that mistaken approach. Others are excessively focused on what they put in and do with their bodies, whether by undergoing extreme health regimens or following rigid dietary rules. Some religious zealots have even harmed their bodies in the name of subduing the flesh and exalting the spirit, although the popularity of these extreme mortification practices has fortunately dwindled in recent centuries.

Be Careful

Harming your body in an attempt to honor spirit is taking a low approach to seek higher awareness. With a greater spiritual view, you come to see everything as a form of spirit and worthy of reverence — including yourself and your body.

Spirituality in Action

Thank your body

Take a pause to give thanks to your body right now. Close your eyes and feel the vibrations and energies that flow throughout your body. Put your hands on your head and heart and bless this divine vehicle of spirit. Let your healing energy flow from your hands into your body to wherever it is most needed.

Take in a deep breath of life energy and feel the energy spreading throughout your body — into your fingers and toes and to the tip of your nose.

To illustrate a good attitude spiritual people can have toward their bodies, my guru used to quote an elderly sage who was on his deathbed and preparing to leave his body and this world. The sage first said goodbye to his family and then began speaking to his own body, saying, “Oh, my dear, beloved friend. With your help, I have been able to pursue different things in my life and realize the Divine Self. You have always tolerated everything I have done to you without complaining. You have cooperated with me in my sorrow and misery as well as my joy. I beg your forgiveness for all the wrongs I did to you. Now I must leave you.” And with that, the sage took leave of his body.

Remember, it is your precious body that allows you to live and breathe on this beautiful planet, interacting with all the people and things you love.

Exploring food choices

Many religious traditions have rules that dictate what you should or shouldn’t do with your body. Some traditions have dietary guidelines about what you shouldn’t eat at specific times, or combined with certain other foods, or ever.

Some who practice yoga and meditation do without certain foods that are said to either excite their senses (such as onions, garlic, and coffee), or that can lower the vibration of their energies (such as meat, poultry, or alcohol). Others may find the same foods that are prohibited by some traditions to be fine or even beneficial for their bodies.

Different health traditions also suggest different dietary choices. Just as with spirituality, conflicting ideas about health abound, with no clear-cut path that has been proven to work for everyone. Ultimately, you have to decide what is best for you. Your body is your responsibility, and it is your job to maintain your own body as best you can, given the information and resources you have available, along with your genetic and environmental circumstances.

An old man

A traveling salesman was passing through a small town when he saw a little old man sitting in a rocking chair on the stoop of his house. The old man looked so contented that the salesman couldn’t resist going over and talking to him. “You look as if you don’t have a care in the world,” the salesman told him. “What is your formula for a long and happy life?”

“Well,” replied the little old man, “I smoke six packs of cigarettes a day, and I drink a quart of bourbon every four hours plus six cases of beer a week. I never wash, and I go out every night.”

“My goodness,” exclaimed the salesman. “That’s just great! How old are you?”

“Twenty-five,” was the reply.

To indulge or not to indulge

Some spiritual traditions suggest that adherents lessen activities that diffuse their energies and take them away from higher spiritual goals. One of the biggies that apparently causes difficulty for some swamis, monks, and priests is the practice of *celibacy* — which basically means to refrain from sexual activity.

Many reasons are given for practicing celibacy. For Buddhists and Hindus, the goal may be elimination of desires or the preserving of spiritual energies. Some Christian monks have wanted to imitate the life of Jesus by taking on vows of abstinence, poverty, and obedience.

Different traditions also have different rules about this topic. Some advocate total abstinence from sex for dedicated practitioners, priests, and monks. Some suggest general abstinence except for the purpose of conceiving children. A few obscure spiritual traditions actually turn the sexual act into a spiritual practice with the intention of lifting it from the lower levels of usual animal instincts into an expression of higher spiritual energies.

Be Careful

Asceticism is not for everyone! This universe has created a wide variety of flavors because it likes to taste all these different flavors through its experience in and as each unique form. Trust your inner wise soul to guide your steps, and you'll be guided to do what's right for you.

