

# Awake & Ready!

Newsletter of the Ananda Yoga® Teachers Association  
Vol. 9 No. 2 • Summer 2004

## PERSPECTIVE

# Inversions and Cardiovascular Problems

Have you ever been suspicious of the contraindication, “Don’t do an inversion if you have a cardiovascular problem”? After all, how dangerous can matsyasana or padahasthasana—or balasana, for goodness’ sake—really be?

This is a safe and conservative guideline for new teachers, but the more we learn about anatomy and physiology, the more we see when this can be *too* conservative. In addition, as medical perspectives evolve, so does the notion of “conservative.”

So I’d like to address the issue of how—and to what extent—cardiovascular problems *really* contraindicate inverted poses. I want to thank Suzanne Ilgun, RN, an Ananda Village resident who helped research and write this article. Suzanne’s experience includes intensive care, coronary care, and trauma care. Now she does pre-op, recovery, and sedation for minor procedures in an outpatient center in Grass Valley—and she is doing a great job as an AYT staff member, teaching the infamous “7 Bodily Systems in 3 Hours” Anatomy & Physiology survey class.

To augment her own medical expertise and experience, Suzanne interviewed a number of physicians for their perspectives on inversions and cardiovascular issues. She also measured blood pressure for a number of volunteers as they were doing various postures. The results follow. (Note: this wasn’t an in-depth study, so until more research is done, we must go with physicians’ best judgment, supplemented by our own common sense.)

### What Are We Talking about Here?

“Cardiovascular problems” (CP’s) means one or more of the following: hardened arteries, heart disease, history of stroke or heart attack, unmedicated high blood pressure, aneurysm, etc. (Most physicians regard “medicated high blood pressure” as, for all practical purposes, “normal blood pressure.” More on this later.)



Gyandev McCord  
Director

“Inverted poses” are asanas in which the head is lower than the heart. Alternatively, one could ally this definition more closely with Ananda Yoga’s energy-to-the-brain perspective by calling them “poses in which some part of the spine is inverted.” In the context of asana practice, these two definitions are virtually equivalent.

In her research, Suzanne found that, although “Don’t do an inversion if you have a CP” is certainly a safe guideline, there are many inverted poses and CP’s for which it is *overly* conservative. Let’s explore why.

### How Blood Pressure Rises

CP’s contraindicate any pose that makes the heart work “too hard” and thus increases blood pressure “too much.” There are a number of factors that explain why inverted poses can do this (although as I’ll explain, some of these factors should not be of concern in Ananda Yoga practice):

- *Head below heart:* Blood “floods the brain” in inversions, right?—and that would be a problem for CP’s, especially stroke victims. Well, certainly blood can travel to the head more easily when the head is below the heart, for there is no gravitational resistance. Also, venous blood tends to remain in the head longer than when upright, due to the lack of gravitational assistance. However, the body has a very good system for regulating the amount of blood in the brain at any given time in any given position, so not much additional blood enters the head during inversions. Yes, there is increased blood *pressure* in the head, but the physicians that Suzanne interviewed felt that, so long as the student does not strain or hold the breath, and the room is not too hot, then the mere

*(continues on page 2)*

### IN THIS ISSUE

Inversions and Cardiovascular Problems, by Gyandev McCord .....	1
AYTA Member News .....	2
Ananda Yoga Comes to a Women’s Prison, An Interview with Nikki Weihe .....	3
A Dream Coming True, by Maitri Jones .....	7
Be ® Now .....	9
Inspirations: Leaving Hansa Mandir after Meditation, by Stuart Moody .....	10
AYTA Contacts .....	12
Upcoming Level 2 Programs .....	12

## Inversions and Cardiovascular Problems (continued from page 1)

- fact that the head is below the heart will not increase blood pressure enough to cause concern—unless, of course, the position is held for too long a time.
- *Pumping against gravity:* Even when you are upside down, the heart still has to pump blood to the legs and feet. If the legs are way up in the air, the heart has to pump it a long distance against the force of gravity (whereas normally gravity is *helping* to bring blood to the legs). To accomplish this, the heart has to pump harder (which raises blood pressure)—not only because of the distance, but because the heart must pump against the weight of all the blood that is already in the arteries. (Think of a tall cylinder, filled with water. The water pressure at the bottom of the cylinder would be quite high, so a pump would have to exert more force to pump water that's at the bottom of the cylinder up to the top, because it has to push up all the rest of the water as well.)
  - *Increased intrathoracic pressure:* When you are upside down, the abdominal organs (stomach, intestines, liver, bladder, etc.)—plus the remnants of your most recent meal—press on the diaphragm. That's why it's harder to inhale while inverted: the diaphragm has to lift all that weight against the force of gravity. When you're exhaling, that weight presses the diaphragm down—a nice stretch for the diaphragm, but it compresses the contents of your thorax (in effect, the contents of the rib cage); in particular, it presses on the heart. In order to continue doing its job in the face of that added pressure, the heart must therefore pump harder, which raises blood pressure.
  - *Strain:* Blood pressure rises with any appreciable muscular effort, but in this article we are distinguishing between “effort” and “strain,” the latter meaning that effort has

escalated into a tense struggle to achieve and/or hold a pose (inversion or not). Strain stimulates the sympathetic (“fight or flight”) nervous system, which automatically raises blood pressure to handle the “emergency.”

- *Holding the breath:* Students often hold the breath—usually unconsciously—in challenging asanas (not just inversions). This “gripping” is strain that, as noted above, raises blood pressure. (Note: There's no problem when the breath stops of its own accord, as in deep meditation, because the body's metabolic processes also stop, so they don't require the intake of oxygen as fuel or the expulsion of carbon dioxide as waste. However, at other times—such as when expending effort to hold an asana—the body still needs to receive oxygen and expel carbon dioxide. Holding the breath at these times causes carbon dioxide buildup, too much of which can literally cause body cells to burst and die. Not good.)
- *Heat:* An overly warm environment—as in “hot yoga”—also increases cardiovascular strain, raising blood pressure. It's not the heat itself that stresses the cardiovascular system; rather, it's the resulting electrolyte imbalance. Here's how it works: The more we perspire, the more we deplete the body's electrolytes and hydration; the added component of exercise causes even more depletion. Many of the body's electrolytes (such as sodium, calcium, and potassium) are directly involved in the contraction and relaxation of muscles. When we upset the balance among these electrolytes, muscles must work harder to do their jobs. This increased exertion in turn makes the cardiovascular system—in particular, the heart—work harder.

