

# Awake & Ready!

Newsletter of the Ananda Yoga® Teachers Association  
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## PERSPECTIVE

### The Forward-Facing Yogi

Sometimes when I see the yoga mania in the media and in our culture generally, I long for the time when yoga wasn't "in." It was so quiet then, so simple, so steady.

Now, it seems, a new style of so-called yoga is invented daily in America. There are countless lines of yoga clothes, yoga props, yoga health supplements, yoga hair care—the list goes on. There are at least 100 new yoga books published *every month*. Yoga classes/products form a \$30 billion per year market. Yoga is used to sell everything from mattresses to cars to tofu to—brace yourself—pork loin filet. There is even a new TV show called, "Great Yoga Teachers." In short, yoga is definitely mainstream.

Where is all this taking us? It's hard to say, but it's certain that yoga in American yoga is changing. And that means that all of Western yoga is changing, for as my European friends assure me, whatever happens here soon happens in Europe.

Of course, yoga itself isn't changing—that won't happen until human nature changes—but I would like to point out several impactful ways in which the American "yoga scene" is changing. Some of it may seem scary, but I think that there is good news in this for Ananda Yoga teachers.



Gyandev McCord  
Director

#### The "Yoga Boom"—It's Still Booming

According to a recent *Yoga Journal* survey, 15 million Americans (about 5% of the population) now practice yoga regularly. If you subtract some large populations who are likely *not* practicing regularly—e.g., most children (although even that number is growing)—the percentage of adults practicing regularly grows to something quite significant.

And the number is growing. Some sources have recently stated that the yoga boom has peaked, but the only research I've seen predicts radical near-term growth: 35 million Americans plan to try yoga within the next year. Not all of those will become regular practitioners, but it's safe to say that yoga, even as a trendy cultural phenomenon, is growing, not shrinking.

In addition, more and more corporations have a vested interest in prolonging this phenomenon. An August headline in *USA Today* said it all: "Big Business Lunges at Fat

Yoga Profits." Major corporations such as Nike, Target, Wal-Mart, and Costco, have dived into yoga. Translation: The business world will use its considerable muscle not only to milk all the money it can from yoga's popularity, but to prolong that popularity through a deluge of marketing techniques. Yoga is still going to be "cool" for a while.

And it's not merely that the size of the yoga world is increasing; its shape is also changing. Business concerns—plus the enterprising American spirit—is re-configuring the way that yoga is presented to the public.

#### The Squeeze on Studios

For example, just a few years ago, many yoga studios were thriving: classes were packed, owners were thrilled, the future looked bright. And while many studios are still doing well, others find themselves struggling to survive; some have already folded. There are a number of reasons for this:

- The economy is still sluggish in many areas, which always dampens discretionary spending.
- Some urban areas, especially on the east and west coasts, have reached the "yoga studio saturation point": there aren't enough students to go around.
- Not all yogis or yoga teachers are good businesspeople. While one might not need much business savvy to have a successful studio in a noncompetitive marketplace, some studios will inevitably fail when competition heats up.
- Yoga conferences with celebrity teachers continue to attract students who might otherwise go to yoga studios.
- For many people, CD's and DVD's have taken the place of in-person yoga instruction.

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All of these factors are squeezing yoga studios, but perhaps an even bigger factor is fitness centers and health clubs. A few years ago, not many of these offered yoga classes. Today, over 70%—some sources say over 80%—of them do, and the percentage is growing. This is putting a huge amount of pressure on yoga studios.

Why? At a typical yoga studio, a monthly pass costs \$90-120 for unlimited classes. Compare that to a typical fitness center, where \$40-60 per month buys unlimited yoga classes, weight training, aerobics classes, spa usage, and more. It's simply smart economics on the part of the consumer and smart business on the part of fitness centers—and bad news for yoga studios, many of which see fitness center yoga as the main reason for their difficulties. (Although some fitness centers have fine yoga teachers and a nice atmosphere, most offer lower quality instruction and atmosphere than do studios. Apparently, customers either don't see those differences or don't value them highly enough to go to studios.)

But there's another factor that is only just beginning to emerge, and it might be the biggest of them all:

### Are You Ready for McYoga?

For years, yogis have joked about the idea of yoga chain stores, as if to say, "Yeah, sure. It can't happen with yoga." Well, guess what? It's already happening.

First came Bikram Yoga, which began franchising a couple years ago. Its YTT graduates pay hefty fees, not only for their initial YTT, but every year thereafter, just to be able to say they teach Bikram Yoga.

Another studio—Sonic Yoga in New York City—has also begun franchising, courting yogis who want to, as their press release says, "realize their studio-owner dreams."

## AYTA MEMBER NEWS

### Renewal Time Is Approaching

In January, we'll mail out a form for renewing your AYTA membership. If you don't receive it by January 20, please contact Brook Dunwoody (see page 12). If you have already renewed, you won't receive a renewal notice.

### Message Undeliverable: Unknown Address

Please keep us on your "hot list" of who to inform about any changes in your e-mail or snail mail address. We don't want to lose you on AYSutra!

### Wanted: Your Insights on Teaching

If you teach a unique population or have had interesting experiences teaching Ananda Yoga, please help make *Awake & Ready!* even better by writing an article about it. We'll even help you manifest it—short or long—through editing it or interviewing you. If we use your article of at least 1500 words—and if you actually write it (i.e., not an interview)—you'll get a *free year's membership!* For more information, please contact Gyandev (see page 12).

Then there are the yoga studio chains. One of Los Angeles' most successful studios, Yoga Works, has been purchased by a group of entrepreneurs (including one who is affiliated with 24 Hour Fitness). It's now a chain of sixteen studios in Southern California and New York—and it's only just begun to grow. A number of studios elsewhere are beginning to multiply into chains as well.

### We Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet

Even these, however, may be dwarfed by a new venture set to start next year. Venture capitalists in Phoenix, Arizona are about to launch a new franchising operation called YoGo ("Yoga on the Go"). If you've seen the fitness center Curves, then you know the business model. It will have small studios in strip malls, offering 45-minute classes on three levels (beginner, intermediate, advanced), with just one preset routine for each level: of 3–5 minutes of warm-ups, 35 minutes of asanas, and 3–5 minutes of deep relaxation, all in a "softer power yoga" style (i.e., "flow").