Staying natural

In general, I suggest that you stay as natural as possible when it comes to what you put in, on, or near your body. In the case of food, nature has combined many important elements in the earth's bountiful produce that can't be perfectly replicated in artificially produced foods. Human bodies have been living well on only the nourishment supplied by nature from the beginning of the species until recent times.

With modern science, production, and distribution avenues in place, the world has suddenly become filled to the brim with artificial everything. Kids are drinking juices made with 0 to 3 percent real juice, and eating plastic candy products made with "artificial fruit flavor" that give the instinctual impression of eating nature's healthy foods, but with little nutrition and a lot of chemicals.

Do you really trust that big corporations and government committees always make the right decisions about what should be allowed in foods? I've seen even committees with altruistic motives and no lobbyists make lots of mistakes and poor decisions. I wouldn't assume that something is safe and healthy just because you see it on a grocery store shelf.

Take time to research so that you can choose what to eat based on intelligent information. Check out books, Web sites, and newsletters that focus on keeping your body healthy and free from toxic substances.

Consider

Most studies agree that natural fruits, vegetables, grains, and legumes lead to good health, and suggest striving, in general, to stay as natural as possible in food and everything else.

Spiritual Wisdom

Wise words about the body

“Believe not that man consists of flesh, skin, and veins. The real part of man is his soul, and the things just mentioned are only outward coverings. They are only veils, not the real man.”

—the Zohar

“The true ascetic does not gratify the body; but he cares well for the body that he may advance the spiritual life. Cared for, it is a better vessel for truth.”

—Gautama Buddha

“He will be the slave of many masters who is his body's slave.”

—Seneca

“Every man is the builder of the temple called his body — we are all sculptors and painters, and our material is our flesh and blood and bones.”

—Henry David Thoreau

“This body is mortal, always gripped by death, but within it dwells the immortal Self.”

—the Upanishads

“If anything is sacred, the human body is sacred.”

—Walt Whitman

Here are some more ways to stay healthy by staying natural:

- **Do your best to stay away from poisons.** Look carefully at what you use to clean your counters and bathrooms. If you spray it, you breathe it! You can find natural alternatives to most chemical cleaners and poisons in health-conscious stores, and many common household items, such as vinegar, water, and baking soda, can be used as perfectly good cleaners.

One of the most bizarre scenes I've seen took place during a Thanksgiving dinner with friends where the owner of the house started spraying poison all over their kitchen to get rid of a few ants. The living room we were all sitting in was right next to the kitchen, so the fumes were clouding out into our breathing space. I quickly and kindly asked him to stop, but was really surprised that this intelligent fellow hadn't thought twice about spraying poison.

Now, I don't like having ants in my kitchen either, but I'm not willing to poison myself to get rid of them! Look online to find out different natural methods that people have discovered and tried. Some use boric acid to get rid of insects, and others even swear by drawing a line with chalk, saying that the ants won't cross the line (I haven't personally tried this one yet). If you must spray with usual products, do it sparingly or preferably outside, near the area where they're entering your home.

I suggest steering clear, too, of defogger cans that fill your home with poison for an hour or two. Does it sound like a good idea to fill your living space with poison? Of course, extreme situations may require extreme measures. However, poison has become a fast-food type of solution to problems in today's society, with little consideration of how that poison is going to affect your body or the bodies of those you love.

- **Don't take too many medications.** Business-based medicine has turned today's world into a world of drugs. I've consulted doctors who've zipped off all kinds of potent prescriptions for minor ailments. Each time I've had prescriptions filled, the pharmacist inevitably hands me a list of potential side effects for that drug — side effects that are often much worse than whatever I went to the doctor for. One list was a whole page long and had some of the most disgusting-sounding possible side effects you could imagine!

Obviously, if you have a serious illness, you should use whatever means are available to cure it, including medicines. I'm not suggesting that you should never take medicines, but to appreciate that your body is your responsibility. Be aware and do your research. Sometimes, even with doctors in white lab coats, you have to "just say no."

- **Read the labels of anything you're going to put in, on, or around your body.** Inquire about natural alternatives when possible. Remember that your skin is also a breathing organ — check the labels of what you're putting into your body through the pores of your skin. Health-food stores often offer natural options, and many of these simple products are as good or better than chemical conglomerations, but without as much of the bad stuff.

