Accessible Yoga

JOURNAL 2018

TORONTO

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In person and livestream
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Whether you’re in your living room, out in nature, or on the road traveling, stay inspired with 500+ of the world’s top teachers. Choose from a variety of styles and class durations. With classes ranging from 15-60+ minutes, you’re sure to find something that fits your busy schedule.

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# Accessible Yoga

## Mission Statement

Accessible Yoga is dedicated to sharing the benefits of Yoga with anyone who currently does not have access to these teachings, and with communities that have been excluded or underserved. All people, regardless of ability or background, deserve equal access to the ancient teachings of Yoga, which offer individual empowerment and spiritual awakening. By building a strong network and advocating for a diverse Yoga culture that is inclusive and welcoming, we are sharing Yoga with all.

[Accessible Yoga](https://accessibleyoga.org)

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## Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welcome Letter</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter from the Editor</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessible Yoga Teams</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenter Articles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dianne Bondy</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chantel Ehler</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tama Soble</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Hayes</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anita Haravon</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shana Sandler</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew Remski</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Stigas</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tobias Wiggins</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiffany Rose</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Rendall</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelly Prosko</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee Majewski</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracey Eccleston</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda Varnam</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judith Mintz</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol Horton</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judy Hubbell</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary-Jo Fetterly</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jivana Heyman</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessible Yoga Network</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessible Yoga Conference Europe</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dear Accessible Yoga Family,

I just wanted to say thank you for coming to our first international Conference, and our first Conference in Canada! We are thrilled to be connecting with our Accessible Yoga community around the world, and that’s why the theme of this Conference is “Embracing Community.” The Accessible Yoga community includes anyone who shares the goal of making the yoga practices available to everybody who is interested in learning them.

In particular, I’d like to thank all of our amazing presenters! I’m so excited to learn from you this weekend. Also, thank you to the University of Toronto for hosting us, and our local volunteer team; Chantel Ehler, Katie Juelson, Ray Chappell, Spencer Jones, Sharon Metz, Chris Stigmas, Carolyn Harding, Denise Gains, Stephanie Ragnay, Margot LeBlanc and Jacqueline Peters. I also want to thank our staff, in particular Conference Manager, Brina Lord; Operations Manager, Megan Zander; Communications Director, Sarah Helt, and Graphic Designer, Sevika Ford. Our Board of Directors, Priya Wagner, Dianne Bondy, Rudra Swartz, Prashanti Goodell, and Sarani Fedman, who also edited this Journal. Thanks to Iswari Spoon for laying out the Journal. Also, thanks to all our other volunteers here this weekend and the close to 500 Accessible Yoga Ambassadors around the world!

Heartfelt appreciation to all our supporters, including our main sponsor, Yoga Alliance, who made our scholarships possible, as well as Yoga International, for sponsoring the World’s Largest Accessible Yoga Class. I’d also like to thank YogaMate, and all the other amazing sponsors included in this Journal.

I hope you enjoy this weekend and have an opportunity to connect with the other attendees and presenters. Networking is not only a key part of finding work as a yoga teacher, but a way to build an alternative yoga community. In fact, I always give the same homework at all our conferences: Over the weekend find one or two other people who you can support in some way. Help them reach their goals, connect them with other people you know, share their work on social media, or find some other way to lift them up. That’s how we truly embrace community. Use #jivanahomework to let me know what you create. There is so much we can accomplish together!

Om,
Jivana

Accessible Yoga
Dear Friends,

Welcome to the Toronto Accessible Yoga Conference. So many details and so much energy go into making a conference come together. Everyone has made a concerted effort to set aside the time to be here and to prepare our hearts and minds and bodies to take in all that the conference has to offer.

And then there are the organizers who have spent hours of their time putting together the physical details, arranging for this beautiful space at the University of Toronto, locating props, chairs, tables and people to set them up, support staff, food, microphones - the list can go on.

Then there are our presenters. They were asked to be presenters because in some way their journey to this time and place has involved a deep understanding, experience, or involvement in the path of Accessible Yoga. Some gain knowledge of the tools that an accessible yoga class or teacher can offer to them as a student. Others are teachers who are sharing yoga with those who haven’t always had easy access to the teachings and practices of yoga. Both sides of the coin, student and teacher. One not so different from the other. Everyone experiencing the joys and challenges and support that yoga can bring to us all.

This journal is full of their stories. Each presenter who writes here is sharing their particular experience on the accessible yogic path. There are stories of transcendence. There are stories of deep insight and creativity. They are all stories unique to each author but with the common thread of our reaching for understanding and support. And finding that wisdom and support through the teachings of yoga.

I had a wonderful ride as I read each author’s story. I hope you find much to learn and much to support you in these short pieces and from the presentations that each author offers during this conference weekend. I hope they inspire you to go back to your community and share these gifts. That sharing and connecting is Accessible Yoga. We learn from and support each other so that we can offer that same wisdom and inspiration to others. It is about Sangha - embracing our spiritual community.

Ommmmm and Love,
Sarani Beth Fedman
Editor
Accessible Yoga Teams

The Accessible Yoga teams came out of our 1st conference in 2015 when so many people came forward to get involved in this movement. If you want to get involved, please email us at info@accessibleyoga.org.

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Conference Logistics Teams

Toronto Logistics
Chantel Ehler, Katie Juelson, Ray Chappell, Spencer Jones, Sharon Metz, Chris Stigmas, Carolyn Harding, Denise Gains, Stephanie Ragnay, Margot LeBlanc, Jacqueline Peters

European Logistics
Priya Pernilla Halldin, Alessandra Uma Cocchi, Katja Sandschneider, Felicitas Scheel, Isadora Bilancino

The mission of our Logistics Teams is to support the planning and organization of the Accessible Yoga Conferences by locating venues, coordinating transportation, scheduling lodging, and all other ‘behind the scenes’ details. We communicate with other teams to create a supportive, collaborative, and collective community. By meeting regularly and designating volunteer assignments, we strive to create a structure of systematic support that enables all teammates and attendees to thrive in their experience at the Accessible Yoga Conferences.

Inreach Team
Cherie Hotchkiss – Inreach Leader

The Inreach Team establishes and maintains communications with all our Accessible Yoga Ambassadors! Inreach is organizing all data to create a single system to carry Accessible Yoga forward as it grows.

Scholarship Team
Valerie Roberts, Carolyn Hitzler

Working together in an effort to provide financial accessibility to yoga teachers and Accessible Yoga students combined, the Scholarship Team’s goals encompass inclusive communication with new and returning Accessible Yoga Ambassadors. We strive to offer a welcoming environment for new Ambassadors through open communication. We encourage all Ambassadors to get involved by sharing the goals of Accessible Yoga with their personal networks and beyond.

Fundraising Committee
Priya Wagner, Maria Amma Fandino

The Fundraising Committee seeks grants, donations and in-kind gifts from a variety of sources to fund scholarships, programs, salaries and organizational overhead costs. We conduct donor research, identify new sources of funds, engage new audiences and build long term donor relationships. We are committed to Accessible Yoga’s mission and strive to carry the mission forward. The Committee is headed by a member of the Board of Directors.

Communications Team
Sarah Elizabeth Helt – team leader, Prashanti Goodell - board liaison, Tricia Gschwind, Lauren Fonvielle

Graphic Design - Iswari Spoon, Heather Sevika Ford, Mary Padma Bickel

Through collaborative efforts the Communications Team uses all forms of social media to reach the public on behalf of the Accessible Yoga Movement. We, as a team, post to Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and our Accessible Yoga Blog in an effort to keep all our yoga connections up to date on what we’re doing, where, and how. In this digital age, the Communications Team plays a vital role in connecting students to teachers, teachers to institutions, and bringing Accessible Yoga to the world.

Advocacy Team
Mary Sims – team leader, Steffany Moonaz - board liaison, Virginia Knowlton, Prakash Capen, Jennifer Gasner, Rose Kress, Elle Potter, Myra Rubinstein

The Advocacy Team speaks up for inclusion within the yoga community and beyond. We are currently working with Yoga Alliance to expand the requirements of yoga teacher training programs to include training in Accessibility to make sure that yoga teachers are receiving proper training in this area. We’re also overseeing the new Ambassador program which will engage our almost 500 Ambassadors around the world to offer educational programming and share the message of accessibility and equity in yoga.