YoGo is designed to appeal to what its founders' research has shown to be a huge, untapped market for yoga classes: overweight women (mostly) who are intimidated by the thought of going to yoga studios to take classes with stereotypical yoga students, i.e., women whom they view as "a bunch of sticks." The cost will be about \$80 per month for unlimited classes, compared to \$90–120 per month (depending on where you live) at yoga studios.

After a brief "pilot" period, the founders expect staggering growth: within five to six years, they hope to have 3000 (three thousand!) locations. American yoga is getting supersized.

Business experts are not surprised at all this. The "yoga market" is maturing, and as happens in any maturing market, there's a "shakeout." Competition leads to "branding" and the need for economies of scale, leading inevitably to consolidation as many small players either fail or are assimilated by larger ones. From this perspective, chains and franchises were as inevitable in yoga as in any American industry.

### It's Not a Problem—It's an Opportunity

What does this mean for the "small players"? Are they an endangered species? Is yoga in America going to be ruined?

I don't think so. Yoga is not the airline or telecommunications industry. True yoga is a highly personal service; people who value that—and there are a growing number who do—will find it wherever it exists. Many independent studios and teachers will continue to flourish, especially in areas that are only now awakening to yoga (and there are many such areas). Even in "saturated" areas, many teachers and studios will find their niches and do quite well. To the best of my knowledge, the Law of Magnetism has not been repealed: teachers who offer a quality yoga experience will always be in demand, no matter where they teach. Look at the restaurant industry: despite all the fast food chains, restaurants that offer a high-quality eating experience not only survive, but thrive.

I'll make an even stronger statement: As more and more people try yoga, certainly more will stick with it. Of those who stick with it, many will tire of "yoga fast food" and grow

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# Ananda Yoga Proven to Help Multiple Sclerosis Patients

*an interview with Claudio Gregorelli*

**F**or two years, Claudio has been teaching Ananda Yoga to people with multiple sclerosis in Rome—with some very inspiring results on many levels. This interview took place in October 2003, at the beginning of the second year of the program.

## **Question: How did all this begin?**

Claudio: Donatella Caramia, a neurologist in Rome, has a lot of patients with MS. They were requesting more and more an alternative way to deal with the disease—not just the normal way: taking medication (interferon), like they all do—because their lives are very active and they need a lot of energy. You see, one of the problems they face with this disease is up's and down's of energy.

Not knowing how to help all these people, Dr. Caramia, together with other neurologists at the University of Rome, conceived a project for improving the patients' quality of life. As part of it, Dr. Caramia asked me to start a course, the first one in Italy, to see if yoga could help the MS patients and scientifically show how it impacts the process of the disease. Dr. Caramia also has connections with some American universities that are gathering the results of this course and its medical tests, and comparing them with results from other institutes.

Sevadevi (another Ananda Assisi staff member) and I take the train from Assisi down to Rome to teach a two-hour class, every Wednesday evening for eight months, October through May (except for two-week breaks at Christmas and Easter).

We're now in our second year of doing this. We wanted to have 30 people in the study last year, but because the classroom space was so small, we started with 15. In fact, the experiment started with two groups: 15 doing yoga and 15 doing physiotherapy. They wanted to see if there would be a difference in the results for the two groups.

Our first-year (2002) yoga group all came more or less regularly. Three of them dropped out for various reasons, but otherwise we had a steady group until the end.

## **What difficulties does MS present in these people's lives?**

Low energy or sudden drops of energy. Depression. Also some disturbances in the body—very light at this point because all patients selected for the study had been diagnosed with MS only within the last five years, so their symptoms were relatively minor: difficulty with the function of their legs, arms, or eyes. It's mainly those three body parts mainly that have difficulty.

The difficulty with the legs and arms is weakness and loss of control. They don't have a connection with those body parts, so they can't really use them well. The body part has not degenerated to the point that they can't use it—they can use it, they can walk, they can use their arms—but it can be a struggle to move it. And it may not be completely predictable how it will move—the coordination begins to deteriorate.

They also have pain in the afflicted body parts. It is not strong pain because the interferon helps relieve that—it's more like a disturbance, discomfort. Without the interferon, however, they would be experiencing significant pain.

There are also common symptoms on the subtle level. I soon realized, for example, that all of them have difficulty concentrating and interiorizing. They can't relate to themselves, to their bodies or their minds. All of them have the same difficulty: the world outside is the reality. And they are so caught in it that they couldn't really bring inside any experience that they have in life. They fear anything related to their body, to their mind.

## **Because their body is no longer their friend?**

I think so. At first, they couldn't relate to themselves—that was the common denominator. When I asked the first class to interiorize, just a little visualization and concentration, they couldn't do it, because they were not used to bringing the mind

inside, staying calm inside. Mostly, they were afraid of it. It took a while before they began to accept that as a wonderful way to know themselves better.

That is the greatest result that we gained from this. We introduced gradually, not only yoga postures and Energization, but meditation, simple visualizations, and affirmations. They were slowly able to accept that and do it just a little bit. And they liked it so much that when I asked on the questionnaire at the end of the course, "What do you want to do more of in next year's classes?", they all said "meditation." So I think that they now understand the value of meditation and concentration.

## **You didn't have any prior training in how to teach MS patients. How did you begin?**

We started out with Energization Exercises, and for the first four to six weeks, we just trained them to work with the muscles, with the body parts, helping them get more in touch with the energy behind the muscles. It was a wonderful



*Claudio is a longtime minister and teacher at Ananda's retreat center in Assisi, Italy. In February, he and his wife Deborah will move to Delhi, India and begin serving with Ananda's work there.*

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## Ananda Yoga Proven to Help Multiple Sclerosis Patients (continued from page 3)

process for them to realize that there *is* energy, they *can* work with the muscles, they *can* work with that energy. We also used affirmations to help them get more dynamic in that. We used the Superconscious Living Exercises. We did that and a lot of relaxation for the first month or two, with simple breathing exercises like diaphragmatic breathing, just to let them breathe and see how they can take it inside.

### ***Speaking of breathing, do you notice any typical breathing habits in this population?***

They have a lot of stress in their lives, so they had difficulty breathing. They had difficulty with diaphragmatic breathing in the beginning. After they had been practicing for a few months, I saw that most of them had improved their breathing. One, however, just couldn't coordinate when to inhale and when to exhale; even now she has a problem with that. We tried different ways to help, and she does a few rounds well, then goes back into her old habits: breathing with the mouth and chest instead of with the nose and diaphragm. It was hard to get her to breathe with the nose, and diaphragmatically, but most of the class improved, and it was very, very helpful for them to breathe diaphragmatically.

