



One of the many reasons that the physical practice of yoga has become so popular in the West is that its health benefits are not simply about the toning and strength it brings, but because it affects the way we can meet life off the mat. The level of focus it asks of us and learning to find softness within strong sensations, trains our minds and bodies to deal with similar intensity in whatever form.

Cravings for foods we'd rather not eat, things we know we don't need to buy and relationships we know we'd be better off without come with oodles of thoughts, feelings, thoughts about feelings, feelings about thoughts and a whole gamut of very real physical responses. We know that knot in the stomach, tightness in the chest, clamping in the head would all just go away if we filled that want with the thing we're drawn to. But we also know that we're going round and round with those patterns, so how do we get off the merry-go-round?

Getting connected

So much of a yoga practice – whether posture work (*asanas*) or more still, meditative aspects – is placing ourselves into positions or with focus that creates the challenge of resistance. Any reason we start a yoga practice is valid, but ultimately people continue because they start to feel more connected to their body and learn to be with the whole mixed bag of feelings churned out by our brains. Physical challenge, opening up your body in new ways, not being able to run away from that pose you don't like, having to simply be still for any period of time; all of it can really push our buttons in places we might not like them being pushed.

Learning to stay with that, explore these sensations and yes, even switch off the judgemental “I like this”/ “I don't like this” mind can change our perception and lessen the level of reactivity to change and barriers. That's where the new relationship with craving sensations off the mat can really start to flourish and we can feel we have more choice when they arise.

How a physical yoga practice can help with cravings

Different aspects of yoga practice are known to help us address giving into wants in the following ways:

Restorative yoga

In this practice, our bodies are placed in positions where they are fully supported and don't need to exert any effort to stay. Props like bolsters, blankets and blocks are used to 'bring the floor to you', so that you feel completely held and you can simply be in the position, stepping away from any sense of doing.

A recent study showed this form of yoga helped with weight loss through its alleviating of stress hormones. Letting the body come to complete and supported rest tells our whole system that it is safe. So many of our urges and knee-jerk responses come from a state of 'constant alert' that doesn't allow us to settle into an easy rhythm. The continually stimulating input from technology, news, the need 'to do' and worries from inside us can give the signals that there is danger around.

Learning how to be still, soft, non-reactive and trusting can make all the difference. This is not easy though, taking intensity and focus to stay in poses, means we have to be more consistently focused on each breath and the unfolding of the feelings from our body in each moment.

Forward bends

The attitude we cultivate folding forward into ourselves is one of yielding and surrender, the absolute opposite of craving and wanting. Often when we start practicing the physical form of yoga, forward bends can create that very same spike of desire – we just want to get further. When we practice the fine art of letting go, we can notice that our body softens and we can deepen more easily. Yoga helps us to experience strong sensations in life by allowing us