Education Team
Sarah Helt, Jivana Heyman, Priya Wagner, Sarani Fedman

The Education Team is exploring different outlets for sharing the work of Accessible Yoga. We are currently exploring how to create an online video platform to share Accessible Yoga classes and workshops and highlight the amazing work of our conference presenters and Ambassadors.

International Team – Regional Representatives

The Accessible Yoga International Team is made up of Regional Representatives who connect the Ambassadors in their region. We are dedicated to building a worldwide network of Accessible Yoga teachers and students. We engage yogis from all over the world to be aware of the great possibilities that yoga offers to people with disabilities or people that have been excluded from these teachings. By creating a strong network we learn from all the different circumstances in each and every country and support each other in spreading Accessible Yoga around the globe.

Accessible Yoga Facebook Groups

Accessible Yoga Ambassadors – main group
Greek
Spanish
Italian
Swedish
Dutch
French
Portuguese
German
Canada
UK
UK: Kent
Asia
Australia
US:
Texas
Midwest

Southwest
Northwest
NY – Northeast
SF Bay Area
Sacramento

Canada
UK
UK: Kent
Asia
Australia
US:
Texas
Midwest

Southwest
Northwest
NY – Northeast
SF Bay Area
Sacramento

AYC_Toronto2018.indd   7-8
6/4/18   7:58 PM
ACCESSIBLE YOGA VOICE

Dianne Bondy

Interview by Kathleen Kraft

Where do you teach and who is the population?

My most accessible platform and the one that I’m most proud of is Yogasteya, which I created in 2012 well before the online yoga boom had started. I had a brick and mortar yoga studio, and there were groups of women who were having babies. In Canada, where I live, we get a year for maternity leave. Some of the women asked me to record the classes on audio so they could practice at home when they had a break, so at first my husband and I decided to set up a camera in the studio and record the classes.

Eventually I decided to create an accessible platform for pregnant and post-partum women, people with disabilities, and people with larger bodies, essentially people practicing with a range of limitations. After some time, I broke it down more and created an accessible yoga website. It mostly catered to people in larger bodies, because when you show up to a yoga class and the teacher is not in a larger body, he or she doesn’t know what to do with you. There’s a whole group of people who feel really intimidated stepping into a yoga studio space so I designed this website primarily for them.

Every Wednesday I do an Instagram Live class and I put it in the Facebook group or on the site so that people have an opportunity to practice live with us. I also teach at the park at the end of my street every Saturday from May to October. I like to teach in unconventional places because they’re less intimidating for people.

Last but not least, I have a group of ladies that have been practicing with me for over ten years—they come to my house and range in age from 75 to 80, so I do a lot of accessible yoga with them. Hip replacements, knee replacements, arthritis, and so on. I really appreciate them because they help me try to figure out how to vary and evolve this practice so more and more people with limitations can get to it.

Can you tell us about a teaching experience that particularly moved you?

I had a student who was in a wheelchair who suffered from genetic scoliosis. She couldn’t bear weight or walk on her legs but she could wiggle her toes. She was essentially strapped into the chair and couldn’t raise her arms higher than her chest. She had sent a group e-mail to every studio in the city and no one but me got back to her. At the time I was taking advanced teacher training and I thought it was a great opportunity to use my skills as a teacher and to serve somebody. I told her that yoga is mostly about breathing.

She lived in my neighborhood so we met at a church where I was teaching, and we tried to figure out what we could do together. Her mother came with her the first time and explained what some of her challenges were. I decided to reach out to her massage therapist and her physiotherapist, and we all worked together to figure out how we were going to serve her best in that chair. This went on for the better part of three years, and by the time she had moved on from yoga she was riding a bike that was powered by her hands—that’s how strong her arms had become.

Eventually she got a minivan and I now see her driving all over the city. It was amazing to see the transformation of a person who was relying on her mother to a person who felt more physically comfortable in her body to ride a bike, to learn to drive and to eventually move out on her own.

She was one of my best teachers. I was inspired that she wasn’t afraid to reach out to people and to try. She’s one of the people who helped inspire this yoga.

Why do you teach this population? What made you choose this specific group?

The population that I was primarily interested in was people of color because those were the people I did not see in yoga class. It inspired me to create a space for people who looked like me and to put my image out there, which was really hard for me initially. At first I used stock photos of thin white women because I was worried that nobody would come, but when I finally put myself out there in the larger body doing all kinds of different kinds of things—chair yoga, yoga at the wall, yoga with props, yoga without props—then everyone started coming because I looked like them.

So that was the catalyst serving that population…. I knew how much the yoga practice had impacted my life and had allowed me to make peace with the body I was in and to be a better person, a better global citizen, and a better parent and spouse. I wanted that for everyone.

What are you excited to do next with your students?

I’m excited to offer retreats and getaways and yoga opportunities for people that don’t feel like they belong. You see the advertisements for retreats with everybody running around in the string bikini and doing yoga on the beach. I offer retreats for full-bodied, melanin-infused yogis!

I’m excited to work with people who are either doing the work that I’m doing or students who can help feel better about themselves and understand that this practice is for them, and that spending time being angry about your body or feeling bad yourself is not a life well spent.

Dianne Bondy, E-RYT 500, has a degree in the social sciences and uses this background in her work and activism in the yoga industry, and has led to her having a worldwide following of dedicated and socially conscious students. She is a regular columnist for Elephant Journal and Do You Yoga, and has been featured in Yoga Journal magazine.
I have been thinking about Francesca quite a bit lately. Possibly because I have not seen her for a while and am simply wondering how she is doing. Francesca (not her real name) was a private student for about two years. I saw her twice a week for about an hour each session. I was part of a comprehensive health care team brought together to help her manage and recover from physical injuries and PTSD caused by a car accident. In addition to my sessions with Francesca, I was involved in many phone conversations and team meetings about her progress.

When we first met, Francesca was in a great deal of physical and emotional pain, had mobility issues and was essentially housebound. My role was to encourage her to explore and enhance the range of motion in both healthy and injured joints, encourage stability when walking and standing, and offer stress relief through breathing meditations. Before any of this could happen we had to establish simple trust between us.

The first couple of times I met with Francesca, her psychologist would observe the first six to eight minutes and then decide whether I was present at two. This was a testament to Francesca’s openness of mind and willingness to try new approaches even while living with such a high degree of discomfort.

Because the approach to yoga I teach is so interwoven with the breath cycle, it seemed logical to establish an awareness of the breath right from the beginning of our lessons. My hope was that by helping Francesca develop basic skills to intentionally call upon a restorative breath pattern, she would have a tool at her disposal for calming herself and over time, through gentle diligent practice, guide her nervous system toward a more balanced and resilient state. The problem was that she had become so unfamiliar with full, relaxed breathing that nothing seemed to give her autonomous and sustained access to it. I could talk her toward the experience, and she could maintain it if I offered ongoing imagery, visualizations or other cues. However, when left in silence, her breathing would revert to rapid and shallow.

She recognized the difference between the breathing patterns but could not sustain the natural self-soothing breath. A solution came from a very simple source. During one of our early sessions, Francesca fell asleep following a guided meditation. I thought I would give her a few minutes of much needed rest and began glancing around the room. There were many family photos, one of which was of a smiling baby. When Francesca woke I asked about the photo. This was her grandson, now 18 months old. Did she ever babysit for him? Yes, of course. Did she ever put him down for a nap or to bed at night? Yes, frequently. Did she ever sit and watch him sleep? Her body relaxed even further as she smiled broadly and talked about how peaceful and beautiful he was when he slept. We had our solution.

