

# Awake & Ready!

Newsletter of the Ananda Yoga™ Teachers Association  
Vol. 8 No. 1 • Spring 2003

## PERSPECTIVE

### Magnetic Protection

As I write this, the war in Iraq seems mostly over, but the question remains: what will come of this unfortunate conflict? And the next one, and the next? Why are these things happening? What is my role in promoting peace? What role can Ananda Yoga teachers play?

During the 1991 Gulf War, Swami Kriyananda gave an answer: “The light that is now coming into the planet with the start of Dwapara Yuga is being battled by darkness. This new age is a time of heightened energy, which is our responsibility to turn toward good. That awakening of Spirit is not going to happen automatically. This is why we’ve been born—we’ve been attracted here at this time not only for ourselves, but to help bring God’s light out into the world.”



Gyandev McCord  
Director

As Ananda Yoga teachers, we can give students powerful tools to help them experience the light and bring it out into the world. However, darkness constantly tries to obscure that light. As soon as students leave our classes, they enter a maelstrom of negative magnetism: fear, tension, confusion, despair—all made even worse by media hysteria. So I’d like to suggest a few ways in which you can help your students counter that negative magnetism and stay in the light.

#### Strengthening the Aura

A strong aura is vital to countering negative magnetism. Asanas can be helpful here; Energization and (for those who know it) maha mudra are even more powerful. In his book, *Awaken to Superconsciousness*, Swami Kriyananda gives many additional techniques for overcoming negative magnetism. Here are two that you can share with students:

- Sit or stand with your arms at your sides. Mentally chant AUM as you circle them slowly out to the side and upward, palms up, until you join the palms high above the head. Use the magnetism of your hands and the power of your will to create an aura of upward-moving light around your body. Bring the hands slowly back down and do it again. Continue for as long as desired.
- Bring your palms together in front of you. Then move them out and around your body in a broad circle until

the palms or fingers touch behind your back; then bring your palms together again in front. All the while, mentally chant, “AUM-TAT-SAT.” (The a’s in TAT-SAT are pronounced short, with an “uh” sound: “TUT-SUT.”) Repeat this front-to-back-to-front process at least three times. Afterward, feel yourself surrounded by that protective vibration. [This mantra is the Hindu equivalent of the Christian Trinity: AUM means the Cosmic Sound, Holy Ghost, or Divine Mother; TAT, the *Kutashtha Chaitanya* or Christ Consciousness, the consciousness of the Creator within creation; and SAT, the Father aspect of God, the Creative Spirit beyond all vibration.]

The Gayatri mantra (see Section 7 of the AYT manual) is another powerful aid. Chanting it gives a palpable feeling of inner strength and centeredness. I also like to play Swami Kriyananda’s CD recording of it for long periods (even overnight), with my CD player on “repeat” and the volume low enough that it’s not a distraction. The mantra washes away negativity, fear, and restlessness. Try it.

#### There’s Strength in Numbers, Too

Another way to support your students is through facilitating *satsang* (“fellowship in truth”). When like-minded souls gather for spiritual—or even mundane—reasons, together they create a magnetic “bubble” that can protect and uplift them even after they disperse to their own homes.

As a teacher, you’re in a unique position to help this happen by organizing ways for students to gather outside of class: community service projects, spiritual discussions, meditations, peace prayer sessions, potlucks, or outings. The nature of the event is less important than the *satsang* itself. People seeking the light need mutual reinforcement.

This will support you, too, by the way. I’ve always seen that the people who help things like this happen are the

*(continues on page 2)*

## IN THIS ISSUE

Perspective: Magnetic Protection .....	1
AYTA Member News .....	2
Therapeutic Yoga: The Lower Back (Part 2) .....	3
Lessons in Love and Courage (Part 1) .....	7
Completing Your Level 2 Certification .....	9
Inspirations: Are Your Students Bored? .....	11
AYTA Contacts .....	12
Level 2 News .....	12



## Magnetic Protection (continued from page 1)

ones who gain the most from it. If you're not already part of such a group, I urge you to consider it. If you would like to form an Ananda Meditation Group—or just find out what that means or what it takes—please contact Krishna Das at [krishnadas@ananda.org](mailto:krishnadas@ananda.org) (530-478-7560, ext. 2340).

### An Empowering Discovery

As the Iraq war approached, I prayed a lot for peace. Sometimes I felt I was helping, but at other times I despaired: “This world is *so* big, and my prayers seem *so* hopelessly puny and unrealistic. Maybe I should just leave it all to the great masters [whom Paramhansa Yogananda said are guiding this world, despite appearances to the contrary].”

But then it came to me: “What if, instead of general peace prayers, I focus where I can be more effective? I'll pray for Ananda Yoga teachers! They *want* to be channels for peace, and we already have a connection. Maybe that will help me be more focused and fruitful than in my general prayers.”

I began strongly to visualize all of you full of joy and strength, radiating light powerfully in all directions—to students, friends, family, coworkers, strangers. As I strove to support you in the light, and see you as dynamic instruments for peace, my prayers began to feel more meaningful and impactful. It's been very empowering and inspiring.

I encourage you to do this for your students as well as for other yoga teachers, ministers—anyone who actively seeks to be a channel. What a wonderful way to help them spread the

light—and help them stay protected!

### We Can Do More Than We Might Think

Also, I've come to see several reasons why we should never think that our prayers for peace are too small.

First, the job is not as big as it seems. As Swami Kriyananda said, divine light is *already* pouring into this world. We don't need to create it—that *would* be unrealistic!—we need only help channel it. Yogananda said that God always works through instruments. God does not impose His light on the world, but rather seeks willing souls who will help it manifest. That's our great opportunity.

Second, a person who serves the light has more power than one who spreads darkness. No one consciously seeks to bring darkness; everyone seeks the light. It's only confusion, misperception, and ungoverned desire that causes some to bring darkness. Because darkness is not his goal, merely his error, such a person's efforts don't have nearly as much impact as another's conscious, focused prayer on behalf of the light. Let that inspire you next time you pray for peace.

Third, miracles can happen through those who continue praying dynamically, even in the face of contrary appearances. I'd like to share an amazing story from *The Power of Positive Thinking*, a classic book by Norman Vincent Peale.