### So What's the Problem?

Okay, in all these cases the heart works harder and blood pressure rises. Why is that a problem? After all, our heart works harder when we exercise, and that's supposed to be beneficial. Besides, almost all asanas require some effort, which means that almost all asanas raise blood pressure.

Well, it's *not* a problem for a healthy circulatory system; in fact, it helps build a stronger cardiovascular system. But if the heart—or more likely, the arteries—is/are compromised (as is true for those with CP's), it's like putting a stronger flow of water into a weak-walled, closed-off garden hose: the increased pressure can cause the hose to burst. And you really don't want one of your “blood hoses” to burst.

Of course, excessive heat has no place in Ananda Yoga, nor does strain or holding the breath during asanas. There is physical effort, but we ask students to practice relaxation in the midst of effort (rather than struggling in the pose until they collapse), and to breathe smoothly and regularly. If we see a student straining or holding the breath, we can ask him/her to exit the pose, or we can offer an asana variation. (Yes, it can be difficult to spot strain and holding of breath—and besides, some people may think they're relatively relaxed in the midst of effort, when in fact they're straining. Well, we teachers just have to do the best we can.)

That eliminates all but two of the above factors—intrathoracic pressure and the heart having to pump against gravity—that make inversions a concern for CP's. The

(continues on page 11)

### AYTA MEMBER NEWS

#### AYSutra Is Staying Home

After considerable research, we decided not to move AYSutra to a web-based “chat” service. It would have been too complicated for everyone. Instead, AYSutra will remain an e-mail forum. Starting September 1, archives of past discussions will gradually become available in the AYTA Member section of [www.AnandaYoga.org](http://www.AnandaYoga.org).

#### Please Keep Us Posted

Please keep us on your “hot list” of who to inform about any changes in your e-mail or snail mail address. We don't want to lose you! See contact info on page 12.

#### Believe It or Not ...

Thanks to some ambitious and serviceful souls, we have all the content for the next issue of *Awake & Ready!*. However, we'll need more for future issues, so if you teach a unique population, have something to share about practice and teaching of Ananda Yoga, or simply have a good story to tell, please contact Gyandev (see page 12).

# Ananda Yoga Comes to a Women's Prison

*An Interview with Nikki Weihe*

**N**ikki has been teaching Ananda Yoga in Boise, Idaho at the South Boise Women's Correction Center for nearly two years. Here is the story of her adventure.

## **A&R: How did you start teaching in a prison?**

Nikki: After AYT in August 2002, it came to me in meditation that I needed to teach free yoga in the prison system. I heard it loud and clear. So I made some calls, and a friend whose brother and sister-in-law are both judges in Idaho connected me with a person who worked for the Department of Corrections, who helped me reach the volunteer coordinator, who was excited about the idea of me bringing yoga to the Idaho Department of Corrections. Within a month I was scheduled for prison volunteer training.

They decided to put the yoga program under the Religious Services category. Administration didn't want aerobic activity, but were interested in the spirituality of yoga. I consider it an honor that the work is identified as spiritual, not just exercise. I went to the volunteer training with Christians, Catholics, and Buddhists.

Next, I met with the chaplain at the medium security section of the prison. The chaplain and administrators decided I should get my "prison legs" at the women's facility next door. I was a little disappointed because I thought I was going to start right then, and hadn't even considered teaching women inmates.

I said "OK, I'll go with that, but you need to call them right now, because I'm here and I'm ready." The call was made and the response was, "Send her right over." The women's facility staff asked, "You want to teach here?" "It's my karma yoga," I said. "I want to come here and do sadhana, my spiritual practice, with your women." They asked, "When can you start?" I checked my appointment book and answered, "November 1."

Now every Friday between 7:30 and 9:00, twenty women practice sadhana. It's been a rousing success. There is always a waiting list with upward of twenty women. Last month there were forty. Unfortunately, because of prison scheduling, we cannot get a full two hours of practice time. Consequently, meditation suffers. The students really need the physical portion of practice.

However, I also lead an Ananda meditation group that meets every other Thursday morning. The meditation group also practices Energization Exercises. Some of the same people do both groups, but many of the regular yoga students are in other classes on Thursday mornings. Some women in the meditation group have quit sadhana practice; the full practice, with the asanas, was too much for them.

## **Describe the classroom and your very first class.**

We meet in the recreation room, which is in the center of the facility. Staff and I decided that twenty students could fit into the space. A signup list was started and on November 1st, the room was packed. All the students brought their blanket and wore comfortable clothes.

Off to each side of the practice room are two tiers. Windows go all the way around, so people can see in. There is a lot of noise. When prison announcements are made, we hear them through the loud speakers. The distraction is part of the practice, their karma and mine.

Our practice space is like being in a fish bowl. The first time we practiced, the women faced the windows to the halls. Other prisoners and staff can and do stare in, creating constant distractions. After that first night we changed positions, so the students look out toward the mountains, and I look out and see the passersby.

That first night—and nearly every other Friday night since then—we talked about the importance of developing our own sadhana. I explained about Paramhansa Yogananda and Energization Exercises, chanting, and preparing the mind and body for meditation. I touched on what Ananda means to me, how Ananda changed my life, how much

I love God, and explained that bringing sadhana to them in this way is karma yoga. I told them I was happy to be there. The students sat and listened. We had an abbreviated sadhana: the entire set of Energization Exercises, a few asanas, and a few minutes of sitting. That first night we chanted *Aum Namah Shivaya*, a cappella and a little off key. It was good.

This summer we are being allowed to practice outside. This is a big privilege for the women in both the meditation group and in sadhana group. There's nothing like double-breathing fresh air! Believe me, these people comprehend their good fortune in having this outdoor experience, and they put a high value on it. It is unlike anything else they are allowed to do in prison!

