





# Moving Energy Through Laughter Yoga

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This article is a reprint from  
*Energy magazine*™

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**C***hugga, chugga, chugga, chugga, choo-choo!* yelled the class members in unison. The chorus reverberated off the walls as feet in colorful socks shuffled through the space, hands trying to hold the shoulders of the person in front of them, snaking like a train with bodies stretching to catch up with the ever-changing rhythm of the leader. People were smiling and laughing. Many were breathless, sometimes collapsing forward in the weakness that accompanies deep laughter and joy. This was not a rowdy kindergarten class or playful scouting activity, but a group of adults who had come together for the serious purpose of having fun. Welcome to Laughter Yoga.

## What is Laughter Yoga?

Steeped in thousands of years' tradition originating in India, yoga, from the Sanskrit root "yuj," means to get hold of, yoke, integrate and harmonize. Yoga has many faces. Some of the more commonly known are breath work or pranayama, body postures or poses known as asanas, and acts of devotion and selflessness called karma yoga. Yoga purifies mind, body and spirit, connecting all together in a seamless whole. This is accomplished by harnessing universal cosmic energy or prana, that flows into the body through the breath. The breath is the key to good health, especially through deep exhalations, ridding the body of stale oxygen and energy.

Laughter yoga is a recent addition to the family of yoga practices, coined by the founder Dr. Madan Kataria of Mumbai, India in 1995. It combines the age-old health benefits of deep breathing, coupled with laughter-inducing exercises and meditative quiet. Laughter comes easily to most people, naturally creating long exhalations without having to think about or practice doing so. Dr. Kataria started his laughter groups by telling jokes in order to help his patients improve their chronic health problems, but soon found that humor is very personal: what one finds funny, another may not, or may even react with offense. Humor is learned and based on culture, whereas laughter is inborn and universal. Kataria quickly discovered when he and his patients acted playfully while laughing, rather than telling jokes, his patients responded with health and well-being, and enjoyed themselves. Even faked laughter worked, for he found that the body did not differentiate between a real laugh and one that was simulated. The body still created health producing effects.

I first learned about laughter yoga in March 2010 by attending Dr. Gulshan Sethi's class on the therapeutic effects of laughter at an integrative mental health conference. Dr. Sethi, a cardiothoracic surgeon and professor at the University of Arizona, utilized laughter yoga as a means to help with his own health concerns. Despite the great health benefits of laughter,



he cautioned not to try laughter yoga if a person had poor health including: a recent operation, hernia, intractable heart failure, intractable angina or if not cleared by a medical professional. Laughter yoga is not for everyone, so refrain from trying it if you are not comfortable for whatever reason.

### How Laughter Heals

#### Laughter and the Physical Body

Laughter is the supreme lung cleanser. One deep laugh forces air out of the lungs using a brisk movement of the diaphragm. This gust creates a longer

upon teasing and ridicule creates stress and tension, which is the opposite of joy and safety. Laughter's best side is enhanced by social settings filled with acceptance, openness and emotional warmth.

#### Laughter Yoga and the Energy Body

Laughter yoga classes are unique to each teacher, club and culture, but all include the core elements of breathing, clapping, chanting, smiling, laughing, moving, imagining and playfulness. Each class is a group activity, encouraging nearly constant eye contact with others, laughing deeply from the belly for no reason and adopting a childlike playfulness.

## *Laughter and mirth are universal human states of being.*

exhalation than inhalation, ridding the lungs of excess moisture, equipping the body with extra oxygen for good health and reducing the chance of lung infections. Laughter enhances the immune system, decreasing stress hormones and increasing natural killer cell activity. In the presence of laughter, the body readily supplies pain killing endorphins and decreases stress-related cortisol. The muscles relax and blood circulation is increased. This leads to a calm, clear mental state, decreasing anxiety and depression, and fostering relaxation and well-being. In order to receive the optimal health benefits of laughter, it must last continuously for at least 10 to 15 minutes, which often does not happen spontaneously in daily life. It is said that adults laugh on average 12-15 times a day, whereas young children laugh on average 300-400 times a day.

#### Laughter and Others

Laughter and mirth are universal human states of being. Regardless of language or dialect and across time, people produce laughter and instantly recognize laughter in others. Laughter is also catchy. If you see or hear someone deeply laugh from the belly, it is hard to be serious. Soon you too are smiling and maybe laughing without reason. You cannot help but feel the joy and the body responds with good health. However, not all laughter is created equal. Laughter based

Each portion of laughter yoga stimulates energy healing. All activity moves energy, which can be seen from multiple points of view, depending upon the culture, history, perspective and education of the observer. For instance, breathing is a physical action that has mind, body and spirit components. A deep breath affects the physical lungs and blood circulation, brings oxygen to the brain, opens the heart, moves chi or life force energy through the lung meridian and spreads prana throughout. Mind, body and spirit are fed.

Here are some more examples of energy movement with laughter yoga:

**Clapping** with open palms together stimulates energy points on the hands that connect to the entire body. These points are recognized by many healing traditions, including reflexology, Traditional Chinese Medicine, Tsalagi (Cherokee) system and the Five Elements in the Tibetan system (space, wind, fire, water and earth). See Dale, C. (2009) for more information.

**Chanting** creates vibrations in the throat, vocal chords and lungs, activating the throat chakra. Chakras ("wheels of light" in Sanskrit) spin subtle energy near glands and vital organs, moving prana



to balance the system. The throat chakra, associated with communication, is like a chimney for the other chakras, collecting and releasing prana from chakras above and below the neck. Chanting positive affirmations, such as “very good” which is often repeated in laughter yoga classes, sends messages of safety and good cheer to mind, body and spirit. When chanted as a group, the space vibrates in harmonious rhythms to which the body resonates.

**Smiling** with others promotes bonding and enhances social communication by providing emotional warmth.

**Moving** and stretching the body circulates lymph, blood and other fluids, and warms the muscles. Subtle energies such as chi or prana are stimulated, clearing blockages and interacting with the electromagnetic field around and interpenetrating the body.

**Imagining or Visualization** uses the mind’s eye to create images or stories. The third eye chakra (in between the eyebrows) opens where imagination and dreaming take place. Information from beyond the self enters through the crown chakra (above the head) and is projected outward through the third eye into space. Creative energies can then be made manifest through thoughts, feelings and actions.

**Playfulness** is open, creative, in the moment and fun. A childlike wonder ensues as the heart chakra, known for love and compassion, exudes joy. This freedom is described by Eden Energy Medicine founder Donna Eden as an attribute of the “strange flows,” known for jumping from spot to spot over the body, carrying good vibes everywhere they land.

**Laughing** produces all the effects described above.

### Try it for yourself

If you want to learn more, you can join in-person and online laughter yoga clubs. The official web site for Dr. Kataria’s Laughter Yoga University is [www.laughteryoga.org](http://www.laughteryoga.org). Laughter yoga classes are typically offered at

no charge, but check with your local club for more information. If you cannot or do not want to meet in person, you can meet every day for at least 15 minutes online via Skype with various laughter clubs all over the world. Another organization, the National American School of Laughter Yoga ([www.Laughteryogaamerica.com](http://www.Laughteryogaamerica.com)), holds an annual Laughter Conference. Mark your calendars for the first Sunday of May, celebrating World Laughter Day. Keep laughing and remember the wise words of Joel Goodman, “seven days without a laugh makes one weak.”



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