### ***How old are your students?***

Young, from 22 to 40 years old, with one exception at 55. MS often strikes younger people. Dr. Caramia told me that it usually starts between ages 20 and 40.

### ***With regard to postures, what works or doesn't work?***

We use all the basic postures of Ananda Yoga, but we use just a very few postures every time to help them to get comfortable and relaxed. We always emphasize the simple variations. At the end of the 2002 course, we did some more-advanced variations, but otherwise I usually used simple variations.

In the asana practice, we focus mostly on working with the spinal energy, helping them to be aware of the spine and to be centered in the spine, especially in standing poses. That feels important.

### ***Why do you do only a few postures? Is it fatigue?***

No, it's the way we set up the class. We want to practice Energization and have a good relaxation afterwards, plus time for meditation and affirmation at the end. That leaves time for only a few postures. Two hours go very quickly.

There has also been a need at the beginning and end of the class to explain things, just to encourage them. I have to spend at least half an hour at the beginning of every class to present some point of view that encourages them in their practice, helps lift them out of depression. You see, their tendency is to become negative, so we teach how yoga can help them to overcome this tendency. We also have some

philosophical presentation together with the yoga routine and Energization.

When we began with Energization, I talked about the benefits and principles. Every time, I explained a little bit more. Every time, I had to bring out their interest in what we're doing. Without that, the practice was not deep enough for them to feel the energy.

Energization, asanas, meditation—I think it is a mixture of all three that has worked. I cannot say that one helps more than others. I think all three tools work in harmony. I think that any one of them alone would not bring out as much success for these people.

### ***Do you ask them to practice at home?***

We invite them to practice Energization and meditation at home, but in fact they only practice Energization at home; only one so far has stayed with meditation at home.

### ***How about pranayama techniques other than basic breathing?***

Rarely. We usually do some pranayama technique before sitting for meditation, and I introduced ujjayi and alternate nostril breathing, but we didn't practice regularly—maybe just a couple of times during the year.

I try to work with them at the level of what they need. It's very much about tuning into what they need at that moment. Outside of the class, even before the class, we have a lot of conversations with them, while we change our clothes. They are very much exteriorized in their behavior, and they like to talk a lot and have an exchange with others. So you can get a lot of information about what they need at the moment.

That helps me to tune in, and I start the class trying to let Master work through the need of that moment. That's why it's a mixture of everything. I prepare the class, but also I have to be alert to make many changes during the classes.

***What do you most often learn from this process—"Oh, tonight they need this, or tonight they need that"?***

They themselves show us what they need. Sometimes they are ready to start with Energization. But if, for example, they had a hard time on the job that day, I instead start with a bit more relaxation. At

other times I observe a tendency toward discouragement over the outward situation, so I have to help them to get out of the depression: we do some affirmation to get more dynamic in thinking positively.

***It's the same in any yoga class, but maybe this discouragement is related to their disease—they're more prone to it because life is such a struggle for them on many levels.***

Exactly. It is the same with any class, but the depression component is very strong in everyone because interferon, the medication they take, has a side effect of depression. It's not that depression is inherent to MS; it's more a side effect of interferon. The medication helps them feel more comfortable

*This yoga course helped me to get through hard moments in my life. Before I was depressed, but no more. At those times when I had physical troubles, I practiced the exercises and the affirmations that I've learned; the troubles went away, and I could regain control of the situation.*

—Tiziana, age 32



in the body, not in pain, to smooth down all the reaction in the nervous system, but it also creates that depression problem with all of them. I guess it just calms them down so much that they don't have enough energy to be uplifted.

MS is an inflammatory disease of the nervous system. The cover of the nerve cells get inflamed, so this disease is really a lot of agitation. Interferon helps relieve that inflammation but does not solve the nonphysical problems. Doctors know that this is a neurological disease, but they don't know its exact cause. They know that it's coming from a trauma, but the trauma is not just at a physical level—it's also on the psychological and emotional levels. So treating a disease like that only with chemical medication could not possibly be 100% effective; they have to find other ways. That's why they are looking at yoga, because yoga works on the psychological and emotional levels. And they have seen that, so far, we have good results.

***In general what results have you observed?***

When they started, it was just low energy, fatigue, and so on. Doing Energization regularly, they could change that situation into a state of more control of their energy and feeling that, whenever they needed to do some activity, they could draw from that energy that the practice brings to them. That's one of the results they've experienced: overcoming fatigue or that sense of low energy.

They also gained more control over their body function, over their arms and legs. Comparing what I saw at the end of last year, with what I saw this year when we met for the first time just a week ago, I could see that they had more control of their body parts, and they felt more relaxed in practicing the yoga and Energization. At least it was true for the people who practiced regularly. Those who didn't practice went backward a little bit, and they are still struggling. It was obvious who continued to practice and who did not.

***How about psychologically? What differences did you see?***

Psychologically we had many testimonials from the students. Also the media asked for comments, so a journalist interviewed some of the students. What they all said is that the main effect is on the psychological level: their spirits were better because the yoga helped them overcome a dark moment in their lives. Whereas before they would react emotionally to a situation, now they could face it more and be centered in themselves and deal with that. Yoga helped them realize what they have that they didn't know about before—that they could be centered and be in control of their energy and emotions. That brings out more willingness, more love for life, and all those good qualities that they lost when they found out that they have MS, when they were left

without any hope—in despair, really.

Even those who didn't continue to practice benefited, because they learned some principles that they could apply in their lives to get more serenity—a different way of looking at things and circumstances outside. Before they had tended to say that the problem is outside, to blame the situation. I told them that a prime principle of yoga is that you have to

learn to deal from what you are, and not blame the situation outside, because in some way you created that situation, and you have to determine what you can do about it. It completely changes the perspective on dealing with the situation. Now they can relate better to the problem of having MS, and they say, "I can accept that, it's okay to live with it." Before they couldn't accept anything that was happening in their lives. So helping them to accept more was a big step.

***You couldn't ask for more than that, yet you got much more: they learned to deal more effectively with their bodies on a practical, outward level.***

Yes, and there's another aspect: the spiritual aspect. I could see that these people didn't have any

spiritual life before. They were completely immersed in mundane life, dealing with everything on the physical and material level. They didn't have an inner life. Now they've begun to understand that there *is* an inner life, there *is* a spiritual life. Some were more ready than others—this is a long process, after all—but we help them find an inner strength, help them ask for help when they need it, and face all the situations in their lives.

