



Lessons in Love and Courage

What I've Learned from My Favorite Group of Students

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

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

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

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

The Lessons Begin

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

To add to the mystery, Wellspring has a strong confidentiality code, so I was not allowed to ask what kind of cancer people were dealing with, or which parts of their bodies might be sore. In addition, because Wellspring serves both cancer patients and their families, I might have some students who were perfectly

healthy, while others would be recovering from surgery or undergoing radiation or chemotherapy treatments. Their ages would range from mid-20’s to 70’s, and some would be dealing with other ailments besides cancer, such as arthritis.

At first I was afraid—of doing too much, of doing too little, of hurting people. I was hesitant to make adjustments, lest I touch a part of the body that was tender or vulnerable. Suddenly safety precautions had much higher stakes for me as a teacher. Right away I gave a talk about safety, asking them to move in and out of postures mindfully and slowly, as they may

have tight or tender areas that they aren’t even aware of. I asked them not to look at or compare themselves to other students, as everyone in the class may be dealing with different ailments, and might also be at different stages in their healing processes.

I soon discovered that people recovering from surgery often simply forget that they can’t move as they used to. Every once in a while someone moved too quickly and deeply into a pose, and suddenly there was a stab of pain and a yelp. Others had trouble with sudden dizziness due to the treatments they were undergoing or drugs they were taking. So along with safety precautions, I had to stress the “continuous awareness” aspect of Ananda Yoga. I invited them to learn how to tune in and listen to their bodies, to move slowly and with awareness, to

be patient and compassionate with themselves, to do only what felt right for them, and to rest whenever they needed. I asked them to focus on the breath, and breathe into the tight spots. I realized that I needed to create an environment where it is not only okay, but empowering, for them to have the choice to do as much or as little of the class as they feel up to on any given day.

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

I’ve continued that practice to this day, always asking permission if I don’t know students well. For safety, I move my hands into their energy field slowly and with awareness, then touch them lightly before I move them in any direction. Sometimes just my touch is enough to get them to move themselves in the right direction.

As for the privacy issue, I ended up suggesting that if they want to share their special needs with me in private, they were



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

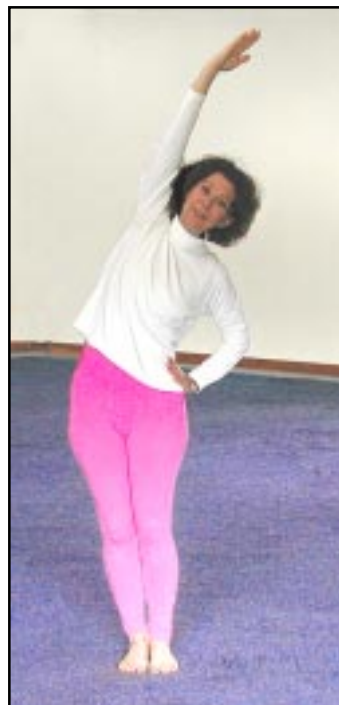
Most of that first group were able to manage a very gentle and slow beginners' class. Some were well on the road to getting their health back; others had exhaustion and pain. One woman showed up in a walker and was unable to stand on her own or get down on the floor at all. I did my best to encourage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

Coming to Terms with the C-Word

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

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

One thing I've learned is that the more relaxed and comfortable I am with talking about it, the more relaxed they



feel, too. I think that initially I was afraid to hear of their suffering and pain. Not anymore. That's one of the benefits of working with any group of people suffering from illness. It helps one to become strong and bravely hold space and compassion for the suffering of others. That in turn has translated into an ability to be more compassionate and brave in dealing with my own suffering, or that of my family members, in a more peaceful and detached manner.

Discovering Which Practices Really Work

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

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

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

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

The standing roll-down through the spine—rolling down and then back up, all in rag-doll fashion—feels great and is a favorite (for healthy spines only, of course).

Energization Is the Ticket

Overall, the best and easiest way to get them on their feet and moving their energy is through the Energization Exercises and the Superconscious Living Exercises. I have seldom had someone who couldn't do them. I don't do all of the EE's, but



I usually put in five or six exercises plus two or three standing asanas. You could just as easily teach more EE's and skip the standing asanas. They love them because they are invigorating, empowering, easy to do, and they really feel the difference in their energy levels.

