

ANANDA YOGA  
For Higher Awareness

# Awake & Ready!

Newsletter of the Ananda Yoga™ Teachers Association  
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## PERSPECTIVE

### Teaching More-Advanced Asanas

Part 2 of "Teaching the Art of Discovery"

Continuing with the topic of how to keep your classes fresh and interesting—to nurture your students' spirit of discovery rather than merely teaching a constant stream of new poses—I'll now focus on strategies for teaching more-advanced asanas. (In the next part of this series, I'm going to suggest a change in the way some of us teach. Later I'll write on how to help your students move toward meditation, and how best to bring yoga philosophy into your classes.)



Gyandev McCord  
Director

#### When Are Students Ready?

The reasons for teaching more-advanced asanas go beyond a desire for variety:

- These poses can help students open and/or strengthen new areas of the body.
- Many offer very powerful energetic and spiritual benefits.
- Students gain a sense of accomplishment and self-confidence from meeting a challenge.
- It's fun to learn new poses! Remember, however, not to teach them in a way that merely feeds restlessness.
- You'll deepen your own practice and teaching by rising to the challenge of teaching these poses.

But when are students *truly* ready? When they have perfected the simpler poses? Who wants to wait that long? After more than 20 years, I'm still working on chandrasana!

Your students should, however, have a solid foundation for the more-advanced poses that you intend to teach: sufficient strength, flexibility, and body awareness. Equally important is that they understand the subtler aspects of asana. More-advanced poses often require greater effort, which tends to distract a person from the subtler aspects. If students have not already developed a sensitive inner awareness through easier poses, then more-advanced poses become mere exercise.

So, for students who have all this, how can you select and teach asanas from an Ananda Yoga perspective? For that matter, what is an Ananda Yoga perspective? That's easy: inward and upward! I'll say more about that shortly.

#### Choosing New Asanas

My favorite source for asanas beyond those in Level 1 AYTT is *The Art and Science of Raja Yoga (ASRY)*. In fact, I urge you to read all the "Postures" sections in ASRY, even the Level 1 poses. You won't find much on asana mechanics in ASRY—Swami's focus is the inner essence of the poses—but you will find many helpful insights.

You'll also find more-advanced versions of some Level 1 poses, such as trikonasana. Instead of going directly to the side, Swami instructs the student to go slightly forward as well. This version helps bring even more awareness to the spine by adding a twist to the pose. Although it requires more inner hamstring and spinal flexibility—and one must take extra care not to strain the back when exiting—it's marvelous for those who can stay open (and breathing!) in the pose. (Those who cannot stay open should do the easier, Level 1 version.)

Another example is the version of bhujangasana taught in ASRY. It's the reverse of the Level 1 AYTT bhujangasana: instead of having active back muscles and relaxed arms throughout the pose, its final phase calls for relaxed back muscles and active arms. Although that's easy, physically, still it's only for those with considerable body awareness and openness in the fronts of the hips—intermediate students at least. Otherwise, one tends to over-compress the lumbar discs as well as miss the energetic point of the pose. Those who are ready for this version, however, will find it even more effective in lifting energy up the spine than is the Level 1 version—provided they practice it with the energetic focal points described in ASRY.

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## Teaching More-Advanced Asanas (continued from page 1)

Also, if you have students who are complaining that the basic asanas are too easy, have them try the no-hands variation of dhanurasana (Step 10). Wow! It will end their whining—and perhaps begin another kind of whining if you ask them to hold it for more than a few breaths.

Of course, there are numerous asanas besides those in ASRY. While some are merely gymnastic, others can indeed fit into Ananda Yoga because they help bring energy into the spine and up to the brain. Let's talk about how to begin teaching such an asana.

### Tuning in to the Asana

To teach a new asana—or even decide whether to teach it—you must first understand it yourself. This begins with the physical doing of the pose.

Yes, you could teach a pose that you've never done, but I feel that you can't teach it deeply and effectively unless you can do it (or something close to it). Otherwise, you won't be able to give proper guidance on the issues of alignment,

focus, balance, energy flow, etc. You'll even be in doubt about sequencing. In addition, you won't be able to convey the vibration of the pose.

It may take time to develop the strength and/or flexibility to do the pose. That's fine. We need to model in our own practice the patient, conscious approach that we'd like our students to adopt. In fact, why not guide students in preparing for the asana even as you prepare yourself. Many simple flexibility- and strength-building exercises can be done in such a way as to feel like asanas, even though they're not. Everyone can enjoy the process, not just the goal!

Build strength and flexibility slowly and methodically; rushing into new poses can invite injury. (Shoulders and necks that are deconditioned or tight are particularly vulnerable.) Seek to strengthen or open up the relevant areas of the body enough that smooth breathing, joint safety, relaxation-in-the-midst-of-effort, and inner awareness won't be compromised when you and your students finally get to the pose.

Alignment is another issue. Most asanas merely involve variations on the basic alignment principles covered in Level 1 AYTT. However, some asanas involve principles that we don't explore much in Level 1: e.g., the finer points of shoulder alignment. So realize that there's always more to know. It may take careful exploration of an asana—and a continuing study of functional anatomy—to figure out the alignment principles that insure safety and promote a deep experience. The more we understand from our own experience the physical and energetic aspects of the poses, the more effectively we can teach our students.

Once you have become able to do the pose, you'll be able to judge whether the pose really works in Ananda Yoga: i.e., does it help bring energy up the spine to the brain? If so, your vibrational understanding will help draw your students into that same experience. If not, then it's mere exercise—and while there's nothing wrong with exercise, isn't it better to direct your students' valuable time and effort toward asanas that offer both exercise and "inward and upward"?