Some people were really ready, as though they had always been looking for something like this. I remember one lady who was ready right away to follow the spiritual path as we introduced Kriya Yoga. For others it has been a slow process, but they are open to it. It's a good step for them, to understand that they are not just the body, not just the mind, that there is something inside of each of them, some reality that they can understand better.

***Swami Kriyananda has said that to have a healthy approach to the spiritual life, you need to start with a relatively healthy ego. You seem to have given them this, a different way to perceive themselves to bring about these changes that you saw.***

We can't really mention the spiritual aspect in our practice, but it's so tangible in everything we do with yoga that it just comes out naturally. It is not an imposition on them. The more we present the Energization Exercises and the principles of yoga, the more they understand how to live that and what it means. We encourage them, help them to be more conscious about the potential of their soul, and see

***I didn't think I could have so many benefits. Especially in facing my daily life, now I feel more serene in confronting this disease.***

—Maurizio, 31

***From a physical point of view, yoga loosened some of my body parts. On a mental level, it gives me more tranquillity. Today I can better deal with my negative emotions and look with serenity at the future.***

—Alessia, 32

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## Ananda Yoga Proven to Help Multiple Sclerosis Patients (continued from page 5)

that they can really overcome if they put their willingness, love, and joy into whatever they do.

We had to meet them at the level where they were. We could not just impose the spiritual practices, including meditation. We presented meditation a little bit at a time, more as an experience of interiorization first, just to introduce them a little bit, because I thought to give them an experience of what is instead of just talking about it. So we had a little experience every time, and they liked it. Most of the people came to me afterwards and said: "It was very nice. I feel very calm and very peaceful now. I would love to do it longer." So the process of meditation and the spiritual practices come naturally, as they are ready.

**Some of them must have had a relationship with God. Does this ever come up in your discussions?**

We do that mostly on the individual level, because some in the class are not ready for anything spiritual. But others have been very ready. I have a wonderful testimonial from one, saying that she was just waiting for this course and for Ananda for her whole life, and she realizes how this disease had to happen so she could get in contact with Ananda.

**Can you share any of the specific research results?**

The neurologists and their assistants made measurements on every patient at the class—testing before the course started, in the middle of the course, and at the end. There was the fatigue impact scale, the fatigue severity scale, the level of depression and anxiety, the visual analog scale, the social experience test. The results were that fatigue was less frequent and less severe, anxiety was lower, depression was radically lower. Vision improved, too. Everything they tested seemed to improve.

**Now you're into the second year with the program. What's happening this year?**

Everybody is very excited to continue. Originally it was to be a one-year course to see how it worked, but Dr. Caramia managed to get the sponsor to extend it to a two-year course. At the end of this year, we will probably conclude with this group, and perhaps continue with another.

We kept all the students from last year, but this year we have a bigger room, so we added five more students, selected by the doctor. Now Sevadevi and I usually alternate teaching. But sometimes we go together, and she helps especially with

talking to the ladies. We spend maybe half an hour before class and 20 minutes after class just helping them as friends.

Sevadevi and I decided at the outset to keep the students in our prayers constantly. All last year and this year too, we've sent out healing energy to them, and that surely has helped—not in a small way—to open the channel for God's grace to flow in their bodies, minds and souls, and helping them to accept yoga with an open heart.

**Does Sevadevi help in her professional capacity as an osteopath, or as a yoga teacher.**

As a teacher. At the beginning of the course she was tempted to help them more via adjustments and therapy. I said, "Let's wait for them to do yoga first, and then maybe later you can help also with that." She agreed with that.

**Isn't that good advice for any teacher? Let students find their own way in the practice before doing too much adjusting or detail or precision. Especially when the group has come to you, not specifically for yoga, but for healing—and yoga just happens to be what they're trying right now—it's good to be very patient and let them find their footing before going in too much.**

—Paola, 35

Yes, and stay aware of this group's particular priorities.

**There was an inspiring article not long ago in Yoga International about working with MS patients. Did you see it?**

Yes, it's wonderful to see the amazing work that this MS patient and her yoga teacher are doing to promote yoga in this country as an alternative way to work with MS. But I realized that the emphasis of the practice they suggest is just asana and pranayama, though they did mention meditation's benefits. Very little was said on how to help people to heal the emotional, psychological, and spiritual imbalances related to this disease. This is where Ananda Yoga—and in fact, Kriya Yoga, in my opinion—would be a more complete approach to working with this disease. We really have something to offer. ♦

*The funding for the experimental program for MS patients officially concluded last spring. However, the program proved so popular with the participants that the classes have been continuing this fall on a private basis (i.e., with no outside funding; the students pay for the classes). If you have any questions for Claudio, you can e-mail him at [claudio@ananda.it](mailto:claudio@ananda.it).*

*Our thanks to AYTA member Patty McCarley for transcribing this interview.*



# Can Being Too Flexible Be Harmful?

by Nicole DeAvilla

In an article entitled, “When Does Flexible Start to Mean Harmful? ‘Hot’ Yoga Draws Fire” (*New York Times*, March 30, 2004), the question was posed, Does too much stretching cause injuries?

Ten to twenty years ago, when I was teaching yoga in San Francisco, one rarely heard of people being injured from practicing yoga. During this time I worked both as a chiropractic assistant and in sports medicine research. To the extent that we saw yoga injuries at all, it was usually something that would be caused by going into or out of an inversion inappropriately. But even that was rare.

Recently, however, I’ve heard that the sports medicine clinic where I worked now treats yoga injuries more regularly than it did ten years ago. What has changed since then?

## Getting to the Root of the Problem

First of all, the number of people practicing yoga has increased, which explains some of the increase in the number of injuries. It does not explain the situation entirely, however, because not only do there seem to be more injuries than increased numbers of participation can explain, but also there is a wider variety of types of injuries, especially for the knees and lower back, as reported in the above article. So what else has changed in the last ten years?

For one thing, there has been a great increase in the popularity of heat-based and power types of yoga, which tend to be fast-paced and to foster a certain degree of competitiveness. There are also a lot more yoga teachers with little or no formal training stepping up to meet the demand for these classes. More and more yoga students in power and hot yoga classes are getting injured more readily as they push the limits of their bodies with little, if any, regard to safety.

The *New York Times* article stated that some physical therapists question the value of excessive joint flexibility, saying that it can lead to inflammation and pain. Some asanas that require extreme bending of the knees such as squats and sitting backwards on folded knees (vajrasana) were particularly cited by a sports medicine doctor as examples of postures that are most likely to cause tears in knee cartilage. This naturally raises the question of the safety of vajrasana and similar asanas.

