

Awake & Ready!

Newsletter of the Ananda Yoga® Teachers Association
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PERSPECTIVE

Living in the Spine

Recently someone asked me: “You say that yogis need to live in the spine. What does that mean, and how can we do it?” Good question! At Ananda, we so often speak of living in the spine that it’s easy to forget that its meaning isn’t obvious; in fact, newcomers sometimes think it’s downright strange. I’d like to address how we as Ananda Yoga teachers can use help our students understand experientially what it means, and why and how to do it—not only in asana practice, but in every aspect of life.

The Big Picture

Living in the spine means centering your awareness in, and acting from, your own divine Self. Okay, that’s a nice definition, but exactly how can we do this?

In *The Art and Science of Raja Yoga*, Swami Kriyananda gives an answer: “To remain more in the Self means to live more in the spine, and at the point between the eyebrows. The yogi’s awareness of the spinal energy must ever be directed upward.”

One way to understand this is to consider its opposite: living at our periphery, i.e., living through the senses. We need our senses to function in this world, but when they become the focus of our lives (as advertisers hope they will), our energy becomes habitually directed outward rather than inward and upward. So the process of growth begins with withdrawing life-force from the senses into the spine. Only then can we begin to move it up to the spiritual eye

Now as you may have seen, newer students often don’t like the idea of withdrawing from the senses. It sounds like deprivation. How can we help them begin in a way that’s meaningful for—and clearly beneficial to—them? I’ll focus on some very basic exercises, taking students through four simple steps that will show them from their own experience:

1. Become more aware of the spine
2. Straighten the spine
3. Become centered in the spine
4. Act from the spine



Gyandev McCord
Director

This approach is easier with regular students because you can develop it over time, but it’s also possible (though harder) with drop-ins. I’ll describe the steps sequentially, but they don’t have to be taught linearly. Also, please note that “the spine” really means “the astral spine”; however, since the physical spine is more meaningful to newer students, let’s begin at the physical level.

1. Becoming Aware of the Spine

It’s hard to live in the spine if you’re not aware of it, and many people are only vaguely aware of it. They know that they have one, and they can feel the bumps on their back, but beyond that, they don’t know much about it. We can show them pictures or models, and visualization—trained via pictures or models—can be helpful. More helpful, however, is their own kinesthetic experience of the spine.

For example, have your students stand in Tadasana and sway the body slightly left and right, *mentally resisting* the swaying with the spine. When the body sways to one side, the spine tries to pull it the other away, back to center. Let resistance gradually reduce the swaying until you come to a point of perfect balance in the center. Then sway the body forward and back, resisting the swaying with the spine until you come to center. In the same way, you can circle the body in a small, inward spiral, gradually coming to center. These simple exercises help students begin to *feel* the spine as a

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part of the body—and of their movement—rather than merely intellectually knowing that it's there.

But why stop with Tadasana? You can do a similar exercise in many asanas. By swaying the body gently and resisting that sway with the spine, students will gain a greater awareness of the location and shape of the spine in that pose—and whether they have “lost their center” in the pose.

For example, sway forward and backward in Ardha Chandrasana or Trikonasana. Move side-to-side in Bhujangasana or Paschimotanasana. Switch back and forth between the two phases of Janushirasana. Or spiral inward in Ardha Matsyendrasana. This simple exercise can be very illuminating for students, revealing both their habits of asana practice and their everyday habits of posture.

2. Keeping a Straight Spine

Everyone knows that one “should” stand and sit up straight, though they may not know why. But when students directly experience how their physical posture affects their state of mind, it is much more meaningful—and much more motivating.

For example, have students alternate between standing (or sitting) with a straight spine versus slumping. (Don't add the element of smiling vs. frowning, deep breathing, affirmations, etc.—those can come later, to add other emphases.) Keep them in each position for several breaths, observing how the position affects the breath and the mind. Students will notice how their breathing is easier, and their minds are clearer and more alert, when their spines are straight than when they are slumping. Call their attention to how quickly the mind is affected by the transition from a straight spine to a slumped spine. It's not rocket science.

AYTA MEMBER NEWS

Attention AOL Users!!!

If you've not been receiving AYSutra e-mails, there's definitely a reason: It's become very difficult to send any e-mail message at all to folks who have AOL accounts. It may be anti-spam measures on the part of AOL, so please put the “expandinglight.org” domain on your “safe” list with AOL so you continue getting mail. There's nothing we know of that we can do to help.

Keep 'Em Coming

Thanks to those of you who responded to the call for articles for *Awake & Ready!* We still need more, however, so if you teach a unique population or have had interesting insights or experiences teaching Ananda Yoga, please consider writing an article about it. For information, contact Gyandev (see page 12).

You can also explore “straight vs. slumped” in a variety of asanas in which the spine is ideally straight. Some good examples are Utkatasana (light vs. heavy), Trikonasana (dynamic vs. stagnant), Vajrasana (mental clarity vs. mental fog), and Ardha Matsyendrasana (open vs. closed).

When students directly experience how their physical posture affects their state of mind, it is much more meaningful—and much more motivating.

This simple exercise can be highly motivating. “Gosh,” students will think, “I can affect my mind simply through my posture. I'd better be more vigilant about what my spine is doing.” This is the beginning of living in the spine. You might give students the “homework” of noticing this affect throughout the days until their next class with you—then discuss it with them at that class. It can be a real wakeup call. Even if you offer your students no more than this little exercise, it would be of great value to them.