Next, you need to work out your teaching instructions for the asana. Clear, careful teaching can make all the difference between an asana experience that is powerful and one that is "ho hum"—or even unpleasant or injurious. The more advanced the asana, the more clarity is essential. Tape-record your teaching, then adopt beginner's mind and follow your own instructions. Are they clear and complete? How can you say it better? It's a great way to improve your instructions for the new pose before springing it on your students.

### No Affirmation? No Problem.

Okay, you've prepared your body and worked out the alignment principles. You've done the pose and experienced that it does indeed help bring energy into and up the spine. You've even worked out crystal clear instructions. But Ananda Yoga has no affirmation for the asana. What to do?

Well, you could make up your own. It's harder than it may seem, however, to come up with one that truly resonates with the inner experience—and with your students.

A better approach, in my opinion, is to borrow an affirmation from a pose that is energetically similar. After all, not

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## AYTA MEMBER NEWS

### Renewal Time Is Approaching

Early in 2004, most of you will receive a renewal notice for your AYTA membership. We are planning some excellent new benefits for members in 2004 (see page 6), so when you receive the notice, please renew right away. Contact Lisa Powers (see page 12) if you do not receive a notice by late January. (If the address label on this newsletter shows a 2005 expiration date for your membership, you're already set for 2004.)

### We're Looking for You, Friend

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.

### Have Any Bright Ideas?

We are always on the lookout for Ananda Yoga teachers who are willing to share their teaching experiences in *Awake & Ready!* You don't need to be a great writer; 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).

### Drop in on AYTT Classes

If you find yourself on Personal Retreat at The Expanding Light during AYTT, you are welcome to drop in on most classes at no charge. Please contact Gyandev or Lisa (see page 12) in advance.



# Teaching Ananda Yoga in a Public School

by Susan Brochin

To bloom where one is planted has become a big lesson for me. Rather than going out to find and create the right dharmic path for teaching yoga, it was there all along, so close that I could not even see it. Without really having a plan, I began to share my yoga practice with students in my elementary school classroom. It is hard to remember how it began or why. But that's jumping ahead of the story ...

What led me to return to my hatha yoga practice in 1996 after more than twenty years of partial commitment was the stress from teaching at Oak Knoll elementary school in the Menlo Park City School District. (Menlo Park is next to Palo Alto, in the north end of Silicon Valley, about 45 minutes south of San Francisco.) Little did I realize that the yoga that I took to heal myself would become an instrument for opening and helping to alleviate the stress in the lives of children.

In the summer of 2000, I graduated from the AYTT program, ready and eager to teach yoga. My yoga teacher at East-West Books in Mountain View, Premdas Ghirla, had left recently to cook at the Ananda Center in Italy, so I began to teach the class where I had been a student for years. It was a wonderful balance for the days I spent as an upper elementary school teacher.

## Practicing Yoga with My Students

That same year, some of my fifth grade students learned that I enjoyed yoga, and during lunch hour, many of them stayed inside to practice with me. It just simply, magnetically, and energetically took hold with them.

In Ananda Yoga we refer often to moving the energy up the spine. We teach it, consciously increasing the students' awareness of what is happening inside. Children, like all of us, are pure energy. The difference is that, in most of them, their energy is clear, expressive, and outward. Intuitively, they understand what yoga is about, but with kids younger than mid-teens, the concept of subtle energy is too abstract. So, what I did is just watch them transform through their practices. The joy and willingness that they put into their postures were immediately obvious. Many spent several lunch hours a week just playing with the postures and using it as their way to connect with each other, and with me.

One thing led to another. Never having choreographed before, I prayed for guidance, and with several dance students' help, we created a "yoga dance" for the fifth grade performance of "The Ramayana." It was a huge lesson in having confidence in the wisdom of these young souls and in

letting go of needing to be in charge. Twelve students—six boys and six girls—volunteered to perform, tirelessly working through their lunch hours. They pulled off a magnificent performance, ending gracefully with a bow and "Namaste" to the audience. We translated, as best we could, the meaning of that powerful word to over 300 people.

During the summer of 2001, I attended the "Sharing Yoga with Children" program at The Expanding Light. This experience—taught by Nitai Deranja, the founder of the Living Wisdom School at Ananda Village—was transformational, joyful, and lots of fun. Being a certificate- and degree-oriented person, I now at last felt *trained* and open to finding more avenues for continuing to develop this aspect of teaching.

## Friday Afternoon Classroom Yoga

Armed with many new techniques from Nitai's program, I committed to an every other-week, 45-minute yoga session with my fifth graders. For props, we used all of my old towels as mats and \$1 neckties from the Goodwill Thrift Store. The sessions began first on Thursdays, and then changed to Friday afternoons, right before the weekend (traditionally a challenging hour for teachers). At first, I

was unsure about having 24 students in such a small room, feet in each other's faces. I wondered about the more rowdy students and was concerned about their behavior, but despite all of that, I persisted. The integrity of the practice, the energy behind it, and the possibility for transformation were bigger than my doubts.

We began with the breath. One of their favorite techniques was nadi shodhanam. With children it is so easy to feel the silence and calm in the room. But that didn't happen right away. They giggled at first, and typical of this age, they thought everyone was looking at them. Soon, however, the room vibrated with their silence. They felt it, too, and we discussed how this technique helps to balance the right and left sides of the brain.