## Flexible Muscles vs. Flexible Joints

To properly assess this safety issue, a distinction needs to be made: flexibility in joints is a different matter than flexibility in muscles.

Joints are where one bone connects with another bone. Joints (i.e., the connecting bones) are held together by ligaments. They are further stabilized by muscles and tendons. As Dr. James Garrick, M.D.<sup>1</sup>, orthopedic surgeon and



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

Director of the Sports Medicine Center at Saint Francis Hospital in San Francisco, states in his book, *Peak Condition*, “Ligaments have some elasticity. They can stretch a bit, but if they stretch over about 10 percent of their length, then they are like Saran Wrap—you stretch it too far and it stays that way. It won’t go back.” The job of ligaments is to help hold a joint in alignment, yet still allow for normal range of motion. If a ligament is overstretched, then it is unable to stabilize the joint as well as it did before. The joint becomes more vulnerable to injury unless adequate muscle strength is developed to compensate for the extra looseness.

If the ligaments are stretched sufficiently—either from a sudden impact (such as a fall or impact), or over time (by overstretching them bit by bit)—the joint will be injured. There will then be inflammation and pain in the joint, for inflammation is the body’s mechanism for stabilizing the compromised joint. The body can repair ligaments to a certain degree, but due to the low blood supply to the ligaments, as well as to the nature of the tissue they’re composed of, repair is slow and they are usually unable to return to their original state. To bring stability back to the joint, the supporting muscles then need to be built up more than usual in order to compensate for

the stretched ligament(s).

Therefore, in hatha yoga or any other activity, care should be taken never to stretch the ligaments. Dr. Garrick states in another of his books, *Be Your Own Personal Trainer*: “You should never feel the stretch in your joints. It’s virtually impossible to stretch joints. Stretching joints means stretching ligaments, and ligaments aren’t particularly elastic. They have a tendency to tear rather than stretch.” One indication that a joint is being stressed (therefore potentially overstretching the ligaments) is if there is any sensation *inside the joint itself*.

(continues on page 8)

<sup>1</sup> As the research assistant for the Center for Sports Medicine, I coauthored an article with Dr. Garrick and Ralph Requa, the head of research, for the *Sports Medicine Journal*, which reported on a large study of injury rates in all types of exercise and sports (yoga included—but this was long before it became so popular). That’s why I know that injury rates have increased. Dr. Garrick treated my knee injuries from dancing; his lesser claims to fame include being medical advisor to the National Football League, the U.S. Olympic Figure Skating Team, and the San Francisco Ballet.

## Can Being Too Flexible Be Harmful? (continued from page 7)

### Understanding Range of Motion

So then we must ask, if a joint has a less-than-optimal range of motion, should we do anything to increase the range of motion? This is often referred to as stretching or opening up a joint. If the range of motion is restricted due to weak and/or tight muscles and tendons, then the answer is “yes”: we do want to increase the range of motion. If the range is limited due to the body’s structure (the bones and the ligaments), then, the answer is “no.”

Most of us never become so flexible as to feel that our bony structure is limiting us in our ability to go deeper into a posture. Back in my dancing days, I heard that in the not-so-distant past, the U.S.S.R. used to x-ray young, hopeful, ballerina girls’ hip joints to see if they had the maximum structural capability for 180 degree turnout. It sounds as though it was a terrible system, but I have to wonder if their ballerinas had fewer injuries caused by forced turnouts—and less need for hip replacements later in life—than their non-x-ray-selected counterparts in other countries.

Muscle is elastic and is meant to be flexible as well as strong. If flexibility is not maintained, the muscles will once again shorten. They have the ability to go back and forth from being short (inflexible) and being long (flexible)

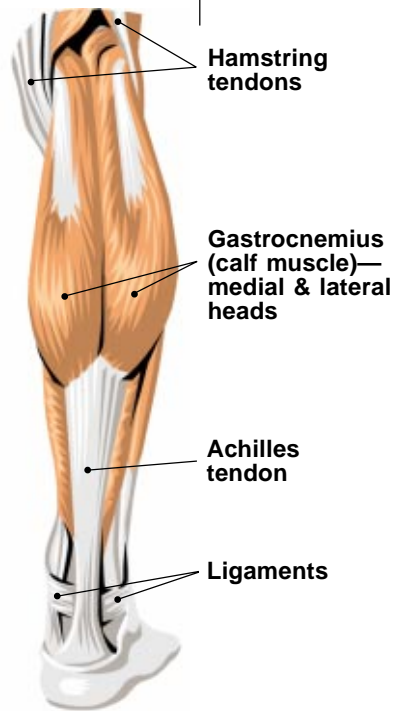
Tendons are the endpoints of the muscles where they attach to bones. “Like ligaments, tendons are strong but not particularly elastic,” states Dr. Garrick. Tendons will stretch, but only so far before they too will become injured.

Healthy muscles will have a balance between flexibility and strength. Overly flexible muscles without strength will not be able to support joints as well when they come under stress, thus predisposing one to joint injuries. Overly tight muscles reduce range of motion, which can limit daily activities and predispose one to straining or tearing muscles.

Can we be too flexible? Dr. Garrick cautions against being overly flexible. Striving for more and more flexibility without a good reason for it may indeed be courting trouble. Dr. Garrick asserts that it may be that stretching for its own sake may cause more problems than it prevents. So as yogis we must ask ourselves, Why do we want to become more flexible? It may be because we are rehabilitating an injury, and that specific stretches will help bring us back into balance. Or perhaps we are compromised in our daily activities from a lack of flexibility. As yogis our main reason for increasing flexibility should be, to be healthy and to be comfortable sitting in meditation. A healthy body is easier to

forget during meditation than an unhealthy, uncomfortable, nagging one.

So how flexible do we need to be? That depends on the individual. If a person is healthy and able to sit comfortably in a chair and go deep into meditation, then being able to put his foot behind his head is probably an unnecessary goal. Another individual may be motivated to experience the subtle energetic benefits of meditating in the lotus posture. If so, then a safe and gradually progressive asana practice of some of the deeper stretches may be appropriate. On the other hand, some bodies may not be meant ever to go into a full lotus position. Such differences must be respected.



Selected muscles, tendons, and ligaments in the right leg (posterior view)

### Keys to Asana Safety

The injuries cited in the *New York Times* article were most likely due to pushing one’s flexibility far beyond the natural range of the muscles. The ligaments and tendons then took the stress and became injured. It takes time to safely increase the flexibility of muscles; forcing a stretch is always a recipe for problems.

