



N E W S L E T T E R

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*A*sana practice is an opportunity to look at the obstacles in practice and life, and discover how we can cope with them.

—B.K.S. Iyengar, *Light on Life*

Join us the weekend of June 9-11, 2006, for the 8th Annual Friendship Yoga Retreat at Prairiewoods in Hiawatha, Iowa. Mary Obendorfer, Senior Certified Iyengar Instructor from San Diego, will be our guest teacher.

# Yoga and your life

Nancy Footner DIRECTOR, FRIENDSHIP YOGA

Most of us struggle with similar challenges that come with family, work, and society, but we are drawn to the study of yoga for a variety of reasons:

- body* | Some are working on fitness or seeking relief from injuries and/or chronic pain.
- mind* | Some are seeking emotional or psychological stability; some are seeking to enhance mental acuity.
- spirit* | Some are seeking a philosophy that will provide some insights into the nature of human existence.

As our yoga practice matures, we gain more insight into our physical selves and our afflictions become less dominant over our lives, we also find that we are better able to control our emotional impulses, think more clearly and make responsible choices. If you feel that you want to expand your experience of yoga from a class once a week, then you simply must make a commitment to establishing a personal practice. Inevitably this means sacrificing some other activity to create the time. Since I have written about how to establish a home practice in past newsletters, (see [www.friendshipyoga.com](http://www.friendshipyoga.com) for past newsletters), I thought I would devote this column to describing in a generalized way the benefits that are associated with the different categories of postures, with the hope that having this knowledge will be further motivation for you to establish a personal practice, and help you in the planning process.

In Iyengar yoga there is a strong emphasis on **standing poses**. The standing poses are energizing and revitalizing. They build strength, enhance pliability, and improve balance. Standing poses also make us aware of our habitual ways of sitting, standing, moving around. They stimulate digestion, regulate the kidneys and relieve constipation. Circulation and respiration improve. Jumping into the poses takes coordination and develops mental alertness. The standing poses surprise many of us when we take our first class, because we are immediately confronted with our stiffness and lack of strength in unexpected ways. Some who lift weights, run and bike and consider themselves to be in "shape" are dismayed to find that they are often very stiff, and those who are naturally flexible

often discover that they are not very strong. These discoveries can bring out disturbing emotions: frustration, dismay, and fear, which defeat many in their first Intro course.

**Sitting poses**, upright and **seated forward bends**, rest the legs and are quieting to the nervous system. They regularize blood pressure, restore health after illness, and reduce insomnia. They tone the back muscles, open the hips and shoulders and continue the work of the standing poses, stretching and strengthening the legs and arms. The seated poses are an important part of the menstrual practice.

**Twists** help to relieve backaches, headaches, and stiffness. The abdominal organs and kidneys are stimulated improving digestion. The spine, hips and shoulders become more flexible. As we age the spine degenerates with age. We become shorter and lose vitality. **Backbends** counteract this process. The spine becomes long, the shoulders and hips more pliable, the chest is opened and the organs are stretched. The brain is energized and we can think with greater clarity and be more positive. **Inverted poses** are revitalizing. They take the weight off the legs and relieve the normal downward pull on the inner organs. Like standing poses they improve circulation and tone the glandular system. They enhance concentration and can improve sleep. We learn sarvangasana (shoulderstand) first, and once the student feels some confidence in sarvangasana, sirsasana (headstand) is introduced. Sirsasana however should also precede sarvangasana in your practice. Sirsasana stimulates the pituitary gland. Sarvangasana stimulate the thyroid and parathyroid. **Supine poses** can be restful and are another important set of recuperative asanas. They are also incorporated into the menstrual series. Balancing poses develop strength, agility, coordination, and mental focus.

Those of us who stick it out beyond the Intro level will attest to the fact that it doesn't get any easier, but it does get more interesting as we expand our repertoire of poses, and we find that as we become more disciplined, our commitment intensifies. Changes begin to occur on a subtle and not so subtle level, and as our understanding expands so does our capacity for learning. By moving deeper into the poses, we delve deeper into our selves.