3. Centering in the Spine

The word “centered” is common these days: “He's really off-center today,” or “She's a very centered person.” Less understood, however, are the deeper yogic principles behind such expressions. One way to convey the point is through balance poses, which take people beyond being merely *aware* of the spine to being *centered* in the spine.

Balance begins with making the spine your physical center of gravity; without that, the pose is one big wobble—for as long as it lasts—and the breath and mind can get agitated. But with centeredness in the spine, the breath and mind stay calm, the pose lasts longer, and it's more enjoyable.

This goes far beyond the physical center of gravity. It's about where your concentration is, where the center of your reality is. That's the real key to the asanas—and to life.

To demonstrate this, have your students concentrate on the lifted knee in Vrikasana, making it the center of their reality. Guess what? It becomes harder to balance. Or ask them to center their reality in their gazing point on the floor. Again, wobble city! Then have them do the pose while concentrating on the spine, feeling it as the center of their reality. It's an entirely different experience; they're still gazing at the spot on the floor, but their concentration is on where they're gazing *from* rather than what they're gazing *at*. Concentrating anywhere else makes balance more difficult, plus the overall experience less pleasant.

Again, translate this principle into non-balance poses. In Standing Backward Bend, ask students to concentrate on whatever they see; they might not wobble as they would in a balance pose, but the asana experience will certainly be, um, unremarkable. Then have them do the pose while focusing in the spine; it's a huge difference. Similarly, contrast doing



Jathara Parivartanasana while concentrating on the outstretched arm versus concentrating in the spine. In the former, you're basically "just hanging out" as the body does its thing, while in the latter, you're at the center of what's happening in the pose, *helping* it to happen.

Breathing in the Spine

One excellent way to become more aware of, and more centered in, the spine is through learning to breathe in the spine. Of course, students with any knowledge of anatomy know that they don't really breathe in the physical spine, but as you know, they *do* breathe in the *astral* spine. Focusing on, and tuning into, this process can be a wonderful teacher for your students, even if they're relative beginners.

You did this often in AYTT and other classes, but let me remind you of some of the main aspects:

- Sit upright with a straight spine.
- Touch the tip of the tailbone (coccyx) with one forefinger, and the medulla oblongata area with the other. Visualize a hollow tube, about as big around as your thumb, connecting those two points, and energy flowing up through that tube with each inhalation, and down with each exhalation. This is the reality, whether students feel it or not; visualizing will gradually help them experience it personally. Next move the first finger to the spiritual eye and visualize breathing through the entire astral spine: from tailbone to medulla, then bending forward to the spiritual eye. Relax the hands to the lap and continue the breathing and visualization.
- Use the Full Yogic Breath pattern: the upward wave of expansion in the torso on the inhalation coincides with upward movement of energy, while the downward wave of relaxation on the exhalation coincides with the downward movement of energy in the spine. The physical expansion and relaxation will help students tune into the energy movements.
- Ujjayi breathing is an option: the constriction at the back of the throat slows the breath and helps draw one's attention to the spine (since the back of the throat is very near the cervical spine).

"Spinal breathing" can help students focus on—and center in—the astral spine. Try it both in neutral poses like Tadasana, and in more-active asanas.

4. Acting from the Spine

Here's the key: when every action—inside or outside of class—originates in the spine, and completes itself by returning to the spine, then we're really beginning to live in the spine. As Swami Kriyananda writes in *The Art and Science of Raja Yoga*, "I have found when skiing that if I deliberately center my awareness in the spine, feeling all my movements to be radiating outward from that center, I can ski very much better. One who can remain consciously centered in his spine will always be poised, ready to meet any situation that arises—even as a man who is well-balanced while running

can turn quickly, whereas one who is not will very likely fall if he turns too suddenly."

Let's apply this to asanas: To enter a pose, center yourself in the spine and you expand from that center out into the periphery of the body. (That is, in fact, exactly what happens: energy moves out from the spine to your periphery in order to move the body.) As you hold the pose, feel that in any area of the body that is active—the upraised arm in Trikonasana, or the straight leg in Janushirasana—that activity originates in the spine. Finally, when exiting the pose, draw all the energy back into your center, into the spine. Notice how even the physical feeling of release seems to move toward the spine. Pausing in the ensuing neutral pose helps you to complete with withdrawal process, since it won't be likely to feel completed merely by exiting the active pose.

When exiting the pose, draw all the energy back into your center, into the spine. Pausing in a neutral pose helps you to complete with withdrawal process, since it won't be likely to feel completed merely by exiting the active pose.

The Energization Exercises provide another excellent way to feel this. When we tense, we send energy from the spine to activate a body part, contracting the muscles there. Conversely, energy returns to the spine when we relax. Although we don't use this full visualization during Energization—we simply focus on energy flooding the body part to cause tension, and withdrawing to cause relaxation—the radiating from and returning to the spine is what's actually happening. Particularly good illustrations of this process are:

- Tensing and relaxing the calves and forearms
- Four-part arm recharging and single-arm recharging
- The "fencing" exercise (stepping one foot forward and thrusting the opposite arm forward, tensing the entire opposite side of the body)
- The final exercise: double breathing without tension.

Full Spinal Living

We don't want to limit our students' experience of living in the spine to the physical yoga practices, however. Anything they do in life can be—and for a yogi, *should* be—a movement from the spine, completed by a return to the spine. Have your students experiment with the following exercises:

Walk from the spine

Let each step be an expansion outward from the spine. Don't overthink this, else walking might all of a sudden become a complicated activity! Just feel it happening. The exercise will be both refreshing and centering.

