

YOGA for AMPUTEES

YOGA for AMPUTEES

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO FINDING WHOLENESS AFTER LIMB LOSS
FOR YOGA STUDENTS AND THEIR TEACHERS

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SACRED OAK PUBLISHING

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Cover and interior design: Emilia Ryan

Photographs of the author:

Amanda Barbosa - cover and pages: xi, 233, 234, 306, 366

Rebecca Brown, page 86

Jamie Baird, page 132

Photographs of amputees: Augusta Rose Photography

The remaining images: www.stock.adobe.com and unsplash.com

978-0-9744858-4-3

Sacred Oak Publishing

1211 Far Hills Avenue

Dayton, OH 45419

www.yogaforamputeesbook.com

First Printing, 2018

Printed in the United States of America

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following people for contributing to this book in so many ways: Emilia Ryan for her exquisite graphics and vision for beauty, Augusta Rose Photography for her compassionate and gorgeous photos, our amputee models: Aimee, Bug, Molly, Ray, Jenny, Kelly, Jeff, Laura and Juanita for their warmth, willingness and bravery to be seen; prosthetists who make our lives as amputees so much easier, especially Keith Cornell, and Optimus prosthetics, for their love and care, Amps4Ohio for creating a support network of amputees, many of whom modelled for this book, the Amputee Coalition for continuously advocating on behalf of amputees, Amanda Barbosa for her stunning cover photo, headshot and more, Rebecca Brown photography for finding a tree stump for me to stand on, researchers, inventors and explorers who are finding new ways through technology to help amputees thrive even more, Kripalu Center for instilling in me the gift of compassionate yoga, my beautiful students who gave me the gift of teaching, medicine, which has continued to keep me here to do my work, my family who have always had my back, my incredible father, Robert J. Danzig, who chose the magic of life every day, the yoga tradition, which has withstood the test of time, the spirit of God which infuses all living things, and all amputees everywhere for living life fully.

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A TRAGIC LOSS BECOMES A GLOBAL MOVEMENT

Dear Friend,

It is with great pleasure that I present this book to you, over forty years in the making! I am so glad you are here.

I lost my leg in 1976, when I was a teenager whose main concern was boys, clothes and getting into a good college. Bone cancer, and the subsequent amputation of my left leg below the knee, changed all that. No longer was I worried about whether my hairstyle was trendy, I was worried about whether I'd live or die. Fortunately, I made it through, but not without many scars, both physical and emotional.

When I found yoga in my early twenties, I was desperate to feel 'normal' again. Before yoga, I lived with terror that I would be found out for the "handicapped" girl I was, and no-one would want to know me. At that time, prosthetics hadn't changed since World War II. They were cumbersome, irritating and ugly. I wore a heavy suspension belt around my waist, endured daily blisters, and worried constantly that 'this would be the day' that my residual limb gave out. Disability rights were still under the radar. The American Disabilities Act (ADA) was years away. I felt very alone as an amputee. But after yoga came into my life, I stopped hiding myself. Yoga gave me back my true self.

With yoga, I began to love and accept myself exactly as I was, after learning to embody compassion for myself. I got my confidence back. By finding ways to adapt my yoga poses, I was able to do things I used to do as a gymnast, which made me feel like me again. I developed a profound ability to listen to and work with my body, which reduced my prosthetic irritations and helped me see how much potential for movement I really had. Lastly, because yoga taught me that deep down, I was one with all of life, I stopped feeling so alone in the world. I learned to trust life again, living in connection with the world around me, rather than separate or fearful of a frightening future.

I felt like a brave pioneer, always the only amputee in yoga class. I was proud of that! To this day I still kiss myself at the end of yoga class, appreciative of the heroic journey I have taken. From battling bone cancer twice, enduring kidney failure, eleven years on dialysis, a kidney transplant, congestive heart failure and a host of physical and emotional challenges along the way, the physical strength, inner calm and mental peace that yoga has given me has made my life better .

I wrote this book for my fellow amputees, who want to learn how you, too, can benefit from yoga as I have. You, like me, want to feel whole, strong and confident on a regular basis. You want to know that your life has purpose, that you are not alone in the world and that you can gain back your independence. You want to feel good in your body, and prevent future illness or injury. You seek hope, a way out of your suffering, or a way to help other amputees who are struggling.

There is something for everyone in yoga, from quieting the stressed-out mind in meditation, to strengthening the core in an advanced yoga pose. When looked at with yoga eyes, boredom becomes a message for personal growth. Fear becomes an opportunity to break free of beliefs that have held you back. Skepticism challenges you to look deeper at old habits. Accepting your body as it is right now shows you ways your body IS working well. A deep breath grants you the optimism you have been searching for.

