



Yoga as a Lifestyle Practice for Diabetes

ABSTRACT

A Type 2 Diabetes diagnosis rekindled an interest in Yoga. I studied the wisdom behind the physical practice and learned how to better manage my condition.

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We don't receive wisdom; we must discover it for ourselves after a journey that no one can take for us or spare us.
– Marcel Proust

A Type 2 Diabetes Diagnosis



A Type 2 Diabetes diagnosis, over a decade ago, led to a series of doctor recommended classes at a local hospital that focused on education about the disease, nutrition, monitoring blood sugar level, medications, and management of my diabetes symptoms. (There are multiple types of diabetes see *American Diabetes Association* for more detail information.)

Type 2 Diabetes is a Lifestyle disease, which I translated as being the result of my decades of long work hours, global travel, sugar laden snacks and a daily habit of restaurant meals.

My diabetes education was full of dire predictions of what my future would look like if I didn't begin to make life style changes. It was overwhelming and depressing. I wasn't prepared to make the drastic

lifestyle changes necessary. So, I took baby steps. I attempted to adopt my nutritionist's eating recommendations. Trying to live my "normal" life as I made "diabetic" lifestyle adjustments was very difficult.

A Late in Life Return to Yoga

To ease my mounting angst around managing my condition, I returned to a weekly yoga class, something that had calmed me decades before. What I didn't realize, at the time, was that a yogic principal of Self-Study about my daily lifestyle choices was critical in my ability to cope with the stress of my Type 2 diagnosis.

Yoga is the connection of mind, body, and spirit. To understand this connection more deeply, I began to explore subtler aspects of yoga beyond the postural movement that is offered in a typical yoga class. I sought out classes that included centering, breathing, movement, meditation and discussion about yoga philosophy. Over the years, developing an integrated practice helped me to better cope and manage my condition.

Yoga Beyond the Physical Postures



After my diabetes diagnosis, I embraced the physical aspects of a yoga breath and movement practice. I started to feel better and wanted to learn more about the philosophy behind the practice. In my initial yoga teacher training, I learned about the Yamas and Niyamas, a set of Ethical Principles which in the yoga tradition, are important practices to adopt in order to live a life without suffering. I listened with interest and found the traditional translations of the Sanskrit terms for each of the ten precepts to be interesting, but not something that I fully appreciated.

Over the years, as I learned from different teachers who interpreted these practices differently, I developed a better understanding of this early wisdom. Over time, my yoga study lifted me out of a “woe is me” frame of mind and allowed me to better manage my health.

Two different teachers made the Yamas and Niyamas meaningful to me. [Nischala Joy Devi](#), in her book [The Secret Power of Yoga](#), presented a more positive translation than those done previously by male Sanskrit scholars. She describes these practices as “ways you live your life, not something you learn.”¹ More recently, [Kristine Kaoverii Weber](#), in her online course, [The Yoga & Neuroscience Connection](#) drove home the wisdom of these ethical tenets as it applies to resilience. I’m drawing from the learning from both of these teachers to describe how each of these principals helped me better understand how to manage my diabetes.

The Yamas (Restraints)

The ***Yamas***, which in Sanskrit means restraints, are described by Nischala Joy Devi as a reflection of our true nature. Kristen Kaoverii Weber translates the Yamas as the Ethics of Empathy in the ways we relate to

¹ Nischala Joy Devi in interview with J Brown

others (and ourselves) in life. Traditional interpretations define the 5 Yamas as:

Ahimsa – nonviolence
Satya - truthfulness
Asteya – nonstealing
Brahmacharya - nonexcess
Aparigraha – nonpossessiveness

1. Nonviolence, Love for All, Empathy



The first Yama, *Ahimsa*, is what Weber calls “Empathy”. Devi defines this as “love for all” a necessary practice to experience “oneness”².