*"Asana is perfect firmness of body, steadiness of intelligence, and benevolence of spirit"*

Translated by B.K.S. Iyengar, *Light on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*

Reading the newspaper or listening to NPR as I do on a daily basis, I try to follow the stories of the world and picture these places... Iraq... Palestine... Sudan, where there is unrelenting strife, and I can't imagine how the inhabitants endure the ongoing threat of violence while continuing to live their day-to-day lives. When Sarah and Carol, whom I knew as yoga students and knew of as members of the Christian Peacemakers team invited me to dinner I was grateful for the opportunity to hear about Sarah's recent experience serving in Palestine. She had been attending classes in December at the time of the kidnappings of the CP team members serving in Iraq, and left shortly after to serve in Palestine. I thought about her a lot over the winter months and even more so after the elections where the Fatah regime was replaced by the Hamas. As we sat on the living room floor of their home on 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Iowa City, and shared a Middle Eastern style dinner, I felt grateful for the opportunity to hear her first person account of what life is like there, what it looks like, what it feels like to be in the midst of ongoing conflict, and how her service intersected with her spirituality. Re-reading Mr. Iyengar's new book *Light on Life* this spring while reflecting on Sarah's experience I rediscovered this line... "Yoga transformed my life from a parasitic one to a life of purpose." N.F.

## From the West Bank to the Eastside Yoga Studio

Sarah McDonald

Initially, when Nancy asked me to write an article about my recent peacemaking work in the West Bank, I had no idea what I could say that would be appropriate for our yoga newsletter. They seemed like two different worlds, distant and disconnected.

The Friendship Yoga studio in Iowa City is a serene and pristine place. We take off our shoes at the entrance and walk barefoot on the pale wood floor. The prop room in the back holds neat stacks of mats and blocks and blankets, which we're careful to return precisely into place after using them. Yoga students here speak in quiet voices—when we talk at all. Often Nancy's voice, detailing instructions for each pose, is the one stream of sound flowing through class. At the end of an hour and a half, when we lie in Savasana, the room is so still I can hear every tick of the clock on the back wall.

The West Bank of Palestine, on the other hand, feels crowded and chaotic. For nearly forty years, Israeli military forces have occupied this territory, squeezing Palestinians' lives between "security" walls and fences, checkpoints and roadblocks, expanding Israeli settlements, land confiscation and home demolitions. Still, Palestinian life and culture go on, tenacious and resilient.

When I think of the West Bank, scenes like snapshots come to mind. I recall the daily vegetable market on Shulala Street in Hebron: the road crammed with people and pushcarts amid a tangle of traffic, while taxi drivers' horns blare and vendors hawk their wares

in Arabic and—when they see internationals passing—sometimes in English. Or I remember visiting a refugee camp in Bethlehem, walking through a bewildering maze of narrow streets with shabby apartment buildings and graffiti on every side.

I think of the South Hebron hills, where I lived for two months in the rural Palestinian village of At-Tuwani. I recall standing on those hills with Palestinian shepherds and their flocks, trying to intervene when Israeli settlers would approach with angry shouts, followed by Israeli army jeeps full of soldiers, who might be helpful or rude or might just tell us all to leave the area, insisting, "This is a closed military zone." My American and Italian teammates and I, video cameras in hand to document what was happening, taped many heated exchanges in Arabic and Hebrew. Even without understanding the words hurled back and forth, we could read faces and tones and gestures enough to know when anger was boiling over, to sense who was feeling frustrated or afraid.

Living in the West Bank, in a village with no running water or phone lines and only a few hours of electricity each evening, I felt as if I'd been dropped into another world. And now that I'm back in the US, it's challenging to discern how to integrate my experiences in the Middle East with my life here. Sometimes,



Sarah in *utkatasana*.

**"Conscience is the consciousness being able to tune into the promptings of the individual soul."**

**—BKS Iyengar,  
*Light on Life***

though, a connection simply appears, unbidden and unexpected.

I had been home for three weeks when I returned for the first time to the Friendship Yoga studio. I was happy to be doing yoga again, glad to be in this space of concentrated focus, feeling the familiar ache of muscles stretched and worked. Then in the final moments of class, as we lay in Savasana, memories of Palestine suddenly flooded my heart, and I started to cry.