This book includes so much more than basic yoga techniques adapted to amputees. Amputees have a lot at stake beyond range of motion. While this book does spend significant time on adapting yoga poses and yoga techniques to amputees, it is the deeper yoga practices of inner healing from pain, grief, life changes, body image and trauma that I feel matter most to amputees.

Wholeness (feeling home within oneself body, mind and spirit) is at the core of this book. Each chapter provides a yoga solution to a common amputee challenge, with the end result that we as amputees feel whole. Throughout the book, amputees of all levels share how yoga has helped them overcome their difficulties, and how they reclaimed their wholeness.

Advancements in prosthetics, disability awareness, and a global adaptive yoga movement make this book timely for amputees. Yoga has taken a front seat in western medicine, with therapeutic yoga programs popping up at hospitals and clinics all over the world. These holistic medicine programs prove that yoga works, increasing patient wellness without invasive procedures or excessive prescriptive medications. Wholeness is not simply having four limbs. Wholeness is knowing that you are complete within yourself, just as you are.

Yoga can make that happen. The pages of this book will reveal just how.

Love, Marsha

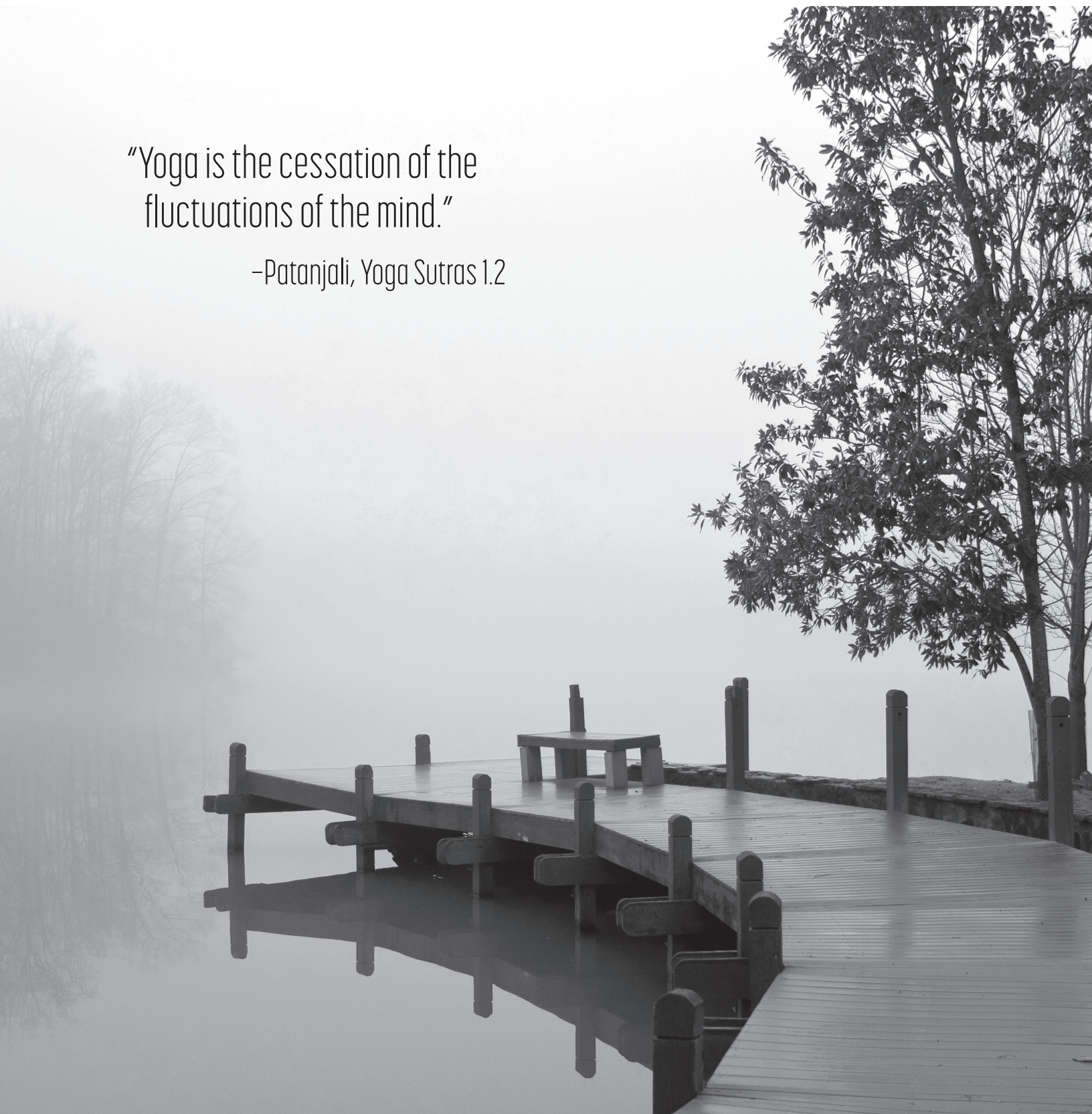
CHAPTER
ONE

WHY YOGA



"Yoga is the cessation of the
fluctuations of the mind."