After years of happiness, a marriage was floundering, and the husband was having an affair. Desperate to save her marriage, the wife sought advice from her minister, who urged her to (1) stop her constant criticism and nagging, which even she acknowledged was driving her husband away, and (2) strongly pray/visualize him at home with her.

Immediately, the woman began to follow the advice, changing her behavior completely—no small thing, I'm sure. When her husband asked for a divorce, with uncharacteristic calmness that greatly surprised her husband, she merely asked for a three-month waiting period. He agreed.

In addition, every day she strongly visualized her husband at home with her, doing all the things they used to enjoy together. She steadfastly refused to let “reality” diminish the power of her visualization. Even at night when he was who-knows-where, she would undauntedly visualize him at home with her. Talk about a warrior spirit!

In time, she began to see him—in the flesh—at home more and more, and finally all the time. After three months, when she reminded him that the delay was over, he replied, “Nonsense, I couldn't bear to be without you.”

A miracle? A coincidence? I think the explanation is that conscious intention—both to change ourselves and to pray for others—is much stronger than unconscious confusion.

### It Takes More Than Just Peaceful Thoughts

Together, let's apply the same principle to prayers for world peace. If enough people unceasingly project the vibrations of peace—not allowing the “reality” of outward strife to deter them—this world can change.

Of course, to send vibrations of peace, people must *experience* that peace; mere thoughts of peace are not enough. As Ananda Yoga teachers, we have the tools to help our

(continues on page 10)

## AYTA MEMBER NEWS

### Retaking Level 1 or Level 2 Programs

Now AYTA members can retake most Level 1 or Level 2 AYTT programs and pay just the *Personal Retreat Plus* rate. Retaking Level 1 AYTT is even less: \$750 off the published AYTT price. Some restrictions apply. Contact Gyandev for details.

### Please Keep Us Up-to-Date on Yourself

Have you changed your e-mail address and not told us? If it's been more than a couple weeks since you heard from AYSutra—please send your name and e-mail address to [AYSutra@expandinglight.org](mailto:AYSutra@expandinglight.org) so we can verify your address in our records.

### Step Right Up for a Free Membership

Would you consider writing an article for *Awake & Ready!* to share interesting teaching experiences or wisdom you've gained? You don't need writing skills; we'll help you manifest it, or even interview you. Short articles might be in the “Inspirations” section (see page 11)—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 12).



# Therapeutic Yoga: The Lower Back

*Part 2 of a 2-Part series by Nicole DeAvilla Whiting*

Hey, guess what? We are going to pretend that Randy—you remember Randy from the last issue, whom we almost sent to the hospital because he had so many complications with his back problem—has responded well to a conservative yoga therapy program. Can you guess what has been his favorite part of his yoga program? Well, it's the Ananda Yoga affirmations: he just loves them.

At first it was hard to tell because he was concentrating so hard on doing his yoga postures correctly that we weren't even sure he was paying any attention to the affirmations. After a while, though, he began asking us to write them down for him. He says he uses them when he is driving in heavy traffic or finds himself in other tense situations; he finds that they help him to stay calm and more relaxed. So Randy is doing just fine—more about the affirmations a bit later.)

Now let's review how to know which asanas to start with for our students with low back concerns. Then we will move into the "how to" section.

## Location ... Severity ... Type of Condition

When choosing asanas for a person with lower back problems, you need to assess the location, severity, and probable general type of condition.

The *location*, as mentioned in the previous article, is usually best ascertained by having the student touch where it hurts. This helps alleviate potential miscommunication from students who may know how to pronounce some anatomical terms, but do not really know anatomy.

*Severity* is determined by the pain level and the effect of the problem on the student's daily activities. The higher the pain level, the greater the severity. This information is coupled with any limits or changes the student has to make in his or her daily activities. In some cases, there may be no change in daily activities. However, common examples of changes would be inability to sit for long periods of time, sleep adversely affected, favoring one side while walking, unable to bend over to pick something up, etc. The greater the effect on daily activities, the greater the severity.

*General types of conditions* will, for this discussion, broadly fall into two categories: muscle strain/sprain and nerve/disc involvement. (We call these "probable categories" because, unless we have the relevant medical training, as yoga instructors we are not qualified to diagnose.)

Muscle strain/sprain can range from overworked muscles due to an overly exuberant workout the day before, to more severe strain from an accident or chronic problem. The sensations tend to be described as stiff, achy, sore, and tender. The sensations that tend to describe nerve and/or disc involvement are sharp, tingling, numbness, radiating pain, and compression. You can also suspect nerve and/or disc involvement if twisting or bending in a particular direction produces a sharp, sometimes knife-like pain, or a radiating

pain, or a significant increase in pain. A student may have only one or a few of the symptoms, and of course there will be some overlap in the description of the symptoms.

If you suspect or know of nerve involvement and/or disc involvement, act conservatively and avoid forward bends, twists, backward bends, and seated postures. Attempt these positions only in very low severity cases that are responding well to yoga asanas and physical therapy. This sounds extreme, but in most cases these movements will aggravate the condition. There are exceptions, but those require more skill and knowledge than can be gained from an article like this. Besides, there are so many effective therapeutic asanas that avoid these movements that I do not feel it essential to know all of the asanas that one could potentially, possibly do. (By the way, you might ask if the student is currently seeing a physical therapist. If so, ask what the therapist is having him do. If the therapist is having him do twists, for example, then it's probably okay for him to do twists in your classes.)



*Nicole teaches Therapeutic Yoga and Prenatal YTT at The Expanding Light. Certified to teach Ananda Yoga in 1984, she also has a background in sports medicine and chiropractic physiotherapy. She lives with her husband and two children in Marin County, Calif., where she teaches yoga and meditation classes and leads an Ananda Healing Prayer group and kirtans.*

## Strategies for Pain Reduction and Prevention

The main goal is to get timely, positive results. Applied sensitively, the handful of basic asanas listed in this article can go a long way toward achieving that!

When working therapeutically, it's best to not hold asanas for long periods. (It's okay to hold restoratives longer, but even then be careful to not overdo it.) Repetitions are best, because injured muscles are by nature fatigued and unable to maintain the work effort without more periods of rest.