Some days we began with the Energization Exercises. Paramhansa Yogananda initially developed these for his school for boys around the same age in Ranchi, India; it seemed natural to use them in this school setting. We did an abbreviated form of the series, and they responded with great enthusiasm. The most popular was always the light pounding of fists on the crown of the head, which they termed "brain thumping." We combined the exercises with affirmations, as



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## Teaching Ananda Yoga in Public School (continued from page 3)

in the Superconscious Living Exercises. I gave them the freedom to make up some of their own, and the one they made up for brain thumping was, "Wake up, brain!" Before standardized testing in the spring, we "thumped our brains" again. The actual effect of this we will never know, but I'm confident that they were at least more relaxed during the testing.

## *My Experience of Yoga* by Ted Moore, 7<sup>th</sup> Grader

The way I got started at the yoga club was when my mom started taking yoga classes. As soon as I told her that there was one at school, she started encouraging

me to go. Finally, after about two or three weeks of her encouraging me, I had nothing to do one day at lunch and decided it would be fun to check it out. The first day was pretty fun because the group was already doing pigeon pose and sun salutations.

Later, in the winter, I had shoulder surgery, which meant that I couldn't do many of the postures. However, that was only for a couple of weeks, so I was able to get back into yoga quickly. Regardless of the shoulder, I was still able to

do things like savasana and half-spinal twist. Sometimes I only had to skip parts of the poses. It was a great way to learn how to listen to my body.

Later I had a case of poison oak. I let it go too long and it became swollen from scratching. It was almost as if the skin of my right arm was too tight. So, in the club that day, we were doing sun salutations, and I could not do it. After all, yoga is all about knowing your own limits and not overdoing it. If you do, you are likely to end up with a pulled muscle or something like that. I learned more about limits through this, and that it's still possible to do yoga with an injury.

The breathing is probably the most useful thing I learned. For instance, in the summer I am on the swim team and am not very fast. So, on the enormous sets, I usually end up missing the rest intervals. When the set is over, I try to do some yoga breathing to calm down and get ready for the next set, so it does help with that. Also, it helps me sleep. ♦



Ted zeroing in on the breathless state.

Many of the postures were huge hits. They especially enjoyed vrikasana and virabhadrasana. Sometimes it felt necessary to depart from the seriousness of an adult's perspective on yoga practice in order to meet the kids on their own levels of understanding and interest. For example, when we went into virabhadrasana, we jumped up with both feet, then as we came down, we made a loud warrior sound as our affirmation.

### The Outdoor Education Surprise

In March of 2002 we were getting ready to go on our annual visit to "Outdoor Ed.", a five-day trip to the redwoods in the Santa Cruz Mountains south of San Jose. One of the most challenging times of the day for the teacher chaperones has been "teacher time." One can only imagine being given a class of energetic fifth graders (who have not seen me in a teacher role in several days, and have not been together as a class) from 4:30 P.M. until 5:45 P.M. Everyone was exhausted, and not particularly eager to regroup.

In past years, I had given students a workbook of activities and simply had them work quietly after bribing them with candy. Not last year—we did yoga! Not only did they do yoga, but they were lying down in the baseball field in savasana while kick-balls from other classes whizzed by. They were calm, strong and steady. Bones, muscles, movement were all surrendered to peace. It was incredible. Not only were they totally into their practice, but also seemed unaware of their peers and not at all self-conscious—very unusual for children that age!

### A New School, A New Direction

The next year, I moved to Hillview Middle School, just down the street in the same school district. There, the 45-minute yoga session became history as life grew more academic. Nevertheless, an opportunity for a yoga club eventually surfaced, and several students from my class came. At first, participation in the club held steady at about 7-8 students.

A boy named Ted was one of those most affected by the practice of Ananda Yoga. He has agreed to write about how the experience of yoga has changed his life (see sidebar at left).

Recently, the local school district has become very interested in the well being of the whole child. As a result, sixth graders (the newest kids in middle school) now have a short "Introduction to Sixth Grade" course. In this class, many aspects of their adjustment to Middle School are explored, including an awareness of the impact of stress on their lives. I was asked to give a yoga demonstration in two of the sections. We had a wonderful time doing some "chair yoga," again with men's neckties as stand-in props for straps.

Just last week there were over 26 students in the club. They were crowded into one average-sized classroom. Students kept dropping in, unconcerned that there were no props left. They just seemed to want to do yoga. I had to teach on top of a desk so they could all see the demonstration, and I could get an overview of how they were doing.



A couple of their favorite asana affirmations are "I am calm, I am poised" (vrikasana) and the one for savasana ("Bones, muscles, movement ..."). They really enjoy them, and they go very deep in savasana. In fact, this group is so positive and enthusiastic that they love everything we do.

Ted continues to be one of our stars. He shone in his demonstration of savasana, making especially sure that the palms were up and the feet relaxed.

### New Horizons

The students continue to open and learn more about themselves. As you may know, many recent research studies have demonstrated how yoga can assist students with their learning and increase their self-esteem. My friend and colleague, Sarah Westfall, the physical education teacher at my old elementary school, recently used these many research findings to convince our local district to fund a new project: "Otter Yogis, Teaching Yoga to and for Children" (Oak Knoll School's mascot is the otter).

This grant will enable us to train teachers in teaching yoga to children. The teachers are kindergarten through fifth grade classroom teachers and specialists. There are 31+ teachers signed up from Oak Knoll School. I am in the process of preparing eight 75-minute sessions to help them bring these ideas and practices back into the classroom—and perhaps even begin a yoga practice themselves.

Eight classes is not a lot, but if they do their reading (which will include introductions to the postures, to pranayama, to savasana, to yoga for kids), they can get a lot out of it. I feel that after these sessions, the teachers will have enough background so they can lead simple, kid-level Ananda Yoga routines (with postures and pranayama).