—Patanjali, Yoga Sutras 1.2



What is Yoga?

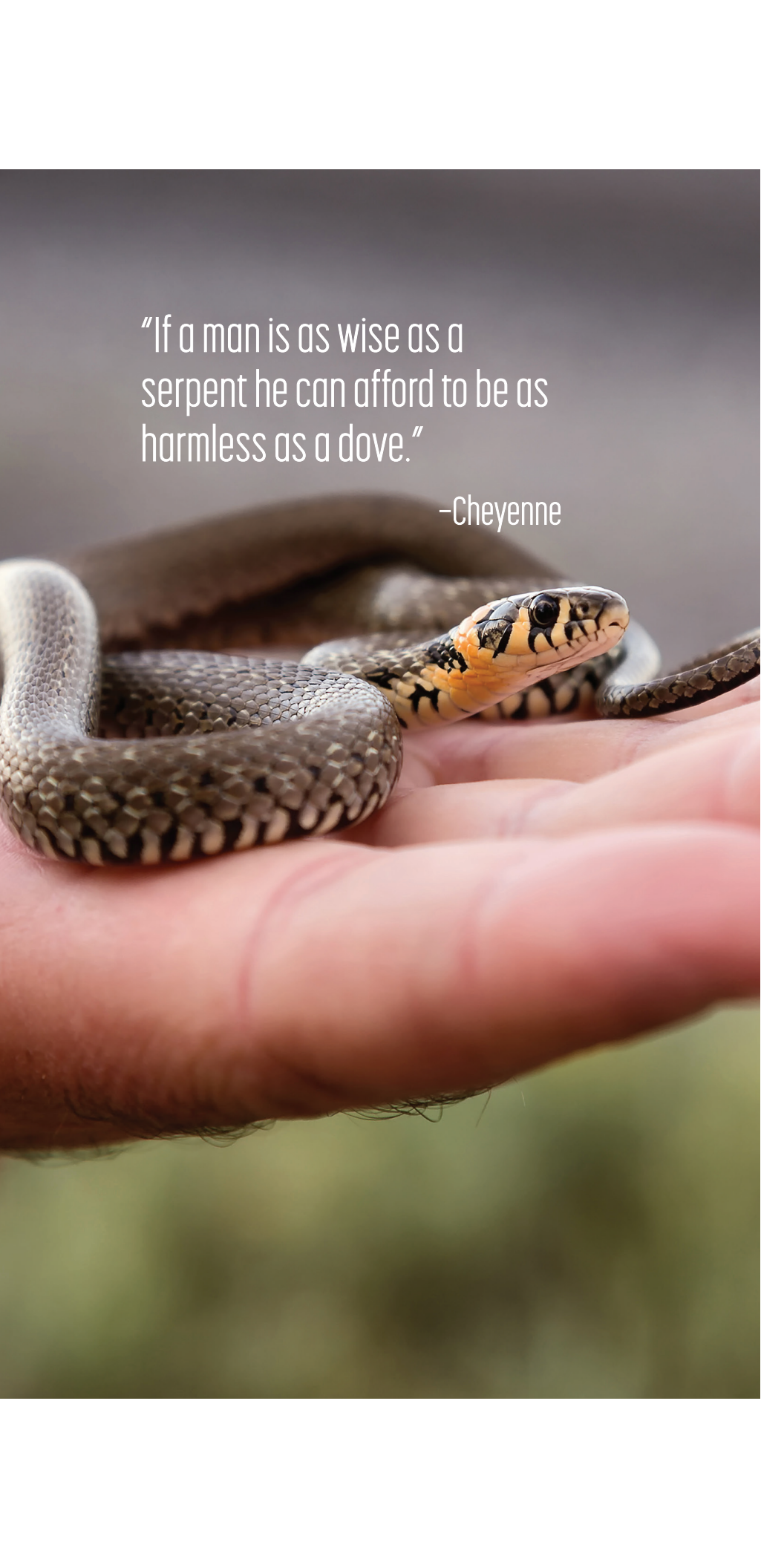
Yoga is a 5,000 year plus tradition originating in India. Believed to be descended from the Indus, an advanced and technologically sophisticated civilization which thrived near the Sarasvati River, yoga was a natural extension of the spiritual roots of the culture, which sought to unite the divine with everyday life, and everyday life with the divine. The first written text about yoga, the Rig-Veda (adoration of the divine knowledge), is an exploration of life's purpose, and the quest to understand the mystery of the spiritual realms.