To take better care of myself, eat right, exercise more, sleep well, I needed to re-connect with my Self. *Ahimsa* made me aware that my lifestyle choices were not choices coming from a place of empathy or love toward myself. I worked and lived hard and loved what I did...but my fast pace

² Joy Devi, Nischala. The Secret Power of Yoga (2007) Chapter 6.

lifestyle and poor diet choices were an assault on my well-being. I pushed myself until I crashed.

While I don't make perfect choices every day. I do take better care of myself and I'm kinder to myself. I pause and check in with myself more. If you have a medical condition, what steps can you take to show yourself more love or empathy?

2. Truthfulness, Honesty



Satya means truth or honesty *in our thoughts, words or actions.*³ For the first several years of my diabetes diagnosis, I pretended that I didn't have the disease. The medication stabilized my blood sugar, but I wasn't living in integrity with myself as I made poor choices that could harm my health. Now, if I make a poor choice, I no longer deny my condition. I acknowledge the lack of wisdom in a less than optimal choice and strive to make better choices in the future. How honest are you with yourself?

³ Ibid.

3. Nonstealing or Generosity



What does nonstealing or as Ms. Devi translates *abiding in generosity*⁴ – *Asteya* have to do with Diabetes? The concept of stealing can apply to things, time, or not giving proper credit where it is due. In my case, I stole time away from doing yoga or walking because I was “too busy” and didn’t think I had enough time to take care of myself. I learned there are enough hours in the day. It’s a question of prioritizing what is important for your own self-care. I also stopped “sneaking” sweet snacks. I sometimes did this as a form of stress eating. If no one saw me, it didn’t count was a common mindset. I was stealing time away from slowly enjoying healthier choices with friends and family. Is busyness keeping you from being generous to yourself?

⁴ Ibid.

4. Moderation or Living in Balance



Brahmacharya, again from Devi – *Devoted to living a balanced and moderate life, the scope of one's life force becomes boundless.*⁵ Wow, could I relate to this concept. The traditional translation of this precept was often translated as celibacy. I couldn't relate at all to that translation. This version of the Yama made me see my Diabetes diagnosis as symbolic to my lifestyle. I was all work and no play and was clearly out of balance. I ate what I wanted when I wanted.

Shortly after my diagnosis, my husband and I started planning regular vacations, taking walks, easing into retirement. As I made better dietary choices, I considered moderation in portions and types of food I ate. With less stress and more balance in my life, I felt more energetic. How balanced is your life? Is moderation something you'd like to try, if not present all ready?

⁵ Ibid.

5. Nonpossessiveness or Acknowledging Abundance



Nischala Joy Devi turns around the traditional definition of *Aparigraha* from nonpossessiveness to:

Acknowledging abundance, we recognize the blessings in everything and gain insights into the purpose of our worldly existence.⁶

This interpretation is so uplifting. As I opt for more fresh, natural food over processed prepared food, I nourish myself with the abundance that mother nature provides. To keep food fresh, we shop more often rather than hoarding prepared food in the pantry. I see abundance rather than deficit. Instead of bemoaning the yoga poses that I can no longer do, I focus on what I can do and feel the healing benefits of accessible poses.

Weber sees *Aparigraha* as Sustainability which complements the Devi interpretation. I had to learn not only how to *appreciate the blessings in everything*, but also how to make sustainable life choices. I no longer work 60 – 80 hours a week. My diet is more sustainable. No more trying

⁶ Ibid.

the latest dietary break through which kept me on a yo-yo plan for years. Where does abundance show up in your life? Is your lifestyle sustainable?

With the help of the insights gained from Nischala Joy Devi and Kristine Kaoverii Weber, I no longer see the Yamas as *restraints*, but as opportunities to connect with my true nature and from that place I connect with others and the rest of the world. I am more at ease and mindful of what will help me better manage my condition.