If the pain level is moderate to high, pain reduction becomes the first priority. Good basic poses to begin trying include pelvic tilts, single and double knees to the chest, inversion at the wall, and knees bent resting on a chair (see below: Low Back Asanas, Group A). Remember to ask continually for feedback on the effects of the positions.

Pranayama—especially good old basic diaphragmatic breathing—is very important for pain reduction. I almost

*(continues on page 4)*

## Therapeutic Yoga: The Lower Back (continued from page 3)

always emphasize the exhalation, as that is where people tend to shortchange themselves. Be sure that the student is in a supported supine position such as savasana, with a bolster under his knees or with his legs supported on a chair seat. Keep it simple; deep belly breaths can do wonders. More-technical pranayamas (e.g., alternate nostril breathing) can cause an increase in tension for some students—especially those in pain—as they struggle to do it right.

As mentioned before, some students may find that a regular yoga routine is sufficient in and of itself to alleviate their lower back concerns, without much emphasis on the therapeutic asanas. You can gauge this by their current activities and pain level. It's especially important that people with lower back concerns do all their asanas with proper alignment. A student who has never been injured can get away with much more poor alignment than can an injured student. Also, keeping the abdominal and low back muscles strong will be necessary to prevent reinjury.

Now I'll describe what I feel are some of the safest, most effective asanas that can be used for a wide range of low back symptoms. These asanas are good for all students as warm ups, building blocks, prevention, and as counterposes. Anyone with a low back concern should begin with the asanas in Group A. Someone without nerve or disc involvement can begin with the asanas in Groups A and B right away. Otherwise start with Group A and slowly add from Group B—only one or two at a time as seems appropriate over time. These asanas represent a conservative approach to lower back concerns.

Please note that I've excluded twists and standing poses, which in many cases are very good for the low back, but can potentially aggravate quite a few conditions. Once a student's condition has stabilized, you can begin introducing twists and standing asanas. If you have a student who is already doing well with these or other positions (perhaps assigned by his physical therapist), by all means go ahead and use them. Standing and seated forward bends are probably the hardest on low back problems; save them for when your student is strong and has not had any symptoms for a long time.

### Low Back Asanas, Group A

These are the basic poses for all conditions, and specific for pain reduction and suspected nerve/disc involvement.

1. **Supported savasana**—A student with back pain should do savasana with support under the knees (photo below). Even after he no longer feels back pain, he should continue this to help prevent a relapse. Start with a roll under the knees, and if that does not seem to be effective, support the entire lower legs on a stack blankets or



pillows, or on a chair (see #A7). Be sure that the neck is in its natural curve; support it as needed to restore the curve. If the cervical spine is not in proper alignment, the lumbar area will not be able to release fully and be tension-free. Keep working until you find a truly comfortable position.

2. **Savasana with pranayama**—Diaphragmatic breathing is very important. When one is in pain, one tends to breathe very shallowly and tensely, which in turn can cause even more pain and discomfort. Deep belly breathing is often all that's needed. If you feel that the student is ready for more, try even-count breathing and the full yogic breath. Even-count breathing can be effective if the count is not too long and you remind the student to relax even more deeply during the holds. With the full yogic breath, watch to insure that the student does not tense at the "top" of the inhalation.
3. **Supine under-curve (tuck) pelvic tilts**—These unassuming little movements can work wonders. The knees should be bent with the feet flat on the floor, a comfortable distance apart (photo below). There are two ways to get



the lower back onto the floor in a pelvic tuck. One way is to push the lower back down into the floor and push the stomach out at the same time. The second, more proper, way is to "scoop out" the abdominal area, moving the abdominal muscles down as the lower back presses into the floor in the tuck position. The first way gives some benefit to the lower back but does not engage the deep pelvic muscles. It also encourages the development of protruding abdominal muscles—something that nobody wants and that serves as a reminder to allow the abdominals to move down with the lower back in a proper tilt. To check if a student is doing this properly, have him place his hands on his abdomen, then relax and inhale (the abdomen should rise with the inhalation), then exhale and tuck. The abdomen should lower on the exhalation, and continue to lower away from the hands as the student goes into the pelvic tuck. Relax everything on the ensuing inhalation, then exhale and tuck again. Continue for a number of repetitions. If the breathing pattern confuses the student, tell him to forget about the breath—simply breathe without holding the breath. Even if he does not coordinate movement with the breath, his abdomen should move down along with the lower back in the tuck on the exhalation. Also, contracting the deep pelvic muscles on the exhalation will strengthen them, while the lower back muscles are gently being lengthened. This is effective both to reduce pain and to help with strength and flexibility over the long term.



## Therapeutic Yoga: The Lower Back (continued from page 4)



4. **Single knee to chest** (photo above)—To keep the lower back comfortable without strain, the opposite leg may need to have a bolster support, or be bent (foot on the floor). Use a strap if needed to make the stretch more comfortable—or even doable in the first place.
5. **Double knees to chest** (photo right)—Check the cervical alignment. The student's head and/or neck may need to be supported. If it is a strain, or in some cases impossible, for the student to grasp the legs, then use a strap to draw the knees to the chest.
6. **Inversion at the wall**—This can be wonderfully relaxing and healing. Support the student's neck and/or head as needed. If the student has tight hamstrings and cannot relax the legs in a straight position close to the wall, move him far enough away from the wall to make this possible. If the lower back releases in such a way that it becomes uncomfortable (this *can* happen), have the student slowly come out of the position; then have him walk around the room in a pedestrian manner, which usually re-stabilizes the lower back. Next time have the student hold the position for only a brief period of time, and build up the time gradually. The piriformis stretch (#7 in Group B below) also can be done at the wall, eliminating the need to use the arms to get the stretch.
7. **Supine with chair support for the legs** (photo below)—This can be an effective alternative both to savasana with bolsters and to inversion at the wall.



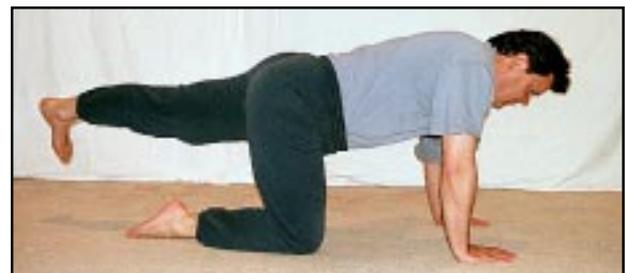
If your student was able to come to your class, he should be able to do all of the above pain-reduction asanas. Still, always go slowly, ask questions, and be ready to improvise, because some of these asanas may not work for some reason.