I asked Francesca to observe her grandson’s torso, particularly his belly while he lay sleeping, and imagine that she was mirroring the movements in his belly. I reminded her that she was a baby once, sleeping and breathing as peacefully as her grandchild. The image and memory of her sleeping grandson became Francesca’s route to an intentional, relaxed breathing pattern in her own body. Over time she was able to access her relaxation response through many different avenues and during stressful and triggering situations such as car rides and interviews with insurers. She was able to maintain breath awareness while practising gentle yoga and walking meditation that led her toward greater stability on her feet and the confidence to take walks around her own home and eventually longer walks outside. One small connection unlocked many possibilities.

Each of us has the ability to rebalance ourselves and shed the burden of stress and anxiety. The key may be physical or based in any number of intellectual gateways. Memory and imagery are powerful, as is the knowledge that we are all capable of participating intentionally and actively in our journey toward balance and health.
Right now there is a group I work with weekly. We are all exploring different approaches, and talking about how some of the tools and techniques impact us. Finding a way to connect, to be truly present with Oneself, is as challenging as it is rewarding. It's also a subtle thing, not easily taught that takes time, patience, and a willingness to experiment. I love this kind of ongoing, long term learning in a small group. In this type of session, we get time to explore and opt in or out of what is serving us and what makes things appropriately challenging. In my therapy sessions, I often get to work with individuals who have the same challenges as I do, coping with daily chronic pain that ebbs and flows in often bizarre patterns with no end. In that brief time, we get to work on the little things, the things that we can change, the things that bring us deep into ourselves.

The benefit I have received not just from teaching, but from taking my own yoga journey, is hard to describe. I know that if I hadn't gone down this path, I am certain many times over that I would be worse off, if here at all. It serves me when I wake up and am in the deepest despair, riddled with pain, scarcely able to move:
- I remember and track my breath
- I look for what I can do
- I meditate
- I drop into the Observer, and trust in the Shift
- When I am able to move, I start small
- I can take small steps, aware that with each step, it disproves the darkness, the fears that want to battle within me, telling me “this is the last time you’ll be able to do x”

When the pain subsides, I have an opportunity to participate fully in life, and savor the “good stuff.” I have time to learn, observe, and reflect on what worked and what didn’t. Having a chance to step back and reflect isn’t always available when in pain. There is a lot of caretaking that is invisible to the outside world. When an opportunity to assess, contemplate and evaluate arises, it is treasured!

I have taught yoga since 2002, and I am weary of the lack of informed consent, critical thinking, or sense of agency present in the current yoga climate. What shocks me is having students expect me to tell them what to do, to expect me to disempower them with corrective, potentially injurious adjustments, and then getting angry with me (or dismissing me) when I refuse to harm or disempower them. The hierarchical structure of many areas of education (not just in yoga) train students to expect that a teacher is there to judge them; to make a student’s behavior “right” or “wrong”; to mold a student into their own image. I reject that system. I seek to commune with students who want to appreciate the value of their own experience, and explore the freedom of walking their own path. It’s a much greater challenge to teach a student to explore their own power, and learn to evaluate their own process and abilities. However once that happens, the rewards are powerful and exponential.

Chantel Ehler: My first yoga “class” was Jane Fonda’s 20 minute Sun Salutation video with my mum as a teenager in the early 90s. In 1999 I was struck with debilitating pain that led to the loss of strength in my right arm and periodic inability to move. I used yoga as a weapon against my fear and my pain, which worked for some time, driving me to attain my certification in Kripalu (2002), Moksha (2007) and many other certifications and training including Yoga Therapy. In 2012 I began to unravel the damage I was doing to my body in yoga, and chose another kinder, gentler path. I started the Amara Vidya Yoga School in 2015.
Where do I stand in yoga?
Vinyasa, Iyengar, Hatha, Sivananda?

With all my different studies and teacher trainings, with all the different modalities of bodywork which have helped me, with my understanding of body mechanics, with my understanding of movement

Is my journey into teaching for all of us, the ‘alternative’ yogis.

My process of being a yogi is my process of understanding this body, this breath, this mind, To observe balance between the breath and the body.

That dance exchange, from breath to movement, from moment to moment.

That’s all we really have as human beings.

At 58, I believe that different styles of yoga were created for different types of people, different types of bodies. Yoga is the road. How you choose to walk it, creates opportunities for growth.

The asana must change as our intentions and understanding change and as our bodies change.

Buddha Body Yoga’s trademark line is: “where large bodies find their center.” That is my touch stone.

Michael Hayes, the proud owner of a “Buddha Body,” has more than 20 years experience teaching and has studied extensively in the following traditions: Iyengar Yoga, Ashtanga Yoga, Thai Yoga, Om Vinyasa Yoga and Yoga Anatomy. In addition, Michael has traveled regularly to Thailand and studies with master teachers. His classes benefit anyone regardless of their individual anatomy, flexibility, age, or yoga background. Michael has also practiced massage for more than 20 years as a licensed massage therapist.
I teach for Shape Up NYC, a program of New York City’s Department of Parks and Recreation. The program offers fitness classes, free-of-charge, at community centers, senior centers and libraries all over the city. Last fall, I had the pleasure of teaching Chair Yoga for Seniors in the Bronx. On a bright, crisp morning in October, I arrived to teach at the Poe Park Visitor’s Center. (It is right next door to a small cottage where Edgar Allen Poe lived in the 1840’s.) The studio is in a cozy, well-lit space within an art gallery.

I arrived to find that the room was unavailable for class because it was being painted. I was told that the class must be cancelled. Unfortunately, no one had told me or my students in advance. Since three students had already arrived, I did not want to turn them away. Although I was disappointed with the unexpected cancellation, I paused for a moment and took a deep breath. I chose to overcome my upset by being creative. Let’s take the chairs outside! Let’s hold an outdoor class! The center’s staff helped us to bring a few chairs outside on the grass. The weather was brisk and refreshing. We had a wonderful practice: seated meditation, grounding, spinal twists, moving with the breath, feeling the autumn air.

I was grateful for my students’ willingness to be flexible inside and outside of their bodies and embrace the unexpected. We shared and connected with the beauty of the outdoors and the benefits of yoga.
I’ll admit it. I’m opinionated and prone to complaining. I point fingers at others and criticize what they’re doing and not doing. It’s so much easier to make other people wrong isn’t it? Self-righteousness was mine to hide behind until I decided to transform that opinionated fire into action.

I was always struck by the lack of accessibility, diversity and inclusion in yoga studios. Change is coming and I’m thrilled to see the explosion of people out there creating yoga for all.

My focus isn’t about advocating for a particular group, but about the possibility of creating an all levels integrated class where no one is excluded. This is not a class for people with disabilities, which can perpetuate separation, but a universal access class where people of all abilities come together. I’m not saying specialized classes aren’t needed, but there are times when people want to attend a class that isn’t for anyone, but for everyone.

When sharing my thoughts about integrated yoga, a typical response is: “Who is your target group? How can you teach a class that serves everyone? Why would a mainstream yogi take a chair yoga class? You’re casting the net too wide.” Maybe there is no net. Perhaps it’s as simple as connecting with aspects of the practice that are universal and available to everyone. We won’t know unless we try.

In 2017 I founded Inclusive Yoga Community Toronto, a weekly drop-in class that welcomes everyone. It is not a class for people with disabilities; it’s a space where people of all abilities practice together. There have been people from the mainstream yoga community who have come, but the number is small. This both baffles and saddens me. I’ll receive kind words about this wonderful thing I’m doing, but I don’t want it to be separate, special, alternative or a “good deed.” It’s about sharing yoga and expanding our community.

When I started exploring Accessible Yoga, I began with these questions:

What would an all levels class that excludes no one look like? What if we didn’t automatically default to categorizing ourselves based solely on physical ability?
How could mainstream yogis benefit from a different kind of practice outside the typical asana-centric experience, connecting with practitioners who would never have access to a studio?

It’s ok to complain and be disappointed with the status quo as a starting point. We don’t need to have things worked out in our heads in order to begin. It’s probably better to not have it all planned out. We can leave some space to observe, listen, and remain open to what arises.

Let’s start with the breath and move from there.