Don't Forget

Don't bathe your body in toxins just for convenience sake.

Stretching, Exercising, and Hatha Yoga

Spiritual Wisdom

In the practice of Yoga, every cell is consciously made to absorb a copious supply of fresh blood and life-giving energy, thus satiating the embodied soul.

—B.K.S. Iyengar

One field of spiritual practice in India is called hatha yoga. Hatha yoga includes the physical postures and exercises that prepare your body for meditation and the ultimate yoga, which is a conscious experience of union with the divine. (*Yoga* means union, and *hatha* refers to balancing the sun and moon energies within your body.) Hatha yoga consists of various movements, breath control exercises, and physical postures that can produce a profound state of inner union, vitality, and harmony.

The ancient wisdom of hatha yoga has trickled into modern-day life mostly in the form of exercise videos and health-club courses that help you lose weight and get your body in better shape.

Yes, these positive effects are available through practicing hatha yoga, however many hatha yoga practitioners lack a solid understanding of the deeper spiritual purpose of hatha yoga. One yoga magazine reporter told me that the hottest thing around the hip Hollywood crowd is to get what they call a “yoga butt” — proving that modern society can make a junk-food version of anything, including sublime ancient wisdom!

Don't Forget

The deeper purpose of yoga exercises is to uplift you spiritually. One yoga scripture describes those who practice exercises without a higher intention as “mere holders of bones.” Hatha yoga postures are intended to be a support for your journey to the *real* yoga — union with the divine!

Where hatha yoga postures come from

How did ancient hatha yoga researchers know that specific postures could heal kidney weaknesses, back injuries, hormonal imbalances, mental agitation, circulation sluggishness, brain, thyroid, and digestion disorders, and so many other physical maladies? They had no books. They didn't learn it in school. They didn't have instruction manuals and videos to explain it to them.

The ancient hatha yoga sages discovered all these postures and exercises with their subtle intellect, through intuitive insight and divine inspiration.

Volumes can and have been written about all the exercises and theories behind hatha yoga. Some postures are called by the Sanskrit names of the animals they resemble, such as *koormaasana* (the tortoise pose), *matsyaasana* (the fish pose), or *bhekaasana* (the frog pose). Most are based on the idea that certain positions relieve tensions and allow your blood and energy to flow more freely in your body. Some stimulate your immune system; while others create or strengthen specific patterns of energy flow in your body.

Spirituality in Action

Being moved from within

Your inner Self is filled with intelligent wisdom. Here's a chance to tap into its healing guidance:

1. Sit or lie down quietly, and bring your focus inside.

Take a few moments to quiet your mind and soften your breath. Become aware of your body from head to toe.

2. Invoke the intelligent energy in your body and invite it to move through you.

3. Let your body gently begin to stretch.

See what feels good and relax into whatever postures come up. Allow yourself to be guided from within. Your body can go into so many different kinds of movements. Stretch gently or dance enthusiastically. Feel the intelligent energy of spirit moving through your body as it guides you on how to move your body.

Sometimes different postures are put together into a flowing sequence. One common series of poses is called *surya namaskar*, or “sun salutations.” This sequence takes you from a standing pose into various push-up type lunges and back bends that flow naturally into one another, and then back into a standing pose to begin the cycle again.

Many hatha yoga postures work on your spine — carefully stretching, opening, elongating, twisting, turning, and bending your spine this way and that. Popular postures for the spine include the cobra back arch, the forward bend, and various spinal twists. Your spine has a very special spiritual significance. It is not only the backbone of your physical body, but also of your energy body.

Be Careful

Hatha yoga postures are extremely powerful, and you should learn them in person from a teacher who can make sure that you are doing them correctly.

Remembering to rest

One of the most important elements of a good hatha yoga workout comes at the end, when you go into what is called *shaavaasana* (the corpse pose), one of my favorite postures.

Spirituality in Action

Lie on your back with your hands out just a bit from your body, palms gently open and facing up. Keep your feet slightly separated. Relax your entire body, either bit by bit or all at once. You may want to tighten and relax different parts of your body — your toes, hips, stomach, chest, arms, hands, throat, and face — or you can just relax everything together right away. Allow your breath to become deep and steady.