These were not "snapshot" memories, precisely framed and intentionally recalled. This was a waterfall of raw emotion, so sharp and poignant I might almost have been back in the West Bank, on the cement floor of our tiny cinderblock house in At-Tuwani—rather than half a world away, on the polished floor of a yoga studio. At the very moment when I was supposed to turn my gaze inward and attend to my breathing, I felt my abdomen shaking with sobs and tears sliding down the curve of my cheek.

It wasn't an entirely new experience: these days I do cry even more readily than I used to before traveling to the Middle East. But why would a yoga

# The Cruellest Month

Jen Dutton

This April, I have had whirlwinds on my mind. The tornados that passed through Iowa City are only part of the picture, a natural event which has become a metaphor that resonates in my daily thoughts. The *Daily Iowan* last week published an apocryphal story about students clinging to lampposts while the tempest raged around them, and I imagine those students, hanging on. The town, in the photographs from above, looks like the hand of some mercurial higher power came down and stroked it. Iowa City is so populated by writers, I'm guessing there will be a corresponding cyclone of poetics on the subject in the pages of the *New Yorker*, or *Granta*, or the *Atlantic Monthly* over the next few months, and it's with humbleness that I make my attempt to write about it too.

When my family came out of our crawl space, I looked out the window and was surprised by the relative absence of fury outside. The rain came straight down and the trees remained eerily still. The tired looking weatherman on television rattled off the details of destruction, people trapped in a *Dairy Queen* basement, the roof blown off Saint Patrick's Church. A few pictures started to come in, but they were dark and obscured by the blur of night. My husband finished putting the kids to bed, and I watched, experiencing a little bit of what I think must be survivor's guilt, or worse, a morbid curiosity about the fickleness of fate and nature's strange choices.

My husband likes to shake his fists at the gods when he's feeling put upon, but I am superstitious and would never ever do that. Athena might turn me into a spider or a donkey or something more awful. Yet there is one small portion of my fate that I do mutter regular curses about. Every April I experience personal tornados in the form of Bilateral Vestibular Menier's disease—vertigo and a low grade hissing in my ears that makes it hard to hear sometimes. This internal eddy had been bugging me for weeks and consuming me with frustration. Every spring, I want my ears to get better, and every spring off they go, just like before, sometimes worse if I've had a flu or a cold. On bad days, I get really into the voodoo of "right living," adjusting my diet, giving up knitting, wine or caffeine, taking antihistamines, anything I can think of to help pull myself out of the vortex.

## WEST BANK *continued*

class elicit such tears? It is as if I had brought home, lodged in my very bones and muscles, a mass of emotions accumulated from three months in Palestine: grief for overwhelming losses and the despair they engender, anger at injustices witnessed, anguish over abuses of power we could not stop. And the discipline of yoga, by exercising my body, drew out the emotions inside me.

I think I am starting to understand what B.K.S. Iyengar might mean when he talks of the "sheaths of being" and describes the physical body as the "means by which we embark on the inward journey toward the core" (*Light on Life*, p 4 & 22). Our physical and spiritual selves, it turns out, are no more disconnected than Palestine and Iowa have proved to be in my own life and

peacemaking work.

But we need to learn to integrate the pieces. Yoga—beyond helping us recover or retain physical health—can teach just such integration. From my very first class at the studio here, I have experienced how yoga opens joints and knees and shoulders. Now I've begun to see more clearly how it may open hearts and spirits, too.



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In the wake of the storm that hit Iowa City, a lot of people may be thinking why me, or why not me. Some may even be shaking their fists. But when I assess my own Karmic spiral, I have to face the fact that I didn't wear a hat during one night of deep subzero weather after going swimming in the University of Alaska pool. I also worked for a year and a half in small venue live music club where the volume was always up high, and I never once wore earplugs. Worst of all, I put all kinds of substances up my nose in college. I can't say, "why me" when it comes to my ears. I can't even shake my fist, not without looking like a hypocrite.