As for the safety of vajrasana, it must be taken in a case-by-case basis (as ultimately all yoga asanas should be viewed). If a person can sit in vajrasana comfortably, and feel no sensations of pressure, tightness, or discomfort in their knees, then it can be a good asana for that individual. (In fact, some people with back problems find vajrasana more comfortable, easier on the back, than other seated positions.) If one feels the thighs stretching all the way to the knees, but not in the knee joints themselves, then it is okay. If there is some stress in the joints, often props can be used to alleviate the stress by decreasing knee flexion (e.g., sit on a cushion placed between the legs under the buttocks, or place a cushion between ankles and

buttocks). If, even after the use of props, one is still experiencing these sensations in the joints themselves, then that person should not practice vajrasana until (if ever) he or she can do so safely.

If there is uncertainty as to whether the sensations are in the knee joint itself or an attaching tendon, or in the muscle, err on the side of caution and avoid the position. This approach should be taken with all asanas, since there never is a time that one should intentionally stretch ligaments.<sup>2</sup>

Apparently what happens in “hot” yoga classes is that the

(continues on page 11)

<sup>2</sup> Exceptions would be in the case of rehabilitating ligaments that have scar tissue or other medical problems. However, it is so extremely easy to re-injure a ligament that even professionally trained health care providers must do so with caution; certainly it is beyond the scope of a yoga teacher (unless he or she has the appropriate specialized training and experience) to determine when and how this should be done. For more information, see “More Thoughts on Lengthening Ligaments” on page 9.





# More Thoughts on Lengthening Ligaments

*an interview with Craig Roberts, D.C.*

**C**raig teaches two yoga therapy programs at *The Expanding Light*: one for the lower back, pelvis, and hips (coming up February 24–27), and one for the upper back, neck, shoulders, and headaches. This interview arose from his program this fall.

**Question:** *We've been told not to stretch ligaments, lest we compromise their vital skeletal support function. Haven't you said that sometimes it is desirable to stretch them?*

Craig: This is tricky. We have to remember that as flexibility increases, stability decreases—the two are in a direct inverse relationship. Overstretching and creating a joint that moves too much—a *hypermobile* joint—can compromise that joint and predispose it to injury. An excellent example of this is the person with a chronically dislocating shoulder: the ligaments and joint capsule of the shoulder are too stretched out, and something as simple as reaching behind the back can cause a dislocation.

On the other hand, a joint that is too tight—or *hypomobile*—causes its own host of problems. Consider a person whose pelvic joints (most notably, the sacroiliac joints) are extremely tight. Normally these joints provide for a good deal of motion during the act of walking. If the pelvic joints are hypomobile and unable to participate in normal walking motion, then other joints must “take up the slack”—for instance, excessive motion might need to occur in a hip joint. When the hip joint is forced to accept more of a burden of movement than it was designed for, the result is early degeneration of the hip. Indeed, many times a joint becomes too mobile in compensation for a joint that is not mobile enough. Thus stuck joints and loose joints are inevitable partners: if you get one, you'll get the other, too.

**Okay, so you might want to stretch a ligament that's too short. How do ligaments become shortened in the first place?**

Generally ligaments become shortened due to one of two reasons: trauma or faulty posture. In the case of trauma, a torn ligament or tendon heals with scar tissue that creates a contracture within (i.e., shortens) the ligament or tendon. A common example is when someone strains the hamstring tendon where it attaches to the pelvis in the buttock (at the corresponding sitting bone); often such a strain causes the person, in the end, to be less flexible in that hamstring.

As for posture, ligaments held chronically in shortened positions actually shorten. An extreme case of this would be someone who has his arm in a sling for several weeks after a surgery. The shoulder capsule (the ligament tissue surrounding the shoulder joint) shrinks to the point where the arm can't be raised beyond perhaps 100 degrees. A more common example would be the person with slumped forward, internally rotated shoulders. In this case, the ligaments in the

front of the shoulder actually shorten since they are chronically held in this position.

**How would a yoga teacher know whether a student has a joint that is either hypermobile or hypomobile?**

It takes years to master the skill of locating hypermobile/hypomobile joints. Often a joint can have excessive motion in one direction, but restricted movement in another direction. In chiropractic, we determine this through palpation, observation, range-of-motion testing, and X-ray. Yoga teachers can get an idea of what normal ranges of motion are by studying the basic postures with a good teacher.

One of the excellent things about Ananda Yoga is that we generally don't practice the really extreme, super-contorted poses. The basic poses will expose tight areas. During a standing forward bend, for example, a good general target is to get the hands to the ankles. Beyond that point, the pose will differ depending on the individual. If a person can bring the hands flat on the floor, it's probably unwise—not to mention unnecessary, from a yogic perspective—to work on going further (although it may be helpful for a gymnast, martial artist, etc.).

The next logical question is, “How do I know whether the restriction is due to ligaments or to muscles?” Let's continue with the example of the person with tight hamstrings—s/he can't reach the hands beyond the knees in a standing forward bend. If this person has a history of low back pain or hamstring strains, he or she should see an expert before proceeding. The danger is that if the student spends a great deal of time stretching, yet the pelvic joints are immobile, hamstring muscles and tendons will probably be lengthened, but the pelvic joints won't be affected: the same poor movement pattern will remain. An expert bodyworker can help the person isolate and stretch out the hypomobile pelvic joints—then the time spent practicing forward bends will pay high dividends. In an individual with no history of back pain or hamstring strains, the forward bend can be pursued with less guidance; it's likely that the stretch will affect the muscles, tendons, and ligaments together in a balanced fashion.

**How can a yoga teacher know whether or not a student is actually stretching a ligament?**

Connective tissues—including ligament, joint capsule, tendon, and fascia (the connective tissue that covers and ensheathes muscle tissue)—are stretched whenever a joint is taken to end range and the stretch is held for 30 seconds or more. (“End range” is the point at which you feel what I call “stretch discomfort” in the muscle, but not pain. Don't aim for feeling stretch discomfort in a joint, although there can be situations in which that's okay.)