Shana Sandler specializes in facilitating yoga classes that are welcoming to people of all abilities. In addition to being on staff at Ahimsa Yoga Toronto, she has taught at the Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre, women’s shelters, various after school programs, Community Living Toronto, and she teaches Chair Yoga for seniors. In 2017 Shana founded Inclusive Yoga Community Toronto, a weekly drop-in Accessible Yoga class. Shana is passionate about expanding yoga’s reach through classes that embrace universal access. Drawing upon the facets of yoga that can be shared by everyone, Shana creates an affirming space that brings people together in community.
There is an old riddle: the blade of a knife, no matter how sharp, cannot cut itself. The problem with looking at consciousness is that we are consciously looking. The I that looks for itself looks through the lens of the I's eye. Consciousness is the black box of experience. Consciousness is like proprietary software both produced by and sold to the end-user: our sense-of-isolated-self.

The yogi is a hacker dedicated to breaking the protected and protective code of our self-enclosed conscious life with awareness. She reverse-engineers how we went from being immersed in our livingworld to believing in our separation and its permanence. Key hacking codes include evolutionary biology, developmental psychology, neuroscience, and language theory. Evolutionary biology provides us with a working model of how everything makes itself, changes, and improves according to innate desire, rather than divine fiat. Developmental psychology allows us to empirically unfold layers of mental function so that we can clearly see what we are treating through meditative practices. Neuroscience smashes mind-body dualism. Language theory shows our self-referential circularity, illuminating the problem of black-box consciousness. And then there is meditation itself, in which all cognitive ventures come into a still focus. Meditation is like a key generator. Each moment of integration (and there are so many we haven’t been invited to recognize) spits out a key-code to unlock the product of our self-possession. Consciousness wants to make money (identity) out of its privacy. But the yogi is a self-hacking Robin Hood.

By strict cultural code, hackers share everything they learn. The discoveries of any individual must enrich the hive. And as they do, the individual expands, and her boundaries become more porous, and she craves yet more intersubjectivity. Yoga should in the end be completely open-source, where open-source is the medium of empathy, so that everyone can read the code, reflect each other’s creations, and alter it towards their novel applications.

The proprietary attitude of various schools over “yogic truth” can provide for a while the engaged heat of dialectic. But like passionate and aggressive lovers melting into each other, the proprietary schools could resolve their quarrels with a fire that illuminates, as the notion of ownership burns. Nobody has the truth. Truth is the product of sharing what seems to be true. We all inquire into yoga.

From the book, “threads of yoga” by Matthew Remski, 2012

Matthew Remski is a yoga teacher, trainer, and consultant. He writes about cult dynamics and adverse experiences in yoga culture at www.matthewremski.com. His forthcoming book is called Shadow Pose: Stories of Trauma and Healing in Modern Yoga. He is represented by Westwood Creative Artists. He lives in Toronto with his partner and their two sons.
It seems like in today’s current culture everyone is more concerned about being image perfect rather than authentic. Our pictures are not a snapshot of a slice of life, but more like a presentation of a repeated moment until the desired outcome of awesomeness is captured. We can re-take and re-take to achieve this. To even further this idea we can add a filter, crop, or even move the shot plus or minus three seconds, if needed, to catch us with our eyes open.

Unfortunately I see this condition infecting the yoga community. We constantly see pictures of these “perfect bodies” performing poses that simply baffle the masses. Upside down on one arm, one leg behind your back and two arms behind your legs. Two people standing on three toes, etc. For the newcomer this can easily translate into “Oh, I can’t do that!” or “I don’t look like that”. These perfect images can effectively block the beginner out of practicing yoga, which can be one of life’s most inclusive types of exercise.

For me, after my spinal cord injury, yoga is one of the few exercises I can still participate in. I am only able to independently move my upper body. Yoga lets me focus on the range of motion that I do have, on breathing, and on calming the mind. It has nothing to do with what position I can get into or what body composition I have for me to enjoy and feel the benefits of yoga on many different levels.

The Accessible Yoga Conference in Toronto is designed to bring this key piece of awareness to people already within the yoga community, as well as to bring this perspective to those who want to try yoga, but are intimidated by the picture perfect images that are so prevalent.

I’m very grateful to have my friend Sharon, an accessible yoga instructor who also believes in this approach. She has introduced me to this truth.

Inspired by her words, yoga is for everybody, and every BODY.
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The Accessible Yoga Training focuses on how to make the yoga practices and teachings available to everyone, regardless of their level of physical ability. We’ll focus on creating Integrated Accessible Yoga classes where all student can practice together. We’ll explore the many ways that yoga practice can be modified to suit students with disabilities, physical challenges, as well as seniors.

Want to host a training?
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To touch and be touched is not an uncomplicated matter. There is something immediately profound and tender about physical proximity to another being. Touch takes trust and elicits vulnerability. It is the vulnerability of two people connecting, of one letting the other into the private space of their own body.

In most Western yoga studios, physical adjustments from the instructor have become a taken-for-granted part of the practice. And like other customary practices, it sometimes becomes difficult to question its normalization. In other words, it can be most challenging to dispute “the way things are,” to disagree with a set of unspoken rules that govern a studio – physical space or larger community.

Some people crave the deepening or alignment that can come from the steady and knowledgeable hands of an yoga instructor, while others – perhaps those whose have survived trauma, who are socially marginalized, or who live with chronic pain – might have more mixed feelings. In reality though, everyone’s desire to be touched can change day to day, and even from moment to moment.

Many yoga communities have begun to recognize how social and political issues impact our personal practice – including discussions about how cultural appropriation, capitalism, racism, body positivity, and feminism all transform yoga spaces. As a holistic and embodied movement, the physical components of teaching asanas must also then, consider the politics of consent.

Consent has been discussed in many venues, but is mostly tied to feminist movements that challenge naturalized sexual violence and slut shaming, while also supporting survivors of assault. But discussions about consent reach far beyond sex, to thinking about agency more broadly, and our right to say “yes,” “no,” and to change our minds in any situation. From feminism we’ve learned that consent cannot be implied; consent cannot be assumed from the absence of a “no,” as it requires an active “yes” that can be revoked at any time, without shame.

Because Western yoga spaces carry the taken-for-granted notion that adjustments are desirable, yoga instructors can also face regular pressure to give them. This includes the subtle message that if they do not give expert physical assistance, they are not a “good enough” teacher. The uncertainty about how to actually get reliable consent to touch students may create additional stress.

A yoga teacher may try to ask the student out-loud during a class: “can I offer you an adjustment?” But for many reasons this question restricts an easy straightforward response. The teacher might already be so close to touching the student that saying “no” feels hard, there may be concern that saying “no” in a public space to a generous offer is rude, or the student may not believe that a “no” is really possible. And because of these and other restrictions, students might be given an unwanted adjustment, one that perhaps carries negative emotional or physical ramifications.

Crafting a culture of consent means valuing our many different identities and histories...

This is why creating a culture of consent is so essential for yoga studios. In a larger social world where consent is not seen as normal or natural and where rights to bodily autonomy is often questioned, it can feel embarrassing, challenging, or even impossible to articulate needs (or worse, if you do articulate your needs, they aren’t heard!). Many facets of Western culture often teaches us that we do not know our bodies and mind – in fact we are encouraged to disconnect. Which is, of course, antithetical to a practice of mindfulness through yoga, but still present in a yoga practice taken/up by the West.

Creating a culture of consent in a yoga studio is about much more than asking permission to touch each other. It’s about actively challenging a social world that tells us we do not know ourselves and our bodies, that renders self-care suspect, and encourages us to push ourselves past our limits. Crafting a culture of consent means valuing our many different identities and histories, with the knowledge that those identities and histories are an intimate part of “showing up” in our practice through body, breath, and movement. It’s about normalizing conversations about boundaries, self-love, and choice.

