



# Awake & Ready!

Newsletter of the Ananda Yoga™ Teachers Association  
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## From the Director

### Straightening Out the Bends

I've been receiving some interesting questions about forward and backward bends, and I thought that this issue would be an appropriate place to share some answers with everyone.

#### To Round or Not to Round?

#### Question #1: Is it physically safe to round the lumbar spine in a forward bend?

Just for fun, I surveyed a number of experienced yoga teachers, physical therapists, chiropractors and an osteopath. Their responses agreed with what we've been teaching, i.e., it's okay to round the spine in the surrender phase, provided:

- The spine is *healthy* to begin with. Injured spines (discs, nerves, etc.) need special care.
- There is *no discomfort*. (Discomfort usually suggests a problem.)
- Rounding comes as a result of *relaxation*, not of straining to go farther into the bend. Straining can put excessive pressure on the anterior portions of the discs.
- The practitioner maintains a *constant, conscious awareness* of what is happening with the spine. Without that awareness, the spine is vulnerable.



Gyandev McCord

In fact, some of these experts emphasized that it's unwise never to round the spine; just like any other muscles in the body, the back muscles need to be stretched to stay healthy!

I've known plenty of students—and teachers—who habitually strain in a forward bend. (Some of them have back problems now, by the way.) It's the "don't wimp out" approach that's so popular in Hatha Yoga today. Some teachers actually sit on a student's back in paschimotanasana, trying to force a deeper bend. Of course we want to go deeper into the pose over time, but it's risky to push on vertebrae; stay with pressing forward and up on a student's sacrum to help roll the pelvis forward.

#### Sequencing Forward and Backward Bends

#### Question #2: Which should come first: forward bends or backward bends? Or are they all mixed together?

Earlier this year, Diksha and I had an amusing experience with this question in our two-week intensive in Assisi, Italy. (Blanche is now "Diksha"; it means "spiritual initiation.") One

student—who assured the class that she's been to *many* ashrams in India—insisted that all the forward bends should be completed before doing any backward bends. On the next day another student, after assuring the class that she had received in-depth training in *numerous* Hatha styles, insisted that all the backward bends should come before any forward bends.

Ah, the joy of conflicting yoga traditions!

In *The Art and Science of Raja Yoga (the 14 Steps)*, Swami Kriyananda explains the Ananda Yoga™ approach: "One should follow a bend in one direction with a bend in the opposite direction, so as always to return the body to a state of balance, even as the teaching of yoga is that one must neutralize the opposites of duality, and become identified with the one central Reality, the Advaitic, or non-dual Spirit which rests forever at the eye of the storm of creation."

This "balance" is energetic as well as physical. All creation is comprised of pairs of opposites: light/dark, up/down, in/out, hot/cold, female/male, young/old, etc.—and of course, forward/backward. Each of us has an innate awareness that these opposites represent a movement away from center, and our very nature cries out for that "eye of the storm"—and for the symmetry of movement that helps us find it. Thus in Ananda Yoga™ we don't do all the bends in one direction, then all the bends in the opposite direction. Rather, we generally follow a bend in one direction with a bend in the opposite direction, which naturally draws our awareness to what lies between: the spine. *That is balance.*

But don't just *assume* you—or your students—are in balance after a complementary bend. Ask yourself, "Have I really found balance?" If not, then do a pose that will help you return to the neutral state, to the spine. In some cases, that might even mean doing, say, two backward bends in a row after a forward bend (or vice versa). That's fine; it's the *experience* of balance that's important, not strict equality between

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## Straightening Out the Bends

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the number of forward bends and the number of backward bends. To put it another way: it's not a matter of what it *should* take to find your center; it's a matter of what it *does* take.

### Which Came First, the Chicken Pose or ...?

#### Question #3: Should we first do a backward bend, then a forward bending counterpose, or vice versa?

In his book, *Ananda Yoga for Higher Awareness*, Swami Kriyananda gives the rule of thumb that one should do a forward bend first, followed by a backward bend. Here is the exact quote: "Forward-stretching poses should always be followed by others that stretch backward. ... It would seem, at least from our experience, that the forward-stretching poses open the nerve channels in the spine, but that the backward-stretching ones help to pour energy through those opened channels."

In *The Art and Science of Raja Yoga*, however, Swami merely said, "Follow a bend in one direction with a bend in the opposite direction." Not quite so specific. So I asked him for a clarification.

Here is his reply:

"Normally, follow a forward bend with a backward bend. In cases, however, where it seems appropriate, the opposite sequence is fine." (Nice to have room for creativity, isn't it?)

It may seem natural to do a backward bend first, because those tend to cry out for—physically speaking—counterposes more than do most forward bends. For example, after an intense backward bend like *ustrasana*, the body needs a forward bend; an easy one, like *balasana*, can feel just right. You may even want to follow that with *sasamgasana* as well, not for back relief but because *sasamgasana* helps us take charge of all the energy that's been awakened by *ustrasana*, then released by *balasana*. All that is fine, but what Swami is saying is that, generally in Ananda Yoga, we *start* the whole sequence with a forward bend—*adhya mukha shvanasana* (before *ustrasana*) might be a good choice in this case.

There are additional reasons for starting with a forward bend. We all know how *matsyasana*, a backward bend, is a perfect follow-up for *halasana*, a forward bend. It's not just for physical reasons, although the physical release of the cervical spine is certainly welcome. Rather, it's that *halasana* can concentrate a lot of energy in the cervical center (fifth chakra); *matsyasana* enables us to open up that area and get that energy moving and expanding.