## **Do the students catch on to the Energization Exercises?**

Yes, Energization is the joy of our practice. Once in a while, if we're short on time, we leave out the EE's, go on with the other practices and have a longer meditation. Sometimes I just go with the flow and change the practice a bit. It doesn't happen often though, as Energization has proved to be an incredible tool for these women. They learn to direct their mind and energy in ways they've never known before, and it seems to really inspire confidence in them.

Turnover happens, and new people come. Each week a

*(continues on page 4)*



*Nikki also gives private yoga instruction in clients' homes. Her teaching business is called Blue Flower Yoga.*

## Ananda Yoga Comes to a Women's Prison

(continued from page 3)

few veteran members leave and an equal number of new students replace them. Students leave because they've been discharged, or moved, or perhaps for other reasons. There is a challenge when teaching EE's to new students. Continuing students are anxious to get into their practice. Time is short—only 90 minutes—and continuing students want the entire practice. The new students catch on pretty quickly by watching the others.

The women learn that EE's are a pranayama technique designed by Master, and the importance of including pranayama in a solid raja yoga practice.

### **Tell us about the ages and physical condition of the students.**

Most of the women are in their twenties. Some are in their mid-forties, a few over fifty. Some have arthritis. One was an amputee. Her arm was amputated at the elbow. She was undaunted and tried everything. She just did it! During the circle of joy she pushed through, around, up and back. While in table position, when reaching out opposite arm and leg, she balanced on her stump. She did downward dog with one arm! She was an inspiration for others, especially those who moan and groan during asana.

For the most part, the women are strong. Many of the women are quite flexible. I had one student who was able to do a beautiful natarajasana. She'd never done it before, but I had a feeling she could pull it off and she did—with ease. It brought tears to my eyes. This is someone whose only exposure to asana has been in prison. She was exceptional, but many of the women show incredible perseverance!

### **Is there anything different about teaching yoga to felons?**

These women have an innocence about them that is hard to put your finger on. They made poor decisions, like all of us, but they've ended up in this place. You can see they want something else and are searching for a path, just like anybody. Their eyes sparkle, and I can see God there. I don't think about them as felons. I love them, that spark of God in them.

I remind these women that we create our own reality, that they are all powerful people. I tell them "Look at what you've created. You did it all yourself. It's amazing. Look at everything you've done to create this world for yourself. You can do that again but in a more positive way. Your karma—the actions you've taken, the thoughts you've had, have brought you here. Not everybody can live like this. Not everybody is strong enough

inside to withstand this life that you've created for yourself. It's a real call to spirit. You have to go through and endure this to get to the next stage. Not everybody can go to prison. You are powerful spiritual beings."

When we roll onto our right side, from savasana, I lead a meditation from *Metaphysical Meditations*. I let my hand open the book and see where it goes. The passage may be about love, or about how they can meditate more deeply. I read that thought to them and sometimes go on with what inspires me. Those positive spiritual messages are in their heads when we sit up and chant. Sometimes they ask me to chant to them while they sit, focused on the ajna chakra. Sanskrit is very healing.

After chanting, we meditate, sometimes as little as ten minutes, but we try to do more. Every class ends with Divine Mother's Healing Prayer. It is a magnificent way to end sadhana. Most of the

women at SBWCC have at least one child from whom they are separated, and the healing prayer has a unique way of bringing peace to troubled hearts.

### **Does some prison official watch the sadhana?**

They can see us through the window from the control center, but it's not like they're actually watching the class all the time. There is a lot of activity for the corrections officers to watch. Inmates are walking around, using phones and asking questions. They have to ask permission for everything!

Then there's *pill call*: tier one and tier two pill call. Some women have to leave class to get prescribed medications—antidepressants and such. It's loud in there. The loudspeaker blasts out, "TIER ONE PILL CALL." We just keep going.

There is also a large ice machine in the room. By the end of the day, the ice has been used up, so the clatter is really loud as the machine works overtime, dumping ice. KAH CHUM! KAH CHUM! The noise becomes part of the practice. The students tell me they block it out. I say: "Well, that's good. If you can learn to meditate in this environment, you can meditate anywhere!"

One noise really angered them a while back. The class was in savasana, which to them is very sacred time. They love it. This is their three to four minutes of alone time. One of the other inmates outside the practice room walked by

and rapped really hard on the window. It was an unusually disruptive sound, and it jolted the class. They launched huge complaints. There was a big investigation. I had seen who did it. She came in the next week and apologized to the class.



Nikki onsite and dressed for her karma yoga offering

*In yoga we learn how to focus our minds to a certain thing, and then mentally see it through. Learning this has helped show me how to set a goal mentally, and achieve it physically.*

— Rachel, inmate

***Do you teach them to meditate, or do you simply have quiet time or visualization?***

We cover Hong-Sau, but we go into it more deeply in the meditation group. During sadhana, meditation is mostly quiet time; we watch the breath. I don't want to talk too much because they have so little quiet time. I affirm with them, "Bones, muscles, movement, I surrender now . . .," and that's it! I say a silent prayer of thanks for being able to serve in this way. Seeing those women in savasana is beautiful.

The inmates sleep on metal beds with thin mattresses. I hear about their beds so often that I call the stories, "The Legend of the Metal Bed." Friday night, after practice, is always their best night of sleep on these beds. The peacefulness carries into their evening and weekend.

They often tell me that, for this one night a week, they don't feel incarcerated. The affirmation "I am free! I am free!" has even more meaning than we on the outside can imagine.

***It's fascinating that you teach this more as a sadhana—with some instruction, but primarily experiential.***

Yeah, the name of the class is "Yoga: A Spiritual Path for Women Incarcerated." Often, we take time in the beginning to talk about yoga philosophy. Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, yamas, niyamas, ashtanga yoga, the complete science of Raja Yoga.

I tell them, "Let me warn you: when you get out and go to a yoga class, it's not going to be like this class." I tell them about books that can help them continue the practice, and we talk about Ananda. I encourage them to look at the *Yoga in Action* program at The Expanding Light.

Most people don't realize the spiritual opportunities that are available in this country. A simple trip to a spiritual retreat can send a seeker on a path never before imagined! I'm certain many Ananda certified teachers can attest to that fact!