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Inspired to Teach

by Fran Zabica

On September 30, the 177th anniversary of Lahiri Mahasaya's birthday, Fran (AYTT, January 1999) bid a peaceful farewell to this physical plane after a heroic battle against acute myeloid leukemia. In her life as well as in her passing, she was an inspiration to many people. Her physicians called her "the strongest person we have ever seen." This great soul helped many, many people. All of us at Ananda Village miss her very much, as do all who know her. The *Expanding Light* has already received numerous glowing testimonials from her students. Last summer, as she pondered the possibility of making her transition, Fran wrote the following letter, asking that it be shared with other Ananda Yoga teachers if she passed. It reflects the purpose she found in her life as well as one of her dearly held dreams.

Here I sit in my hospital room, undergoing my third round of chemotherapy, reflecting on my life. Just a few months ago, I thought I knew who I was. I named myself yoga teacher and yoga studio owner. I lived in a very nice apartment that I had just redecorated last October. I was mom to two very sweet kitties. I called myself daughter, friend, student, customer and spiritual seeker. I never called myself patient, dependent, unemployed, or homeless.

And yet, here I am. My current address is Harbor UCLA Medical Center, Room 5E, bed B. My studio has been transferred to the very capable hands of my friend and fellow Ananda Yoga teacher, Kari Burgos. My friends packed up all my belongings and put them in storage. My beautifully decorated apartment has now been repainted white, and someone else will enjoy that peaceful space. My kitties are living with Jayne, and they are making friends with Max the dog. So what is left? What do I name myself now? What is true and lasting?

The True and Lasting Essence

The answers can be condensed into a few words: essence, God-stuff, consciousness, heart, ... Then, as so many have done, we can expand this feeling, this knowing, into volumes

to try to understand and help others understand. I sincerely hope to be blessed with enough time to write my journey, to inspire others through lecturing and teaching. But since you are reading this letter, God has already decided that my time on the planet is over, and He has called me home.

So I reflect on my life. I sift through all the love and heartbreak, the failures and successes, the labels and roles. What of me still remains? The spiritual seeker of course is

still present. But the role or label that still rings true is the part of me that I call teacher. That flame burns very strongly inside of me. If I am attached to anything, I will admit that I am attached to sharing the inspiration that comes to me from my teachers, and their teachers, and their teachers, all the way back to God. I cannot think of anything more fulfilling than to have something uplifting to offer someone in need. For me that translates into being an Ananda Yoga Teacher.



Fran at Gyandev's and Diksha's home during Fran's final visit to Ananda Village on, appropriately, Memorial Day weekend, May 2005.

I can never sufficiently express my gratitude to my teachers for inspiring me, training me, sharing with me their passion for truth and God. And in my turn, I have shared that with my students. The flame was ignited in several of them, and they are now teaching, sharing, and growing in the Ananda tradition. And they will inspire others to become teachers. The ray continues to flow and touch and inspire. There is no end.

Gratitude—and a Need

How can I thank my teachers? I had always offered teaching as a prayer of gratitude, but if I'm no longer teaching, does it all stop? There is a desire to express my gratitude in a more practical way. This idea came to me when I was at Ananda over Memorial Day Weekend. There were two programs going on, and I was on Personal Retreat. I love meditating in front of the "Last Smile" picture of Master in the temple, but I couldn't get in there during the day, and I didn't have my usual energy to stay up after everyone else had gone to bed. So other than sadhanas, I didn't have my



usual time with Master in the Temple. I really saw the need for a dedicated space for larger groups, a real Yoga Room.

I know that there has been talk at Ananda Village about a Yoga Room for awhile now. The plans are still in the ether. They have not quite condensed into the activity of human hands and the financing required for such a project. The Expanding Light has grown into a beautiful retreat center. The evolution that I've seen in just seven years is incredible. Step by step, project by project, the retreat center grows. And we enjoy all the classes and special offerings. Our teachers share with us their precious personal time as well as their professional time. I don't know about you, but I always feel special and completely welcomed when I am there. My teachers make me feel like they have all the time in the world for me, even though they have a billion and one things to do to prepare for other guests and programs. They never complain. They just adapt to the moment. And they ask for very little. This opens my heart to want to do something for them; something beyond paying for my room and program, and supporting the boutique and the Center for Radiant Health during my visits. I want to get some real energy flowing towards the building of a Yoga Room.

Come Join Me, Friends

Now remember: since you are reading this, God has already called me home. I could try to whisper in each one of your hearts from the other side, hoping that one of you will get inspired to start a fundraising program, but that seems pretty iffy. So the practical person that I am (was), I have made plans to get the ball rolling, and am holding out my hand for you to join me.

I have already instructed my father to make a donation to The Expanding Light Yoga Room Fund after my transition. And I will ask my friends and family to make donations in lieu of flowers (even though I really like flowers). Now here is where you come in. You don't have to be good in math to calculate that just a small donation of \$50 to \$100 dollars from 300 Ananda Teachers translates into \$15,000-\$30,000! I think that is a pretty good start. And perhaps your students would like to donate \$5 or \$10 towards a project that will most probably serve them in the future as well. Wouldn't you feel great knowing that you had a hand in building the very room where you will take your Level 2 classes? And this would be a small gesture of thanks to all of our wonderful teachers for their inspiration, sharing and love.

