

“Yoga & Epilepsy”

By: Bryant Chu

I never thought I would talk about epilepsy publically, let alone write an article about it because I had built up all these negative impressions over the 20+ years since I started having seizures. I was not born with epilepsy. This neurological disorder came with the onset of puberty – a time in my life when hormones were going crazy and all I cared about were chasing girls. Suffice it to say, this was not the most ideal time in my life to be throwing more distractions my way, especially ones I couldn't control.

So what is epilepsy? As stated above, epilepsy is a neurological disorder. But is it tied directly to seizures? There are differences between epileptic seizures and seizures that are caused by other events like alcohol, drugs or other neurological traumas. So you could potentially have a seizure and not have epilepsy. When I was first diagnosed with epilepsy, my neurologist ran numerous tests on me, hooking me up to wires to scan my brain, body and what I thought was my punished soul (I don't think there are really any tests for your soul other than what your heart may tell you). What he found, though, was that my symptoms coincided with epileptic conditions. Even to this day, there is still not a lot known about where epilepsy stems from. Some say that it is congenital, and others lead us to believe that they stem from other life events that change something in body – like a traumatic experience. What we do know is that there are ways to help minimize the frequency and effects of a seizure, depending on severity level, through medication, surgery or lifestyle changes.

I am fortunate to be able to live my life with what is now a low dosage of medication along with a daily practice of yoga. Bringing awareness to my life and body were probably the first steps in the right direction to changing how epilepsy affected my perception and daily routines.

I spent the first decade of seizures with frequent doctor visits paired with heavy medication dosages. With any initial onset of epilepsy, the idea is to contain the seizures as quickly as possible. Any seizure you experience is so detrimental to your mind, body, and it definitely took a toll on my spirit. Many medications are meant to shut off the neurons that would normally be (mis)firing in your brain, but the downside to that is it also shuts down many of the other emotions and your ability to focus on things. Imagine you were talking with a friend, but then slowly, one by one your senses start shutting down or are dulled. Conversations wouldn't be as fun, huh? Life wouldn't have as much to offer. Depression is a common side effect. That's when I sought out new methods for managing my epilepsy.

At one point I tried to self-medicate, which more or less was me taking myself off medication because it was ruining my ability to communicate and interact with others. I could “feel” again, but I began having seizures more frequently. So I came to my senses and surrendered myself to the prescribed pill routine. This wasn't the outcome I was looking for, but at the same time, it started me thinking, what else could I do? Surgery is only done for the extreme cases. Diet changes have been known to work, but are far too strict, and also have their own cons, given the high protein content with lack of vegetables. I'd probably suffer a heart attack first. And this led to me down the path that I've followed this past decade.

I started participating in more physical activities during my college years, and this is when I was first introduced to yoga. At the time, this was merely a therapeutic practice to heal my physical wounds from more *rigorous* activities. So it was complimentary to my physical therapy, but not something I had originally thought would have such a great impact on my life, specific to epilepsy. Once I made the connection that yoga significantly reduced my stress levels far more than just physical activity, it all

made sense. You know how you can get a runner's high? This wasn't it. Tying my breath to mindful and slow movement forced me to focus my attention on one thing at a time. When you are running or cycling you go on autopilot and just churn out energy. Endorphins are made, and you're generally happy. Yes, you can bliss out on yoga, but to achieve true bliss takes lifetimes of practice. Nonetheless yoga forced me to slow down and pay more attention to my body's needs.

I found the following:

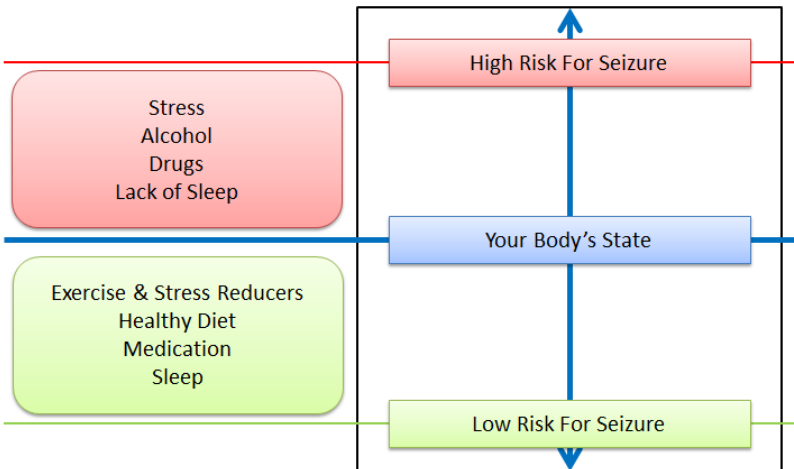
- More body awareness – As I moved with more intention, I no longer was just moving for the sake of moving; I was able to engage my body in micro-movements, so subtle that only I could feel them; not even visible.
- Mindfulness – I learned where my edge was. I've always had a habit (or my ego has had a habit) of pushing myself past my edge, which ultimately led to injury. I pulled back the intensity, and found smarter ways to practice. This gave me a lot more endurance in mind and body.
- Acceptance – I've never been really comfortable with the idea of epilepsy. Yoga, though taught me to accept my physical limitations during practice. The journey itself was more important than the cool looking pose. Learning how to overcome my lack of flexibility or strength really showed me how to let go of the idea of being able to control my seizures, therefore showing me how to accept that this was the journey of growth I was on – still on...