***What is the inmates' favorite part of practice?***

There is a lot of joy in Energization Exercises. You know, I feel Master move through me when I stand up and say "Let's energize!" The inmates pop up, even when they're tired. By the time we get to four-part arm recharging and affirm "I'm positive, energetic, enthusiastic," the response is the awe inspiring! We raise the roof with enthusiasm!

Sometimes students ask, "Can we have a really hard yoga postures class today?" They love asana, too. A challenging

asana series makes savasana so much better. It's easier to detach from the mind when it's been subdued through pranayama and asana.

I don't like to cut down Energization to a shorter set. It's a complete system and a key pranayama technique.

Energization, asana, savasana, chanting, and meditation are our complete practice.

Given the response to the class, I think most of the women enjoy it all!

***For how long are these women incarcerated?***

At least 16 weeks, up to many months if they're "timers." SBWCC is not a long-term correctional facility; it's a "rider program," where judges send the women (instead of sending them to the penitentiary) to keep closer track of them.

The inmates go through anger management courses and other programs like Alcoholics Anonymous. If they do the inner work and

don't get into any trouble, then they will be released. If they don't do the work, or are troublemakers, then they can go to the state penitentiary. Some people from the state penitentiary come to this correctional facility on their way out, or for good behavior.

The facility is super-serious. Every week many new people arrive for incarceration. The inmates wear prison uniforms, and they are not allowed to work outside the facility. SBWCC is a place for incarcerated women to buckle down and learn skills for a better life on "the outs" [i.e., outside the prison].

***Do you ever have troublemakers in your classes?***

In the beginning there were some real clowns, but they stuck with it and made a big change. Most students—in and out of prison—have a few weeks of giggling, laughing, and talking as they work out their nervousness. Then they settle into inward practice.

It's fun to watch new students settle down. When new students arrive, I'm thinking, "You're like that now, but in a few weeks you won't be." Other students ask, "Was I like that in the beginning?!" I nod my head, and they say, "That's really annoying." One of the prior students wrote a letter saying that through this practice she now can control where her mind goes. That's really big.

You don't know what effect your actions may have on others. A while back a company sent a case of soft soap samples to hand out to students. Not

*When I am in class, I can forget about all of my trouble and learn to center myself. Being centered has helped me in my day-to-day life. I take what I learn in yoga class and try to use it in my life. I have learned self-discipline, and how to concentrate on taking my mind where I want it to go.*

— *Melissa, inmate*



*This year, everyone is enjoying a treat: outdoor sadhana!*

*(continues on page 6)*

## Ananda Yoga Comes to a Women's Prison (continued from page 5)

thinking much about this, I gave the soap packets to prison staff to be handed out to inmates—all the inmates, not just the yoga students. The reaction was unbelievable: they gave me a standing ovation in yoga class. Inmates receive a little packet of soft soap and you've made their life so much better.

On a different scale of course, the same sort of reaction happens with sadhana. They take the tools to inner peace and self-realization, and drink it in. They are thirsty, super thirsty.

**Do you have on going contact with the prison administration, or just when they perceive a problem?**

Only when they see a problem, and that isn't often. I see the same correctional officers each week and they tell me that they see the program as "a valuable inmate management tool." I've invited upper administration to observe or participate in the class, but no one has taken me up on it ... yet.

I don't want to give up our Friday night class. Sometimes I fear the administration could take practice away. I realize that if it does end, it will be God's will, and I can accept that. Perhaps I'm there for just one person in particular, and when they've come and gone the work will end. No thing lasts forever in this world.

**Do you have to dress any particular way?**

They never said anything about that, but when I teach at the prison I wear Indian clothes: a kurta [long, loose Indian shirt] and pajama pants. I don't wear the usual yoga clothes. I'm very modest in appearance and manner.

I think it helps establish an atmosphere of no competition. I don't want people comparing themselves to me and looking at my body. I think yoga teachers in general might want to think about this aspect of teaching.

Even when I taught at the YMCA, I wore a kurta. I'm also a private teacher. I go to people's homes and I maintain a modest dress. It's different in this culture to dress this way. This is how I foster the proper attitude, the *bhav* we learned in AYT. The teacher sets the tone and energy for the class. I want to come at it in a way that encourages inward projection. I don't want other people to compare themselves to me, overdo it, and get hurt.

We're simply facilitators, and we can set a good example for others simply by how we dress. It's key to my practice, and it's going to be key when I beginning training other teachers to do this work: simplify the dress, no matter where you teach.

*Meditation helps ease my stress, and tension, calms me throughout my entire body, soul, and mind. I'm so relaxed, yet fulfilled, after attending Nikki's meditation class. I even took along another inmate one day, and she keeps going to them since.*

— Yvette, inmate

**It sounds like you plan to train others to teach in prisons.**

I have a vision to develop the program and share it with other yoga teachers. Perhaps a teaching kit with chakra charts, big posters of chants and mantras, and pictures of saints and gurus. I want a systematized approach, including a manual that can be given to the women as they enter the program. The manual can be a resource for them when they are no longer in prison.

I want to take the program around the country and around the world to women in prison. Not only for women incarcerated, but as a tool for other yoga teachers who want a good, prison-based karma yoga practice. Others may have a calling similar to mine. Perhaps they see this as an opportunity to give back to the community and to serve God in a really important way. God is present, God's in jail, and the Light wants out. What key can we give these people to help them out of the system? We are all imprisoned, but the inmates are in double prison.

I want to turn Blue Flower Yoga into the "Blue Flower Yoga Foundation." It will be a not-for-profit, which would enable us to receive donations and grants to fund travel to train other yoga teachers to work in correctional facilities.

Some people have asked if anything has been set up for inmates when they get out of prison. Continued monitoring, or attempts to control outcomes, is not what karma yoga is about. Detaching from the outcome is key. In other words, the teacher gives and the student takes what they can from the practice. The teacher's job is not to monitor—at least that is not what my program is about.

The mission of the Blue Flower Yoga Foundation will be twofold. It will be about giving inmates tools for self-realization. Some will use them. Some may catch only a glimpse of who they truly are and what they can achieve in this world. It will also be a vehicle for yoga teachers to experience and share selfless service.