Here's another example: Swami teaches that *padahasthasana* and standing backward bend (SBB) are a natural sequence: First you open the spine with *padahasthasana* so energy will flow freely, then you lift that energy up the spine with SBB. Although the opposite order is by no means "wrong"—it can feel good even if you haven't gone swayback in SBB—note that SBB is a thoracic spine asana, whereas *padahasthasana* is a lower spine (sacral area) asana. Therefore reversing the order simply wouldn't be as effective in raising the energy because *padahasthasana* would be working below the area where SBB had already worked.

This is a specific example of the general principle that forward bends tend to work with the first and second chakras. Backward bends tend to work higher in the spine, especially in the third and fourth chakras. (There are exceptions, but this is the general nature of those types of poses.) Again, since we are trying to raise energy up the spine with our practice, it makes sense to work with the lower chakras first.

By the way, have you noticed that some of the sample routines in *The Art and Science of Raja Yoga* end with *two* backward bends. Try it. It's a great way to take maximum awakened energy straight into meditation. (Kriyabans: note that you'll soon get a complementary forward bend anyway, via *maha mudra*.)

Looking from the other direction, why might one sometime want to do a backward bend first? Well, if your energy has been a scattered, you might use a backward bend to awaken your awareness of the energy and get it moving, then a forward bend to calm and focus it. Or if you need a boost, you might do a backward bend to awaken energy, then just enough of a forward bend to give a physical release without dissipating the energy. (If we don't have enough energy to stay focused, forward bends can be sleep-inducing rather than calming.)

By the way, forward bends aren't the only possible complementary poses after backward bends; a twist can be a good, too. I may use a twist to make sure I don't lose the energy awakened by the backward bend, because for me they maintain the energizing

## Member News

### It's Renewal Time

Unless you're already an AYTA member through 2002, you'll soon receive a notice saying that it's time to renew your membership. Please respond promptly so you won't miss your next issue of *Awake & Ready!*

### Want a Free Membership?

Have you had insights on teaching or the student/teacher relationship? Creative ways to find teaching opportunities? Inspiring stories of teaching? Then please consider contributing an article—short or long—for *Awake & Ready!* You don't need writing skills; we'll be happy to help you manifest it. Short articles might be in the "Inspirations" section (see page 9)—and if we use your longer article of at least 1500 words, you'll get a *free year's membership!* For more information, please contact Gyandev (see page 8).

### Got Burning Questions? Get Cool Answers!

If you haven't yet joined AYSutra, our e-mail Q&A forum—or if you've joined but somehow don't seem to be receiving anything—join today for help on teaching or practicing Ananda Yoga, sharing experience with teaching "special needs" students, even prayer requests in times of need. To sign up send a "sign me up" e-mail to [AYSutra@expandinglight.org](mailto:AYSutra@expandinglight.org).

You're also welcome to send questions to Gyandev; one of the AYTT staff will answer you privately—or, if you don't mind, perhaps in an issue of *Awake & Ready!*

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## Exploring the Essence

# Asanas Can Teach Us the Deeper Side of Yoga

## Gyana Yoga—The Yoga of Wisdom

Part 3 of a 3-part series by Maria McSweeney

**G**yana (sometimes written *jnana*) is wisdom, the goal of all learning and knowledge. On one level, it is higher awareness gleaned from life's experiences.

As each one of us goes through the "school of hard knocks" known as life, we learn, grow and understand more. We hopefully garner wisdom: a perspective on life—and on ourselves—that is increasingly centered in truth.

On a deeper level, which is particularly relevant to us as yogis, wisdom emerges from within as the fruit of the revelations of the soul.

Every one of us possesses wisdom on a soul level. It will, however, remain undiscovered so long as we lack discrimination, and are restless and ego-centered.



*Maria and her husband, Ananta, direct Ananda Sacramento, where she also leads an Ananda Yoga Teacher Training program.*

### Developing Discrimination

Wisdom first comes through the practice of *viveka* (discrimination), says Swami Kriyananda in *The Art and Science of Raja Yoga* (the *14 Steps*). This practice can easily be applied to the practice of the yoga postures.

When we put out energy to learn in any field—what to speak of becoming a teacher in that field—there is always the possibility that we might become proud of the knowledge we acquire. In an effort to sound like the expert we want to become, we end up sharing our knowledge of yoga, but compromising vibration and the opportunity to tune into the uniqueness of each individual. To counter this tendency we need to direct our attention to the essence of yoga, and to our own realization of its core truths.

In *Autobiography of a Yogi*, Paramhansa Yogananda quoted the ancient sage Shankara: "realized knowledge alone destroys ignorance—knowledge cannot spring up by any other means than inquiry. Who am I? How was this universe born? Who is its maker? What is its material cause?" Yogananda added, "The intellect has no answer for these questions; hence the *rishis* [sages] evolved yoga as the technique for spiritual inquiry."

As we practice Ananda Yoga, we should periodically ask ourselves similar—though much less grandiose—questions, such as: "Why am I doing this? How long should I hold this pose? How far should I stretch? How is my mind reacting? Is the pose expanding or contracting my consciousness?" Feel for the answer to these questions from a place of deep inner awareness and sensitivity to the highest wisdom of the moment. In this way, through careful and relaxed observation (which is an element of

the practice of Gyana Yoga), we move our practice ever closer to the essence of yoga.

### Asana Affirmations as Gyana Yoga

In *The Art and Science of Raja Yoga*, Swami says, "The gyana yogi tries, even at the time of outward enjoyment, to interiorize his consciousness, feeding the inner flame of soul-consciousness. He knows that if, like worldly people, he borrowed its embers to give light to things, the true source of joy within himself would burn itself down at last to gray ashes."