After the pain is less severe or even gone, continue with Group A asanas, and begin adding asanas from Group B.

### Low Back Asanas, Group B

These are for low-to-moderate severity, and for stability and prevention.

1. **Inversion at the wall with piriformis stretch (#7 below) or with the legs in butterfly position**—For the butterfly position, have the student bring the soles of his feet together into butterfly position; then tell him to relax and that it's okay for the feet to move apart when they relax.
2. **Yogic sit-ups**—The first key to yogic sit-ups is to do them consciously, with awareness and coordination of body, mind, and breath (thus “yogic” and not the usual “go for the burn, as many as you can” type). Do not hold the breath. The second key is to do the sit-up with a deep under-curve pelvic tilt (tuck). The fingers should rest on the thighs and not go above the knees (photo right top); this keeps the lower back on the floor and protected. If the student experiences any neck discomfort, then the arms should be crossed behind the head to support the neck (photo right bottom). Even slight discomfort in the lower back means that either the pelvic tilt is not strong (or even existent), or that the muscles are fatigued and one should rest.
3. **Table pose with leg extensions** (photo below)—Be sure that the student does not remove the natural spinal curves by swaying the lower back, twisting, or lifting the head up.

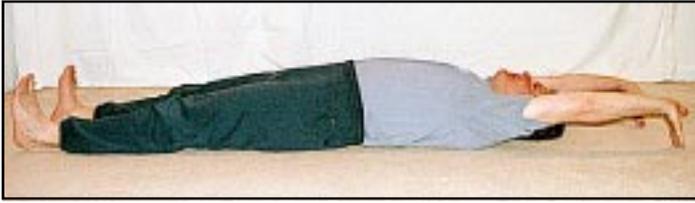


4. **Modified cobra**—This is the sphinx pose, except the lower back and legs should remain relaxed. Do slow repetitions, not holding the position for very long.
5. **Psoas stretch**—The psoas muscle attaches to the lumbar spine and inserts on the lesser trochanter of the femur. When this important hip flexor is too tight, it pulls the lumbar spine toward lordosis, compressing the discs. To stretch it, the student should lie flat on his back and fully stretch his body, with the arms straight overhead. The wrists are bent fully backward, finger tips on the floor, and the toes are flexed toward the knees. Maintaining a

(continues on page 6)

## Therapeutic Yoga: The Lower Back

(continued from page 5)



very active stretch in this position, the student should then press the navel toward the spine and the spine toward the floor (photo above). Hold for only a few seconds at first, then release just the lower back and abdomen. Repeat the pressing of the lower back down into the floor a few times before relaxing completely. As a variation, press down with just the left side of the abdomen and low back, then just the right side. Repeat the whole sequence a few times, with rests in between.

6. **Leg stretches with a strap** (photo below)—Make the same adjustments (as needed) as are you would make with “knees to the chest” (#A4, A5).



7. **Piriformis stretch** (a.k.a. “Figure-4 stretch,” photo below)—The piriformis muscle is deep in the pelvis, attaching to the anterior sacrum and inserting on the greater trochanter; it helps rotate the hip externally and is often involved in sciatic pain. If the student cannot easily take hold of the leg to come into the stretch, give him one or more of the following props, or else use the wall: If the student’s head tilts back even a little, put a blanket (or



pillow) underneath his head so he can maintain the natural cervical curve. A strap around the leg that is being drawn up will help an inflexible or large student hold the position more comfortably (or be able to reach that leg in the first place). Doing this stretch at the wall can work very well, as that enables the arms to stay relaxed. Again, use a support for the head and neck if needed. Start with the legs straight up on the wall. Cross one leg over the other, bringing the ankle onto the opposite thigh just below the knee. Then bend the leg still at the wall (sliding the foot down the wall) enough to feel the stretch in the piriformis, other area of the gluteals, or inner or outer thigh. Depending on a student’s relative tight spots, this stretch, though primarily intended to stretch the piriformis muscle, may also stretch these other related areas. Even a very slight bend might create an intense stretch. Some students may need to scoot a little bit away from the wall in order to have a comfortable stretch. The buttocks should not lift off of the ground.

### Speaking of the Affirmations

Now, let’s get back to Randy. Are you wondering about the affirmations for “knees to the chest” or yogic sit-ups? Well, I’ve not heard of any official versions, but here’s what I do:

I don’t believe that we need a new and different affirmation for every asana—especially the “building block” and therapeutic types of asanas—so I borrow from the wonderful list of affirmations that we already have. For a building block asana, I use the most appropriate affirmation from the asana or asanas that one is potentially building up to.

For example, “inversion at the wall” (#A6 above) is a preparation for the classical inversions. Its restful nature is more in line with shoulderstand than with, say, headstand, so I use the shoulderstand affirmation: “God’s peace now floods my being.” In a class where the word “God” may not feel appropriate, I will use, “Peace now floods my being,” mentally infusing the word “Peace” with God’s presence. For an asana that may not feel particularly related to the specific energy of any asana that has an Ananda Yoga affirmation, I may simply choose to have the student focus on breath, space, or light to help interiorize the experience.

While any student will have his up and down days, if you are not seeing any progress in a reasonable amount of time, you should suggest that the student see a health care provider. There can be many causes for back pain—including problems with internal organs, or cancer—that need to be addressed by a specialist. Similarly, a bulging disc or severe nerve impingement needs intervention beyond what yoga can currently offer the student.

Last but not least, pray for your students—all of them. And remember, the more you practice yoga as a way of life and teach with an attitude of service and respect, the better you will be as a teacher. The more you work to be in tune with your higher self, the deeper your intuition will be. And if you pray for your students and for guidance, it will be as though you have a master teacher, always helping you. These practices are what develop the art of Ananda Yoga therapy.

Blessings to you in your practice and service. ♦



# Lessons in Love and Courage

## What I've Learned from My Favorite Group of Students

*Part 1 of a 2-Part Series by Christine Reeves*

**H**ave you ever scheduled yourself to teach a “special needs” class with no props, almost no idea of what the special needs were, and no idea of who the students were? I have, and it launched me on an amazing adventure.