*Not only has it spiritually opened my mind, but also my body, which has never happened before. To be able to come up to the point of relaxation and understanding that I have is truly wonderful.*

— Nicole, inmate

**Do you think a man could teach in a women's prison, or a women in a men's prison?**

It would be allowed. I was trained to work with male offenders, but I think administration was wise in directing me to work with female inmates.

There are rapists and child molesters in the men's medium security prison. I thought working with this population was part of my service, the opportunity for ultimate forgiveness. I had my bouts with creepy perverts when I was younger, and I thought this would be one of the ways that I could forgive them. When I heard the call to this service, that's what I thought was happening.

(continues on page 9)

# A Dream Coming True

by Maitri Jones

**T**wenty one years ago, when I first decided to go to nursing school, I thought I would get training in an occupation that would be service-oriented, and then I would find a way to integrate spiritual teachings into my work. Over the years I have worked in many traditional settings: hospital, health department, home health, and hospice. I have attempted to use yoga—including meditation, affirmation, attunement, right attitude, and prayer—as a tool in my personal practice as I try to be a channel of healing and blessing to patients and coworkers. Rarely, however, was there an occasion when I felt permission to openly share yogic teachings with patients.

Times have changed. Now medical providers often recognize yoga and meditation as self-care approaches to many common health issues. Since taking Ananda Yoga Teacher Training in Spring 2003, I have found an opportunity to be able to offer the patients whom I serve something more than shots and pills for their health care needs.



*In addition to her classes at Sierra Family Medical Clinic, Maitri regularly leads sadhanas at The Expanding Light.*

practical interventions to help change harmful behaviors and ways of thinking. She asks patients to practice making these changes at home. The “homework” can be as simple as “Go out in the fresh air and take a walk for 30 minutes

each day,” or “Read an inspirational book for 15 minutes a day.” On the other hand, it also can be as difficult as exploring alternative behaviors to replace a habit of smoking, or setting boundaries in an abusive relationship.

As part of her individual counseling, Jennifer also talks to people about relaxation techniques and, when appropriate, even leads them through a progressive relaxation exercise. Many patients greatly appreciate this service, as now they don’t have to go to a separate facility for counseling. They also have the assurance of continuity in their care because all the providers (medical and behavioral) are in close communication with each other regarding the treatment plan. It has been a wonderful way to offer a more holistic approach to health issues.

## Research on Rural Depression

For the last three years I have worked as a Registered Nurse at Sierra Family Medical Clinic (SFMC), which is near Ananda Village. This clinic was founded by Ananda resident, Dr. Peter Van Houten, M.D., who later gave the clinic to the larger community surrounding Ananda Village. Dr. Van Houten is still the medical director, but the clinic is now a nonprofit rural health care clinic governed by a board of directors made up of volunteers from the surrounding area.

Since rates of depression are high in rural areas, SFMC has been included in a three-year research project funded by The University of California at Davis to study depression and the effects of integrating behavioral health care services into rural health care clinics in Northern California. Grant money from this study has enabled the clinic to hire a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, Jennifer, who specializes in behavioral modification and cognitive therapy.

As part of the study, we screen all our patients for depression and anxiety via a mental status questionnaire. Often the screening shows that the patient could benefit from counseling to help him or her deal with problems such as depression and anxiety, or the stress of living with a chronic disease. In such cases our medical providers introduce the patient to Jennifer and set up visits with her.

During her counseling sessions, Jennifer recommends

## Ananda Yoga to the Rescue

Recently Jennifer and I began working together by offering these same patients a weekly “relaxation training” group. Simply bringing together people who have similar difficulties can be therapeutic in that the group provides support and social interaction. Beyond that, however, we talk about the benefits of affirmation, visualization, and the body/mind connection that makes stretching, body awareness, and posture useful in achieving stress reduction and relaxation.

How do these benefits come about? Often people with chronic diseases become committed to negative thought patterns that contribute to a self-perpetuating cycle of stress and anxiety. For example, they may feel a sense of sadness and despair about losing their former healthy state. Or they may feel helplessness and dependence on doctors to provide effective medications for relief of discomfort. Or they may experience anxiety as they worry about the disease’s progression and how they will cope with decreased ability to function. These negative emotions usually lead to muscular tension and increased pain, as well as mental tension and stress.

Using affirmations and visualizations with gentle yoga stretches is a powerful combination to counteract both physical and mental aspects of the problem. We can help the mind be more uplifted and receptive by assuming a

*(continues on page 8)*

## A Dream Coming True (continued from page 7)

posture that lengthens the spine, as is natural when we feel good. Gently stretching muscles sends a message of relaxation and well-being to the brain, creating the perfect opportunity to practice interjecting a positive perspective into depressed thought habits through affirmation and visualization. In this way, if we can experience a feeling of well-being, harmony, and peace—even briefly—it gives us something to come back to and expand upon. Just a moment spent recognizing our innate inner joy can be the foundation for building a renewed sense of strength and ability to find happiness despite a host of outer difficulties. Ananda Yoga provides all these elements, so it fits beautifully in this setting as a tool for behavior modification and relaxation training.



## The Group Process

At the beginning of our group time, I take each patient's blood pressure and pulse, and have them rate their anxiety or mood on a scale of 1 to 10 for comparison afterward. Then I lead a routine of gentle yoga postures with affirmations, incorporating breathing exercises into the poses. We end with a visualization during deep relaxation. I usually go through all the body parts, giving special emphasis to any parts with which I am aware that someone has difficulty. I have them visualize conscious healing light filling the body on the inhalation; on the exhalation, they visualize tension, fear, disease, and pain melting into the light. We visualize the internal organs radiating with light, serving the body in the best possible way. We see the heart pumping, not just blood, but healing light to nourish every cell with light. We flood the brain with light, dissolving all worries about the future, all regrets from the past, so we can fully experience living this moment in perfect light and joy. Last week I focused the visualization on peace and calmness, seeing the body floating on a lake of peace, being gently caressed and bathed in the soothing waters of peace. Then I read "On Spreading Ripples of Peace" from Paramhansa Yogananda's *Metaphysical Meditations*.

By the end of these practices, we usually see an elevation in a patient's mood as well as a decrease in blood pressure and pulse readings. Interestingly, one participant who usually has very low blood pressure either stays the same or has a mild elevation in her reading, which probably represents a normalization of pressure for her.