The Niyamas (Observances)

The *Niyamas*, traditionally translated as observances are more subtle than the *Yamas*. Joy Devi sees the Niyamas as an evolution toward harmony. Kaoverii Weber translates the Niyamas as the Ethics of Self-care. The traditional translation of the Niyamas are as follows:

Saucha - purity
Santosha – contentment
Tapas - self-discipline
Svadhyaya - self-study
Isvara Pranidhana – surrender



1. *Purity or Cleanliness*



Saucha, which is often translated as purity or cleanliness, applies not only to the physical body, but also thoughts and emotions. Negative self-talk about how well we are or are not managing our health is counter-productive to our long-term wellness. Nischala Joy Devi translates this niyama as: *Through simplicity and continual refinement the body, thoughts, and emotions become clear reflections of the Self within.*⁷

The first Yama urges us to be kind to ourselves, this precept is a more subtle reflection of this practice. To be mindful of how we treat our body, what we read, listen to, view on TV or social media can all contribute to how well we feel on a daily basis. Cleanliness is an important part of diabetes self-care. We wash our feet and hands to avoid infection. We take care of our feet and examine them for wounds that could lead to complications. We ensure that whatever point on our body is selected as the site to monitor glucose, it is clean before we prick ourselves. These habits of self-care are vital to minimizing complications.

⁷ Ibid. Chapter 7

2. Contentment



Santosha or contentment with oneself and others makes life a lot easier. Accepting a diabetes diagnosis may take time. It's a shock and sobering to learn about this silent killer. I have my ups and downs which is a normal part of living. After many years, I am finally at peace with my condition. I welcome each day as an opportunity to do the best that I can. I focus on what healthy choices I am fortunate enough to be able to make on a daily basis. I try to hold my disease lightly and see it as a learning experience rather than a curse. I imagine what is still possible with what lifetime I have left.

3. Self-Discipline

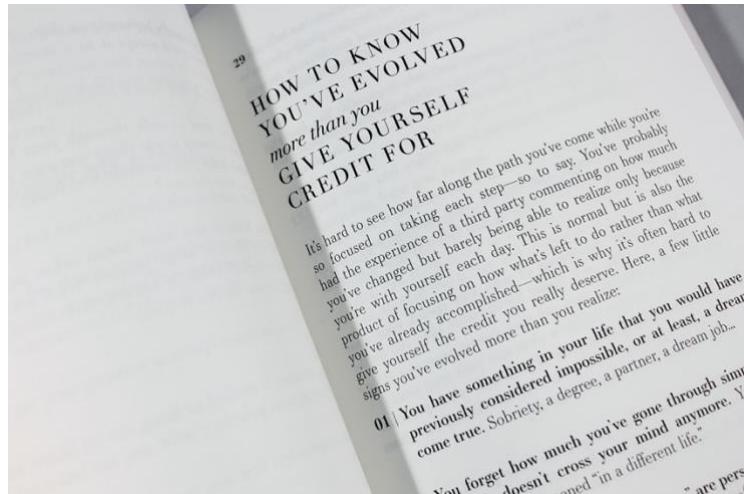


Tapas or self-discipline is how we further practice moderation. According to Devi, it is *kindling the purifying flame through refining the actions of our bodies, minds and speech*⁸. By kindling this flame, our actions move towards moderation, kindness, gentleness among others. This enables us to live life with *zeal and sincerity* as the *purifying flame reveals our inner light*.

When we live in integrity with ourselves, we are able to offer service to others, either in our jobs or to our families. If our flame is extinguished, we are of no service to anyone. The act of checking our blood sugar routinely tells us whether we are living in balance. Over time, we learn what practices restore us so that we can better shine our inner light.

⁸ Ibid. page 213

4. Self-Study



Svadhyaya or self-study has been an important part of my diabetes journey. Learning how the body responds to my environment, food, thoughts, emotions and stress has been an important aspect of managing diabetes. I live in my head. The body was always an afterthought prior to diabetes.

Diabetes has given me a gift of awareness on many levels. By reading health and medical journals, as well as contemplative works from various spiritual traditions, I see interrelatedness and I compartmentalize less. Connections that were previously unseen are now seen. Diabetes has been the blessing that has spurred me on to learn and study more. If we consider each human as an expression of the Divine, this course of “Self-study” through texts, observance of nature and introspection in Nischala Joy Devi’s words – *Guides us to the Supreme Self.*⁹

Self-study is an important part of self-care, especially with a condition, like diabetes. You become aware of how different foods, lack of sleep and/or stress can wreak havoc on your blood sugar.