Touch is important. It is also a beautiful part of yoga – allowing someone who has committed a part of their life to the practice, to impart their knowledge through physical connection. This is why tools like consent cards, which allow students to flip between a “yes” and a “no” during their practice, are so essential. These cards are becoming more common in studios across North America, including their introduction in Toronto by Christi-an Slomka and Jamilah Maiika in May 2013. Ottawa local studios have been following suit, including Union Yoga’s upcoming launch of their cards in August 2017. Slomka shared in an interview the year of their release:

“We can’t always know what someone has been through and if touch may be a trigger (especially when it comes without consent). Rape and sexual abuse can continue unchecked in a culture that doesn’t value consent. By demonstrating that consent is important to us, I believe we may be able to empower a shift in culture. Ultimately consent helps us to cultivate a safer space.”

By including these cards, yoga instructors communicate a vital message to their students. Consent cards, if well integrated into a studio’s culture, highlight that their community prioritizes informed choice, accountability, and student’s agency regarding their own bodies. It allows everyone to develop self-awareness, empowering both teachers and students in the processes of offering and receiving adjustments. Most importantly, it is through having these conversations, with each other, that we can continue to build the types of healing communities we truly need to thrive.

I want to acknowledge Christi-an Slomka (http://www.lakesofdevotion.ca), and thank her for her contributions to my thoughts and progress towards writing this article. I’m continually moved and inspired by your yoga practice and politicized care work.

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Tobias B. D. Wiggins is a PhD candidate, consultant, and social justice advocate in Toronto, Ontario. In the department of Gender, Feminist, and Women’s Studies at York University, he teaches and writes on interdisciplinary topics relating to sexuality, gender, race and racism, dis/ability, and colonization. His dissertation research explores contemporary issues of transgender identity and mental health. You can find him at https://www.tobywiggins.com or on Twitter @wigginstobias.
I’ve been in eating disorder recovery for over 25 years, I also live with severe mental illness. My area of expertise is in yoga for mental health, I teach PTSD Yoga and work regularly with people who live with ongoing mental health concerns.

The brain is part of the body.

I have chronic illnesses that will never go away. In order to survive I have done herculean internal work with my mind that helps me live. That work, the most effective action I have ever taken and the thing that keeps me showing up day after day for my family, for my work, and for the world, was in embracing negativity. It wasn’t until I stood and faced and witnessed and held space for all the darkness, all the horrible thoughts, all the never quiet screaming voices, the one dark booming drum of a voice that calls to me daily to end my life – that I was able to feel like I was living.

I embrace the fact that there are parts of myself that I fucking hate. Especially that asshole “Rick” who sits at the back of my mental theatre and yells “kill yourself”, I hate that guy. The best way I have developed to keep living in a body that wants me to die, wasn’t through positivity. It was through finding a way to make art with shit, and sometimes art isn’t positive.

One of the mushrooms to blossom from all this shit is that I am able to use my hyper vigilance (developed through years of abuse) to gain some sensitivity into the “energy” of others, I can read a room pretty well. This makes me a sensitive yoga teacher and the feedback I’ve received from my students is that I help them have a feeling of safety.

An important element of trauma sensitivity is autonomy, which means we do not define an experience for our students, and can also be viewed as a part of ahimsa. Forcing our students to adopt any mentality or dogma in order to feel like they can participate is not allowing them to experience their own truth. I think it’s scary to allow people their full experience especially if it feels negative or “toxic” to us. It is damaging especially for mental health to deny our full experience.

I have been exploring the ideas of body neutrality, being ok with not liking certain things, and maybe feeling ok with other things. There are some of us who cannot “choose” our thoughts. Some of us are at the mercy of the waves that are our fluctuating thoughts. For some like me, who are cult survivors, we are at the mercy of our programming. Yoga is for everyBODY and it doesn’t always need to feel or be positive.
Michael Stone was my teacher for 6 years. He deepened my practice of yoga and Zen and like thousands of his other students, he taught me ways to love the parts of myself that were broken. In the year before he died, he gave me an important gift - he disclosed to me his bipolar diagnosis. I'd reached out to him around my own diagnosis – bipolar II*. He shared his heartfelt support, treatment advice and ways for me to connect to practice. He seemed surefooted in his own health... did anyone expect him to stumble? When he died, he died human, imperfect and stumbling. I think we were all painfully reminded how vulnerable we are. Michael died seeking relief. He took a street drug and accidentally overdosed. For many years he managed his health and even thrived with yoga, meditation practices and therapy. As a Buddhist and yoga teacher, he taught people how to navigate their suffering. What drove him towards his tragic fate? Will we ever know? All we know is that while practice can hold some suffering sometimes, it cannot hold all suffering all the time. We need each other so much, sometimes in ways that are not always available. Many struggling through mental health challenges will traverse vulnerable times. How can invisible suffering be welcomed to heal in relationships, communities and practice spaces? How can our sense of shame be lessened?

These days, I am acknowledging what brought me to practice in the first place – anxiety, depression, racing thoughts, deeply woven traumas and the feeling of being unsafe in my own body. I began these practices nearly 16 years ago in the offices of my cognitive behavioral therapist – an East Coast nurse, and Buddhist – who offered me her embodied compassion. Not long after I began Zen meditation and yoga practices. In yoga, I discovered the basic sanity of my body and breath, and ways to balance the thermostat of my nervous system. Empowered by this, and with the support of community, I didn’t feel so alone.

When I met Michael 6 years ago, he inspired me to become a teacher. I did my training, but it took a long time to step into the role. I didn’t know how to teach from my heart, from the place that had brought me to practice. I substituted for several years and only in the past year did I begin to hold my own classes. When Michael died, I felt I began to know who I was as a teacher. In my grief, and the community’s collective grief over his passing, I began to advocate for awareness around mental health challenges, and for the first time I felt grateful for my own traumas, wounds and challenges. I could see that they weren’t anything to feel shame for. They were gifts, intimately planted inside my body, meant for me, meant for me to care for and to love and grieve. They were braille-like texts woven into my nerves that I could touch and translate and teach from.

David Rendall began practicing yoga asana and meditation in 2003 at age 17 to ease his depression, anxiety and racing thoughts. In 2013, he completed his training at Downward Dog and has since taught at Yoga Star, Yoga Village & Mount Sinai Hospital. David teaches slowed down, gentler, student-centered versions of the traditional ashtanga-vinyasa sequences & restorative hatha postures. He holds a safe and thoughtfully-sequenced space, guiding students towards inner exploration, balance and integration. David serves as a mental health advocate through public speaking, writing, and visual art – www.frameofmind.blog. He is currently finishing his studies as a massage therapist at Kikkawa College, where he’s done clinic outreach with cerebral palsy and AIDS patients.

* I recently discovered in March of 2018, through a psychiatric reassessment, that my bipolar II diagnosis was in fact a misdiagnosis, and I currently do not have any diagnosis. My journey through the mental health system will be part of my discussion during the Accessible Yoga Conference in Toronto in June, as well as future articles.
Maximizing the effectiveness, sustainability, and impact of those working to make yoga and mindfulness equally accessible to all.

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There are approximately 100 million Americans, 1 in 5 adult Canadians and 1.5 billion people worldwide who suffer from persistent (chronic) pain (1,2). In 2017, The American Academy of Pain Medicine reported that there are more people living with chronic pain than diabetes, cancer and heart disease combined (3). The opioid crisis has resulted in an increased awareness of the need to provide effective and accessible non-pharmacological treatment options for people suffering from persistent pain and better pain care education for healthcare providers.

Can yoga be part of the solution? I think so. Over 30 million Americans practice yoga (4). More and more people are looking to yoga for overall wellness and to address their specific health concerns. A 2016 study reported that back pain relief was one of the most popular health-related reasons that people practiced yoga (4). Healthcare providers are recommending yoga to their patients for stress management and other health issues as an adjunct to treatment. Some healthcare professionals, like myself, are even integrating yoga into their treatment sessions with patients.

Since 1998, I have been integrating yoga practices and philosophy into my physiotherapy sessions. I use my skills, knowledge and training as a physiotherapist and yoga therapist to assess the person and create an individualized program guided by my clinical experience, the best current evidence and the person’s values, needs and goals. I help people who suffer from a variety of health issues, but my training and experience is focused on helping people who live with persistent pain.