To end our time together, I ask everyone to choose an affirmation that we used during the class. I write each patient's choice on a note card so he or she can take it home and practice during the week. Because of this special setting in which I teach, I have to modify some of the asana affirmations to take out any religious reference. For ex-

ample, in *tadasana* I use, "I stand ready to make positive changes in my life."

One of the favorites has been an affirmation that needs no modification, the one for *savasana*: "Bones, muscles, movement, I surrender now. Anxiety, elation and depression, churning thoughts, all these I give into the hands of peace." In fact, when one patient who had Lyme Disease came to the clinic a few days later for a painful injection, she asked me to repeat this affirmation with her while she waited for the anesthetic that we give prior to the shot to take effect. She found it helpful in dealing with the uncomfortable procedure.

One day, the group included a woman who reported a long list of medical problems to me, and then admitted that the problem currently bothering her most was headaches. So I changed my planned routine and brought out the yoga therapy book that

Gyandev and Dr. Van Houten recently wrote: *Yoga Therapy for Headache Relief*. Because the patient stated that she also had a history of a bulging lumbar disc, we modified the routine recommended in the book to keep her back in a neutral position. She was delighted to be offered something besides medications to help deal with her pain. In fact, after the second week she left telling everyone how much better she felt. Since this patient usually found it difficult to report *anything* positive about her life, and often resisted the recommended interventions, exclaiming that she felt better after our group session was a definitely a step forward.

## Addressing Chronic Back Pain

Recently we have started offering individualized yoga sessions for patients with chronic back pain. Studies have shown that treating depression in pain patients can help alleviate not only their mental suffering, but their physical suffering as well. After studying the book, *Back Care Basics*—and after taking the Level 2 AYT classes *Adapting Asanas for Physical Limitations* and *Therapeutic Yoga*—I developed a list of postures that are safe and helpful for this patient population. We start very cautiously, with careful attention to individual response, and I modify the list to fit the limitations of specific back problems. Something as subtle as pelvic tilts or cat/cow stretch can be beneficial in not only stretching and strengthening muscles that support the low back, but also enhancing awareness of posture and alignment.

Ananda Yoga affirmations and visualizations provide these patients with something more than what they can get from traditional physical therapy. The mental and spiritual aspects of a yogic approach add a valuable dimension that goes beyond mechanical exercises. People in pain often focus on their discomfort to the point where all they can see around them is unhappiness. When we do supine ham-

string stretches with a strap, I use it as a modification of Janushirasana so we affirm “Left and right and all around, life’s harmonies are mine.” This gives me the opportunity to mention how, when we approach life with positive expectations, we are more likely to find those positive qualities reflected back to us.

Of course, it takes an extra effort of will power to find joy or harmony in spite of an uncomfortable body. So if it is appropriate, we do a simple version of Virabhadrasana to strengthen the muscles of the legs, buttocks, and abdomen that support the spine. The affirmation for this pose speaks of power and inner strength with joy. For my particular setting, I have modified it to, “I joyfully manifest the power of my inner strength.”

Patients have responded enthusiastically to these private sessions. Now my challenge is to inspire these folks to practice the exercises at home and create new habits in the way they sit, stand, and go about their activities of daily living. A woman who works as a bus driver told me that, after our yoga session, she went home feeling great and had the best night’s sleep she’d experienced in years—and she woke up in significantly less pain. Since she complained that her pain was worse in the mornings, we had suggested changing her sleep position to give her back better support. One week after our class, however, she admitted to suffering with her usual back pain again. Her difficulty (as with most people) has been in finding time to keep practicing the exercises at home.

I am currently working on making the list of home exercises short enough to do in just ten minutes a day. Also, I want to provide more ideas how to incorporate stretching and affirmation into daily activities. For the bus driver, I recommended doing pelvic tilts as she is sitting at a bus stop. She worried that passengers might think she is “squirming in her seat,” so I am waiting to hear back from her how this worked. These classes are still a work in progress, but I find that the more I share these teachings with others, the more I am helping myself to deepen my own application of yogic principles to every aspect of my life.

## Expanding the Dream

I’ve always believed that traditional medicine has its place in helping people deal with physical disease, but that attending to one’s consciousness, as in the practice of yoga, is even more basic to finding true health in body, mind, and spirit. So using Ananda Yoga to help patients cope with stress, depression, and anxiety—and now back problems, too—in a family practice clinic is providing, at long last, the integration of two worlds that I hoped for when I first began my journey as a nurse.

Teaching opportunities like this one will surely become more available as time passes and we see the dawning of a more enlightened medical community. ♦

## Ananda Yoga Comes to a Women’s Prison (continued from page 6)

There weren’t going to be guards in the room with me because they’re shorthanded. I was going to be in the chapel and people would be within earshot, but I’m a woman and just walking onto “the yard” made heads turn. In my vision I see male teachers going to male institutions.

Recently, male plumbers were called to make repairs at the women’s facility. There were many comments like “Oh my God, have you *seeeeen* the plumbers?!” So from my experience, the same-sex teacher/student setup is probably more appropriate.

I don’t want to be too general. For instance, in minimum security where inmates aren’t incarcerated very long, seeing a woman wouldn’t be a big deal, but when inmates are incarcerated for a long time, it could take awhile for them to see the opposite sex instructor as a minister or teacher.

Of course, having an opposite sex teacher could be part of the practice. I’m all for that, if there are people around to protect the teacher. You know, I went into teaching in this environment fearless, with the idea that this is my calling and God isn’t going to send me anyplace that’s going to be awful ... and He didn’t! There are angels everywhere!

### *How could someone else do this, if interested?*

A certified yoga teacher could call their state’s Department of Corrections and ask for the volunteer coordinator, or for the coordinator of religious services. Tell them you’re interested in teaching a yoga class. If they already have a yoga program, ask what you can do to be a part of it. You know, “Where there’s a will, there’s a way.” And as Master taught “The greater the will, the greater the flow of energy.”