*(continues on page 10)*



*Craig lives at Ananda Village with his wife and three daughters. He practices chiropractic there and in Nevada City.*

## More Thoughts on Lengthening Ligaments (continued from page 9)

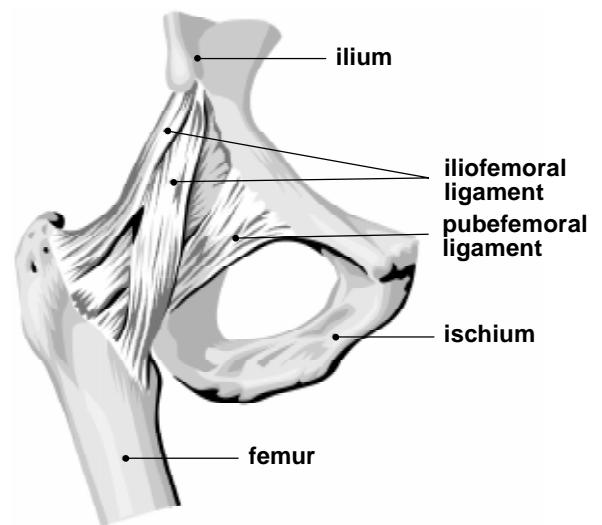
To understand this better, consider what happens during a stretch: as you initiate a stretch, your muscles reflexively increase their tone (i.e., contract), which prevents us from damaging muscles as we stretch. This increase in tone lasts about 15–20 seconds. After 15–20 seconds of a sustained stretch, the muscle relaxes and you are more likely to be able to access the ligament and joint. To avoid injury, it's wise to be warmed up before performing this type of stretching. Muscle will stretch, too—remember that each muscle cell, each group of muscle cells, and each entire muscle, is wrapped in fascia, which behaves very much like ligament in that it is “thixotropic.” Thixotropy is a property of connective tissue that basically means this: if you yank on connective tissue, it is incredibly strong (stronger than steel, pound for pound!); if you apply a steady force to it, however, it “creeps” (i.e., slowly stretches). Connective tissue creeps the most from 30 seconds to 5 minutes into a stretch.

### So at “end range,” you're pulling not only on muscles?

Right. You will pull on the muscle, tendon, and one or more ligaments, because a fully stretched muscle is more like a piece of wire than a rubber band. At end range, you've “used up” the muscle's elasticity (at least until it can relax more), so the stretch not only pulls on the muscle and its tendon, but opens the affected joint by stretching the ligaments around the joint. You're always stretching all three at end range—it's just that actual lengthening of the ligament or tendon doesn't happen until after 30 seconds.

### How can a yoga teacher know when a ligament has been lengthened enough, and shouldn't be lengthened more?

Actually, I don't think yoga teachers should try to lengthen ligaments in the first place; that requires specialized training. Make it simple: don't push a student—either overtly or by example—beyond performing the poses in the correct manner. This can challenge a limber teacher, since the tendency is to think that everyone should be able to do what you can do. Remember that every body is different. The person built like a pit bull will usually be less flexible than



*Ligaments in the right hip joint (anterior view)*

one built like a giraffe—the bear less flexible than the dragon. It's important to observe and get a feel for these differences. Anyone who experiences pain in a joint should seek expert advice.

Remember: you are generally safe in advocating that a person move into a pain-free stretch, just short of end range, and hold it less than 30 seconds. This type of stretch will relax muscles without lengthening and changing other tissue. I think it's safe to hold stretches longer (say, a minute) if the person does not have a problem in that area and the stretch is not held at end range. (If the person is indeed trying to change structure—and really knows what s/he is doing in that regard!—it can be okay to hold it even longer at end range.)

Also, remember that strengthening poses are equally important. Strength is what gives a joint “dynamic stability,” whereas ligaments give a joint “passive stability.” Dancers, martial artists, and others whose profession demands greater-than-normal flexibility keep their joints healthy and stable with strength, which guides and coordinates movement.

### Any final thoughts on this topic?

It's important not to get too hung up on details. Help students work toward good flexibility and good strength, but keep them focused on the deeper aspects of the poses.

In a class situation, stretches should be performed in such a manner as to relax and gently stretch muscles. This can mean either holding a moderately intense stretch for less than about 30 seconds, or holding a less intense stretch for longer. Holding stretches at end range should only be done under the guidance of someone who possesses specific knowledge indicating that ligaments require lengthening, and who knows how to do that safely.

Remember that great benefit comes simply by learning to release patterns of muscular tension. As the body relaxes, a subtler, deeper relaxation occurs. In this receptive state, your students will be better able to experience their true nature—that is the essence of yoga. ♦

## More Member Benefits

The latest addition to the [www.AnandaYoga.org](http://www.AnandaYoga.org) website is a large number of past AYSutra discussion threads. Just log in as a member, click on the “AYSutra Archives” icon, and you'll find a long list of past threads, compiled and edited by AYTA member volunteers.

The threads are in chronological order, so if you vaguely recall that some topic grabbed you last summer, you can easily find it. Also, you can use your browser's “find” function to search the list to check whether your question has already been asked (and answered).

We're very happy at last to have these available to everyone. Thank you, great-souled volunteers, for all your service!



## Can Being Too Flexible Be Harmful? (continued from page 8)

climate—both temperature and social—and the teaching styles encourage pushing too far, too quickly into many positions. This results in muscle strains, tendonitis, ligament damage, and other joint injuries. It's an issue of awareness rather than asanas—of how to teach and practice yoga appropriately.

### Tips for the Teacher

Yoga asanas requiring a relatively high degree of flexibility have been around for thousands of years. History tells us of yoga's therapeutic benefits, not of its injury rates. A competitive, purely physical, and superficial expression of the asanas is currently in vogue, and if it continues to produce a high rate of injuries, it is not likely to survive in that form.

We're lucky to be well trained, teaching the Ananda style of yoga. If you ever experience more than a very occasional injury in your yoga classes, step back and review the basics. Are you giving thorough warm-ups to your students? Are you checking students' alignment and teaching the asanas in stages ("building blocks") to prepare students adequately for the full positions? Are you setting a noncompetitive tone in your classes? Are you practicing what you preach?

Furthermore, learning more about alignment and therapeutic yoga will help you help your students avoid injury. When I teach therapeutic yoga, I begin with, continue with, and end with teaching: (a) do no harm, and (b) alignment and body mechanics, for *prevention* as well as therapy.

Along with the physical nuts and bolts, attitude is very important. Be sure you are not competing with your own students. Keep bringing the focus inward and upward. A student who does that is not so aware of what the other students are doing, and therefore is unlikely to contribute to a competitive atmosphere.