I have witnessed the benefits of yoga for people in pain. Research is steadily growing to support the use of yoga as a safe and effective approach to reducing pain and improving functional outcomes for people with chronic pain and pain associated disorders (5, 6, 7).

But there’s a problem. Even though yoga can be a valuable option to help people in pain, it unfortunately isn’t an option for everyone. Yoga classes in the community are often not appropriate or accessible for people in pain for a variety of reasons; one of which is that the instructors may not have the appropriate training, and they may not understand contemporary pain science. People in pain may find that their pain flares up when they attend a yoga class, regardless of the type of class. Sometimes even gentle, restorative, chair or beginner classes can exacerbate symptoms in those who live with persistent pain. The common advice is then given: “listen to your body and stop if it hurts.” Although this may appear to be sound advice in the short term, it often isn’t effective as a long term pain self-management technique. A common response we will hear from the person in pain is, “but it always hurts, so how do I know when to stop?” The advice to “stop when it hurts” is rarely effective to help the person in pain reach their goals of being able to progress movement and improve function. We know that pain alone does not give us an accurate indication of the state of the tissue (8); so should we even be using pain alone as a guide to tell us when to stop moving? But if we push past the pain, how do we know if damage is occurring or if it will cause a flare up?

Yoga teachers and therapists can gain an understanding of the basics of pain science and experience yoga practices and movement guidelines that are accessible and adaptable for people living with persistent pain. We can use yoga to help people in pain move and live with more ease, improve function and be empowered to manage their pain effectively and safely; but it takes time, patience and a willingness and commitment to learn, on our part, to understand more about pain and to practice working with and helping people in pain.

Shelly Prosko

Shelly Prosko, PT, PYT, CPI, C-IAYT is a Physical Therapist and Professional Yoga Therapist dedicated to empowering and educating individuals to create and sustain optimal health by teaching, promoting and advocating for the integration of yoga therapy into modern healthcare. She is a respected pioneer of PhysioYoga, a combination of physical therapy and yoga therapy. Please visit www.physioyoga.ca for more info.

In 2006 life served me the unexpected experience of a cancer journey. The treatments lasted almost 3 years and changed my life completely, giving it new and unexpected direction. In the last 10 years I progressed from corporate management to full time yoga teacher and then yoga therapist, certified by the International Association of Yoga Therapist. Today I work mainly with students with cancer and non-communicative diseases (NCD).

Working with students who have cancer is especially rewarding although it can be quite challenging. There are many different cancers and typically 4 main stages of progression of these diseases. Each type of cancer and each stage has its own challenges and limitations, yet for each of these stages, yoga offers tools of relief. In a group class it is not always possible to know where in the cancer journey the person is. Therefore, I will outline a general concept of how to safely teach an asana class with clients who have a broad range of needs in attendance.

People who come to a group yoga class and do not talk to the instructor before the class, usually are in early stages of diagnosis and before any surgery. Others may be well recovered after surgery but do have some movement limitations. There are also those who didn’t have an operation at all, but the nature of their cancer may present some limitation in their movements. All these cases call for a specific and cautious approach to asanas. It also calls for abandoning extremely challenging asanas and offering modifications or alternatives to the class.

Usually, while teaching asana, we tend to put an emphasis on the body alignment – and rightly so to avoid any injuries. However asana class for students with cancer moves the emphasis from body alignment to the student’s awareness of his/her limitations. Therefore, we focus on three major elements, which are reflected by the instructions:

1. Sensing the body’s limits in asana and backing off while holding onto the essence of the pose.
2. Slow and deep breathing to help the body relax into the posture rather than force the body into the posture.
3. Focusing on self-awareness of the body with attention to specific muscles and ligaments. Awareness is also directed to any emotions or thoughts that might be arising.

When these three elements are included in instructions, the asana class becomes more of “being in asana” than “doing asana.” Often, if conducted skillfully, such an asana class feels like a meditation in slow movement. This is purposeful in that it helps to provide safe body engagement, and it allows the student to release accumulated tension. It also builds self-awareness in clients, who typically are disconnected from their body. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it gives power back to clients to do what is comfortable and not necessarily what the teacher instructs them to do.

On our part we, as yoga teachers, have to be extremely attentive to students needs and recognize a person with any specific physical limitations. It is our responsibility then to discreetly find out the reason for the limitation and to offer appropriate modifications. Once you demonstrate such sensitivity and understanding – you will find that you just gained a loyal student!

Lee Majewski, MA, DYEd, C-IAYT is the founding director of Yoga For Health Institute in Toronto, Canada. She also is a Senior Yoga Therapist at Kaivalyadhama Yoga Institute, the world’s oldest yoga institute located in Lonavla, India. Her own journey through cancer brought home the value of ancient yogic methods and techniques to facilitate self-empowerment and healing in her life. For more information on Beyond Cancer or Chronic Solution retreats you may contact Lee directly at info@yogaforhealth.institute
In my late teens, I hit a yoga plateau. It seemed no matter how hard I worked on certain poses, they simply weren’t accessible to me. I felt like a failure. I’d been told over and over if you practice a pose every day for a year, you’d be able to accomplish it. Yet I still struggled with many poses.

Why did no one tell me that the design of my body could be causing the limitations? Or that if I did push to accomplish a pose, I risked injury? Finally, why did my Yoga Teacher Training not educate me about proportions, compression vs. tension and orientation?

Let’s start with why our teachers are not educating us about the body’s natural limitations? I suspect it’s because many yoga teachers have “traditional yogini bodies.” Their body type is long, slender and hyper-flexible. My experience is that when something comes easy, you don’t know what you don’t know. It may be hard for someone who has pretzel knees and hips to understand the difficulty of sitting in lotus position if their student doesn’t have the same physiological make up.

I was blown away the first time I watched “Anatomy for Yoga with Paul Grilley.” I had no idea how drastically my short arms affected my asanas. I was shocked to learn that my ankle joints created limitations. I was also surprised to see that not everyone could touch their chin to their sternum, or raise their arms behind their head. Now I understand why so many students don’t have a straight line in downward dog and/or struggle in shoulder stand and plough. What hit me the most was that as a teacher I was potentially putting my students in risk of injury.

Which leads us to the problem of idolizing the hyper-flexible and the lack of education about “overstretching.” I’ve noticed in the last 5-10 years many of my teachers have had hip and knee replacements. They are now struggling with their yoga practice because they feel that they were let down by yoga. I don’t believe that yoga was the cause. It was extreme physical versions of yoga that lead to their issues. If you study ahimsa (the principle of nonviolence to all living things), how can you ask students to push through pain and discomfort to accomplish a pose?

Joints are meant to be stable. Yes, we can stretch and stretch and eventually they will stretch to the point that the joint will become loose and sloppy. Loose joints make many more advanced poses accessible. The question is, are you willing to give up comfort in walking in your senior years for the chance to say that you could once put your foot behind your head?

Yoga is a lineage-based system. Teachers teach what they were taught. If they didn’t learn it, how can they teach it? Practice Svadhyaya (self-study.) Explore. Listen to and honor your students and your own experience. Learn how the body creates natural limits, and when you should and shouldn’t push past those limits. These tools are available to all teachers and students of yoga. They make yoga truly accessible.

Tracey Eccleston, IAYT, E-RYT 500, IPT, is owner & educational director of Ageless Arts Yoga offering a 200 hour Yoga Teacher Training and many workshops. She is the creator two Chair Yoga Teacher Trainings – “The Foundations of Chair Yoga” & Chair Yoga Therapeutics; Balance & Support.” After completing her 200 & 500-hour yoga teacher training, Tracey saw the need to make yoga even more accessible. She studied and was co-director of Lakshmi Voelker Chair Yoga.
WHAT IF BEGINNER MIND = ANXIOUS MIND?
Linda Varnam

I love to travel. I often include a yoga class in my itinerary. I find the experience of going to a new teacher, hearing a different perspective, and allowing myself to be the student, a wonderful opportunity to learn for my own teaching. Being in a new space, listening to a new voice, not knowing what will happen next, and noticing how that feels, I am reminded of how much energy and attention it can take to attend a class.