*"Bones, muscles, movement, I surrender now ..." Deep relaxation is a real favorite among the students.*



*Here's Susan, helping energy and joy to flood into her Yoga Club students' body cells at Hillview Middle School. That's her, perched on the table at the far left.*

The first session is scheduled for mid-December—an Ananda Yoga session, affirmations and all. After a hiatus for the holidays, the sessions will continue into March. Week 2 will also include the Superconscious Living Exercises. In subsequent sessions, we will take apart the pieces of the first session, practice more pranayama techniques, and learn about doing and teaching simple postures to kids. As things unfold, we will repeat and integrate what we did in previous weeks. We hope that by April, all of the teachers will begin to use the techniques in some way in their classrooms.

A lot of the fun has been in the planning. I am doing just one week at a time, because I really want it to be well planned, including hand-outs etc. The text is *The Idiot's Guide to Yoga for Kids* (I don't like the name, but I love the book), and there is a wonderful deck of cards called *The Yoga Deck for Kids*. The other book is *Yoga Games for the Classroom*. The school district is giving us over \$5,000 for a set of books for each teacher. It's almost mind-boggling that they are supporting us in this way. Who knows where it will go?

This is a an open and growing field for anyone who has had experience with children or simply enjoys the energy of these young souls. I feel blessed to be working with them both as a classroom teacher and as a yoga buddy. ♦

*Susan would be happy to respond to your questions. You can reach her at [sbrochin@comcast.net](mailto:sbrochin@comcast.net).*



# Dwapara Yuga, Here We Come!

Ever since AYTA's humble beginnings in 1995—thanks to the loving tapasya of Carol Gray of Ashland, Oregon—we have gradually been upgrading the AYTA member benefits. We expect that 2004 will bring several significant steps forward in this arena:

## AYSutra Gets an Upgrade

First, we plan to move AYSutra to a web-based service, so you'll go to a website to read AYSutra postings. The advantage is that you can search for past questions and responses—a feature that a number of you have requested—and follow an entire discussion rather than one or two responses at a time. You will be able to set your own user preferences to receive an e-mail notification every time a new message is posted, or only when there are postings on your chosen topics, or no notifications at all if you like. We'll send out complete information when the changeover happens.

## Awake & Ready! Goes Digital

It's time to leave Kali Yuga behind, save trees, and say goodbye to snail mail: *Awake & Ready!* is moving to the web. Rather than mailing out "hard copy" every four months, the newsletter will be posted for viewing/downloading at AnandaYoga.org. (We'll notify you via AYSutra when a new newsletter has been posted.) This will enable us to offer equal membership fees for U.S. and non-U.S. members. It might even enable us to move to a quarterly newsletter.

We expect that you'll be able to test-drive the web-based format sometime in December. When it's ready, we'll send out an e-mail via AYSutra to tell you how to do it. Don't worry, we'll still mail you a hard-copy newsletter if you like (albeit at a higher membership fee).

## AnandaYoga.org Gets an Upgrade, Too

In 2004 we'll also upgrade the AnandaYoga.org website, one of three Ananda websites that host the AYTA member directory. We want to make AnandaYoga.org a much more prominent (i.e., findable) destination for the internet search engines—one to which you will want to link your own site.

We also plan to post more Ananda Yoga content on the site, including video. There will be a special password-entry area for AYTA members, where you can view/download past issues of *Awake & Ready!*.

## The Next Steps

For the few of you who don't yet have internet access, now is the time to get it. You don't need to buy a computer or even pay for an e-mail account. Most communities have free internet access at the public library (or cheap access at an internet café). You can get a free e-mail account at [www.hotmail.com](http://www.hotmail.com), [www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com), and a few other services. If you haven't yet made the electronic leap, prepare yourself by going into halasana and mentally affirming, "New life, new consciousness now flood my brain!"

We're greatly looking forward to entering Dwapara Yuga once and for all. C'mon along! ♦

## Teaching More-Advanced Asanas (continued from page 2)

every asana needs to have its own unique affirmation, as though its effects were utterly different from those of any other asana. For example, I've found that padahastasana's "Nothing on earth can hold me!" works well with a variety of standing forward bends.

Here's a further thought, however. Although I hope that Swami will someday give affirmations to more poses, I see no need to have an affirmation for every asana. This reminds us to rely upon our inner resources, to cultivate our own personal experience of the asana. To me, an affirmation is a means, not an end—a springboard that helps us dive deeper into the asana. We shouldn't confuse the springboard with the diving, nor forget that the diving is more important.

Besides, any student who is truly ready for more-advanced asanas understands the inner practice well enough that the absence of an affirmation will be no hindrance. In fact, it may even stimulate a more personal sense of discovery in the pose. Yes, affirmations are helpful, but there comes a time when the little bird (that's us!) has to fly on its own—even for poses that have affirmations.

At the same time, we must remember that one purpose of the affirmations is to help us focus on a pose's effect on energy and consciousness. When there is no affirmation, we must be extra-vigilant, not allowing physical effort to disrupt a calm, sensitive, inward focus.

Here again the teacher can help: even experienced students can benefit from your setting up the (nonexistent) affirmation. By "setting up" an affirmation, I mean what you could say to prepare students to receive the affirmation. These words are intended to lead them seamlessly from the physical doing of the asana to the psycho-spiritual experience of the pose, which would normally be reinforced by the asana affirmation. With or without an affirmation, this setup will help students direct and maintain their inward focus, aiding their voyage of discovery in the pose.

Your own experience with the pose (or a similar pose) is invaluable for this. The more you know what's happening in the asana, the better you can guide students into this inner experience. So use your knowledge and tape-record your setup of the (perhaps-nonexistent) affirmation; then play it back and do the asana yourself to see whether your setup works. Test-drive a number of different setups. It's tedious but illuminating, and you'll see the benefit in your teaching.

