



**TIMOTHY MCCALL** rests outside a small temple founded by Shankaracharya in the state of Karnataka in SW India.

## The Good Doctor

Anyone who has ever asked Timothy McCall whether yoga can help with a particular health issue has probably heard him answer: “It depends.” Not one to jump on the yoga-fixes-everything bandwagon, McCall approaches yoga therapy—his chosen field—with respect, love, scientific inquiry, and a healthy dose of skepticism. After all, he was a doctor long before he was a yoga teacher.

For more than 10 years, McCall practiced medicine as a primary care physician in Boston—until working in corporate health care settings became unbearable. Once he could no longer spend time getting to know and educate his patients—the greatest joy in his clinical career—he was ready to hang up his stethoscope. In fact, one night in 1997, he came home from work and had what he considers a life-changing epiphany. “I remember thinking to myself, ‘What if I don’t do this anymore? What if I just write instead?’” Ten minutes later he had made the decision to quit medicine, and within six months he’d turned his part-time writing into a full-time job.

Just three years before that kitchen table revelation, McCall had taken up yoga and attributes his decision to quit medicine—at least in part—to his yoga practice. “I’m not saying I quit practicing solely because of yoga,” he says, “but it may not be coincidental that I had that epiphany and acted on it so quickly. When you cultivate awareness, you start to realize things you might not have realized before.” >>



### A SNAPS Assessment

No matter what your physical challenge, a yoga therapist assesses five categories before offering you an individual treatment plan.

**1 Structural.** Your postural habits; bony alignment, including spinal curves; patterns of muscular overwork and weakness; asymmetries

**2 Nervous System.** Your stress levels, sympathetic and parasympathetic systems, heart rate variability, breathing patterns, and prana vayus

**3 Ayurveda.** Your nature (*prakriti*) and current doshic imbalances (*vikriti*), digestive fire (*agni*), etc.

**4 Psychology.** Mood, anxiety, mental properties (*gunas*)

**5 Spirituality.** Equanimity, compassion, joy, discipline, sense of meaning in life

Your treatment would include asana, breathing and meditation practices, and restoratives, as well as diet and lifestyle suggestions. Even though your back pain may be structural, a therapist evaluates all areas because an ayurvedic imbalance or even unresolved anger may contribute to your pain. The more elements we can address, the greater the chance for success.

Yoga principles had actually entered his life long before 1995, although he didn't recognize them at the time. As an 18-year-old up-and-coming tennis player, McCall read *The Inner Game of Tennis* by W. Timothy Gallwey, and it radically changed the way he approached the game. "I started using yoga techniques to improve my tennis game, to notice my habits, to notice the way my mind interfered with my efforts to achieve certain things on the tennis court," McCall says, "and I started applying those principles to the rest of my life."

A year after McCall left medicine, he began to miss having "one foot in the real world" and longed to combine his love for scientific inquiry with his new passion for yoga. In 2002, he set out for India to research the medical benefits of yoga. He wanted to know what evidence existed to suggest that yoga could heal chronic and acute diseases. And if it could, how? That research—along with scores of interviews with scientists, yoga teachers, ayurvedic practitioners, and students—became the basis of his book *Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing*.

Although McCall continues to teach a popular yoga-for-depression workshop with senior Iyengar teacher Patricia Walden (coauthor of *The Woman's Book of Yoga and Health*), he has also branched out on his own, using *Yoga as Medicine* as the foundation for a series of well-respected weeklong yoga therapy intensives. Don't expect to find advice on the perfect pose for every ailing back or the one way to relieve digestive disorders in any McCall class, however. Remember: "It depends!" The right yogic "prescription" hinges on all sorts of factors, he says, and he adamantly resists cramming yoga therapy into the "reductionist Western model" of one-size-fits-all treatment regimens. No perfect pose exists that fits everyone's needs, he reminds his students; no breathing technique will heal everyone's back pain.

His workshops attract doctors, holistic practitioners, yoga teachers and students, and those simply wanting to improve their health. Through lecture, discussion, and supervised hands-on therapy work in these small-group practicums, McCall helps his students look at the whole person—her motivation, stress level, ayurvedic constitution, and life challenges, as well as any physical complaints—and together they map out an individualized holistic strategy for healing.

McCall's own yoga practice plays a prominent role in his self-discovery. His daily routine includes bhakti practices, such as chanting and mantra meditation, as well as pranayama and asana. "One of the things about being on this path and really engaging it sincerely," McCall says, "is that with time you peel away the layers and start seeing so much more." —Linda Sparrow >>