The Indus were a people like so many ancient cultures, who lived lives according to the rhythms of nature, and the spiritual influences that nature presented. Sacrifice, self-observation and discipline were viewed as the way to unite with the divine that permeated all of life. For the spiritual seeker, that meant stilling the mind for long periods of time, abstaining from distractions like alcohol and sex, and gaining purity of mind and body. Through these disciplines the devotee hoped to experience transcendence, timelessness and unification with the divine.

Many fundamental principles of yoga evolved from these Vedic ("from knowledge") yoga practices, including many scriptures and refined teachings on meditation and yoga techniques. The Bhagavad Gita, in particular, is a beautiful poem which tells us that, in order to unite with our blissful nature, we must also act with love, integrity, free from self-serving (or ego driven) deeds.

In the second century AD, yoga was further refined with the writings and tradition of Raja yoga (the Royal Path), prescribed by Patanjali in his Yoga Sutras (yoga threads) and his book of Ayurveda (science of life) as well as the teacher Vyasa.

Patanjali's life is both legend and tradition. It is said that he was born of Vishnu, one of the divine emanations of God, in the form of a tiny



"If a man is as wise as a
serpent he can afford to be as
harmless as a dove."

—Cheyenne

serpent, into the palms of a devout Hindu woman named Gonika. He was a physician, scientist and author of the Yoga Sutras, short maxims for right living using the full practice of yoga, which means yoking with the divine. Patanjali proposed that we were all made up of prakriti (matter) and purusha (spirit). The purpose of yoga became the purification of prakriti (matter) so that the individual operates from pure purusha (spirit) within the context of the material world. Much of modern yoga is based on Patanjali's sutras.

Yoga continued to shift with the times. Physically based yoga, such as Tantra and eventually Hatha Yoga, which came about a number of centuries after Patanjali, brought in more advanced practices of asana (yoga poses) to support the body with better health and life fulfillment, a change from transcending the body, to celebrating the body as the temple of the divine.

Yoga is a shift in consciousness of simply 1%, to allow a new reality, new thought patterns and a new belief system to emerge that is in harmony with all of life.

Many modern yoga techniques practiced today are a result of these explorations and enhancements.

Central to most of yoga is a belief that, ultimately, we are all part of the same divine source. How we 'get back home' is multi-faceted. Yoga is a shift in consciousness of simply 1%, to allow a new reality, new thought patterns and a new belief system that is in harmony with all of life. Or, as some like to see it, yoga helps us remember our true selves. Amputation can offer a clean slate for the future, about who an amputee wants to be and how she wants to experience the fullness of life. Yoga plants new seeds of consciousness.

This brings us to now. **How can yoga, its gifts and traditions, benefit an amputee now?**

Benefits of yoga for an amputee

Yoga is a healing practice that makes life better for amputees, especially as they grapple with prosthetics, body image, pain, freedom of movement, and other residual effects of limb loss. In fact, many amputees experience yoga without even knowing it. When an amputee learns to walk or grip a cup, he is very present to the task at hand and is usually slowing down his breath to stay focused, building motor and mental control in spite of fears about falling or dropping something. This is **meditation in action**. Over time, that present moment awareness becomes a natural state, more solidified through an ongoing practice of yoga.

The positive mind/body connection that an amputee develops is refined, creating **new neural pathways** and often a new outlook on life. An amputee who practices yoga not only continues to build these stronger neural pathways, he also gains physical strength, flexibility and balance, and insight into the inner world of his emotions, accessing a holistic non-invasive way to heal trauma, pain, suffering and stress.

Pain is a big concern for amputees. Using yoga, an amputee is better able to recognize pain triggers, relax the mind, increase resilience and decrease reactivity to pain with yoga breathing (pranayama), poses (asana) and active rest (yoga nidra) .

Bad habits, such as smoking or spending the day glued to the couch, fall away, as an amputee begins to feel better through yoga. As health and mindset improve, more preventative actions, such as better nutrition and exercise become needed daily rituals that take over those bad habits.

Spiritually, through meditation to still the mind and contemplation on the concept of oneness with all of life, an amputee gains insight into the meaning of amputation, life purpose, and a sense of the wisdom gained from limb loss. Rather than feeling separate or isolated, an amputee, through yoga, will have a renewed sense of joy in life and a deeper connection to the world.

A person practicing yoga even for a short while sees changes almost immediately. New yoga practitioners report better sleep, better coping skills, more confidence, more energy, greater sex drive and more peace of mind. Seasoned yoga practitioners have better access to higher realms of consciousness, including fine-tuned body awareness as well as profound experiences of bliss. Long-term yoga practice evokes a deeper level of understanding about what it means to be whole, and the nature of life's purpose.

“Every living being is an engine geared to the wheelwork of the universe. Though seemingly affected only by its immediate surrounding, the sphere of external influence extends to infinite distance.”

—Nikola Tesla