As you lie in *shaavaasana*, you may also want to practice something called the *full yogic breath*, where you breath in deeply, filling first your stomach area, then your chest area, and then your upper ribcage area. Then you pause for a moment before releasing the breath, starting again at the stomach area and again moving up to flatten down the chest and upper ribcage areas. This breathing exercise can come to feel like a wave of healing energy.

After doing full yogic breath for a while, let your breath return to its natural flow and relax completely into the pose. Some teachers say that if you don't include this resting *shaavaasana* time at the end of your hatha yoga routine, you won't receive as many benefits from the exercises. This relaxing yoga pose is one more example of how spirituality is not about doing more, but doing what is best.

Consider

You can also apply the philosophy behind this pose to your life, understanding the importance of adding moments of deep rest to your activities. Perhaps you'd like to go into *shaavaasana* for a few minutes before you go to sleep at night.

Living longer versus having fun

A man approaching retirement went to see the company doctor for one final checkup. To his horror, the doctor said, "I don't know quite how to put this, but your heart is on its last legs, and you have only six months to live."

"Is there nothing I can do?" asked the shocked man.

"Well," said the doctor, "you can give up alcohol and cut out smoking. Don't eat rich foods, don't go dancing, and don't even think about sex!"

"And this will make me live longer?" the man asked hopefully.

"No," replied the doctor. "It will just seem longer!"

Practicing Spiritual Breathing

Your breath is much more than just the simple movement of oxygen in and out of your lungs. Your breath is a vehicle for not only the physical oxygen that's necessary for your body functions, but subtle energies as well. The air has its own aura or energy field. Sometimes, you can even see these tiny scintillating particles of light filling the air around you. (Please don't tell me I'm the only one who sees them!) Indian scriptures use the word *prana* to describe this life force and their word for breath exercises that increase your life force is *pranayama*.

You've probably noticed that your state of mind affects the way you breathe. For example, when you're agitated, your breath tends to get shallow and fast. When you're feeling happy and peaceful, your breath becomes slower and deeper.

Just as your state of mind affects the way you breathe, so also the way you breathe affects your state of mind. Because your breath mirrors your mental state, you can create an intentional feedback loop where you guide your breath to become calm and slow, little by little. Calming your breath also calms the thoughts in your mind. As the agitation of your mind begins to subside, your breath naturally becomes even calmer, thereby making your mind even quieter.

Consider

Breathing slowly and deeply can lead you into more peaceful spaces within your mind, heart, and soul.

Spiritual Wisdom

The soul is the divine breath. It purifies, revivifies, and heals the instrument through which it functions.

—Hazrat Inayat Khan

Spirituality in Action

Here's a way to experience healing life-force energy through breath control:

1. **Sit quietly in a meditative space, allowing each breath to get longer and longer, deeper and deeper.**
2. **Slowly increase the length of each inhalation, as well as the pause at the peak of your inhalation while holding the air in.**

3. Let the air out slowly with each exhalation, pausing again at the end of each exhalation as the air is retained outside.

You may have an easier time doing this exercise while counting mentally. You can begin by breathing in to the count of three, gently retaining the breath for a count of three, releasing the air to the count of three, and resting on the point of exhalation to the count of three. After the count of three is comfortable, you can add a number, and do the same cycle to the count of four.

Continue to add numbers to your breath rounds until the point where it would become uncomfortable. If you feel a need to take a few ordinary breaths here and there before continuing on, that is fine. Trust your inner guidance.

Be Careful

Breath exercises should give a bit of challenge, but no discomfort. Be careful not to force the breath, while gently guiding your breaths to become longer and deeper.

Various teachers give different suggested ratios of breath inhalation, retention, release, and rest, where your count for inhalation is different from retention or exhalation. As someone who likes to do my practices with minimal bookkeeping, I suggest starting with this simple straight-across count.

The important elements in this practice are your focus on the breath and on consciously expanding and softening your capacity to receive and release air and life force through your breath. Breathe in and feel that you're breathing in light and filling your body with light. Breathe out and shine that light into the world.