Asana affirmations are of great benefit in this regard, and they're wonderful tools to help your students begin to experience—rather than simply hear about—the practice of Gyana Yoga. The affirmations direct our consciousness away from the periphery of our practice into the heart of the yoga experience.

For instance, in *padahasthasana* (jackknife pose), we affirm: "Nothing on earth can hold me!" The position of the body is one of relaxing, letting go, as though we were shedding layers. Without a reminder to go inside, however, it's easy to spend the entire pose wishing our hamstrings would lengthen already! But the affirmation (if we participate fully in it) reminds us to look within ourselves—not merely beyond our bodies, or people's opinions, or other outward influences of this world, but beyond our *samskaras* (natural tendencies/inclinations), our likes and dislikes, our opinions, our habitual reactions to life—to the central truth in everything. In Gyana Yoga, truth becomes more important than being right or knowing all the facts.



Or consider *garudasana* (eagle pose), which does a great job of reflecting our lives. Just as we get all twisted up in a swirl of activities, conflicting priorities, seeming emergencies, never enough time—in short, in confusion—so in *garudasana* we can easily get caught up in winding our limbs farther and farther. The thought comes, "If I can just get my palms together, then I'll be doing the pose so much better!" But isn't our inner awareness the true measure of how well we're doing a pose? Far better, then, to focus on the unmoving center of the pose—the spine—and in so doing, call our attention to the unmoving, calmly observing center of all life's movement: the soul. All the masters tell us that we *are* that center, so let's identify with it: "At the center of life's storms, I stand serene."

### Wisdom is Born of Calmness

To develop wisdom, one must develop calmness. Only through calmness can one become deeply centered in the Self.

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## Asanas Can Teach Us the Deeper Side of Yoga (continued from page 3)

The cervical center (the *vishudha* chakra) is the seat of spiritual calmness in the body. If our energy is directed inward and upward at this center, we experience calm. If it is directed outward or downward we experience restlessness. The quality of energy at this chakra directly affects our reactive process. We have all experienced being challenged in life, and the difference between responding appropriately because calm, versus inappropriately because agitated. Whether we receive life's experiences through the filter of calmness or the filter of restlessness greatly determines the outcome. With this in mind, of course we want to develop greater calmness. Yoga postures are a powerful aid in this regard.

You can direct your students toward a deeper state of calmness—and thus wisdom—by leading them in postures that stimulate the energy of this chakra to move inward and upward. Examples would be: the *simhasana* (lion pose), neck/throat rechargers, *sarvangasana* (shoulderstand), *halasana* (plow pose). Another example is a variation of *sasamgasana* (hare pose) in which we slowly bring the body up with an awareness in the spine of each vertebrae righting itself on the one below. When in full position, the neck is drawn tightly into the throat, stimulating the cervical chakra.

For me, one of the most rewarding benefits of Ananda Yoga™ is that it helps to clarify my mind and harmonize it with my soul. I find it easier to say what I mean, to speak from my heart, to be inclusive, understanding and compassionate. These are all attributes of wisdom.

Invite your students to discover this relationship for themselves. Ask them about their exchanges with others in the workplace or with family. Are those exchanges different after their practice of yoga? You know they are, but your asking will help students “put 2 and 2 together.” That's an important aspect of Gyana Yoga: linking cause and effect.

A great time to sow the seeds of wisdom is at the close of your routine, during and after *savasana*. Introduce your students to Swami's *Secrets of Life* CD by playing a selection; my favorite is “Secrets of Inner Peace.” The calmness they will have gained in their practice will allow them to feel his affirmations on peace as a natural state of consciousness within themselves, one that has always been with them—and always will be.

### Renouncing My Little Egoic Self, I Expand with My Great Soul Self Everywhere

In *Rays of the Same Light* (Vol. 3), Swami Kriyananda says, “Gyana Yoga begins and ends with the task of demolishing the sense of ‘I’ and merging it into Divine Consciousness.” This is no small undertaking, but even in simple asanas we can begin moving in this direction.

I once had a yoga student who was paralyzed from the waist down. Without any prior inquiry as to whether Hatha Yoga would be appropriate or even helpful to her, she just showed up! I was immediately taken with her enthusiasm, warmth, spirit, and complete faith that yoga would be of great benefit to her. I fumbled around a little at first, making an extra effort to help her so she wouldn't feel left out, while also leading the rest of the

class in a manner they had come to expect. To my surprise I watched her following with ease, naturally making adaptations that were true to the essence of each pose. Clearly there was a lot she couldn't physically do, but as she told me later, she would do it mentally and felt great benefit. She was very excited about what she was experiencing, and the possibilities that it foretold. I was so inspired by her understanding and wisdom. In getting herself—and her considerable physical limitations—out of the way, suddenly the whole universe lay wide open before her!

### Awakening the Spiritual Eye

As you know, in the physical body, the seat of the intellect is the frontal lobe of the brain—specifically, the point between the eyebrows. Concentration at this center, however, potentially stimulates levels of awareness far beyond the intellect. In the science of yoga, this is the seat of ecstasy, spiritual vision, and the highest wisdom. Hence its name, the Spiritual Eye.

The Spiritual Eye is not imaginary. We can, in fact, see it in meditation, when the thoughts are stilled, and when the intellect functions on its own higher, intuitive level. Paramhansa Yogananda said that we can grow very quickly by keeping our awareness focused at the Spiritual Eye. It is the positive pole of the *ajna* chakra.