There's a rule of thumb at Ananda: Whoever gets an inspiration to put something new into action is usually the one who gets elected to see it through. So here is another idea I have, and I would have been most grateful and willing to put this into action, but since I am no longer here to do it, perhaps one of you would like to step up. I think that an Ananda Alumni Association would be a wonderful thing to create. (We could call it the Circle of Joy.) Through this association we could create a scholarship fund for future teachers. As you may know, The Expanding Light already

offers partial scholarships for those who need financial help, but that impacts the program's cash flow. If 300 of us were to contribute an annual amount of, let's say \$25, that would be \$7,500 each year, representing nearly three complete scholarships, or a number of partial scholarships.

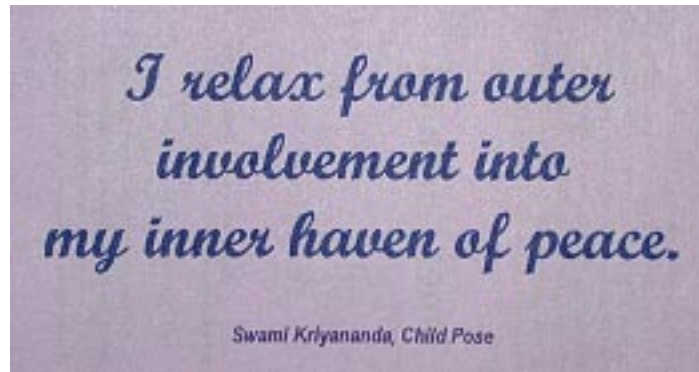
The Expanding Light Yoga Room Fund is a done deal. You are invited to participate at any level you choose. This fund is separate from any contributions you make to

the Ananda Worldwide Appeal or any tithing you may already be doing. This is simply an affirmation of the continued growth of Ananda Yoga Teachers and an expression of appreciation to The Expanding Light and all of our wonderful teachers there. The Circle of Joy is up for grabs. One of you has the talent and experience required to get this going. Once the energy starts flowing, all the help and resources will also flow. And then there is me, doing what I can to inspire you from where I am.

I am taking this opportunity to again thank Master and all my teachers for the inspiration to become a teacher myself. These last five years have been the most fulfilling and exciting and growth-filled years of my life. I hope all of you feel the same way. ♦

Postscript: The Expanding Light has received yoga room donations from many of Fran's students. However, due to Ananda's financial realities, a new yoga room doesn't seem to be "just over the horizon." So if after some years it still has not materialized, The Expanding Light will use the donated money to fund another Ananda Yoga-related project in memory of Fran.

If you feel to donate to help make Fran's (and The Expanding Light's) dream come true, please make your check payable to The Expanding Light and send it to The Expanding Light, Attn: Fran's Memorial, 14618 Tyler Foote Road, Nevada City, CA 95959. You can also put your donation on a credit card by calling 800-346-5350 (530-478-7518). Please be sure to indicate whether you would like to receive a formal donation acknowledgment letter for tax purposes.



This is one of the affirmation slips that Fran used to hand out to students at the end of her classes. Fran has taken it to heart.

Are You Ready to Own a Yoga Studio?

An Interview with Cheryll Barsic

In March 2005, Cheryll Barsic (AYTT summer 2001) opened her own yoga studio, Lotus Yoga Loft, in her hometown of Palestine, TX (pronounced PAL-uh-steen). She teaches beginning and intermediate yoga classes during the week, as well as special-topic classes such as chakras, restorative yoga, and meditation, on the weekends. Her class sizes run from 6 to 15 students. Cheryll is also a full-time school counselor.

Diane Calabria (AYTT fall 2004) interviewed Cheryll to explore the process of opening and running a yoga studio.

Diane: First, a little background information. When did you complete AYTT?

Cheryll: I received my Ananda Yoga certification in August 2001 and my certificate to teach meditation in July 2001. (I had already been certified in other styles.) After I read *Autobiography of a Yogi*, I contacted Self-Realization Fellowship in Houston and attended an introduction on Kriya Yoga. I enrolled in their program and began looking for a retreat center. That's how I found Ananda. Right away, I knew that I wanted to teach Ananda Yoga. I felt that something had been missing all the years I had taught prior to finding Ananda. I wanted a more spiritual yoga. Perhaps it had been offered way back then and I was not ready to receive it, but I was at the time I found Ananda.

What was your impression of AYTT? Easy, hard? Any especially powerful "aha!" moments?

I loved my AYTT training. It was all that I had been seeking and more because of the dedicated and knowledgeable staff. I felt I had found not only a training program but a spiritual family. I don't really remember it being hard, however it was very comprehensive. Two of my yoga students have gone to AYTT and I will continue to recommend this great program to those who ask me.

At the time you completed AYTT, what were your teaching plans? Teach a little, teach a lot?

I was already teaching yoga when I earned my certification; however I had not been teaching meditation. So, I continued to teach three classes a week at different centers in town, and I started teaching meditation a couple of times a year in my home. I was teaching at the YMCA, hospitals, and schools. You know, packing around the stereo, music, mats, blankets, huff and puff. However, I was doing what I loved.

Describe your initial teaching experiences. How did you manage the transition from AYTT to actual teaching?

When I began teaching Ananda Yoga, I felt that I had more to offer my students. The affirmations were well received and loved. The transition to pauses between asanas and a less athletic yoga was trickier. However with continued help from

other Ananda teachers and staff I got better at it. Having students focus on the affirmations during the pauses seemed to work well.