Nearly two years ago, I gave a couple private yoga therapy sessions to a friend of mine who had been battling cancer and beating the odds for more than ten years. She told me of Wellspring, a privately funded support center in Toronto for cancer patients and their families. Originally a member for her own support, she had long since moved on to become a peer support counsellor. “You’d be perfect for teaching there,” she told me. “You have just the right gentle, caring energy that creates a sense of safety for people.”

Having always been an advocate of yoga as healing, I promptly arranged to meet with the director of Wellspring. The facility offers support in every imaginable form that the medical system cannot begin to touch. It’s not a hospital or treatment center, but rather a source of comfort, emotional and psychological support, and practical information. They have a library and about forty programs, all free of charge: professionally led discussion/support groups and private counselling; “expressive” programs like art therapy, journaling, music therapy and quilting; and “coping skills” programs like Yoga, Tai Chi, Qi Gong, Relaxation and Visualization, and Body/Mind meditation. It is a truly extraordinary place that offers something for anyone living with cancer.

After a long interview and follow-up of my references, I was assigned my first eight-week course, one class per week. I wondered how I would adapt yoga to serve the needs of the people there, and how yoga actually fit into the enormous healing paradigm that they offered. I didn’t know yet.

### The Lessons Begin

On the evening of my first class, I went early to set up the room and introduce myself privately and individually to the students, as is the procedure at Wellspring. The classroom is like a large living room. I rolled the furniture to one side of the room to clear the carpeted floor for practice. There were a few pillows on the couches and a few light flannel blankets, but no mats, no ties, no propping blankets, and only a couple of chairs. Needless to say, I was a little nervous about teaching a “special needs group” without any props. I also had no idea what or whom to expect.

To add to the mystery, Wellspring has a strong confidentiality code, so I was not allowed to ask what kind of cancer people were dealing with, or which parts of their bodies

might be sore. In addition, because Wellspring serves both cancer patients and their families, I might have some students who were perfectly healthy, while others would be recovering from surgery or undergoing radiation or chemotherapy treatments. Their ages would range from mid-20’s to 70’s, and some would be dealing with other ailments besides cancer, such as arthritis.

At first I was afraid—of doing too much, of doing too little, of hurting people. I was hesitant to make adjustments, lest I touch a part of the body that was tender or vulnerable.

Suddenly safety precautions had much higher stakes for me as a teacher. Right away I gave a talk about safety, asking them to move in and out of postures mindfully and slowly, as they may have tight or tender areas that they aren’t even aware of. I asked them not to look at or compare themselves to other students, as everyone in the class may be dealing with different ailments, and might also be at different stages in their healing processes.

I soon discovered that people recovering from surgery often simply forget that they can’t move as they used to. Every once in a while someone moved too quickly and deeply into a pose, and suddenly there was a stab of pain and a yelp. Others had trouble with sudden dizziness due to the treatments they were undergoing or drugs they were

taking. So along with safety precautions, I had to stress the “continuous awareness” aspect of Ananda Yoga. I invited them to learn how to tune in and listen to their bodies, to move slowly and with awareness, to be patient and compassionate with themselves, to do only what felt right for them, and to rest whenever they needed. I asked them to focus on the breath, and breathe into the tight spots. I realized that I needed to create an environment where it is not only okay, but empowering, for them to have the choice to do as much or as little of the class as they feel up to on any given day.

I learned quickly that I needed to exercise my own “continuous awareness” and “safety precautions” when it came to making adjustments. Sometimes people felt extreme vulnerability, fragility, and tenderness after a surgery. Many were afraid to be touched or adjusted. So I told them that if they prefer not to be touched, either let me know in private at the start of the class, or give me a hand signal when I move toward them. When I moved in to touch someone, I let him or her know I was going to do so.

I’ve continued that practice to this day, always asking permission if I don’t know students well. For safety, I move my hands into their energy field slowly and with awareness,

*(continues on page 8)*



*Christine lives in Toronto, Ontario, where she teaches yoga in various locations to a variety of student populations.*

## Lessons in Love and Courage (continued from page 7)

then touch them lightly before I move them in any direction. Sometimes just my touch is enough to get them to move themselves in the right direction.

As for the privacy issue, I ended up suggesting that if they want to share their special needs with me in private, they were welcome to, so that I could better customize the postures for them. In the beginning, most said not a word to me, and I could sense it would take time to gain their trust. Some of them had never been to Wellspring before, so for them, just being in a group with other cancer patients was a whole new experience. All I could do was be caring and respectful of their personal experiences at all times.

Most of that first group were able to manage a very gentle and slow beginners' class. Some were well on the road to getting their health back; others had exhaustion and pain. One woman showed up in a walker and was unable to stand on her own or get down on the floor at all. I did my best to encourage her to stay with the breath, and I adapted as much as I could for her to do in a chair, but after three classes she dropped out, feeling that it was just too much for her. This was my first disappointment, but I realized that this is part of what happens at Wellspring: twelve people sign up, and you end up teaching six or eight each week. Sometimes it's not the right time in their healing process to come, and occasionally it's simply the wrong program.

### Coming to Terms with the C-Word

As for myself, I soon became aware that there was another fear present in me, one that was more to the point: I was a little bit afraid of the cancer—the “big C” word. It was somehow uncomfortable, awkward. Should I mention it and acknowledge it, or should I avoid all reference to it? I didn't know. In the first couple of classes, I found myself walking on eggshells because I didn't know how to relate to it or them. “It” was present in the room, but no one was saying anything. I was later to learn from one of my students that they can actually sense that same fear in most people, but no one admits it. Often when she tells people she has cancer, suddenly they freeze up because they don't know what to say or how to handle it.

To open the door gently on this topic—without prying into my students' processes—I took the time to ask them how the yoga had been for them, and how they were feeling after class. Some of them liked to talk openly about the cancer, the symptoms, and how the yoga helped; others did not care to talk at all. If they initiated the conversation, I would listen empathetically and supportively, and sometimes make yoga suggestions. If they did not want to bring it up, I respected their wishes.