Awakening the Spiritual Eye is one of the goals of yoga and meditation practice. It is meaningful to note that Kriyananda defines “awakening of a chakra” as the total withdrawal of energy from the periphery and senses into the deep *sushumna* (astral spine) and then upward through that chakra to the spiritual eye. In regard to the Spiritual Eye itself, this would mean a very high state of realization. Here, let's use “awaken” to mean doing what we can to focus and act more from a center of awareness at the Spiritual Eye.

Guide your students to experiment with this when practicing pranayama and asanas. During the pauses between poses, and during deep relaxation, ask your students to inwardly observe the energy as it withdraws naturally—and better still, to use their will to help it withdraw—from the periphery of the body and senses, into the spine and up to the Spiritual Eye. Then ask them to hold their concentration there. Even though this practice takes a high degree of sensitivity and attentiveness, it will prove far more restful than what students will otherwise tend to do: drift into daydreaming, planning or worrying. In addition, it will prepare them to experience higher states of consciousness and help develop wisdom.

I'd like to share with you a meditation exercise from Swami's book, *Awaken to Superconsciousness*. You might find it helpful for awakening the Spiritual Eye. Gyandev used it for the deep relaxation at the end of his video, *Yoga to Awaken the Chakras*; try it with your own classes.

“Concentrate at the point between the eyebrows. Visualize a tunnel of golden light. Mentally enter that tunnel, and feel yourself surrounded by a glorious sense of happiness and freedom. As you move through the tunnel, feel yourself bathed by the light until all worldly thoughts disappear.

“After soaring through the tunnel, visualize before you a curtain of deep violet-blue light. Pass through that curtain into another tunnel of deep, violet-blue light. Feel the light surround-

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# Teaching Yoga for Round Bodies

*Part 1 of a 3-part series by Kay Erdwinn, M.D.*

In our current Western culture, no one wants to be fat. To be fat is to feel ugly, to have difficulty finding attractive clothes, and to have always to think about restaurants, theaters and airplanes in terms of whether or not one will be able to fit. To be fat is to be judged as gluttonous, emotionally ill, stupid or lacking in will power. Both the allopathic and holistic health care industries condemn fat as unhealthy, increasing susceptibility to certain diseases, and inevitably causing early mortality (none of which, incidentally, has been proven). To put it mildly, being fat can be a drag.

I have been fat all my life. And I have heard all the stereotypical reactions to it. “You have such a pretty face, it’s a shame about those extra pounds, dear.” “You are afraid of intimacy.” “You have a problem with anger.” “You can lose that weight if you just put some effort into it.” “Have you tried Jenny Craig?” (This last was from a complete stranger on the street!) All the well-meaning comments aside, my actual experience with being fat is that if I eat reasonably (not perfectly or “diet portions”) and get a reasonable amount of mild to moderate exercise, I feel fine. But healthy eating and exercise don’t make me thin, just healthier. And as much as it would be easier to be thin in our culture, fat is just the way I am.

Like most other fat people, I have felt embarrassed to exercise in front of others. Elementary school physical education classes were a nightmare of being singled out and teased by classmates and teachers alike. And as the teachers would not acknowledge me for what I was good at—folk dancing, tennis, dodgeball and cricket—I got a C in P.E. regardless.

As an adult, exercising is easier because I have a thicker skin, and on average grown-ups are more polite than kids. But I still get comments from people around me, still get shown plastic models of “5 Pounds of Ugly Fat” when I look for a new health club, and still get flack from doctors who assume that I need a reducing diet before they’ve even looked at my medical chart, let alone at my eating and dieting history.

## Enter Ananda Yoga™

I’m going into all this not to rehearse old grievances—we’ve all got plenty of those, fat or thin. Rather, I want to demonstrate just how much courage I had to have—and that any fat person must have—to walk into a yoga class. I was lucky. It was an Ananda Yoga beginners class taught by the warmest, least

judgmental person alive. (Okay, I’m exaggerating. Still, Lin Turner, who teaches in Davis, CA, is a wonderful person and an excellent teacher. [See “Inspirations” by Lin on page 9.]) She not only taught me the asanas, she encouraged me to find ways to adapt them to my size if I needed to. After about two years, she suggested that I enroll in the Ananda Yoga Teacher Training course at The Expanding Light. My reaction? I panicked. I scoffed. I laughed hysterically. And then I enrolled anyway. What Lin wants, Lin generally gets.

I was convinced that the course would improve my practice immensely. I was equally convinced that they would not give me a certificate that said I could teach yoga even if I levitated for an hour in lotus position. I was fat, and fat people could not be yoga teachers.

But the funniest thing happened in that class. Initially, I covered my terror of being judged with Attitude. I started belligerently pointing out that some of what they were asking us to do wasn’t possible for me as a fat person. I expected to be told condescendingly just to keep trying, but that wasn’t what happened. Instead, Gyandev and Jyoti (then Rich and Joey) started asking me what I could do to modify the asanas and my entries/exits. They wanted to know precisely how my experience as a fat person was different. They listened, asked questions, and thanked me for my input. And my classmates were interested, too. I was floored. All through that month, I went back to my room after many classes

and cried for joy. I’d never been so accepted. It was then that I realized that maybe I could offer something as a yoga teacher. My fat was suddenly a vehicle of healing and compassion for other fat people trying to find a safe place to exercise. Darned if Lin wasn’t right!

Now I teach a weekly yoga class in Placerville, CA. I call it “Yoga for Round People,” although everyone is welcome. Usually 75% or more are fat people from 200 to 400 pounds. I have found real joy in watching other fat people learn the asanas, get stronger and healthier, and learn to make some peace with their fat bodies. And as with any yoga teacher, teaching makes my practice stronger.