I remember many years ago pacing the pavement outside a yoga studio and willing myself to go in, to overcome my anxiety and fear and take that step. Fortunately, I made it inside and to the class. My life has changed since. My journey practicing and teaching revolves around the issues of mental health, both personally and professionally. I am often caused to consider: How can we as yoga professionals hold space for anyone struggling with mental illness? How can we create the opportunity for safe entry and continued support to explore the practices of yoga as tools for healing and recovery? From the perspective of a beginner mind and an anxious mind, I have found these few simple considerations to make a huge difference.

“When anxious about a new environment it is reassuring to be welcomed...”

Invite
Use language that invites but is also clear. For example, an invitation like “Make yourself comfortable,” can often feel vague and create confusion. Be clear. Try “You may wish to use a blanket for warmth; if so, please feel free to take one from the shelf.”

Choice
Empower people with clear choices. If the choices are too vague, this may lead an anxious person to feel overwhelmed and even more anxious and unsure of what to do.

Welcome
This may feel obvious, but I am surprised it doesn’t always happen. When anxious about a new environment it is reassuring to be welcomed and perhaps receive a short description of the lay out. “Great to see you. Props are here, washroom is here...”

Simple
Less is more. An anxious mind cannot follow complicated jargon and instructions. Save Sanskrit terms and detailed anatomy for more experienced students. Repetition is helpful, not boring. Repetition is also reassuring. Using these simple guidelines can support students with anxiety, depression or a history of trauma. They can leave the class with a sense of ease and clarity. These simple steps can foster a desire to return to class with a better understanding of how the tools of yoga can support them in their journey.

Linda Varnam is a Certified Yoga Therapist and Qigong Instructor. Her passion is empowering students to include the valuable wisdom of yoga and qigong as powerful tools for daily living. Her extensive experience includes developing a seven week breathing program while a member of a clinical team in a holistic mental health program servicing international clientele.
“Feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression” (bell hooks). Feminism asks us to re-think and re-set our power relations and our privilege from all our intersecting positions in society. Feminism is not only for women, but as a social movement, it has the power, says hooks, to transform all of our lives in a meaningful way through intersectional community involvement. We need a feminist ethics of care in yoga not because there are a lot of women in the North American yoga world, but because through yoga, many people have unwittingly replicated conditions of social inequality through expensive classes and gear, body idealism, and multi-level cultural insensitivity. Through an ethos of a feminist ethics of care, we can create a truly accessible practice that fosters a connection to social action and authentic yoga. Using Patañjali’s Yoga Sutras as a philosophical framework we can develop ethical guidelines that incorporate feminist principles that help shift the power relationships in our society. To get an idea of how we integrate feminist care with yoga ethics, we need to explore Patañjali’s teachings on the yamas or his ethical precepts. For this article, we’ll briefly focus on ahimsa (non-violence), aparigraha (non-greed), satya (truth), and asteya (non-stealing).

Much has been written on the yogic social ethical practices known as the yamas. As yoga practitioners developing a feminist ethics of care founded on inclusivity and accessibility, it is important that we work toward sharing rather than clinging to power, which would otherwise perpetuate violence. We can expand the ways in which we understand concepts such as ahimsa and aparigraha into notions of how we can care for one another and ourselves. The yama “satya,” or honesty, relates to a personally authentic approach to living and being in the world (Stone). Satya and ahimsa are “inherently connected” (Gonzales and Eckstrom). Satya is more than telling the truth to others; it is connected to how we focus our awareness on the honesty of our yoga practice, our desires, and how we moderate these desires. For example, we can consider satya through the authenticity of how we are in our bodies when we practice yoga.

To demonstrate how we might integrate the Yoga Sūtras with a feminist ethics of care, I’ll share an example of “Lara.” Since 2013, Lara has been teaching a weekly chair yoga class to a committed group of women in their 60s and 70s. The class fee is $9, which pays for the rental of the space; Lara leads the class without payment. Lara keeps yoga accessible to people in her community both on a physical and monetary level. She puts the benefits of the practice first, rather than turn yoga into a commercial project driven by financial gain. While not everyone can afford to teach for no pay, Lara’s example is worth considering. Lara has created an inclusive community of practitioners who support each other spiritually, emotionally, and physically.
A STRAND OF PEARLS THREADING THROUGH MY DAYS: YOGA AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Carol Horton

The first time I experienced a visceral understanding of yoga as a spiritual practice, I was standing knee-deep in the late summer water of Walden Pond — that very same place where Thoreau once contemplated the lessons of nature, the nature of America, and the wisdom of the Bhagavad-Gita back in the early 19th century.

I was irritable. I’d moved to the Boston area for the year with my husband and two small children because he’d received an academic fellowship at MIT. This was, of course, good. We were fortunate. Yet I felt disgruntled, cranky, and dissatisfied.

Work-wise, I’d been able to take a paid research project with me to complete in absentia. But to do so, I’d forsaken my spartan, but nonetheless professional downtown office for telecommuting from a lovely, but nonetheless lonely suburban café.

My head was spinning with self-absorbed anxieties. My heart felt tightly bound up with packing tape. Why had I left academia? Why had I left Chicago? Why this; why that? I knew my obsessing was a waste. But I couldn’t stop.

Here I was, lucky enough to be able to take my two little boys to the legendary Walden Pond on a summer afternoon. The disjunction between the wonder of the setting and the angst inside me was simultaneously painful and absurd.

I knew this. But knowing it did no good. And then, in a fleeting instant of a moment, I made a shift. I let go of my internal turmoil and looked up at the sky. The sun was starting to set, in multiple tones of red, yellow, orange, gold. The clouds had just parted enough to see it clearly. I felt my feet on the earth, legs in the water, heart open to the air, eyes toward the sky. Everything that had been so preoccupying simply dropped away. And the universe opened to me in a moment.

The feeling was timeless. But it was also newly nuanced. Because rather than being an isolated instance of grace, it felt embedded in a growing chain of similar, if less dramatic experiences. And this feeling of familiarity, I felt certain, came from the growing momentum of my yoga practice.

And the words came to me like a vision. My yoga practice was like a strand of pearls threading through my days. In my mind’s eye, I saw the slow, ongoing process through which each small moment of internal stillness and spaciousness I’d ever experienced on my mat connected to the next. It was like an ever-growing beaded necklace. And as it grew longer, each pearl deepened into a more lustrous beauty, creating a new layer of experience with each day of practice.

And it came to me that day that all my issues about work and family, identity and ambition, professionalism and feminism, were really not the point. There was a mystery to my being that yoga was starting to bring to the surface. It broke through to my conscious awareness that day at Walden Pond.

— Adapted from Carol Horton, Yoga PhD: Integrating the Life of the Mind & the Wisdom of the Body, Chapter 5 (Kleio Books, 2012)

Carol Horton, Ph.D., is a writer, educator, and activist working at the intersection of mindful yoga, social science, and social justice. She is vice-president of the Yoga Service Council and a co-founder of Chicago’s Socially Engaged Yoga Network. Carol has written four books and numerous articles about yoga, and serves as an associate editor for Asian Medicine: Tradition and Modernity, and peer reviewer for Race and Yoga.
Accessible Yoga gave me the freedom I needed to start doing multi-modality work after 30 years of study in classical yoga, the qigong-based world of T’ai Chi Chih, and teaching singing. In all these disciplines, the connection of mind-body is paramount.

I like starting everything from its roots. How does the foot come down and become rooted to the floor? What are the lines of energy in the body work we do with Accessible Yoga? How do we maintain alignment? How does the breath and voice fit into the world of mind-body for health? As a professional singer until the late 80's I had also become very interested in contemporary classical music, where improvisation and technique come together in raw and fun ways that intrigued me.

Freedom, equality, and a sense of justice is also strong for me. I am devoted to the idea of working with diversity and bringing people together to get a project to work that invites freedom to grow. I love to take public transportation at the end of the day, or to walk everywhere in my hiking boots, even to meetings!