So in a nutshell: when students are truly ready for more-advanced asanas, first *you* go for it, and then help *them* go for it! ♦



# Assessing and Correcting Posture

by Nicole DeAvilla Whiting

**P**aramhansa Yogananda often said, "A bent spine is the enemy of self-realization." Patanjali stated in his *Yoga Sutras*, "The fruit of right poise is the strength to resist the shocks of infatuation or sorrow."<sup>1</sup> In *The Art and Science of Raja Yoga*, Swami Kriyananda wrote, "Right posture is vitally important to the yogi." And one of the first known written books on Hatha Yoga, the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, explained that asana "... should be practiced for gaining steady posture, health and lightness of body."<sup>2</sup>

The importance of good posture is undisputed. Yet I have found that the teaching of good posture is rarely at the forefront of most yoga classes. Even in classes that purport to emphasize alignment, often the focus is so strongly on, say, the position of the little finger, or the placement of the femur through various muscular contractions, that it can leave the spine in a compromised position. At best the spine is beset with tension, and at worst it is contracted in such a way as to impede the flow of energy up the spine—and an unimpeded flow of energy is the ultimate goal of practicing yoga postures, whether one's goal is physical prowess or enlightenment.

I suspect that there are several reasons for this common discrepancy. Some instructors do not have the training and experience to be able to correct more than the grossest postural problems. Even those who are better versed in alignment may not realize that correct positioning of the spine is more important than correct positioning of any other part of the body. It also takes a combination of hard work and intuitive attunement to be able to teach students of varying body shapes and sizes how to have perfectly aligned posture. To teach the subtleties of alignment, it is necessary to experiment with one's own posture and learn how to experience the subtle shifts of energy caused by subtle alignment changes.

## The Purpose of Posture

Why is good posture so important? How can we know whether we ourselves are in good alignment? How can we know whether our students have the best alignment that they can have for their bodies in order to maximize their benefits from yoga practice? And how do we make corrections to improper posture?

Proper alignment is necessary for preventing injuries as well as maximizing the benefits of any asana. For example, putting all of one's weight onto the standing leg when the

knee is hyperextended puts tremendous strain on the ligaments supporting the knee. They become overstretched and may cause swelling, which can over time cause damage to the knee joint. Also, overstretched ligaments in any joint provide less support, predisposing one to a potential future injury from something as mundane as stepping off the curb incorrectly and causing a sprained joint.

Additionally when the knee is hyperextended, the leg muscles are not being correctly utilized and strengthened, and the energy flow of the leg is disrupted, thus limiting the potential benefits of the asana.

Similarly, misalignments in the spine can create the same problems, for the vertebrae also are connected by joints. I'm sure you can see how misalignments in the spine and the corresponding problems can easily be compounded.

When working therapeutically with yourself or your students, proper alignment is essential. Often injuries are caused by poor posture and/or continue to be aggravated by poor posture. A very subtle correction in alignment can make the difference between complete recovery and being stuck with managing a chronic problem.

## Posture and Energy Flow

Poor posture impedes energy flow, with a resultant negative impact on one mentally, physically and spiritually. Conversely, good posture will help improve one's mental, physical and spiritual state of being.

For example, when we are feeling well (on any level—mentally, physically or spiritually), we naturally lift our eyes and lengthen our spine. In describing how we feel, we use words like "up" and "high." When we are not

well, we tend to look down, slump our spine, and speak of being "down."

Indeed, when we are feeling "up" there is a corresponding upward flow of energy in the spine. This upward movement of energy is one of upliftment and expansion, and with it comes vitality in the physical body and a more positive mental outlook. Spiritually, this upward energy can be directed toward an expansion of consciousness.

On the other hand, when we are feeling "down," there is a corresponding downward flow of energy in the spine. This downward movement of energy is one of contraction; with it comes a loss of physical energy/vitality and a more negative mental outlook. Spiritually, it tends to move us toward self-centeredness.

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Nicole teaches Therapeutic Yoga and Prenatal/Postnatal 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.

## Assessing and Correcting Posture (continued from page 7)

### A Quick Postural Checkpoint

A simple test for your own alignment is to stand in tadasana for five minutes or more, then ask yourself the following questions: "Am I comfortable? Am I completely free of tension? Am I becoming more energized as I stay longer in tadasana, feeling the energy moving upward in my spine?" If you can answer "yes" to all of these questions, then your alignment is probably very good.

On the other hand, if even the *thought* of standing in tadasana for five minutes makes you uncomfortable, then probably you have some work to do on your posture—and probably you should not even try the exercise. (A word of advice: do not ask your students to stand this long in tadasana in class unless they have good posture and are very advanced. Otherwise at best, you will see attendance going down in your subsequent classes, and at worst you will have someone's muscles go into a spasm that's not easily released.)

When we align our bones correctly, we will engage muscles that are designed to keep us in our upright posture. These "postural muscles" are designed to hold us upright for long periods of time.

However, when we are not aligned properly, the body must recruit other muscles—muscles not intended for this purpose—to hold us upright. Because those muscles are being asked to do something that they were not designed to do, they will tire easily—as well as spasm—if asked to do the work of the postural muscles for too long. (In fact, if one has not been in proper alignment for a long time, the postural muscles will have atrophied to some extent. They will need to be toned progressively, and it may take a while before they can return to their intended full-time job.)

### Overview of Correcting Posture

First of all, to assess your students' alignment in tadasana or any other asana, you will have to walk around the room and view your students individually from the front, from at least one side, and from the back. No amount of postural knowledge will help you individually correct your students' posture if you view them only from your position in the front of the classroom.