Yoga should bring our bodies and minds into balance. Yoga should help heal our knees and backs as well as calming our minds. The consciousness and intention of our yoga practice and teaching are all important to the results of yoga practice. Clearly Ananda Yoga for Higher Awareness is good not only for our souls, but our minds and bodies as well. ♦

To read the entire New York Times article that Nicole cited, go to [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) and use the site's search function to look for the phrase "When does flexible" (put it in quotes). You might have to register in order to view the article, but registration is free.

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## The Forward-Facing Yogi (continued from page 2)

curious about yoga's deeper aspects. They will look for something that is not for the masses, but that is right for them individually. They will look for yoga that has more meaning than "workout," teachers who give them personal attention and a feeling—yes, an *experience*—of having

(continues on page 12)

# Ah, Flexibility!

by Gyandev McCord

Recently Swami Kriyananda asked us to use "ardha chandrasana" for the pose that we've been calling "chandrasana." For some reason, "ardha" was dropped from *Ananda Yoga for Higher Awareness* and *The Art and Science of Raja Yoga* about twenty years ago; we've been calling it "moon pose" ever since. Now, Swami asks that we call it "half-moon pose" ("ardha" means "half"), as he'd always intended. I must say, the asana certainly looks more like a half-moon than a full moon.

There are also other hatha traditions that call this pose "ardha chandrasana." Still others, of course, call it chandrasana, as we had been doing.

### And That's Not All

Adding to this festive variety of names, there is a different asana—a balance pose, pictured below—that is known as ardha chandrasana in some hatha styles (e.g., those of B.K.S. Iyengar and Pattabhi Jois, and derivatives of those styles). This pose has long been a favorite of mine, so when Swami asked for the return to "ardha chandrasana," I saw an opportunity: I asked him to "initiate" this balance pose into Ananda Yoga by giving it an affirmation—and by telling us its Sanskrit name, which clearly couldn't be "ardha chandrasana."

Happily, he consented. It's "tola trikonasana": balancing triangle pose. Indeed, it *does* look like, not a half-moon, but a trikonasana that has expanded into a balancing position (bringing trikonasana's front hand to the floor and rear leg up into alignment with the spine).

The affirmation is, "I expand fully into this moment." As I've experimented with it, I've found it a superb fit. It not only expresses the spirit of the asana, but by helping you put your mind in that "fully present" space, it helps you do the pose more easily in the first place!



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**The Forward-Facing Yoga**  
*(continued from page 11)*

unlimited possibilities. Ananda Yoga will be a natural choice for many of those people.

Of course, those who pursue yoga for spiritual reasons will continue to be a minority. Ananda Yoga is not and never has been for the masses, nor is any yoga tradition that holds self-realization as its goal. But I believe that there will be plenty of people who want what it has to offer, and therefore want what you have to offer.

**Necessity Is the Mother**

True, the widening availability of yoga may mean that you need to increase your own skills and magnetism in order to attract and retain students. However—and here I speak from experience—being forced to increase your magnetism is a *huge blessing!* It kicks you out of your comfort zone and makes you improve the way you do things. It awakens you to a new world of needs and possibilities. It opens the door to greater creativity, growth, and renewed enthusiasm for both your practice and your teaching. All this benefits not only you, but your students.

How to increase your teaching magnetism? Here are two simple, familiar, time-tested formulas:

- The greater the will, the greater the flow of energy.

**LEVEL 2 NEWS****New Programs & 2005 Preview**

AYTA Members receive a **15% discount** on all Level 2 programs, which more than pays for your membership. If you need financial aid, please don't hesitate to apply for it; call or e-mail The Expanding Light for an application.

**Advanced Yoga Intensive (June 19–24)**

Take your practice to the next level via advanced techniques of Ananda Yoga—from more-challenging (or just different) asanas, to powerful pranayamas/bandhas/mudras, to more-dynamic meditations. Led by Gyandev McCord, this program is all about depth, offering some instruction but mostly guided exploration and practice, including many techniques touched on only briefly in other Level 2 programs.

**Sharing Yoga with Children (June 26–July 1)**

Susan Brochin adds a new dimension to this popular program, led by Nitai Deranja. It's still a complete training for working with children—asanas are only the beginning. Susan, however, has succeeded beautifully in bringing hatha yoga into two Bay Area public schools. She's even trained other public school teachers to teach their own students. She'll share with you how to do these and similar things in your area.

In the schedule below, “★” indicates a required Level 2 program.

3/27–4/3 ... ★Meditation Teacher Trng.	7/3–16 ..... ★AYTT Assistantship
4/3–16 ..... ★AYTT Assistantship	7/10–15 ..... Therapeutic Yoga
5/4–8 ..... Kriya Yoga Preparation	7/17–23 ..... Med. Teacher Trng. Level 2
5/26–6/5 ... Yoga of the Heart®— Cardiac & Cancer YTT	7/17–22 ..... Prenatal YTT
6/5–10 ..... Yoga to Awaken Chakras	7/22–25 ..... Postnatal YTT
6/12–17 ..... Deeper into Spirit of Yoga	7/31–8/6 .... ★Practical Insights from the Bhagavad Gita
6/16–19 ..... Restorative YTT	8/7–12 ..... Yoga to Awaken Chakras
6/19–24 ..... Advanced Yoga Intensive	8/7–14 ..... ★Advanced Pranayama
6/23–26 ..... The Joy of Sanskrit Level 1	10/19–23 ... Kriya Yoga Preparation
6/26–28 ..... The Joy of Sanskrit Level 2	10/6–16 ..... ★Meditation Teacher Trng.
6/26–7/1 ... Sharing Yoga w/Children	10/16–29 ... ★AYTT Assistantship
6/23–7/3 ... ★Meditation Teacher Trng.	10/30–11/4 . Deeper into Spirit of Yoga

*“The Law of Magnetism has not been repealed: Teachers who offer a quality yoga experience will always be in demand, no matter where they teach.”*

- The greater the flow of energy, the greater the magnetism.

Am I oversimplifying? Certainly there are details to work out. That's where the fun begins, as you bring these principles into your own teaching context, make them your own. Still, it *is* simple.

So don't let the commercialization of yoga intimidate you. Success can belong to anyone who puts out a lot of energy in intelligent, imaginative, magnetic ways. Consider it an adventure in your own spiritual growth.

You have a great advantage in being different. In business parlance, teaching Ananda Yoga is a “USP”: Unique Selling Point. And if more and more students come to your classes via yoga studio chains, you can be thankful to the chains. You can also be thankful for what you offer, which has drawn the students to you. Your students certainly will be thankful for it—and for you. ♦