

## **Yoga and Golf: the Open Secret**

It's no longer a secret that many professional golfers practise yoga and meditation to improve their game.

Asian Tour Chairman Kyi Hla Han, Singapore's Mardan Mamat, Jyoti Randhawa, (eight Asian Tour victories including the Thailand Open this March), Myanmar's Zaw Moe and Malaysia's Danny Chia have all studied this ancient Indian mind body discipline.

Yoga teacher Valerie Faneco says that players need silence and stillness because they have to study the terrain, the wind, the weather and other factors. "Based on all those parameters you decide what club to use and how you might hit the ball and that is all meditation. It is essential to be completely absorbed in what you are doing without allowing any distractions to interfere. Professional golf players practise and cultivate that skill and I'm sure that a lot of them do yoga because it trains the mind."

As well as being a teacher, Valerie is a yoga therapist and teacher trainer. She says her company 'Being in Yoga' is about "helping people to be well, stay well and recover from problems or develop new skills."

Aged 40, she has been practising yoga for 15 years. She studied with and was certified by TVK Desikachar, an internationally respected yoga master, in Chennai, India. Once a year she returns there to continue her yoga education.

Valerie has been teaching for nine years and for the last five years in Singapore. Unlike some teachers and many clubs, her focus is on customising yoga for each person: "Yoga is supposed to be adapted to the individual, not the other way round," she says.

She teaches at the Complete Healthcare Institute (CHI) in Rochester Park alongside GPs, a dietician, psychologists, an osteopath, a speech therapist and a podiatrist. At her home studio she holds one-on-one sessions. Students include a wide variety of people: a singer, a professional tennis coach, pre- and post-natal women, clients with back conditions or ones just looking for maintenance.

Valerie is learning golf but is just at the driving range stage. Her Australian husband, who has been struggling with golf since he was 16, now has a handicap of 18.

With her husband as with anyone who wants to improve their game, she works in three ways: physical preparation, mental preparation and physical recovery and compensation (see box check list).

"With the physical preparation, you should practice yoga postures with a focus on the rotation of the hips, turning the shoulders and mobility in the back and shoulders. Those will help and you will feel the full effects quite rapidly in the fluidity of your stroke and the power that comes from this. Mental preparation is more subtle: it is about cultivating a suitable approach to the game. As someone said, 'it's a game of patience not a game of perfection.' Your mind must be able to recover from having

played a disastrous hole or an out of bounds penalty shot. It needs to move on without looking behind. That requires practice!

“Athleticism is not enough. In golf, you need suppleness and stamina. You will be on your feet for up to six hours. Balance is also important. Being aware where the body weight is, awareness of the body’s placement and the position of the feet are crucial and yoga can help with those.”

Valerie has showed her husband postures to open the shoulders so that they can turn better in the swing, to improve mobility in the lower back. “A good mobility in the shoulder and pelvic girdles are important in golf.”

Considering mental preparation, Valerie says, “The untrained mind can be like a untrained puppy running everywhere. Yoga helps to calm the fluctuations in the mind.”

Yoga also includes exercises in visualisation such as imagining how to hit the ball. “We also use visualisation to develop a positive attitude about ourselves. With positive visualisation you can imagine hitting the ball very well and playing a perfect game on a perfect day with perfect weather.”

Breathing she says is the key to mental preparation. “Many people must start by learning how to breathe through their nose. We need to practise a long, smooth and conscious breath, rather than a short, uneven breath and to work with long exhalations that promote a release of tension. These will decrease anxiety and reduce stress

“The times I hit the ball best is when I am conscious of my breath. I take a deep breath in on the back swing and exhale slowly as I go through the swing and after. This is what works for me. What is relevant is to find what works best for you.

“Yoga has helped my husband him more from a mental rather than a physical aspect. He will think about his breathing before, during and after hitting a ball. Breathing helps you connect with a quiet place inside you and helps to create a contemplative state.

“He has improved his concentration and yoga has also helped him deal with his frustration. He will come back and say ‘I played terribly today’ but now he does not get angry about it. He will just acknowledge that it was bad and move on. He doesn’t let his nerves override him any more.”

According to Valerie, both preparation and compensation are equally important. “With preparation you ensure that you approach the game in the right condition. Compensation is what you do after to ensure that you remove the negative effects of what is happening in an essentially asymmetrical game. The repetitive swinging movement, always in the same direction, can cause stress in the body, especially in the back, shoulders and arms. It is essential to restore balance afterwards with well chosen yoga postures such as forward bending movements with the knees slightly bent among others.”

### **Valerie’s Golf Check List**

### ***Physical Preparation***

Body awareness,  
Rotation of torso and hips,  
Back strengthening,  
Shoulder opening and turning,  
Alignment of the legs, hips and spine,  
Awareness of the centre of gravity,  
Developing core strength,  
Balance and weight distribution.

\* Choosing the appropriate yoga postures and applying them with appropriate modifications for each person's ability is very important.

### ***Mental Preparation***

Focus and poise,  
Training the mind to focus on a single object,  
Visualisation applied to the action in the game,  
Visualisation applied to a self-enhancing positive attitude,  
Detachment from success, failure and results,  
Learning to respond rather than react,  
Conscious breath to control the nerves,  
Appropriate breathing techniques to lengthen and smoothen the breath.

\* The effects of yoga practice on mental conditioning are subtle and can be felt over time.

### ***Physical Recovery and Compensation***

Muscle stretches combined with conscious breathing,  
Rebalancing the body following asymmetrical movements,  
In general forward bending movements can help alleviate tension in the back.

\* These can vary depending on each player and the post-game effects.

By Neil Riley (in GOLF magazine May 2009)