## Physical Considerations for Fat Students

So what exactly is different for a fat person practicing yoga? And how can the yoga teacher, who most likely has never had the



*Kay teaches “Yoga for Round Bodies” in Placerville, Calif. She also volunteers at the El Dorado Women’s Center, a local domestic violence help resource. She lives with 9 cats, who are very proud that she had her photo taken while wearing the above T-shirt.*

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## Asanas Can Teach Us the Deeper Side of Yoga (continued from page 4)

ing you. Slowly, the tunnel walls disappear in blue light. Expand your consciousness into that light—into infinite freedom and bliss.

“Now there is no tunnel. There is only the all-encompassing blueness and bliss of infinity.

“At last, visualize before you a silvery-white, five-pointed star of light. Mentally spread out your arms and legs, assuming with your body the shape of that star. Give yourself to it in body, mind and soul as you surrender every thought, every feeling to absolute, Self-existing Bliss. Bliss cascades gently over you, like a waterfall of mist, filling your heart with ineffable peace.”

Whether or not you behold the Spiritual Eye, by meditating at that point your consciousness will gradually rise until at last it passes the portals of human awareness and enters the state of ecstasy, or superconsciousness.

### The Union of the Yogas

Raja Yoga, the royal yoga, is the bringing together of the practices of Bhakti, Karma and Gyana Yoga, with meditation as the supreme guide. Meditation will enhance our devotion, our activities, and our divine understanding. Conversely, as we practice these three yogas, each will in turn help to guide our meditation toward the goal of Raja Yoga: liberation.

This also is the goal of Ananda Yoga; hence its full name: “Ananda Yoga for Higher Awareness.” It’s all so simple! Harmonious movement, pranayama to stimulate the life force, affirmations to focus and purify our hearts and minds. Practicing in this way, even those who are less inclined toward meditation find themselves naturally drawn to it, and more comfortable with it than they ever thought possible.

Recently a friend of many years came to visit us. His wife had passed on shortly before. She was, in fact, one of Sacramento’s first yoga teachers some 50 years ago. Feeling a great sense of loss, he asked us to teach him how to meditate. He had always been afraid of meditation because once he had had a deep experience and felt himself outside of his body. We practiced some postures and preparatory pranayama, and then meditated.

His experience this time was very different. He felt a level of relaxation he had never before experienced, and consequently he was no longer afraid. He found his consciousness at peace with ease at the point between the eyebrows. Established here, in the wisdom of his soul, all fear and anxiety fled. He was in the joy of all understanding.

### Concluding Thoughts

Formulating these three articles on the Deeper Side of Yoga has been greatly inspiring to me personally—and I hope to you. To the best of your ability, seek an ever deeper experience in your personal practice. Then you will find that you are giving to others in a way that is transforming and lasting—for them and for you. Let’s all help each other to keep going deeper into the “Ever-New Joy” of awakening in Spirit. ♦

### Teaching Yoga for Round Bodies

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experience of being truly fat (I’m not talking just 20 extra pounds here), make fat students feel safe and accepted, not just tolerated and their difficulties politely ignored? How can one help fat students to adapt an asana if needed, and still maintain good alignment and safety?

Let’s start with what the general physical differences are for the fat person (beyond the obvious, I mean). Any pregnant woman knows that having a big tummy changes things. Her center of gravity is different; her balance is different. Her gait is thrown off. She can’t cross her legs when she sits down anymore. And she has to lean over a book or dinner plate in a very different way than she did when she was thin.

The same difficulties are true for a fat person. From what I have observed in myself and in my fat students, there are four main ways that being fat affects one’s movement:

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## *New Programs in the Level 2 AYTT*

Here are some of the latest developments for the Level 2 certification curriculum at The Expanding Light:

1. Jyotish and Devi Novak will teach both the *Bhagavad Gita* week and *Yoga Sutras* week in 2002. (This year’s *Sutras* class was all we’d hoped it would be: stimulating, insightful, inspiring, lively and fun.) Both programs will also include how to teach a number of asanas that are more advanced than those in Level 1 AYTT.
2. *Meditation Immersion* is a new 4-day program that takes place at Ananda’s special Seclusion Retreat. Program leader Diksha McCord will help participants focus on how to deepen and lengthen their meditations.

3. *Meditation Teacher Training* has increased to 10 days to allow more time to explore the material in greater depth, deepen participants’ personal practice, and give more student teaching experience and feedback.
4. *Special Needs Teacher Training* (June 16–21, 2002) will explore how to work with seniors and students who have injuries, chronic illness and/or very limited flexibility. Valuable for any yoga teacher! Program leaders will be Jyoti Spearin and David Ramsden.

See the calendar on page 10 for the dates of these and other Level 2 programs.



## Teaching Yoga for Round Bodies

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1. Bending forward is in varying degrees hampered by the abdomen. If one is quite fat, it's like trying to lean over a beach ball.
2. The fat person usually finds it difficult to internally rotate the hips. Fat on the thighs spreads the legs apart, outwardly rotating the hips. This accounts for the characteristic wide-based gait and open-legged seated posture of the fat person. The resultant contracture (if a person has been fat for a long time) in the external rotators makes postures that require the legs to remain together difficult and even painful.
3. Fat in the upper arms and the upper/middle back makes putting the hands together behind the back difficult, as does the fat person's increased ratio of torso circumference to arm length. Take the Circle of Joy, add a fat person, and presto!—instant Circle of Frustration. (Actually, this is easily solved simply by moving the arms behind one instead of clasping the hands.)
4. Fat people tend to have some neck difficulty, because of the habitual need to crane the neck forward to get closer to something to read, eat or whatever. If the tummy dictates that the person must sit further from a desk, the neck and shoulders bear the brunt of bringing the head and hands forward to lean over a book or dinner plate. Unlike in pregnant women, for a fat person this “lean forward” part happens for an extended period of time; it could lead to a chronic unhealthy curve in the cervical spine, and even a “widow's hump.”