One thing I've learned is that the more relaxed and comfortable I am with talking about it, the more relaxed they feel, too. I think that initially I was afraid to hear of their suffering and pain. Not anymore. That's one of the benefits of working with any group of people suffering from illness. It helps one to become strong and bravely hold space and compassion for the suffering of others. That in turn has

translated into an ability to be more compassionate and brave in dealing with my own suffering, or that of my family members, in a more peaceful and detached manner.

### Discovering Which Practices Really Work

After that first eight-week series, the classes developed quickly. What has guided me is my connection with the students. I stay tuned to what they are able to do and what seems to be too strenuous, both individually and as a group. Generally speaking I do a lot of warm-ups or little stretches that prepare them for the asanas, and I give lots of attention to details like feet, ankles, hands, wrists, head, neck, and shoulders. Most of the postures are adapted variations or “half” versions; some of them are closer to restorative yoga, only with fewer props.

One definitely needs to be prepared to be creative and adapt the postures a lot for individual needs. Some weeks the group seems to have more energy, so we do some standing postures; other weeks I focus exclusively on pranayama, relaxation, and floor asanas. Occasionally I simply ask them how this or that posture felt. Mostly I observe and intuit. In any case, I relate to them and talk to them about life, yoga, and healing, before and after the class; I invite silence and focus within the class. I become part of the team effort to fight against the “downs” of cancer, adjusting my teaching as I go, finding out quickly what they enjoy and find helpful, and what doesn't belong in that particular curriculum.

Of course, all this varies from group to group and from class to class. Although standing postures can sometimes be a bit strenuous, many find them empowering. When we practice a few standing postures, we do not hold them for very long, and we often use the wall to brace the back heel in warrior pose or triangle. We have also used the wall for natarajasana, utkatasana, and vrikasana. In natarajasana, for example, they face the wall, one hand up, leaning the chest forward. Some cannot extend the back leg and foot very well, so we might just do a quadriceps stretch (or start with it): square the knees, tuck the tailbone under, pull the back heel into the buttock, then extend the knee back a bit.

Chandrasana is a great standing pose that most of the students can do, but we start with the one-armed version: one hand is on the hip, pressing out to the opposite side, and the other arm comes up and over (see figure). It's less strenuous than the full pose, especially for those who have had mastectomies.

The standing roll-down through the spine—rolling





down and then back up, all in rag-doll fashion—feels great and is a favorite (for healthy spines only, of course).

### Energization Is the Ticket

Overall, the best and easiest way to get them on their feet and moving their energy is through the Energization Exercises and the Superconscious Living Exercises. I have seldom had someone who couldn't do them. I don't do all of the EE's, but I usually put in five or six exercises plus two or three standing asanas. You could just as easily teach more EE's and skip the standing asanas. They love them because they are invigorating, empowering, easy to do, and they really feel the difference in their energy levels.

In terms of physical benefits, the EE's are paramount for cancer patients as they help to detoxify the body. In her book *A Call to Women: The Healthy Breast Program & Workbook—Naturopathic Prevention of Breast Cancer*, Sat Dharam Kaur, ND, explains: "It is primarily muscular movement that causes the lymphatic fluid to flow efficiently to the cleansing stations known as the lymph nodes. In the lymph nodes the white blood cells work away at keeping your body free of bacteria, viruses, toxins, and cancer cells. It is the movement of the arms, armpits, and chest that assists lymphatic cleansing (especially of the breasts) ... Marching and walking while swinging your arms is extremely beneficial on a daily basis. When muscle contraction is used in combination with deep breathing, lymphatic circulation is enhanced even more. This improves the body's cancer-fighting ability ... Aerobic effect also increases the size and number of blood vessels in the body. There is a greater total blood volume and increased ability to bring oxygen to all body cells. Cancer cells do not thrive in a well-oxygenated environment." Upon reading this, I realized that the EE's, with the tensing and relaxing of the muscles, double breaths, shoulder/elbow/arm circles, the fencing exercise, and marching to "I'm awake and ready!" are ideal for these students' needs.

### Tools for Detoxification

For prostate, uterine, ovarian, or cervical cancer—or any organs in the pelvis—we want to open the hips to stimulate circulation of lymph and energy in the groin and pelvic region, especially around the sexual/reproductive organs. I have them lie on their backs, bend one knee into the chest and draw giant beach-ball size circles with that knee in the air, synchronizing deep breathing with the movement. We also do stretches like upavistha konasana (seated forward bend with feet wide), frog (child pose with knees wide), janushirasana, lunge with the back knee on the floor, and a variety of simple stretches that can be done lying or sitting.

With upavistha konasana, I have them firm the legs and press the backs of the knees down into the floor. Everyone rounds out in this pose, especially if trying to lean forward, so I have them place the palms on the floor, just behind the buttocks, pressing down to help rotate the pelvis forward, preserve the natural curve of the low back, and lengthen up in the chest (see figure). Most have no forward flexion at all, so after we have worked on strengthening and lengthening

(continues on page 10)

## Completing Level 2 AYTT

by Gyandev McCord

Some of you are nearing Level 2 certification, so I'd like to answer a few questions about how to finish up.

Q. How do I know how much I have left to do?

A. Contact me (see p. 12) and I'll tell you.

Q. Have the Level 2 requirements changed recently?

A. No, just a couple surprises. One person forgot that at most 125 sadhana hours can count toward Level 2, so she had farther to go than she thought. (For a copy of the full Level 2 requirements, please contact me.)

A second surprise was on me. As you know, in Level 2 you can opt out of the AYTT Assistantship if you've taught at least 500 hours of classes since graduating from Level 1. What I didn't foresee is that, depending on which Level 2 electives you've taken, that might leave you with too few hours of "Supervised Teaching." (Yoga Alliance and Level 2 AYTT call for 40 hours.) Don't worry. Even if this happens to you, you won't need many more hours; we'll work with you to find a way to get them.

By the way, the more experience we have with the Assistantship, the more we recommend that *nobody* opt out. All participants have found the Assistantship a valuable aid to going deeper into this important aspect of teaching. Which brings me to the next FAQ:

Q. Tell me about the class I have to teach if I want to opt out of the Assistantship?

A. You'll need to teach 90 minutes of asanas to AYTT staff and volunteer students, satisfactorily demonstrating your ability to assist/adjust students. The poses can be any of the asanas from Levels 1 and 2. "Satisfactorily" means doing as well as we'd expect an Assistantship grad to do in modifying asanas, assisting/adjusting, props, etc.—i.e., you should be solid in these areas.