Were there any rough spots? How did you overcome them?

Some days, when I had been very busy with other responsibilities in my life, I would find that my classes had a less peaceful vibration. I was not centered and felt I was cheating my students. I didn't feel that I had fulfilled my purpose. So I began offering every class to Master and asking him to guide me, that each

student would receive what he or she needs. It works wonders.

Describe any special joys, or experiences that kept you going.

Students report that they have lost weight, are more calm, can act and not react, are more balanced and flexible, but my favorite is when students say that they feel more spiritual after classes.

When did you begin thinking about opening a studio? How long did it take between initial musings and bringing your goal to fruition?

I always thought it would be nice to have a studio, but once I felt it was necessary, it still took me two years to bring it to fruition.

What factors influenced your decision? What encouraged you, and what fears did you have to overcome? Was there a particular incident that solidified your resolve to move forward on opening a studio?

I felt I needed some control over the environment. I could handle packing all my stuff around, but the facilities would change my days and times (sometimes not telling me until students and I arrived for class), or the length of time the room was available, and it was usually very cold in the rooms. The atmosphere at several places was very competitive and loud. And some places were filthy dirty when I arrived. I was told not to hand out any literature from Ananda, nor could I sell any books, blankets, etc. The



Cheryll Barsic poses in her new Lotus Yoga Loft



greatest factor was that I wanted a peaceful, spiritual energy in our space—I wanted a place to grow internally, not just physically.

Did you just see this space available one day and think, “There’s my yoga studio.”? Or were you actively looking for a space when you found it? Is there an interesting story connected with how you found the space?

I’d been looking for about a year and wasn’t finding anything appropriate, not even close. Occasionally I wondered if it was a message that I should stay at the YMCA. After all, I had been teaching yoga there for 15 years. In retrospect, I think it just wasn’t the right time. My intuition kept telling me that I could be truer to my path if I found someplace where I had more control over the energy and atmosphere. Then a lady I work with mentioned that there was a big, vacant room (loft) in a building belonging to a relative of hers, a karate instructor. When I saw it, I fell in love with it. It needed some cleaning, painting, and emptying of stored stuff, but it was perfect. I started working on it, but ran into a snag: this guy didn’t own the building after all, and the owner wouldn’t allow me to sublet! For the next six months, I visualized, intended, and willed the place to my cause. Every time I drove by, I asked Yogananda and Ganesha to remove all obstacles and make it so, if it was the right place. Eventually, the karate instructor bought the building and I was in!!!!

Do you think there is a “critical mass” at which an aspiring yoga teacher/studio owner has to be in terms of length/breadth of teaching experience?

I feel that it is whenever and wherever the teacher is guided internally, following intuition and staying true to one’s real purpose for teaching. I really did not have the time, money or assistance, yet it needed to be done. I actually quit teaching completely, and the void lasted for six months while I affirmed, “I go forth in perfect faith, in the power of Omnipresent Good, to bring me what I need, at the time I need it.” Boy, that became a constant mantra!! And it still is.

In your opinion, what are some important character traits a yoga studio owner must have?

Responsible, creative, dependable, and dedicated to purpose.



You work full time as school counselor. What kind of counselor? And how do you find the time and energy also to run a yoga studio?

I am a School Community Liaison with the Palestine Independent School District. I interface between our community (student’s parents) and our schools. I work with families of “at risk” kids who have failed, have been truant, have been in trouble at school or with the law. I counsel the children and teach parenting skills, and I do social work. I have a bachelor’s degree in psychology.

I love my job and am very grateful for it, but to do that and to run a studio, it takes lots of Energization Exercises and meditation. I relate back to my affirmation to stay away from worry/fear and to stay in faith! When we do something that we love, the energy is available. I sure do wish that there were more hours in each day, though.

Do you have anyone to help you with the business aspects of the studio (bookkeeping, advertising, enrollment)?

I do the business aspects of the studio myself. My very talented husband, John, and I do the cleaning and maintenance of the Loft. John has replaced toilet seats, door handles, and installed air conditioners. The feeling of shared love and support helps establish positive energy at the Loft.

About how much time do you spend on these parts of running a studio?

It takes about an hour or two each week to keep my records straight and to call or e-mail students. Then at the end of each month, I spend about four hours doing accounting, making a new schedule, getting it out to students, business etc. I do not spend time doing things that are not important to me, like watching TV. I wish I had more time to read. My husband is very supportive, and that’s important. He does help me with e-mails and bank account stuff when I need him to.

What’s the best part of owning a studio?

Having control over the energy in the studio, being able to display Ananda literature, not having to worry about the cleanliness (I clean it myself) or scheduling of classes.

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Good vs. Great—What Makes the Difference?

by David B. Ramsden RYT

Having attended and taught many yoga classes over the years, I've often pondered the question of what differentiates a good yoga class from a great yoga class. Sometimes the difference is obvious, such as when a teacher has technical expertise versus when a teacher doesn't. But often the quality of the class is not about such noticeable things. For example, even if the teacher has good technical expertise asanas are demonstrated perfectly, and cautions and modifications explained fully—it may still be a run-of-the-mill class. Good, perhaps, but not great.

What marks a class as great? In my own experience, the evidence comes after the class is over: I can see from students' reactions just how well I (or another teacher) did. Are the students quiet and inward as they leave? Are their eyes filled with joy? Or here's a simple question to ask yourself: Will the rest of their day be different? Over the last eleven years, I've taken note of the classes I've taught (and others have taught) that seem to have achieved the best reactions for students. I'd like to share some of what I found contributes to a great yoga class.