It's interesting that, because of these four differences, it's often the simpler asanas that are difficult for the fat person, whereas some more challenging ones are actually easier for most. For example, I can do a mean *prasarita padottanasana* (wide-stance standing forward bend) and *anantasana* (lying on one side, with that same side's elbow on the floor and the head propped on that hand, with the top leg raised and top hand holding the big toe of the raised foot). However, *padahastanasana* and *balasana* are very difficult for me—and I'll explain why below.

One additional note: In inversions such as *halasana* or shoulderstand, large-breasted women will have an additional difficulty—breathing—that a man or less well-endowed woman will not have. A firm but stretchy bra may help relieve this, but these too may be uncomfortable if they “cut” into the flesh too much.

I'll return to the physical difficulties later in this article, going through each of the asanas taught in the current Level 1 AYTT. For now, let's move on to the psychological difficulties.

### Psychological Considerations for Fat Students

First of all, fat aspiring yogi/yoginis who screw up their courage to even walk into a yoga class are laying themselves open to anything from furtive stares to outright insults to well-meaning put-downs. This stuff happens even in classes that are designed for beginners, although the Power Yoga or Bikram classes obviously see more of it, since they're designed more for ambitious, competitive athletes. Some fat people who are more self-accepting may be able to handle it and simply do the best they can. Others, perhaps the majority (although I don't know that for sure), are wearing their heart on their sleeves and are ready to run

for cover at the slightest sign of impending humiliation. I certainly was. I have several suggestions for putting the fat yoga student at ease in a class:

### 1. Examine Your Own Feelings about Fat People

If you privately think that fat people are always couch potatoes with poor eating habits, then however nice you are, the fat person in front of you will still know what you're thinking. It's like radar. (Most likely, actually, it's non-verbal body language.) What I have seen, and try to convey to others, is that fat people run the gamut of eating styles and levels of physical activity, same as thin/normal-sized people do. Some may be compulsive eaters and haven't walked a block since 1974. Others may eat fairly well and go for a 30-minute walk every day. A few might be really into fitness, like Cheryl Haworth, the champion weight lifter, or Judy Molnar, the triathlon athlete. A few may have the diseases traditionally associated with obesity, like diabetes or hypertension. However, even if obesity does double the risk of these diseases (which is by no means proven), that means the risk goes from something like 0.5% to 1%. (Read Dean Edell's book *Eat, Drink and Be Merry* for further discussion of this point.) So most fat people don't have these diseases. Don't assume.

### 2. Expand Your Definition of Beautiful

Include images of fat people in your definition of beautiful, and more importantly, include images of fat people in your definitions of beautiful yoga asanas. Lillian Russell was considered to be the most beautiful woman around in the early 1900's. She weighed over 200 pounds. Marilyn Monroe wore a size 16. A fat person practicing an asana who is in alignment and feels that centered joy that yoga can give us, can be beautiful. On a practical level, I have found that all of us, including fat people who are new to yoga and may be out of shape, have at least one asana that is “ours.” Our bodies do it perfectly and effortlessly. If I judge that a fat student has found his/her asana and won't freak at the attention, I have him/her demonstrate it for the class. This can be a much-needed confidence booster.

### 3. Include Differences in Body Type in Your Teaching

As a matter of course, use phrases like, “Short people will need to choke up on the strap.” or “Those with knee problems should probably use a cushion under the knees.” or “If you have a bigger tummy that's getting in the way, open the legs to accommodate it.” These go a long way toward reassuring people that their differences will not only not get them injured, but will also not be ridiculed. A few quick reminders about internal practice, not comparing yourself to other class members or pictures in books, and the benefits of practice at any level of ability will also help. I have seen well-meaning teachers, however, make these very speeches, then proceed to choose only their hotshot favorites to demonstrate asanas, or follow up the speech with the supposed weight-loss benefits of yoga.

At the other extreme, it's also possible to over-focus on fat students. Giving them too much attention—by, say, adjusting them in every pose—can embarrass them. Lin had a very nice way of offering a brief suggestion or giving me a strap, then telling me to play around with it to see how to adapt the pose for myself. That works well once a student has some experience.

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## AYTT Manual Clarification

Page 8-3 of the current AYTT manual states, “a healthy shoulder can rotate farther internally than externally.” That’s true if one starts from anatomical position. However, anatomical position is not a neutral position; the shoulder must rotate externally even to *get* into anatomical position. Therefore it’s more meaningful to speak of rotation starting from “joint neutral”—i.e., relaxed, no rotation at all—in which case the shoulder joint permits more external than internal rotation.

To see this, start from joint neutral (arm hanging at your side) and abduct your shoulder until the arm is horizontal, then bend your elbow 90 degrees (so your fingers are now pointing forward). Your shoulder is still in an unrotated position. From this position, observe that you can rotate much farther externally than internally.

### Teaching Yoga for Round Bodies (continued from page 7)

I advertise my class as focusing on large people. In addition, I am fat myself, so I can address the subject directly. Often I will simply demonstrate the difficulty a fat person could have with an asana, show what to do about it, and ask a thinner person to demonstrate the asana without the problem. I realize it may be difficult not to seem like you’re singling out fat people if you’re a thin teacher. But I believe frank, matter-of-fact discussion of differences can be tremendously reassuring, as long as it is free of condescension. Refer back to #1.