I am totally willing and able to help others implement a similar yoga program in their city or state. It’s not as difficult or daunting as it may seem. Women are being incarcerated at alarming rates in this country, and the states are scrambling to find programs to help these people. Given the lack of funding most states are experiencing at this time—particularly in the prison systems—the opportunity to donate time and energy is real and it can be a godsend for many.

*(continues on page 10)*

## Be ® Now

It’s official: “Ananda Yoga” is now a registered trademark in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. This doesn’t have many practical implications for you, but we thought you’d like to know.

Now, instead of writing “Ananda Yoga™,” as we’ve been doing for a number of years, all of us should write:

## Ananda Yoga®

If you find yourself using the term “Ananda Yoga” a number of times in something you’re writing, you don’t need to use the “®” every time; just the first time is enough.

If you have any questions, please contact Gyandev.

**Ananda Yoga Comes to a Women’s Prison**  
*(continued from page 9)*

At the facility where I work, they wanted a “spiritual yoga class,” which happened to be exactly what I had in mind. There are many religious activities going on in prisons, but not everyone is Christian or Buddhist, and Raja yoga, with its inclusive, non-denominational qualities, is easily and openly embraced by people of all religious backgrounds—including seekers and people with little spiritual training.

**Any last thoughts for other Ananda Yoga teachers?**

Working in women’s prisons is my calling. What’s yours? You have one, and when you tune in, you can hear it. Meditate often and deeply, and you will discover your life’s work.

The practice of karma yoga is about total non-judging, love, compassion, acceptance and, in my case, sisterhood — there are so many elements to this practice. Whatever you can do to be closer to God in your practice, do it! One of those things is undoubtedly karma yoga. Perhaps for you, selfless service is teaching art to kids at school. Maybe your practice has nothing to do with teaching asanas. What really rocks your boat? Find a way to give your gifts to other people.

*I’ve found that I am able to focus and concentrate better when I do yoga. I also have a new sense of energy within me after the Energization Exercises. I find I am more aware of the different parts of my body and always come away from class relaxed and more aware of myself and how I feel.*

— Carol, inmate

For many people in our culture, yoga is exclusive and expensive. A lot of the inmates come from underprivileged circumstances. Many of them have wanted to learn yoga, some have read yoga books. You can tell they’ve tried it but haven’t had instruction. It’s a beautiful thing to take asana

practice to people in our culture who are left out of these practices because of economics.

Anything we can do to bring true yogic practices to everyday people makes the world a better place.

Everyone deserves “peace within, peace without.” Everyone deserves what yoga practice brings. More than likely the less fortunate

are the ones who will take the practice to heart.

The new age, Dwapara Yuga, is the time for those of us who have the tools for self-realization, and who have a fire that burns inside, to share those tools with all those that we can reach. When a person hears a calling, they have a responsibility to act on their intuition. Be a vehicle through which God’s love can flow to others. Do what you can do to find the people who need you. Somewhere out there is someone wanting exactly what you have to give, and when you find each other, it’s incredible. ♦

*Our thanks to Gerry Swan for transcribing this interview. If you have questions, you can e-mail Nikki at [aumgirl1122@yahoo.com](mailto:aumgirl1122@yahoo.com)*

**INSPIRATIONS**

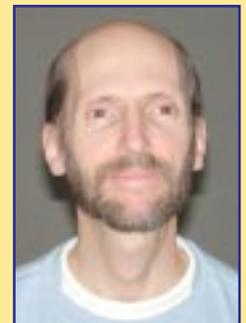
*Leaving Hansa Mandir after Meditation*



How beautiful the morning,  
 Gray sky cleaning everything below.  
 Red clay soil shining,  
 Long pine needles shining,  
 Cedars, madrones, oaks, grasses—  
 All bright beneath the clouds.

Everywhere the laws of nature recite:  
 Breathe, begin, rejoice, grow.  
 Drink the rains of knowing,  
 Pour down the streams of desire.  
 Dive to the roots of awakening,  
 Swim in the ocean of love.

All trees reach to the clouds.  
 All hearts reach to heaven.



*by Stuart Moody  
 AYT Oct. 2003*

## Inversions and Cardiovascular Problems (continued from page 2)

question is, when does an inversion involve *enough* of either or both of these factors to contraindicate the pose?

### Sorting Out the Inverted Poses

As you might expect, there isn't universal agreement on an answer. (In fact, one physician told Suzanne, "Any yoga posture is just fine for CP's." Suzanne and I discretely discarded that data point.) But here's what we *can* say:

- The more inverted the legs and/or torso, the harder the heart must work to pump against gravity, and hence the higher the blood pressure.
- The more inverted the torso, the greater the intrathoracic pressure, and hence the higher the blood pressure.

Now let's apply this to specific postures (see the "Inversion Checklist" sidebar at right for a summary of what follows).

#### Almost No Inversion at All

The above discussion makes it clear that gentle poses in which the torso and legs are barely inverted, if at all—e.g., *balasana* (child) and *matsyasana* (fish)—are safe for CP's.

#### Torso Inverted / Legs Inverted

At the other extreme, we can rule out asanas with both torso and legs inverted: e.g., *sarvangasana* (shoulderstand), *sirshasana* (headstand), and *viparita karani* (simple inverted pose). The problems due to both gravity and intrathoracic pressure are simply too pronounced.

#### Little or No Inversion of Torso / Legs Inverted

There aren't many of these, but *legs-up-the-wall* pose is an example. Technically, it's not an inversion at all, since no part of the spine is inverted, but it's worth discussing. Yes, the heart has to work harder to bring blood to the feet in this pose than when standing or sitting, but not all that much harder because the torso is not inverted. Also, there's no thoracic compression. So the pose is fine for CP's. (If you put a cushion under the pelvis, or if you want to be extra-careful, place a cushion under the student's head to avoid raising blood pressure in the head.)

Another example is full *salabhasana* (full locust), in which the legs and pelvis—and perhaps even the abdomen—are off the floor. This pose almost always entails significant strain and/or irregular breathing, so it's definitely not for students with CP's.

#### Torso Fully Inverted / Legs Not Inverted

These include *halasana* (plow), *karnapirasana* (ear-closing pose), and *ardha sirshasana* (half headstand: legs horizontal and feet on wall). Because the complete inversion of the torso causes significant intrathoracic pressure, persons with CP's should avoid these poses.

