

[Tackling Number One Killer with Lifestyle and Yoga](#)

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Tackling Number One Killer with Lifestyle and Yoga

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Dean Ornish, M.D., is a lean man with a warm smile and a mean mission against heart disease. Not just control it. Reverse it. Better yet, prevent it. His book, Dr. Dean Ornish's Program for Reversing Heart Disease, is a New York Times best-seller. Cardiovascular research he and colleagues have conducted proves that many people reverse heart disease by changing their lifestyle. To what? Ornish evolved a contemplative life pattern that is heart-and-soul parallel to the lifestyle of the ideal Hindu: a fat-free vegetarian diet, with no smoking or alcohol; yogic exercises and long reflective walks; meditation and spiritual growth. It is called, aptly, Opening Your Heart Program. To Ornish these practices not only unclog arteries - proven in clinical studies - but also the mental blocks to spiritual peace, putting an end to the stress induced by the ambitious "modern American mantra of want, need and buy." He says, "Happiness often eludes us. And like the fabled musk deer that wanders the forest, searching for the source of the beautiful odor and not realizing the scent comes from itself, we often seem to be looking in the wrong place for our happiness and sense of self-worth."

Here is a physician who talks of Indian fables of happiness, has been featured in magazines from Newsweek to New Age Journal and carries more credentials than TV's beloved Dr. Ben Casey. Ornish is assistant clinical professor of medicine and an attending physician at the School of Medicine, University of California, and an attending physician at the California Pacific Medical Center, both in San Francisco. But his home base is in picturesque Sausalito where he is president and director of the Preventive Medicine Research Institute.

Remarkably, the controlled study of people in his program showed that the coronary arteries of people with severe heart disease actually opened up, and the patients began to feel more relaxed and energetic. As Ornish points out in his book, "Although the incidence of heart attacks has been declining during the past

decade, more people die from heart and blood vessel diseases each year than from all other causes of death combined, including cancer, AIDS, other infectious diseases, accidents, and homicides. Yet if heart disease can be reversed, then it may be preventable. We don't have to wait for a new drug, surgical procedure or technological breakthrough."

Ornish proposes commonsense, lifestyle changes: "Somehow, many of us believe we must choose between leading an interesting, exciting, productive life that's filled with stress, great food, and dying young, or sitting under a tree, eating boring food, and watching our longer life go by - or maybe it just seems longer." He points out that it needn't be that way, for his program creates comprehensive lifestyle changes that make you feel physically, mentally, emotionally - and even spiritually - better. He says, "Ultimately, the Opening Your Heart program is about learning how to feel freer and happier - a different type of 'open-heart' procedure, one based on love, knowledge, and compassion rather than just drugs and surgery. We can learn how to open our hearts on emotional and spiritual levels as well as anatomical ones. While these changes are more difficult to measure scientifically than the improvement in coronary anatomy, I find them to be even more interesting and important for leading a happier, healthier life."

It comes as no surprise that Ornish's book is dedicated to Swami Satchidananda, founder of the Integral Yoga Institute. For the young doctor was greatly influenced by the Swami's teachings since a period of despair back in the swinging seventies. Indeed, the Swami's teachings are the bedrock of his program. The book is peppered with sayings of Satchidananda: "Someone once asked Swami Satchidananda, a spiritual leader, 'What are you, a Hindu?' 'No', he replied, 'I'm an Undo. I'm trying to teach people how they can undo the patterns that cause damage to their minds and bodies so they can begin to heal.' It's a simple statement, but one that reflects a different conception of health and healing."

At a very low ebb in his life, Ornish took to heart the Swami's suggestions of yogic exercises, meditation and a low-fat vegetarian diet. Yet to suggest these very commonsense techniques to the Western medical world has always met with skepticism. Ornish recalls that when, as a second year medical student, he asked a cardiologist to refer patients to his study entitled Effects of Yoga and a Vegetarian Diet on Coronary Heart Disease, he was told, "Well, Dean, I'd like to support your research, but it sounds too weird. What would I tell my patients - that I'm referring them to a swami?"

Ornish changed the name of the study to Effects of Stress Management Techniques and Dietary Changes on Coronary Heart Disease and the offer was promptly accepted. As Ornish points out in his book, "Although that was over 13 years ago, for some people the words 'yoga' and 'vegetarian' still conjure up negative images: the sixties counterculture. Hare Krishnas with shaved heads...and so on. 'Meditation' was often confused with TM or 'transcendental meditation' popularized by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi..."

Although the West is skeptical about Hindu wisdom, it has appropriated many of the principles, as scores of books on meditation and imagery testify. According to Ornish, the Lamaze breathing techniques used by millions of women during childbirth, the stretching exercises used by athletes as well as fitness and beauty programs like Raquel Welch's all depend on yoga techniques. Ornish calls yoga "a system of powerful tools for achieving union - and healing - with parts of ourselves, with others, and with a higher force."

Just as the West seems to be finally turning (knowingly or unknowingly) toward a way of life that's consistent with Hinduism, ironically, many Hindus in the West, are adopting a more stressful, acquisitive lifestyle where monetary success is the barometer of a man's worth and where Big Macs and a couch potato lifestyle take over yogic exercises and vegetarian cuisine.

Ornish's Reversal Diet is comprised of 70 to 75 percent carbohydrate, 15 to 20 percent protein, 10 percent fat and 5 milligrams of cholesterol per day. He points out in his book. "The Reversal Diet is a very low-fat vegetarian diet, with no animal products except egg whites and nonfat dairy. This is what the patients in our study consumed, whose coronary heart disease began to reverse. I am convinced that this is the world's healthiest diet for most adults, whether or not they have heart disease."

Yet in spite of all his insistence on living pattern changes as a panacea for preventing heart disease. Ornish is not against surgery and drugs when needed. As he points out, "When a patient comes into the emergency room with severe chest pain, saying, 'Doc, please get this elephant off my chest,' I don't just feed him broccoli and ask him to start meditating - I use whatever cardiac drugs, electrical shocks, and surgical procedures are necessary to treat the acute, life-threatening condition." About yoga he emphasizes: "Yoga complements rather than replaces Western approaches and medical care. Knowing the power and limitations of each

is very important."

Still, as a method of reversing, or better still, preventing heart disease, the Opening Your Heart program seems to be without parallel. This writer, using herself as a guinea pig, lost a few pounds just by adhering to the yogic exercises, long walks and low-fat vegetarian diet. The Opening Your Heart Program certainly more than opens your arteries - it opens you to a whole different lifestyle which is rich and contemplative.

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