Q. Tell me about the final class I have to teach for Level 2 certification. Is it separate from the "opting out of the Assistantship" class?

A. Yes, it's separate. For Level 2 certification, you'll need to teach a satisfactory two-hour class to AYTT staff and volunteer students. The class needs to include:

- 30–40 minutes on Energization (a 5-minute intro followed by a detailed teaching of the exercises).
- 60–70 minutes of asanas in true Ananda Yoga style: proper sequencing, dynamic affirmations, safety, adjusting/modifying/props as needed, etc. The poses can be any of those in Levels 1 and 2.
- 20–25 minutes of teaching meditation: why meditate, what meditation is all about, details of the Hong-Sau technique, and leading the group into a mini-practice.

**Important:** The Level 1 graduation standard is "a basic understanding of Ananda Yoga, and able to start teaching safely." The Level 2 standard is higher: "solid in all aspects of Ananda Yoga." If you don't regularly teach *all* of the above aspects of Ananda Yoga, we recommend that you teach them all regularly for a while before you arrange to teach the final class for Level 2 certification.

## Lessons in Love and Courage (continued from page 9)

up in the spine, I let them round forward, hang their heads, and relax in “phase two” of the posture.

Of course, deep pelvic breathing (diaphragmatic breath) while doing forward folds, hip openers, and especially twists is good for increasing circulation and giving a gentle massage to the pelvic organs as well as the liver and spleen (the body’s main organs of detoxification). Sphinx and half locust can help detoxify the kidneys and adrenal glands through the “squeeze and soak” effect. Fish and bridge (simple versions) are great for the thyroid and parathyroid glands, as are restorative versions if you’re lucky enough to have props. The only inversion I teach this group is “legs up the wall.” If you have some cushions, you can place them under the sacrum while the legs are up, so that it becomes the restorative version of viparita karani for hormonal balancing, which is important for women whose estrogen levels have been a contributing factor to cancer.

For pranayama, we do lots of diaphragmatic breathing and the full yogic (three-part) breath. I also use alternate nostril breathing and kapalabhati, remembering that cancer does not thrive in a well-oxygenated environment.

What does not work well with this group are sun salutations and any strenuous postures, or too many standing postures. Remember that these people are most often suffering from exhaustion. Their bodies may be in recovery from recent surgery, needing lots of rest and deep relaxation. Many are terribly anemic or have low blood pressure. Others are energetically drained from chemotherapy, radiation, or drugs, not to mention the mental and emotional stress that come with a life-threatening illness. With this in mind, it’s a good idea to have savasana at the beginning of class, as well as a nice long one at the end.

In addition, the Ananda approach of pausing between postures is extremely helpful. The pauses become a time for silence, tuning in, becoming aware, and letting go of any strain that might have crept in from trying too hard during the preceding posture. Most of all, the pauses are very much about simply resting, which these people desperately need.

Many of my students have mentioned how they love hearing the benefits of the postures. One woman said that hearing the benefits helps her focus her mind on the cleansing, healing goodness that each posture brings. “It was very helpful knowing how the exercises were helping me. I would do elbow circles for lymph stimulation every morning in the shower.” Delighted to hear this, I told her that bringing her conscious awareness to the positive effects, and to the



individual organs and body parts, was very likely enhancing the healing process. By focusing her mind on it, she was bringing more energy to the point of concentration. She loved that idea. ♦

*In the next issue, Christine will explore the role of the asana affirmations, working with the emotional ups and downs of cancer, students’ perceptions of the benefits of their yoga practices, a miracle story, and more.*

---

## Magnetic Protection (continued from page 2)

students have that experience. They will in turn radiate that peace to others, whether they consciously try to do so or not. It will happen all the more if we pray for them—and still more if they, too, offer themselves as instruments for peace.

All this not only builds world peace, but also protects us from negative magnetism, for remember: we cannot both give and receive at the same time. When praying for others, we are on the wavelength of giving, of harmony and healing; we can’t absorb negative magnetism because we’re simply not on its wavelength.

## The Instrument is Blessed ...

Yogananda often said, “The instrument is blessed by that which flows through it.” *Whatever we express leaves its imprint on our consciousness—for better or for worse.* So if we actively channel peace into this world, we in turn will be blessed with greater inner peace.

Kriyananda also emphasizes that, to have a positive effect on this world, our thoughts, words, and actions must come from a place of inner peace. When we live from inner peace, our very lives become prayers for peace. On the other hand, violent actions, words of hatred, or negative thoughts—even in support of a righteous cause—can never lead to peace and harmony; they lead only to further rounds of violence and hatred. In Jesus’ words, “An evil tree cannot bring forth good fruit, nor can a good tree bring forth evil fruit.”

After 9/11, Swami pointed out: “The real war today is not military. It is a conflict between faith and the repudiation of all faith, between love and hatred. What will win this war is if millions of people offer themselves up as channels of God’s truth and justice. Each of us has the power to pray to God: ‘Lord, use me! Let me be a channel of Your love to all!’ Divine Love is a force. If we understand that by loving rightly we express God’s love, He will be able, through us, to uplift the world’s consciousness. United with God’s will, we can help mightily in the struggle between the forces of light and darkness. By praying and acting rightly, we may be instrumental in ushering in a period of international and inter-religious peace and understanding.”

Yes, as Paramhansa Yogananda said, the great masters are guiding this world. Yet even they need willing human instruments *through* whom they can work. May every Ananda Yoga teacher be such an instrument. Thank you for all that you do for a better, more peaceful world. ♦



## INSPIRATIONS

# Are Your Students Bored?

by David Ramsden

Once I received a phone call from a student who had taken my “Yoga for Seniors” class. She had been teaching Senior Yoga for about two weeks and had run out of new postures to teach. She was calling to ask me what she should teach next.

It was interesting to me that after only two weeks she was looking for “new stuff.” I told her to teach the same postures again and again until the students were comfortable with them. I think she was surprised—and a bit relieved—as though she hadn’t really considered that she “could” keep repeating them.