As we know, every circle may start small but eventually grows larger. In my job of running a program in a big city, I am committed to working with diversity and advocating for seniors. My program serves those aged 55 to 102 of all cultural, ethnic, and diverse backgrounds. I believe it is the complexity of living styles that make life so amazing, that we cannot run away from this complexity.

Although Accessible Yoga is developing a world-wide community, a bigger circle, my work is to figure out how to do something like that on a smaller scale. I enjoy intellectually developing the connection between various modalities, but the purpose of my work is not only developing a program that meets the needs of seniors, but one that has at its essence the joy of life-long learning. Students of all ages can laugh, sing, and use their voices to empower movement and feel the energy of the breath.

Energy can be brought up or down as we work in the classroom. Music has as its essence an energy that rises and falls, has beginnings and endings, and middle parts where little is happening; so does work in the classroom. Everything is unfolding in the “Development” section in a symphony. There are sparks of energy ready to take flight in the final “Allegro”. Keeping awake and aware, with unexpected moments of surprise is part of what I love to do. I also use the knowledge I gained crossing a lake in the dark to climb a mountain. I like to have my students feel the energy come in from the farthest star in the universe through their fingertips, as the imagination brings energy through the body. To help others more fully express their innermost joy in learning, we do not need to fear new things and different ways of thinking.

Life is so like a symphony. There are exciting parts, and there are slower parts. There is the “Allegro” and the “Lento”; and then the “Finale.” I would like to see a kinder world, and I keep trying to envision it every day in the “Development” of my own long life. I draw a larger circle that invites others to see the possibilities; even as I move slowly in the dark at times, wondering where it is all going, or as I draw in a deeper 3 part breath coming home on the bus.

Judy Hubbell (Mirabai) presently teaches Accessible Yoga, T’ai Chi Chih, Breath and Vocal Resonance to seniors through her Mind Body and Body Dynamics I classes in the Excelsior & Mission Neighborhoods of SF. She serves to build community throughout the City of San Francisco and as Chair CCSF’s Older Adults Department. Judy sees her work as that of helping others develop the connection between the breath, body, and mind by bridging various modalities.
Where do you teach? Who is the population?

I teach adaptive yoga at my in-home private studio and at rehab centers, hospitals, and private physiotherapy centers. I also teach at the Heart and Stroke Foundation, Youth Without Limits – Cerebral Palsy Association BC, BC Wheelchair Sports Association, and Spinal Cord Injury BC. I also run Adaptive Yoga Teacher Training programs. I enjoy teaching in my home studio most of all because I have a lift and the equipment that is needed to make yoga truly accessible for all bodies.

Can you share an experience that stands out?

Since becoming disabled, the experience of teaching and practicing yoga has been exaggerated, meaning that when I first was injured I had a very different sense of my body and who I was in my body, and as a result I needed the spiritual, non-physical tools of yoga in order to help me deal with those feelings and distortions. Once I had established myself physically in a more grounded and familiar place and I could teach to ‘the physical,’ I began to notice that teaching yoga to populations who had some form of trauma or physical challenge was quite different than teaching a group of ambulatory people. The concept of ‘body-betrayal’ challenge was quite different than teaching a group of ambulatory people.

No matter who we are or what our physical incarnation is, we need to learn how to love, care, and most importantly, manage our physical bodies in our experience of being physical. This is crucial for both populations. Consequently, I changed the way I teach to my adaptive groups so that I can address the potential fragmentation between the body, mind and spirit in direct ways, thereby moving toward a more conscious and intentional acceptance. This slower, more conscious intentional approach has made a huge difference with the ambulatory population in coming to terms with their own body/mind disconnect.

Does your special-needs teaching affect how you teach “mainstream yoga”?

I find that teaching the special-needs population informs my teaching of the mainstream population more than the other way around. I find that concepts such as patience, acceptance, surrender and the ability to see oneself not just as a ‘physical’ being are more readily accepted and understood by many who have had the experience of adversity or trauma. I am continually humbled and inspired by those people who have to deal with a lot yet are still earnest and diligent in their desire to stay positive and attuned to their physical, mental and spiritual being.

What are you excited to do next with your students?

Lately, I have been working on new projects that combine yoga and coaching in order to facilitate the change agent in places where it is needed. One is a concept called “Yoga-fit4disability,” which uses both cardio and yoga to help clients achieve better health and well-being. I am also very excited about the “Recovery Deck” project I created to implement yoga in hospital settings as best practices for newly-injured spinal cord, brain, stroke, and cancer patients. Finally, I am always excited about my Adaptive Yoga Training program and the students who are learning how to become adaptive yoga teachers.

Mary-Jo Fetterly is a mother of two, a Yoga Teacher/Therapist and President of Trinity Yoga Inc. She began her formal training in Iyengar yoga in the mid 80’s, while raising children and studying psychology. She opened “Shanti Yoga Works”, the first yoga studio to be established in Nelson, BC. During the first operational years of the Shanti Yoga studio, Mary-Jo developed a 200-hour yoga teacher training program, and formed the company “Trinity Yoga”, which has trained hundreds of teachers since its inception.
I remember when I was young, I would look up at the stars in amazement and wonder what the hell was going on. Somehow the infinite space in the sky opened up space in my mind for big questions like “Who am I?” “What am I doing here?” and “What’s the purpose of my life?” When I watched my older siblings reading chapter books, I thought, “Maybe those books have the answers to all my questions?” I was very disappointed when I finally started to read those books and realized they were all about human drama.

As I got older, I bought into a story about my life, which focused on finding a partner, settling down, making money, etc. It was a nice story, but it didn’t include those big questions, which hung over me like stars, always there, but imperceptible in the light of day. I was obviously looking for some clear spiritual guidance, and I didn’t find that until I started practicing yoga more deeply in my twenties. As I began studying yoga philosophy and the teachings of Swami Satchidananda, I was excited to learn that the process of asking these questions is a key element of yoga practice, called Jnana Yoga, or the path of wisdom and self-inquiry.

“...I know that my big questions are the door to answers that rest in my own heart...”

According to these texts, the key teaching of yoga is that each of us is an aspect of the divine, and that we all have that universal consciousness within us. It’s not something we have to get or achieve—it’s our most essential self. To touch that place, we practice yoga, which is mostly about working with the mind and making peace with the inner voices of anxiety, greed, and fear. The yoga practices are specifically designed to help calm the mind. And all those crazy yoga poses are really about how you feel inside!

In the Bhagavad Gita, the big questions are offered in the context of a story about a battle. This is an analogy for an inner spiritual struggle. Krishna, who is the divine incarnate, counsels the protagonist, Arjuna, a great warrior prince. Arjuna is about to go on a battle, and before he does, Krishna takes him aside and asks him, “Who am I?” “What is my purpose?” Arjuna is confused and not knowing where to turn.

Arjuna’s surrender represents an openness to his own intuition and spiritual growth, which is a model for our own transformation.

Arjuna’s big questions lead him to the realization that he doesn’t understand the nature of reality. He’s confused and needs help—just like me! In fact, that feeling of confusion is something I’m learning to appreciate in my own practice. Sometimes I try to meditate and just end up in tears. I used to think that I was too messy, but now I see that this is the most powerful kind of practice. I cherish those moments when I can cry out for help to my own inner Krishna. I know that my big questions are the door to answers that rest in my own heart, and it’s a door that can only be opened by admitting that my mind doesn’t know the answers. After Arjuna collapses, Krishna smiles and begins to teach him about yoga—how to live in the world in a peaceful way.

An Accessible Jnana Yoga Practice:
Find a very comfortable position seated in a chair, seated on the ground, or lying down, and check your posture. Close the eyes or keep them open enough to read these questions. Relax the body. Take a few breaths, focusing on long, slow exhalations.

Who am I?
Am I my body?
Am I my mind?
Am I my thoughts?
Where are these thoughts coming from?
Who is listening to the thoughts?
Who am I?

After a few minutes, deepen the breath and then slowly open the eyes.

This is an excerpt from Jivana’s upcoming “Accessible Yoga” book, to be published by Shambhala Publications in 2019. Originally published on the Yoga for Healthy Aging Blog.

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