The Teacher's Energy

The quality of the teacher's energy is a major factor in teaching yoga. It needs to be focused, calm, centered, and enthusiastic. When any one of these vital ingredients is missing, your class just won't be great no matter what level of technical expertise you have. In my opinion, showing up thirty minutes before class starts, then meditating to get centered and calm, is a key to being attuned to this ancient teaching.

Also, if you're not having fun or radiating joy when teaching, then yoga is becoming just another job. When I hear of teachers experiencing "yoga teacher burnout," I wonder whether the inner joy of their personal practice has also disappeared. I know that if my own interest in yoga were just on a physical level, my enthusiasm wouldn't have lasted long. I long ago realized that it is the inner sacredness and power of these ancient techniques that enables students to change their lives—and also inspires me to teach with joy.

Flexibility

Tuning into students' needs, and being flexible with regard to any previously planned yoga routine, is another big factor. It demonstrates not only your intuition, but also your ability to listen and care about your students.

Some teachers rely far too heavily on the day-to-day planning of yoga classes. Certainly it's important to plan your classes, and it's good to have goals for your students, but you must be realistic to meet the needs of that day. Even if the class has been planned perfectly, if the students are not ready or able to do the planned routine, what's the point?

Some days when students arrive, I can tell that the challenging class I'd planned is exactly what they *don't* need. They may need a more inward and relaxing class. Some of them may have unknown (to you, or even to them) injuries, or suddenly have needs for certain postures to address certain areas of the body or state of mind. I am always willing to scrap any plan if I intuitively feel I should. In a great class, we'll often see students smiling and saying, "Thanks, that's just what I needed."



David lives in the Ananda Portland community. He teaches at Ananda's Portland Mandir and at Portland's Northwest Fitness Complex.

Voice

The tone and tempo of your voice is also very important. Is it clear, calm, and well modulated? Students in yoga classes want to relax. After a hard day of work, the last thing they want to hear is a drill sergeant's voice, or a voice they can hardly hear, or one that has a high squeak. It's a very stressful world out there, and many students just want time to relax. That's not to say that relaxation is the only objective. In fact, a magnetic voice can inspire a student to release further into a posture, and an energetic voice brings energy into the affirmation and posture that students can draw on. But relaxation does need to be present in some form. In Savasana especially, students' ability to relax is often inspired by the tone of the teacher's voice.

Pace

The pace of the class also needs to be optimized for the group you are teaching. If it's too slow, they go to sleep. If it's too fast, it's not possible for them to go inward. Are the yoga instructions for beginner's classes slow, clear, and easy to understand? Are you talking too much (especially during classes with intermediate students)? All of this is important to think about.

The pauses between asanas are an especially important aspect of the overall pace. They take advantage of the fact that asanas—even the more-challenging ones—are all about bringing students more inward. Helping them feel the new energy of this inward place will help them experience more peace, calmness, and joy—and that in turn will lead to



awakening them to their divinity within. If yoga becomes only about the form of the asana, it will lead only to a greater identification with the body, which is exactly what we are trying to get away from.

A certain amount of stillness, according to each student's ability, is required in and after each asana, so the body will gradually take a back seat to the awareness of the inward-flowing, upward-rising energy. Newer students will be able to handle less stillness—in the active asanas because of limited endurance, and in the pauses because they haven't yet learned to turn their minds inward. More experienced students can handle—and should want—more stillness in both active and neutral asanas.

Assisting Students

Sometimes even the smallest adjustment to a student's position in an asana will make a huge difference in his or her experience of energy. Just because a student is doing well in a posture does not mean he or she won't benefit from your help. There are always opportunities, even with flexible students, to help them to have deeper experiences. Assisting students is a great way to inspire them to open, expand and release tension. The quickest way to get students to leave your classes is to seldom help them—they might as well buy a yoga video instead. (By the way, I highly recommend the AYT Assistantship as a way to upgrade your assisting skills.)

Come Early, Stay Late

I always come early to class—not only to meditate beforehand, but so I can talk to each student to ascertain his or her present condition. In addition, a friendly greeting is always welcomed and helps to keep the class relaxed.

During this time—and even during the class, if I can't connect beforehand—it's also important to ask the right

questions of your students. I often grill my students when they have an injury. I ask as many questions as I feel I need so that I can understand their limitations. When I probe in the right way, it not only shows that I care for them, but they also know that I have the level of expertise to keep them safe. If I know enough information, I can show the right modifications to make the postures more enjoyable and beneficial.

Also if there is an injury that needs a doctor's attention, I will suggest that they consult one. People who are uncomfortable in a posture will not always tell you they are uncomfortable. By being alert, caring, and creative, you can always find ways to modify asanas for these students.

It's also important stay on after class to talk to students rather than rushing off. Some of my most meaningful conversations have been after class. I always allow time to chat with students, not just as yoga students, but as a friend. I often demonstrate postures or answer deeper spiritual questions after a class. I also make it a point to visit with any students who seem to have had problems with certain postures. It may be an injury that I am not aware of.

Energy, Focus, and Intuition

To teach a great yoga class it takes every bit of energy, focus and intuitive insight that we can muster. Draw on the Masters; they are as close as we think they are. Be awake and ready. The ultimate goal of yoga is union with the higher self. No matter whom I teach, the thought of how can I help this student go inward is always foremost in my mind. Any student who even slightly touches his or her true Self will see a dramatic life change.