#### 4. Do You Sell Yoga Accessories?

If you sell T-shirts, leotards, mat carriers with shoulder straps, etc., then please be sure to carry them—or have quick access to them—in large sizes. Nothing makes a fat person feel more welcome than to be able to wear the same T-shirt as everyone else. I suggest having them available up to 4x and able to order them to 6x. Be aware that clothes are available, by mail order at least, in sizes up to 10x. Junonia, Making It Big, and Casual Male Big and Tall are good on-line sources of large-size T-shirts, leotards, leggings and sweat pants. For the shoulder strap problem, look for adjustable ones, and acknowledge the problem for the fat wannabe mat carrier owner: I’m not aware of any that would accommodate more than about 2x or 3x.

Now I’ll address each of the asanas in the Level 1 manual, the potential problems that each may present for fat people, and some resolutions of those problems. The asanas are in the same alphabetical order (by Sanskrit name) as in the manual.

#### Adho Mukha Shvanasana

Downward-facing dog is hard for most beginners no matter what their size. Because of having greater weight, the fat student may prefer a wider stance in both hands and feet for better balance. The dolphin variation, where the forearms, not the

hands, bear weight, can be used if the person is not yet strong enough to hold his/her weight in this position.

#### Ardha Matsyendrasana

Half spinal twist is a nightmare for fat people! It’s usually the knee that’s pulled up to the chest that’s the problem. The fat student usually can’t even find out how supple they are in this asana, because the belly gets in the way. Difficulty breathing, and a tendency to lean back (to unconsciously accommodate the belly) are the usual result. I seldom teach this asana in my class, substituting supine twists. However, I do sometimes use it to teach alignment. (It’s a good one for demonstrating keeping the head aligned with the torso.)

I usually recommend that the fat student raise the knee to a comfortable level only, and that s/he not cross the raised leg over the other knee. This, of course, lessens the stretch in the lower back and buttocks. On the other hand, it permits the fat student to breathe. I know which one I’d go with.

#### Standing Backward Bend

I don’t think this asana has any problems exclusive to fat people—except that they have to hold up even more weight in the arms, so it’s hard to hold the pose for very long.

#### Balasana

Ugh! Just *where* is the fat in my tummy, chest and thighs supposed to go in this asana?! Let alone the air from an inhalation? Child pose is often taught as a “reprieve” from a difficult asana—a real “milk and cookies pose.” For the fat person, it is anything but that. Because bringing the knees and the chest together compresses the abdomen and chest, in order to breathe, the fat person usually ends up with his/her buttocks in the air, which is humiliating if s/he is the only one doing that. And it is even more so if the thinner people are heaving sighs of relief at how easy and comfortable the asana is.

One trick that Lin Turner teaches everyone for vajrasana may help somewhat: “roll” muscle and fat from the calves laterally before sitting down fully into vajrasana. I think that doing the same for the thighs relieves compression of the medial thighs and makes it easier to hold the legs closer together, and to get the

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# Inspirations

by Lin Turner, RYT

## Yoga Is for Growth on All Levels

When Steve first came into my class, he had a pronounced slump, and his body and face were all gray from not being able to take in enough oxygen. He was about 58 years old at the time, a geography professor at the University of California at Davis. Locked into the academic environment, he'd never really "lived in his body"; he was disconnected from it, living completely in his head.

In one class, when I asked him to correct his posture in a seated asana, he asked, "Why? I've slumped all my life." I figured that he would respond only to a very down-to-earth reason, so I explained that a straightened posture allowed room for the lungs and the heart to function more efficiently. That resonated with his entirely rational mind, so he was willing to give it a try.

For the next year and a half, he came faithfully twice a week to my classes. With this kind of dedication, his posture gradually improved, as did his health and coloring.

Not long ago, I met him on the street. He said he was leaving for France and asked, "Would you please give me a hug before I leave?" When I did, my chin ran into his shoulder—and I used to think that he was exactly as tall as I am. From his regular practice, he'd gained about three inches in height!

Some time later, at his retirement party, his daughter came up to me and said, "I want to thank you so much for all you've done for my dad. He's a new person!" ♦



*Lin Turner has taught Ananda Yoga since 1987 in Davis and Vacaville, Calif.*

## Voting with Their Feet, and Knees, and Hips ...

I teach an ongoing Intermediate/Advanced class each week to a small group of regulars. They're very much into Ananda Yoga, and they love the affirmations. (I can't get away with skipping any of them!)

Recently I went to an Iyengar/Power Yoga workshop and learned what seemed like a nice (if strenuous) bunch of flows. I thought, "I'll take this back to my class. They'd probably like a little change of pace."

And that's exactly what I did. The day after the workshop, I added all of these new goodies to my Intermediate/Advanced class experience. At the end of the class, they moaned, they groaned, they complained of sore knees, sore hips, and on and on. They were generally unhappy. They pointedly remarked how much they'd liked last week's class, which I'd taught right after I came home from *Advanced Pranayama and the Subtle Body* at The Expanding Light. It had been classic Ananda Yoga.

So the next week, I gave them classic Ananda Yoga: coming back to center after each asana, using the affirmations, etc. They went out at the end of class laughing and smiling, no complaints, saying, "This is why I come to yoga!" ♦

*Do you have an inspiration to share? Teaching tip? An amusing yoga story? Please send it to Gyandev (see page 10) for possible inclusion in a future issue.*

## Teaching Yoga for Round Bodies (continued from page 8)

buttocks closer to the heels. It does, however, introduce a slight pressure toward internally rotating the femurs, which may not feel comfortable for some knees. At any rate, this may prove helpful also in *balasana* by making the lower body more compact.