Second, when correcting posture, always start at the base first. In standing asanas, the base is the feet. Tension and misalignment in the spine are often the results of improper distribution of weight on the feet.

In seated asanas, the base is the ischial tuberosities (a.k.a. sitzbones, sitbones, sitting bones). If the sitzbones are tilted forward even slightly (i.e., the pelvis is over-tucked), the

spine cannot be in proper alignment. True, we do not want to tip the pelvis too far forward either, but only very flexible individuals will be able to come into that exaggerated position. Particularly inflexible individuals, on the other hand, will not be able to tip forward enough to come into proper alignment without the aide of props such as blankets or pillows under the sitzbones. In fact, anyone who has an injury or chronic condition that is even mildly aggravated when sitting on the floor—and for whom props do not completely alleviate the discomfort—should not sit on the floor until he or she is able to do so with no discomfort whatsoever.

Starting from the base, work your way up the body to make corrections. As you do this, continually look back at the base and the other lower points, because there is the habitual tendency for the body to revert to its former position while you may be trying to correct another area.

Last of all, do not expect perfection all at once. Though it is important to have excellent posture, reality will dictate how quickly one can move toward a more perfect alignment. In many cases, it is quite enough of a challenge simply to focus on the proper placement of the feet, while generally encouraging the rest of the body to "stand tall." Again, you want your students to come back to class, right?



### Alignment of the Joints

My own view of proper alignment is that, viewed from the side, the center of the ankle joint, center of the hip joint, center of the shoulder joint, and center of the ear canal should be in a straight vertical line (see photo at left). That sounds easy, but it is actually a bit tricky to tell where these centers are.

For example, when one looks at the knee joint, the tendency is to find the midpoint between the front and the back of the visible parts of the knee. That is incorrect. The kneecap is in front of—not part of—the actual knee joint. (See image at right.) If you consider the kneecap as part of the joint, you will determine an incorrect center of the joint, and thereby possibly encourage hyperextension of the knee joint just to get all of these points into alignment.

Fortunately, the other points of alignment are easier to find than is the knee. Even then, it takes practice to get it right with all the different body shapes and sizes that you'll encounter. Make small adjustments at any given time, observe the results, and ask your students how they feel in the new position.

Explain to them that they may feel different or strange—and that's okay—but you do not want them to feel discomfort or tension. Then ask them specifically, "How do you feel in this new position?" The more



The black dot marks the center of the knee joint. It is somewhat behind the visual center of the knee.



feedback you get, the more you will learn about what works and what does not work.

### Getting Clarity on "Natural Curves"

For correct posture, the spine should be in its "natural curves." If you look closely at the curves of the spine on a skeleton, you may be surprised at how small the curves actually are. However, when looking at an actual person, the true skeletal shape is somewhat obscured by the many different types of tissue that cover it. (See skeleton inside the outline of the body at right.)

For example, in standing posture, the protrusion of the gluteal muscles (and perhaps some fatty tissue as well!) tends to give the illusion that the lumbar spine has more curve than it actually does. Therefore it's easy to conclude—incorrectly—that someone with large, developed gluteals has too much curve.

Then too, someone with nearly flat gluteals may appear to have insufficient lumbar curvature. A lumbar curve can also look flatter than it is because of a lot of developed musculature in the lower back; this is often the case with people who do physical labor for a living—the spine can literally disappear between two high ridges of muscle.

Keep in mind that healthy spinal curvature is not a "one size fits all" proposition. Once while being examined by Dr. David Kessler (from Ananda Village), Gyandev remarked that his lumbar curve was too flat. Dr. Kessler's response was, "Are you comparing your lumbar curve with some theoretical lumbar curve that you *think* you're supposed to have?"

When you are not sure if someone's clothes, excess or lack of fatty tissues etc., may be making their posture look "not quite right" to you, go back to checking whether the points of alignment are in their proper places. Also try to get your students to *relax* into good posture. Being tense is not only undesirable, but can make a person's posture not look right even if their bones are aligned properly.

Similarly, the scapulae (shoulderblades) and the muscles around them tend to make the thoracic spine appear to have more curve than it actually does. Finally, the skull perched on top of—and sticking out behind—the cervical spine gives the appearance that the cervical spine has more curve than it actually does (see image above).

With all of this said, do make sure that people keep their curves! Too little curvature in any part of the spine is potentially just as destructive as too much curvature, and that, too, will impede the flow of energy up the spine. The natural curves of the human spine developed as they did to help support the body, distribute our weight effectively, and provide cushioning to absorb shock from walking, jumping,



and moving in general. Without the curves, we lose our ability to move freely without risk of injury.

### Common Postural Problems

To make corrections in spinal curvature, I've found it helpful to be aware that different people have different learning mechanisms. Some people respond best to auditory cues, others to tactile (touch) cues, still others to visual cues. For the auditory person, imagery often works well: "Feel as though there is a weight at the end of your tailbone" will help to tuck the pelvis. For the tactile person, a light touch can be best; e.g. lightly touch the tops of the scapulae with the tips of your fingers to indicate that they should release downward. You might want a visual learner simply to watch you make the correction on yourself, e.g., draw a protruding chin inward, toward the back of the neck. So I find it important to offer all three types of cues. And for especially difficult corrections, it sometimes takes the repetition of all three to achieve the response that you want.

In my experience one of the most common postural problems is having the weight too far back on the feet, i.e., too much weight on the heels. Even a small amount of misdistribution can create postural problems and tension farther up in the spine.

Often related to this is the tendency to have the lower rib cage protruding forward and the upper part of the rib cage angled toward the back of the body. (See photo at right.) This is actually very common in experienced yoga students (and teachers) with otherwise good posture. We spend so much time working on opening the heart area and counteracting the influence of gravity and rounded shoulders, that we and our students often overcorrect the spine and rib cage in this way.