The more important question for me, seems to be "what now?" On the Friday morning after the storm, I showed up for my yoga class, hearing aid in place, wondering, like my fellow students, if the studio had been blown away, or if anybody I knew had been hurt. The two or three minutes before class were animated by stories about what each of us had experienced and stories about the people we knew. Some people looked red eyed, as if they had spent the night awake wandering the streets like many of the writers, photographers, and journalists of my acquaintance who wanted to be witnesses to the blast. The sun slanted in through the windows. Birds sang. After a moment, we began to settle down. Nancy said, "Let's begin." And each of us did, the best we could.





Dear MYEF donors,

Thank you so much for your contributions to this important fund. I want you to know how grateful I am to be benefiting from your generosity.

Because I'm in transition between full-time studies and an unpaid internship, receiving a scholarship enables me to take yoga classes I could not otherwise afford. And it is precisely during this time of transition and limited resources that I most need the grounding discipline of regular yoga study.

I find myself sustained and encouraged both by Friendship Yoga classes and by the kind spirit and generous vision that prompted your donations.

Thank you again—a grateful student

**This summer the Maitri Yoga Education Fund will sponsor a class at Friendship Yoga for ARC, a non-profit organization serving youth and adults with disabilities. There also will be financial aid offered for the Prairiewoods Retreat. Please support our efforts to help others gain access to Iyengar Yoga Education, by making a contribution.**

# A Quiet Space —Hilary Buri

I have a hard time writing about yoga, because it represents one of the few aspects of my life that transcend analysis. Perhaps that's why I keep doing it, despite the time pressures and demands of having a young family and attending medical school, which have led me to curtail other "me time" activities. Wednesday evenings at 5:45 is the only segment of my week when I am guaranteed a quiet space, where there is no competition, where I can neither succeed or fail, where, on a bad day, I don't even have to generate any motivation, aside from walking through the door. I can just listen to Nancy's voice, follow her directions—"Close your eyes, let go of your day"—and, eventually, I will start observing my own breath.

A year and a half ago, when I started medical school, I began a project of jettisoning things from my life—making dinner every night, for example, or attending all my son's soccer games. I have to admit (sorry, Nancy!) that I considered jettisoning yoga, in order to gain another dinner and evening at home with the kids. It seemed the clock was always ticking down the time until the next exam, and I was in a bizarre struggle between the material I needed to learn and the time it took to learn it. I remember coming into yoga one evening in the first semester, after a day of biochemistry lectures and anatomy labs, and having a sort of epiphany when Nancy guided us to "allow what you have learned from the asanas to penetrate to a deeper, more internal part of yourself."

Wow. What if I could do that? What if I could approach all this medical knowledge not as information to be

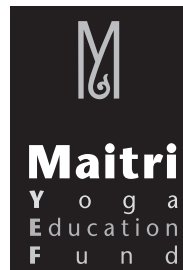
struggled with or overpowered, but as the ideal form of the pose that I was training my body to enter, and that would, in turn, begin to inhabit and shape me? It wasn't an easy approach to adopt—although I could accept that indeed the pentose phosphate shunt inhabited me down to my cells, the names of enzymes still didn't come easily—but I did find some of the pressure lifting.

By understanding medical school in terms of a practice, I could abandon some of my anxiety about memorizing material immediately or performing on exams. Instead, I could accept that, just as with backbends, I wasn't going to get it right the first time, but if I kept doing them, I'd start feeling great. Moreover, the purpose of a backbend was not to pass some sort of diabolical backbending test, it was in the moment of the backbend itself, and in the rippling out of that moment. Having attempted the pose, I could move forward to the next pose, or the next attempt, informed by what I had learned from the first.

So it was with all those medical facts, key terms, and concepts. I didn't have to get it all perfect the first time, because the purpose was not simply in passing a test or memorizing the names and convolutions of components of the brachial plexus. The purpose was in learning enough to learn more, by applying what I'd already grasped to the next problem.

Of course, having said all this, I still can't claim to be an ideal medical student. That's okay. I still can't do an ideal backbend, either, but the ones I can do still feel pretty good.

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