More recently, I took over an intermediate yoga class from a retiring teacher. She told me that the students were bored, so she had started



teaching a more flowing style of yoga, introducing new postures frequently. I had just moved to Oregon, and naturally I wanted to attract new students. I could have been tempted to break away from the Ananda style and give the students what they thought they wanted, but having studied and taught Ananda Yoga for as long as I have, I really had no interest in teaching other styles.

When I walked into the class, I began teaching the basic postures. Why?

Even after years of teaching, I can’t say I’ve come close to mastering any of the asanas. After all, the purpose of asana is to go deeper and deeper until we merge with our true nature. If that’s not happened yet, then there’s room for improvement. That’s why I never lose interest in doing the same postures over and over. Besides, just because I’m familiar and comfortable with the postures, that doesn’t mean that the students are. So if students were showing signs of boredom, perhaps it was because they had lost touch with the meaning of yoga. I decided to help them get in touch with that meaning.

In my years of leading sadhanas at The Expanding Light, I usually used the same series of postures, which I had determined were safe and comfortable for most guests. Even guests who came often did not complain about this. They knew that the peace and joy that occurs when they touch their inner selves was the result of going deeper into the postures. When the teacher constantly changes the asanas, students’ egos may be entertained, but it can actually distract them from going inward.

In my experience, it takes students several weeks with a posture before they can go into and out of it with relative

ease. At this point, they’ll have a certain level of comfort with the process, and they’ll start to relax into the postures. This is when the most profound changes begin to occur, which you’ll recognize in their beaming faces as they leave class, and which will assist them in their everyday lives.

There are many outward ways to approach Hatha Yoga. Besides a desire for endless variation in postures, students can get caught up in flashy clothes, sticky yoga mats, and flexible bodies. And then there’s achievement.

Overachievers almost seem out to do themselves harm. No matter how far they can stretch in a posture, it isn’t far enough. But in his *Yoga Sutras*, Patanjali didn’t even mention stretching. He defined posture merely as “a steady, comfortable position.” (Of course, he was talking about meditation posture, but I think it’s fair to apply it to asanas as well.) The goal of a yoga class is not to entertain students with flashy new postures, or to give the encouragement to “push harder.” Postures should be relaxed and open—and in the end, they should heal.

Paramhansa Yogananda said that after so many years, so many lifetimes, of being attached to outward form, we begin to feel the redundancy of it all. Life becomes an “anguishing monotony,” as he put it. Truly there is nothing “out there” that will bring us happiness, unless happiness comes from within ourselves in the first place. So naturally students will become bored, unless we can help them find real depth in the asanas that we offer.

When I worked at The Expanding Light I saw the profound changes that yoga brought into people’s lives. Within the space of three days, people would come away with a new sense of inner freedom, a connection with their true nature. They would simply shine. That’s how a yoga class should be.

Well, my intermediate class went very nicely after all. One of the students had told me that she needed to leave early, so I tapped her at the appointed time during savasana. She shook her head and whispered, “I just can’t go!” Another said he loved it so much he planned to take both Monday night classes, back to back.

Next week I will try to guide them even deeper into those same postures.

People everywhere desperately need a way to slow down and relax, and to go inside and finally see who they really are. Helping them through Ananda Yoga is a great service to the world, and I bless you in this. ♦

*Long a popular sadhana leader and teacher at The Expanding Light, David now lives in the Ananda Portland community. In addition to helping out with community tasks, he teaches at the Ananda Mandir in Beaverton and at a number of other locations in the Portland area.*



### AYTA CONTACTS

Gyandev McCord  
The Expanding Light  
530-478-7518 ext. 7081  
gyandev@expandinglight.org

Doug Andrews  
831-338-9850/2103  
rdwdyoga@sbcglobal.net

Lisa Powers  
The Expanding Light  
530-478-7518 ext. 7087  
lisa@expandinglight.org

Bent Hansen  
Co-Director, Ananda Portland  
503-626-3403  
anandap@europa.com

Maria McSweeney  
Co-Director, Ananda Sacramento  
916-361-0891  
anandasac@jps.net

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

## Level 2 Programs This Summer

As usual, this coming summer is full of programs that count toward your Level 2 AYT certification. Here are the newest ones; all the Level 2 dates are listed below.

- *Restorative Yoga Teacher Training* (June 19–22, 2003), a 3-day weekend training led by Jyoti Spearin.
- *Prenatal Yoga Teacher Training* (August 3–8, 2003), a 5-day training program with Nicole DeAvilla, who also teaches *Therapeutic Yoga* (June 15–20, 2003).
- *The Joy of Sanskrit* (August 8–10, 2003), a weekend intensive with Dharma Widmann.
- *Special Needs Teacher Training* (August 17–24, 2003), now in a 7-day format. Led by Jyoti Spearin, Barbara Bingham, P.T., and Kay Erdwinn, M.D., you'll explore how to work with a variety of anatomical, physiological, and psychological conditions often encountered in yoga students.

Remember that AYTA Members receive a 10% 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 The Expanding Light for an application.)

In the schedule below, "★" indicates a required Level 2 program. For complete program details, please see The Expanding Light's program guide or visit [www.expandinglight.org](http://www.expandinglight.org).

5/18–25 ..... ★Advanced Pranayama and the Subtle Body

6/15–20 ..... Therapeutic Yoga

6/19–22 ..... Restorative Yoga Teacher Training

6/22–27 ..... Sharing Yoga with Children

6/22–29 ..... ★Essence of the *Bhagavad Gita*

6/29–7/6 ... ★Meditation Teacher Training

6/29–7/6 ... Kriya Yoga Preparation

7/6–19 ..... ★AYTT Assistantship

8/3–8 ..... Prenatal YTT

8/8–10 ..... The Joy of Sanskrit

8/17–24 ..... Special Needs YTT

9/28–10/5.. Kriya Yoga Preparation

10/12–19 ... ★Meditation Teacher Training

10/19–11/16 ★AYTT Assistantship

2004 Preview

1/11–24 ..... ★AYTT Assistantship

3/28–4/10 .. ★AYTT Assistantship (tentative dates)

5/27–6/6 ... Yoga of the Heart™—Cardiac and Cancer Teacher Training (tentative dates)

## The Expanding Light

14618 Tyler Foote Road  
Nevada City CA 95959