Always be sure before making this adjustment that the lower body alignment is in place to support the correction. Sometimes this rib cage position is simply the body's reaction to the alignment below being off, as in the case of someone who chronically has the pelvis shifted way forward, so it's not under the shoulders anymore. First get the lower body aligned, then (if necessary) proceede with the upper body correction(s).

To help correct this position, I will sometimes exaggerate the incorrect position with my own body, and place my hands on the sides of my ribs, showing with my fingers that the lower rib cage is pointing forward. Then when I correct my posture they can see that my fingers move to pointing straight down toward the floor. I speak of bringing the rib cage over the pelvis.

Another effective method for correcting this problem is to stand to one side of your student and simultaneously place



*Here, the lower ribs are protruding forward. Compare with the photo on the facing page.*

*(continues on page 10)*



## Assessing and Correcting Posture (continued from page 9)

one finger on their upper back (indicating that the upper back is to move forward) and another finger on their lower rib cage in front (to suggest that it move backward), all the while explaining the desired direction of movement.

### "Hey, This Feels Really Strange!"

When we correct this position by moving the lower part of the rib cage back and the upper part of the rib cage forward—bringing the rib cage to its upright position right over the pelvis—there is often an accompanying feeling of being too far forward. There even can be a sensation of feeling like one is about to fall forward.

Similar misperceptions of being "off" can occur with other postural corrections. This off-balance sensation is produced by a mechanism in the inner ear that is responsible for our sense of balance. When we habitually place ourselves out of alignment, this inner ear mechanism will in time "give up" on us, figuring that this must be the way we want our bodies to be. To help us strengthen this desired position, the inner ear will reprogram itself to give the signal that this new position is "normal." Then, for example, when we correct a position in which we were aligned too far back, the inner ear signals that we are now forward of our "normal" position by causing us to feel that we may be in danger of falling on our face.

I have made this correction countless times, and though I have known many a student to experience this sensation, rest assured that not one has ever fallen on his or her face—or even lost his or her balance, for that matter—due to my making this correction in tadasana.

One way you can know that you are not overcorrecting someone is to ask if s/he feels tension or is uncomfortable in the new position. As long as the answer is "no," then sensations such as feeling like falling forward, feeling "funny," strange, etc., are okay; they will go away as the inner ear recalibrates itself. In fact, the inner ear re-calibrates itself fairly quickly.

Unfortunately it takes us a lot longer to change our postural habits than it does for the inner ear to adjust. I had a rather dramatic experience of this phenomenon many years ago when I had an operation on both of my feet. I was in a wheelchair for a month. My legs were kept straight out in front of me at a right angle to my torso. At the end of this period, when my doctor told me to stand up, I did so, but I kept my body at the same right angle that I'd been sitting in for the past month! Intellectually I knew that I was bent over at a right angle, but experientially, I felt that if I were to straighten up, I would fall over backward. It was a very strong sensation.

The doctor took my hand to encourage me to stand up and walk down the hallway. I can still remember my surprise at not being able to overcome the feedback that I was

receiving from my body, even though I "knew" it was okay for me to stand upright. I still think of how hard I held onto my doctor's hand as I tentatively walked down the hall, as though I was about to fall backward off the edge of a cliff. To this day I wonder if I bruised his hand by holding on so tightly! I do not remember exactly how long it took for the inner ear feedback to adjust, but the process did begin immediately, and in a matter of days I felt normal once again in my upright position!

Another aspect of postural habits is that neurological pathways are created between the muscles and the brain when we form muscular habits, whether good or bad. It takes time and concentration to create new habits and reprogram the neuromuscular pathways. Once the effort has been put forth and a new habit has been established, the hard work pays off—from that time forward, less energy and focus are needed to maintain it.

### Beyond Tadasana

When you find a student with postural misalignment in tadasana, you can usually bet that s/he will have the same misalignment in other asanas. If you do not address the misalignment in tadasana, you will find it that much more difficult to correct the misalignment in the other asanas. Furthermore, as the asana positions become more complex, one increases the likelihood that the misalignment will aggravate an old injury or cause a new one.

When I work with young children, I ask them if they are ready for a really, really hard asana. If they say "yes," then I have them stand briefly in tadasana. I praise them for whatever attempt they made to stay still and tell them that it is a difficult pose for adults to do as well.

Keep this in mind for your classes also. Do not spend too much uninterrupted time working on postural alignment in tadasana. Instead, weave good alignment points throughout the entire class. Always check first for anything that can cause strain or injury, such as hyperextended knees in a standing pose or a hyperextended neck in a backward bend. Then go back to the basics of proper distribution of the weight on the feet or the angle of the sitzbones.

### Final Tips on Teaching Correct Posture

The more familiar you become with the human skeleton and how it looks when placed in various positions, the more you will be able to fine-tune alignment. Learn to have x-ray eyes to figure out how a student's skeletal frame is lining up underneath all the layers of clothes and varying shapes of muscles and fat.

Once you get a feel for the bony alignment, go a little deeper and become aware of tension and relaxation in your students. You may be able to get your student's bones to align properly, but if you still are observing tension, then you need to work on suggesting ways to release the muscular tension. Often the slightest touch and/or mention of releas-



# Where There's a Will, There's a Way

by Mary Vickars

When got home from AYTT, I called up a community center to see if I could get in as a teacher in next September's schedule. The woman who answered said that they were full, but she still asked me for my resume.

I knew right then that my name, phone number, and certificate weren't going to get me in the door! I needed to "practice."