This is why I love teaching yoga. I have seen so many students' lives change so completely that the teachings of the art and science of yoga continuously inspire me to make each and every class as great as I can. ♦



Ayurvedic Healing & Yoga Retreat

with Ananda in Kerala, India

February 9–26, 2006 ✦ Led by Gyandev & Diksha McCord

There's still space for you to enjoy two relaxing, rejuvenating weeks of Ayurvedic healing treatments and Ananda Yoga at Kerala's finest seaside Ayurvedic resort—and receive Level 2 credit. Time is short, so call today. For more information call The Expanding Light at 800-346-5350 (530-478-7518) or visit www.expandinglight.org/kerala.

Are You Ready to Own a Yoga Studio?
(continued from page 7)

What's the biggest challenge of owning a studio?

Not having another teacher to cover for me, and being concerned about being able to pay the bills. I have not made much profit but I am staying afloat and feel fulfilled.

What do you know now that you didn't know: 1) when you enrolled in AYTT? 2) when you opened your studio?

I did not realize that teaching yoga would impact every aspect of my students' lives, that it could offer blessings beyond their physical needs. When I opened the studio, I did not know if anyone would come. They are coming, and in faith I believe more will come.

What was your biggest surprise in opening the studio? Anything you really weren't prepared for?

I was surprised when some students offered things to add to the decor. They seemed to feel a part of the "building of community." It was very special I wasn't prepared for all the work of managing a business. It requires much time and energy that I had not had to expend before. I know that I should be making more phone calls when people are absent and would like to do more advertising but it is expensive.

Anything you would do differently, if you had known then what you know now?

I don't think that I would do anything different. Daily, I offer gratitude and ask that the Lotus Loft be an instrument for growth of body, mind and spirit for all who come there. I am also very thankful for my guru and everyone at Ananda who has shared his teachings with me. I continue to feel their blessings and guidance.

What are your future plans? Do you plan to expand?

I have been looking for a nice way to do something special for the community, so am now offering a restorative yoga class to seniors at a wellness center in town on the first Saturday of each month. This is a population that cannot get up the stairs at Lotus Yoga Loft. Already I have had several people sign up for the class. I am excited about it. Any love offerings will go to the homeless shelter. Also, I would like to hire a teacher who could help me teach and who would offer some classes during the day while I am working as a school counselor. I do not wish to



Cheryll adjusts her "very talented husband," John.

change locations. My loft has hardwood floors, it is about 50 X 75 feet, has three big windows, a bathroom, lots of parking, is downtown Palestine and the rent is fairly inexpensive. We do need a better air conditioner, as it's very hot here. Guess I could teach Bikram yoga ... just kidding.

Any sage bits of advice you'd like to pass on to Ananda Yoga teachers who are considering opening a studio?

It is never too late to open your own studio. I taught here in Palestine for 17 years before I opened my studio at age 60. And, listen to your intuition and repeat Master's affirmation. "I go forth in perfect faith ..." ♦

If you're interested in teaching daytime classes at Lotus Yoga Loft, please contact Cheryll at jcbarsic@earthlink.net.

Living in the Spine
(continued from page 3)

In Paramhansa Yogananda's *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam Explained*, Swami Kriyananda comments on India's *danda swamis*, who carry a long, straight staff, symbolic of the spine. "This *danda* is an affirmation of the bearer's centeredness in the Self within. The straightness of the *danda* is a reminder keep the spine always straight. An erect spine indicates a willing assumption of responsibility for one's own life: an attitude that begs assistance from no one, that blames no one, but declares, 'All I need lies at my own divine center.' The *danda* is a courageous statement: 'I am the center of my own universe, the sole cause of all that happens in my life. No outer circumstances condition my inner sense of who I am. In my divine Self I am forever free!'"

"In your own life, similarly, try to live more in the spine. As you walk, mentally carry a *danda*. As Paramhansa Yogananda [said], only by accepting full responsibility for who we are and for whatever happens to us may we hope to change our destiny."

Speak from the Spine

Here's a real good one: Pause before speaking, and refer back to the spine any thoughts you're about to express outwardly. Make sure that they resonate with your inner Self, with your own aspirations, before you clothe them in words. How? Try to feel in your spine whether they are true to who you are, to who the listener is, to the situation at hand.

Sound tedious? In the beginning, it is, because so many of us are accustomed to putting our mouths on "autopilot." With practice, however, it becomes more natural and, at least in my experience, a huge relief. You may be surprised at how much quieter you become, how much more truthful you become, how much more attentive to others' feelings and ideas you become, how much more impact your words have on others—and how much less frequently your words get you into trouble!



A Yoga Teacher's Guide to English Verb Forms

by Prakash Van Cleave

In 1978, Prakash changed the landscape of Ananda by founding the Ananda Yoga Teacher Training program. (Having remarked to Swami Kriyananda that Ananda needed a YTT program, he was charged with starting one.) Even today, Prakash is changing Ananda's landscape—with bulldozers, backhoes, dump trucks, etc. And did you know that he is a former professor of English at the University of North Carolina? A true Renaissance man!

Although I am writing this for the amusement and benefit of all, it is inspired by my experience at numerous Expanding Light sadhanas. It concerns the following two basic rules of English verb forms, frequently violated by yoga teachers:

- Transitive verbs take a direct object.
- Intransitive verbs stand alone (i.e., no direct objects).