#### Torso Somewhat Inverted, Little or No Inversion of Legs

This diverse group of poses includes *padahastasana* (jackknife), *sasamgasana* (hare), *adho mukha shvanasana* (downward-facing dog), and *setu bandhasana* (bridge). For

## Inversion Checklist

Below are guidelines for a variety of asanas for students with cardiovascular problems. You can extrapolate from these to other poses.

### OK Generally

- *Balasana* (child pose)
- *Legs-up-the-wall* pose—it's best to put a cushion under the head

### OK If ...

The following asanas are fine if the student does not strain or hold the breath, and the room is not too hot.

- *Adho mukha shvanasana* (downward-facing dog pose)—strain is likely, so hold only briefly
- *Matsyasana* (fish pose)
- *Padahastasana* (jackknife pose)
- *Purvotanasana* (front-stretching pose)—strain is likely in full pose, so choose a gentle variation
- *Salabhasana* (locust pose)—hold only briefly, and avoid full locust pose
- *Sasamgasana* (hare pose)
- *Setu bandhasana* (bridge pose)
- *Supta vajrasana* (supine firm pose)

### Contraindicated

- *Chakrasana* (wheel pose)—near certainty of strain contraindicates the pose
- *Halasana* (plow pose)
- *Karnapirasana* (ear-closing pose)
- *Sarvangasana* (shoulderstand)
- *Sirshasana* (headstand)
- *Viparita karani* (simple inverted pose)

many of these poses, intrathoracic pressure is mild, and gravity is a minor factor with respect to blood pressure, so the bodily positions are fine for students with CP's.

However, even though the bodily *positions* may be okay, holding some of those positions is so likely to entail strain that the poses should be modified—or omitted altogether—for those with CP's. For example, use only an easy version of *purvotanasana*. Hold *adho mukha shvanasana* only briefly. And since *chakrasana* (wheel) almost always involves strain and/or irregular breathing, you can cross it off your list for students with CP's.

### Common Sense: Don't Leave Home without It

Even though all this suggests that many inversions are okay for persons with CP's, remember: these are only the

(continues on page 12)

**AYTA CONTACTS**

Editor: Gyandev McCord  
530-478-7518 ext. 7081  
gyandev@expandinglight.org

Membership: Lisa Powers  
530-478-7518 ext. 7087  
lisa@expandinglight.org

The Expanding Light  
14618 Tyler Foote Road  
Nevada City, CA 95959  
800-346-5350, 530-478-7518  
530-478-7519 (fax)  
info@expandinglight.org  
www.expandinglight.org

**LEVEL 2 NEWS****Upcoming Level 2 Programs**

All the programs below count toward Level 2 AYT certification. AYTA Members now receive a **15% discount** on all Level 2 programs, which more than pays for your membership. And if you need financial aid, please don't hesitate to apply for it. (Call or e-mail The Expanding Light for an application.)

In the calendar below, "★" indicates a required Level 2 program. For details, please see The Expanding Light's program guide or visit [www.expandinglight.org](http://www.expandinglight.org). You should receive the next program guide in September.

10/6–10 ..... Kriya Yoga Preparation  
10/10–17 ... ★Meditation Teacher Trng.  
10/17–30 ... ★AYTT Assistantship  
10/31–11/5 . Deeper into Spirit of Yoga

1/9–22 ..... ★AYTT Assistantship  
3/27–4/3 ... ★Meditation Teacher Trng.  
4/3–16 ..... ★AYTT Assistantship  
5/26–6/5 ... Yoga of the Heart—  
Cardiac Teacher Training

**Inversions and Cardiovascular Problems**

(continued from page 11)

opinions of physicians (who, despite their enthusiasm for yoga, may not know much about it). Pending more research, we teachers still need to use common sense and be conservative.

For example, students with CP's should not hold significantly inverted positions (e.g., *sasamgasana*) for a long time, say, two minutes. Also, students who have had a cardiovascular "injury" (heart attack, stroke, etc.) within the past six months should not do such an inversion at all; in fact, they should be in a special class for people with these conditions, not a general yoga class.

Then there's the question of whether medicated high blood pressure contraindicates inversions. Many physicians feel that inversions are okay when blood pressure is "under control." However, the effect of blood pressure pills wears off after some hours (that's why people have to keep taking them), and blood pressure rises once again. So the question is, at the specific time that you lead an inversion in your class, is your student's blood pressure normal, or is it too high for safety? Neither you nor your student is likely to know, so be cautious: watch for strain, holding the breath, redness of face, and other signs of discomfort.

By the way, there are CP's for which "safe" inversions (e.g., *setu bandhasana*) are contraindicated even if there is no strain or holding of breath. Fortunately, people with those conditions are unlikely to be in your class. They're quite sick, and if by chance one such person did arrive, even a quick glance would tell you that s/he doesn't belong in your class.



*Suzanne researching downward dog.*

**Creating a "Game Plan"**

To summarize, what if a person with CP's (on medications or not) wants to take your Ananda Yoga class? Is it okay? Yes—*usually*—provided you:

- Are conservative as you get to know this student and his/her capabilities

- Make sure that the student avoids holding the breath and/or straining in all poses (a teacher can often guess when a student won't be able to do a pose without strain)
- Have the student avoid certain poses and modify others, as noted above
- Don't superheat your classroom
- Stay very observant at all times
- Use your common sense

When in doubt, have a CP-student play it extra-safe in his or her first class, then contact the student's physician. It's not always easy to get a response, but one approach is to send the physician a medical clearance form, which describes what you ask of students and asks whether this would be okay for this patient. The physician doesn't have to write much; s/he just needs to check a box ("Yes, it's okay," or "No, it's not okay.") and sign his or her name. Do also provide space for the physician to indicate specific things that your student should not do. You can download a sample medical clearance form at the AYTA Members section of [www.AnandaYoga.org](http://www.AnandaYoga.org). You will need to alter it to describe your own situation and your own classes.

Suzanne and I are still researching a few CP issues, and we'll fill you in if we learn something worth sharing. Meanwhile, I hope that all this information helps you relax—and lowers your blood pressure—about teaching inversions to students with CP's.

It sure did for me. ♦