I usually teach the frog variation, wherein the knees are spread before one lays the torso down. (See photo at left.) This helps, but usually there is still some difficulty. One of the problems to watch for is an increased tendency not to round the back enough, due to the weight of the tummy increasing the lumbar spine's lordotic curve, so that there is strain on the lumbar area. (In the photo, you can see how a heavy tummy is beginning to cause this strain.) All the weight is shifted forward, which also places additional strain on the neck.

I solve this by encouraging the student to pay extra attention to rounding the back appropriately, keeping the bulk of the

weight over the hips, not thrown forward, and placing cushions or soft blocks under the forehead.

Of course, this can overly restrict the breathing, and the student may not be able to remain seated on the heels, so cushions under the buttocks may be needed as well. Nevertheless some fat students will be able to find a reasonable amount of comfort this way in *balasana*. Not complete relaxation, perhaps, but at least a reasonable amount of comfort.

Also, bear in mind that all this arranging takes time and focuses a lot of attention on the student. It's good training for adapting an asana to one's individual needs, but it could be embarrassing, especially for more sensitive people. You have to know your students and watch for their non-verbal cues. ♦

*Kay's article will continue in the next two issues of Awake & Ready! as she takes us through the remaining 27 poses in the current AYT manual.*



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# Upcoming Level 2 Programs

AYTA Members receive a 10% discount on all Level 2 programs, which more than pays for your membership! In the schedule below, “★” indicates a required Level 2 program. For details, see the Expanding Light program guide. (In March, you should receive the next program guide, which covers May–October 2002.)

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| <p>1/6–19 ..... ★AYTT Assistantship (with Jyoti Spearin)</p> <p>2/28–3/3 .. Meditation Immersion (with Diksha McCord)</p> <p>3/7–17 ..... ★Meditation Teacher Training (with Savitri Simpson)</p> <p>3/17–30 ... ★AYTT Assistantship (with Jyoti Spearin)</p> <p>5/5–12 ..... Kriya Yoga Preparation (with Dianna Smith)</p> <p>5/8–12 ..... Meditation Immersion (with Diksha McCord)</p> <p>5/12–19 ... ★Advanced Pranayama and the Subtle Body (with Gyandev McCord, Uma Meshorer and Savitri Simpson)</p> <p>5/19–24 ... Therapeutic Yoga (with Nicole DeAvilla)</p> <p>5/30–6/9 .. Yoga of the Heart (with Nischala Joy Devi)</p> | <p>6/16–21 ... Special Needs Teacher Training (with Jyoti Spearin and David Ramsden)</p> <p>6/23–30 ... ★Essence of the Bhagavad Gita (with Jyotish and Devi Novak)</p> <p>6/30–7/5 .. Sharing Yoga with Children (with Nitai Deranja)</p> <p>6/30–7/7 .. Kriya Yoga Preparation (with Dianna Smith)</p> <p>7/4–14 ..... ★Meditation Teacher Training (with Savitri Simpson)</p> <p>7/14–27 ... ★AYTT Assistantship (with Jyoti Spearin)</p> <p>9/18–22 ... Meditation Immersion (with Diksha McCord)</p> <p>9/19–22 ... The Healing Path of Yoga (with Nischala Joy Devi)</p> <p>9/29–10/5 ★Essence of the Yoga Sutras (with Jyotish and Devi Novak)</p> <p>10/5–12 ... Kriya Yoga Preparation (with Dianna Smith)</p> |
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## Straightening Out the Bends

(continued from page 2)

effect of the backward bend better than do forward bends. Or, if I want to be sure that I don't relax so much in a forward bend that I allow the energy to dissipate, I may hold it only for a short time (e.g., a brief knees-to-chest release after setu bandhasana).

Remember too, that different poses offer different degrees of bend in different locations. There are gentle bends (e.g., balasana, matsyasana) and intense bends (e.g., halasana, chakrasana). Some backward bends focus on the cervical region (e.g., matsyasana), others on the thoracic (SBB), still others on the lumbar (salabhasana). Likewise, forward bends may focus on the cervical spine (karnapirasana), thoracic spine (janushirasana), or lumbar spine (sasamgasana, which also bends the thoracic). All these poses are quite different, so they require individualized consideration.

## Stay Flexible

All this points to the need for personal understanding of principles rather than blind following of rules. That's why the practice of yoga is really rather simple. It's when we try to memorize everything—rather than understand—that complications arise.

For example, you've been through a chakras routine—sequencing postures according to the chakras that they help magnetize—and felt the power that it can bring. It's a wonderful practice, and it makes a lot of sense to design routines that way: using the asanas to work your way up the spine, chakra by chakra, ending at the spiritual eye, even if you never even think of the word, “chakra.”

But that isn't a hard and fast rule, even with chakra routines. If it were, then we'd never do paschimotanasana (first and second chakras) after having done the standing backward bend (fourth chakra) earlier in our routine. Rather, feel

what needs to happen—and do it. Different objectives call for different treatment.

It's the joyful art of practicing and teaching Ananda Yoga. ♦

*“In the postures it is important always to balance every movement with its opposite. When you bend to the left, bend also to the right. When you bend forward, bend also backward. Try through these balanced movements gradually to center yourself in the spine. Then try to raise your consciousness toward the brain.”*

— Swami Kriyananda  
*The Art and Science of Raja Yoga*