Here are some examples using the present tense:

Lay and Lie—"Lay" is a transitive verb, whereas "lie" is intransitive. Thus, before you *lie* down, *lay* a blanket on the floor. Please don't say, "Lay down in Savasana," or "Lie your head on the floor."

Set and Sit—"Set" is transitive, whereas "sit" is intransitive. Thus, *sit* down, remove your socks, and *set* them to one side. Please don't say, "Set yourself down."

Honoring these rules will even improve your yoga classes, because your students will no longer cringe with tension from hearing the English language abused.

Now as for your Sanskrit pronunciation ...



Professor Prakash will not take this lying down! Instead he sits down and sets the whiteboard on his tractor, so he can lay down the law and set all of us straight.

Enjoy from the Spine

Whenever you enjoy something—good food, a hot bath, a massage, a walk in nature—refer your enjoyment back to the spine. Feel the spine as the origin of your enjoyment. Don't allow the thought that the outward experience causes enjoyment, for in fact it does not. If that were true, everyone would enjoy exactly the same things—and clearly they don't.

No, your enjoyment comes from inside yourself; the outward experience merely reminds you of your capacity for enjoyment. When we realize this, it's very freeing. We see that our enjoyment of life is much less limited by circumstances. Philosophy alone won't give us this; it takes practice. Yogananda once said of such practice: "Most people don't have the patience to practice it. I had the patience."

Meditation on the Spine

When emphasizing "living in the spine" to your students, it can be helpful to begin and/or end class with the following visualization from *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam Explained*:

You are not the rose, which scatters petals afar on the summer wind. You are not the body, which scatters energy abroad on

winds of worldly desire. You are the subtle essence of reality, of all beauty and perfection. The essence that is you changes never.

Withdraw the energy of your body into your own center, in the spine. Relax.

Release your mind from its ceaseless busyness. Relax.

Cast onto the wind all desires and attachments of your heart. Relax.

As you breathe naturally, feel your breath rising through the spine with every inhalation, then descending with every exhalation.

Train yourself to become more conscious, throughout the day, of your own center in the spine.

In his book, *Meditation for Starters*, Swami Kriyananda explains the best way to carry meditation-born awareness into daily life: "By developing a consciousness of your own center in the spine," he writes. "Live outward from that center, rather than inward from your periphery."

As you help your students learn this truth through their own direct experience, their lives will begin to change in wonderful, magical ways. ♦

**LEVEL 2 NEWS***Early 2006 Highlights***Advanced Pranayama (May 21–28)**

Explore with Gyandev McCord some of the most powerful techniques in yoga: breathing techniques, bandhas, mudras, special hybrid techniques, plus Energization in greater depth and detail. (Come two days early and join Swami Kriyananda for his 80th birthday celebration.)

Restorative Yoga Teacher Training (June 15–18)

Learn the ropes (and cushions, and blankets) of this useful teaching tool—whether to teach an entire restorative class, or simply to come up with just the right alternative for a student who just isn't feeling up to doing what the rest of your class is doing. Led by Lisa Mallery.

Advanced Yoga Intensive (June 18–24)

Take your practice to the next level via advanced techniques of Ananda Yoga—from more-challenging asanas, to powerful pranayamas/bandhas/mudras, to more-dynamic meditations. Led by Gyandev McCord, this program is all about depth, with two long (2.5–3 hours) practice sessions each day.

The Therapeutic Use of Asana (June 25–30)

Nicole DeAvilla has restructured “Therapeutic Yoga” into this course, which will be a prerequisite for her future therapeutic teacher training programs. From anatomy to alignment to higher awareness, you'll explore asanas from the inside out—and then back inside again.

AYTA CONTACTS

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2006 Level 2 Calendar

AYTA Members receive a **15% discount** on all Level 2 programs. If you need financial aid, please contact The Expanding Light for an application. A “★” indicates a program that is required for Level 2 AYTT certification.

- 1/18–22 **Kriya Yoga Step 2: Preparation**
- 2/9–26 **Ayurvedic Healing and Yoga Retreat in Kerala, India** (see p. 9)
- 3/10–19 ★**Meditation Teacher Training**
- 3/15–19 **Kriya Yoga Step 2: Preparation**
- 3/19–4/1 ... ★**AYTT Assistantship**
- 5/10–14 **Kriya Yoga Step 2: Preparation**
- 5/21–28 **Advanced Pranayama**
- 5/25–6/4 ... **Yoga of the Heart®**
- 6/15–18 **Restorative Yoga Teacher Trng.**
- 6/18–24 **Advanced Yoga Intensive**
- 6/25–30 **The Therapeutic Use of Asana**
- 6/23–7/2 ... ★**Meditation Teacher Training**
- 7/2–15 ★**AYTT Assistantship**
- 7/16–23 **Prenatal YTT** (note: it's now 7 days)
- 7/19–23 **Yoga to Awaken the Chakras**
- 7/23–26 **Postpartum Yoga Teacher Training**
- 7/27–30 **The Joy of Sanskrit—Level 1**
- 7/30–8/1 **The Joy of Sanskrit—Level 2**
- 7/30–8/5 **Practical Insights from the B. Gita**
- 8/6–12 **Meditation Teacher Trng—Level 2**
- 10/13–22 ... ★**Meditation Teacher Training**
- 10/18–22 ... **Kriya Yoga Step 2: Preparation**
- 10/22–11/4 ★**AYTT Assistantship**
- 11/8–12 **Deeper into the Spirit of Yoga**

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