I remember being advised by one of the AYTT teachers to start teaching right away, even if it was to your cat. Well, I don't have a cat, so I started with my dog, Dudley. He just looked at me much too adoringly to be taken seriously. He did a great downward-facing dog, but his other limitations were more than I could work with.

Luckily, the weather was quite dry and beautiful. Being desperate and resourceful, I put out a big blue plastic tarp—20 feet by 30 feet—and started teaching on Saturday mornings in my front yard. (We live on a third of an acre on a dead end street. It's quite rural, even though we are just minutes from the city of Vancouver.) The clear blue sky provided a heavenly ceiling, a forest of trees on one side provided the energizing prana, and the sweetly singing birds in the trees provided the back ground music. I'm blessed—what can I say?

And people started coming! My youngest pupil was 14, and my eldest was 65. I was delighted when, on one



*Mary lives in Burnaby, BC, a suburb of Vancouver.*

morning, I had three 14-year-olds attend, and they really liked it!

I gave out my business card to everyone I would meet who was even remotely interested in yoga. I collected e-mail addresses and notified everyone by Wednesday of my Saturday classes. So that is how I gained experience, confidence, and a small, enthusiastic following.

Now I am teaching an 8-week course on Monday nights at a yoga studio that I have been attending for the past two years. I have 10 people signed up. One of them is one of the 14-year-olds! I am very pleased with my start.

I have been pleasantly surprised at how receptive people have been to Ananda Yoga. I use the affirmations, and I try to create a spiritual experience, not just a mechanical one. I admit that I had some reservations about how people would react to the affirmations. My neighbor wasn't at all concerned, however. As she supportively pointed out to me, "People are ready for the spiritual connection!" ♦



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and higher awareness*

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ing or relaxing will produce the desired results.

Dynamic use of the affirmations can also promote good alignment. A well-energized affirmation of "Strength and courage fill my body cells!" can help take the wilt out of a collapsed chandrasana. Some quiet, relaxed time in an asana can help melt away the tensions of old habits as well as interiorize the experience for the student.

You'll help your students in an even more profound way if you can sense if and where energy is being blocked in a pose, then help them adjust their position to get it moving again. This is definitely a more-advanced teaching skill, but it's well worth the effort to develop it.

After stating the importance of right posture in *The Art and Science of Raja Yoga*, Swami Kriyananda goes on to say, "A bent spine impairs the flow of energy. It also cramps the breath, making it almost impossible to breathe deeply. Right posture, however, from a standpoint of yoga, is by no means

the rigid stance of a soldier on parade. One must be relaxed even while standing straight. Indeed, until one can learn to keep his spine straight, he will never know how to relax perfectly."

And if we don't have perfect relaxation, then vibrant health, complete peace of mind, and spiritual heights also will elude us. So, whether your students are looking for a more perfect body, peace of mind, or self-realization, the more you can help them improve their posture, the more swiftly they will be able to move toward their goal. ♦

#### Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali: An Interpretation*, by Charles Johnston, Brotherhood of Life, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> *The Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, translated by Pancham Sinh, Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1980.

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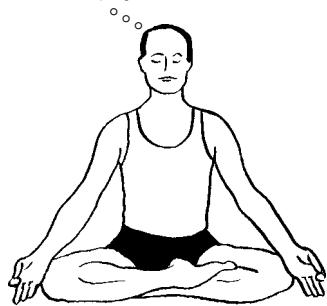
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I set ablaze the fire of inner joy by  
renewing my AYTA membership!  
(see page 2)

***The Expanding Light***

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**LEVEL 2 NEWS****New Level 2 Programs**

All the programs below count toward Level 2 AYTT certification. Note especially:

- *Yoga to Awaken the Chakras* (March 7–12), with Diksha McCord. Take the next step in your understanding of how to work directly with chakra energies through asana, pranayama, and meditation. You'll get lots of ideas for your own classes.
- *Ananda Yoga & Ayurveda* (March 14–19), with Sue Loper-Powers. You'll explore the powerful relationships between the sister sciences of ayurveda and yoga. Classically used as compliments to one another, it is only recently that they have begun to be perceived as separate fields. In this program, you'll learn how to bring them back together for their original purposes: ayurveda for physical health, Ananda Yoga for spiritual health, and both for mental harmony.
- *Deeper into the Spirit of Yoga* (May 23–28), with Diksha McCord. A powerful, personal experience of Ashtanga Yoga and other aspects of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*. You'll experience concrete examples of how to bring the *Sutras* into your classes. 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 or e-mail The Expanding Light for an application.)

In the schedule below, “★” indicates a required Level 2 program. For details, please see The Expanding Light's program guide or visit [www.expandinglight.org](http://www.expandinglight.org). The next program guide will be mailed out in March.

**1/11–24 ..... ★AYTT Assistantship**

**3/7–12 ..... Yoga to Awaken the Chakras**

**3/14–19 ..... Ananda Yoga & Ayurveda**

**3/21–28 ..... ★Meditation Teacher Trng.**

**3/28–4/10 .. ★AYTT Assistantship**

**5/2–9 ..... Kriya Yoga Preparation**

**5/23–28 ..... Deeper into the Spirit of Yoga**

**5/27–6/6 ... Yoga of the Heart™—Cardiac and Cancer YTT**

**6/20–27 ..... ★Meditation Teacher Trng.**

**6/27–7/10 .. ★AYTT Assistantship**

**Also in SUMMER 2004**

Dates for the following programs will be available by January 31:

..... Restorative YTT

..... Therapeutic Yoga

..... Sharing Yoga with Children

..... ★Essence of Yoga Sutras

..... ★Advanced Pranayama and the Subtle Body

..... Prenatal YTT

..... Postnatal YTT

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