Yoga is unique in that it can be practiced in so many different ways. Maybe you have explored the eight limbs of yoga. In particular, I tend to routinely practice:

- Asana – Physical practice of yoga
- Pranayama – Breath practice of yoga
- Meditation – Mental practice of yoga

These three limbs allow me to do a few things. Somatic therapy is a very powerful tool, which should be done carefully. By incorporating a focused asana practice tied to breath, you are able to release and expose mental blocks that you've created over your lifetime. This could root anywhere from your childhood experiences to more recent ones. The release of these mental stresses, manifesting themselves in physical form, can be extremely scary if you are not prepared for them or do not have the right support from a teacher or therapist. These same practices can be used to release mental blocks associated with epilepsy. Imagine your brain is creating a lot of energy (due to epilepsy) and that prana flows through your body. If your body isn't prepared to release that energy because your chakras (focused energy knots in your body) are closed off, you'll experience seizure-like symptoms: shaking or tightened muscles. But if you can work on opening your chakras, you now have an exit point for your *spare* prana to escape.

To understand how things influence the likelihood of having a seizure, see this diagram:



Note that this doesn't cover everything, but based on the activities you experience, your body's state moves up and down towards differing levels of risk. Keeping a healthy lifestyle will likely promote wellness around epilepsy – having fewer seizures. Practicing specific asana can accelerate the reduction of stress more than general exercise. And yoga is accessible to a wider demographic of the population as asana ranges from restorative to vigorous; plus, breathing and meditation are accessible to everyone. By having strong stress reducers like yoga, a healthy diet, and restful sleep, I have been able to reduce my medication dosage to barely anything. This is something that I've been able to work out with my neurologist. He confirms that if my current routine is suppressing seizures, there really doesn't need to be any adjustment in my pill regimen.

I also practice a daily meditation paired with pranayama. There are many scientific studies that have shown that meditation is a great way to rest your mind and allow your body to heal itself. This type of practice engages your parasympathetic nervous system (PNS: rest and digest) versus the sympathetic nervous system (SNS: fight or flight). When you are most at rest, your body has the available energy to repair the body.

When I meditate, I do the following:

- Focus on my object
- Subtle breathing
- Bringing awareness to both my physical body and my mental state (of distractions)

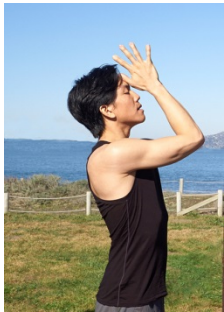
Through a consistent meditation practice, I can drop into my "object" of focus on demand. This is important for some of us, and here's why. Some epileptic students have a tell sign when they're about to have a seizure. If you are able to recognize that and immediately fall into your meditation object, putting your body in a PNS state, you'll likely reduce the severity of the seizure.

This practice for both me and my students is an evolving practice. There aren't any silver bullets out there to resolve our epileptic seizures, but I have also read that in certain cases, practitioners have been able to remove medication from their lives. A lot will ultimately depend on the severity of your epilepsy, understanding what triggers you have, and professional guidance from your doctor. I hope that this sheds some light on epilepsy and what it has been able to do for me and my own life. Perhaps this would inspire you or a loved one to consider yoga as a means to live differently...

I work with students in my public hatha and restorative classes to make sure that we focus on different asana strategies. It is just as important to have a balanced yoga practice ranging from vigorous activity to restful activity where you can deepen a pose over a long period of time. Private sessions are typically reserved for meditation and intense somatic therapies. Don't feel alone in this journey. Know that there are tools out there that you can learn and use to positively impact your life. If you are local to the San Francisco area, come to one of my classes, and discover something different.



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Bryant is a San Francisco based yoga teacher who works passionately within the community. His goal is to help you find the light within yourself, so that you can shine brighter than you have before. Continuous growth, compassionate introspection, and unbiased awareness is what we seek to enable in each of us. Through practice, understanding, and experience do we achieve our best.