⁹ Ibid. 219

5. Surrender



Isvara Pranidhana, often translated as surrender, is about accepting higher support. This concept transcends religions and refers to your unique expression of spirituality. Affirmations or prayers can be intercessions for this support. It is tapping into faith as we live in the present moment. Acceptance is a key part of my diabetes management. Instead of fear and denial, I live with curiosity and awareness. I learned to accept this condition and take steps to manage it. Each day is different. To thrive, I acknowledge that each day, I am doing the best that I can in this moment.

Ok, Interesting, but What Does This Have to Do with Diabetes?



A better understanding of these Yoga principals has helped me better cope with a Type 2 Diabetes condition. It took me many years to appreciate the value of this lifestyle wisdom. If you remain unconvinced, Kristine Kaoverii Weber¹⁰ offers these thoughts on adopting the practices of Yoga Ethics:

- Adopting these practices helps us to build resilience.
- We are able to connect better with others as we adopt pro-social behaviors
- Encourages healthy lifestyle choices of clean eating, better sleep hygiene, exercise, stress management and limits our exposure to toxins.

As I embrace various aspects of Yoga (not just the physical postures) in my daily life, I have better results when I test my blood sugar. I have learned there is no single magic pill. All is connected. For me to live a balanced life, I need to integrate many healthy practices on a regular basis.

When I eat well but don't move, continue to remain stressed or feel out of balance, my sugar level is not well regulated. My study of yoga and subsequent self-study taught me that my stress level could have as big an impact as my dietary choices in my diabetes management. For me, stress can be triggered by living out of alignment with any of the practices discussed above. The more I live in concert with Yoga Ethics, the better I feel.

Think about how the 10 precepts discussed here might help you better cope with Diabetes or any other lifestyle related condition.

In the meantime, try this short relaxing breath practice for a few weeks. After this practice, check your sugar levels. See if your symptoms are eased.

¹⁰ The Yoga and Neuroscience Connection on www.Subtleyoga.com



A Short Breathing Practice to Ease Stress

Extending your exhale – Stress relieving Breath Practice

Sit comfortably on a chair with your feet flat on the floor. Check your posture make sure that your feet, ankles, hips, spine, shoulders, head are comfortably aligned. Close your eyes, relax and focus on any sensations you may be feeling. Just notice them without judgement. Begin to inhale through the nose to the count of 3 or 4 whichever seems easiest. Then gently exhale to the count backward from 6 or 8. I like to count using om 1, om 2, om 3 on the inhale, exhale om 6, om 5, om 4, om 3, om 2, om 1 to keep the count even. Do this for about 10 rounds or set your electronic timer to 1 – 2 minutes. Open your eyes and notice how you feel.

Learn More

If you would like to explore these precepts further or join me in a virtual gentle, restorative, or chair yoga class, send me a note through my website:

[Lavender Om Wellness.](#)

Remember, it's your journey, continue to observe and experiment to find what works best for you!

References

- § *Prevent T2 Lifestyle Coach and Participant Manuals* from University of Virginia Center for Diabetes Prevention and Education, 2018 edition
- § *Metabolic Syndrome and Yogic Principles* by Denyse Le Fever, C-IAYT ©2016 – Research Paper for Comprehensive Yoga Therapy Certification
- § American Diabetes Association article on *Mindful Eating with Diabetes*
- § *The Secret Power of Yoga* by Nischala Joy Devi ©2007
- § *Yoga & Diabetes* article by Annie Kay, MS, RDN, RYT and Lisa B Nelson, MD also have a book by same title available through American Diabetes Association
- § *Yoga and Neuroscience Connection* – On-line course by Kristine Kaoverii Weber (*Subtle Yoga*)

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