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

Tools for Detoxification

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

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

Of course, deep pelvic breathing (diaphragmatic breath) while doing forward folds, hip openers, and especially twists is good for increasing circulation and giving a gentle massage to the pelvic organs as well as the liver and spleen (the body's main organs of detoxification). Sphinx and half locust can help detoxify the kidneys and adrenal glands through the "squeeze and soak" effect. Fish and bridge (simple versions) are great for the thyroid and parathyroid glands, as are restorative ver-



sions if you're lucky enough to have props. The only inversion I teach this group is "legs up the wall." If you have some cushions, you can place them under the sacrum while the legs are up, so that it becomes the restorative version of viparita karani for hormonal balancing, which is important for women whose estrogen levels have been a contributing factor to cancer.

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

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

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

Many of my students have mentioned how they love hearing the benefits of the postures. One woman said that hearing the benefits helps her focus her mind on the cleansing, healing goodness that each posture brings. "It was very helpful knowing how the exercises were helping me. I would do elbow circles for lymph stimulation every morning in the shower." Delighted to hear this, I told her that bringing her conscious awareness to the positive effects, and to the individual organs and body parts, was very likely enhancing the healing process. By focusing her mind on it, she was bringing more energy to the point of concentration. She loved that idea.

Affirmations and God

As my relationship with my students unfolded, I began to love teaching at Wellspring more than any other place. These people are not there just for a good stretch and relaxation. They are more open than any other group of students, and their openness has inspired me as a teacher. They are all, without exception, open to yoga as healing, as mind/body/spirit work. They have a willingness to learn and to change.

For this reason the use of affirmations has been an effective



tool with this group. Using the affirmations helps to draw their awareness to themselves as spiritual beings and energy bodies, rather than just physical bodies. Many of them feel that their bodies are failing them in some way, so taking their awareness beyond the physical is freeing for them. Affirmations help transform the negative mind to one of positive upliftment, peace, happiness, and contentment.

Many people in my classes relate well to the concept of God, and find great comfort and peace in that. However, my groups are usually very culturally diverse, with a broad spectrum of religious backgrounds, so I am careful to be non-sectarian in my words. I do not wish to offend anyone or have anyone feel that he or she doesn't fit in. Also, sometimes people who are facing the fear of death may feel abandoned by or angry with God. For these reasons, I generally do not refer to "God" in my talks or in the affirmations. Instead I refer to the Divine, the Universe, the Soul, Spirit, or their Higher Self or Higher Consciousness. If I can adjust the affirmation slightly in this way, I do.

Sometimes I offer them a choice, inviting them to think upon or call upon whichever divine form they relate to, be it God, the Buddha, Divine Mother, or some other form. Other times I simply invite them to experience the essence of the posture, describing or outlining the state of consciousness or the flow of energy that the asana creates and invokes—and that the affirmation reinforces.

Many of these students have a myriad of emotions and thoughts about having cancer, thoughts they have not been able to process or come to terms with. So along with the use of affirmations to cut through the mind's constant chatter, I also encourage quiet, meditative silence and inward focus on sensation and the breath. This too seems to help them connect with and accept their truth, and hear their inner wisdom. I apply this technique while guiding them through the many "special needs" warm-ups and stretches, which don't have affirmations, and also during the pauses. I also constantly refer to yoga as "union" and invite them inside themselves to find that feeling. They understand well the idea of leaving the outside world of doing and thinking, and tuning their attention inward to their body, breath, and inner voice of wisdom.

When I asked my students how yoga was benefiting them, one replied: "I find that yoga is detoxifying, not just in the physical sense, but also on an emotional level. I love the twists and other postures that help to massage into the chest and belly. I feel that the physical massage into these areas helps me to become aware of my feelings."

"Yoga has helped with the emotional ups and downs," said another. "When I was diagnosed with cancer, it became me against my body, but yoga helped to change that relationship. When my white blood cells were down so low that I couldn't even do my treatments, I actually felt I was crying tears of compassion for my cells, recognizing and appreciating how hard they were working. Yoga has taught me how to love my body. It's not me against my body anymore."

A third responded, "Yes, I agree, it has helped me to love myself and love my body. It's taught me to listen to each part of my body individually, like 'Oh, my knee needs a little prop under it here.' I have learned to listen to what the body wants and needs. I'm no longer driving it like a machine."

The Courage to Live More Fully

Needless to say, their openness to yoga as healing and their ability to connect with the divine love and wisdom within them are intoxicating to me as a teacher. I find they draw the very best out of me as a teacher because they are so hungry to learn and change.

At the same time, my students at Wellspring have become my teachers. I learn so much from them about courage as I hear their stories from week to week, and witness their fighting spirit. These people are not about to become victims of fear and stop living because they have cancer. Instead they are facing their fear of death. They are dealing with pain and with the loss of body parts and bodily functions. Most are experiencing an enormous amount of hellish symptoms and side effects from their treatments or drugs. Yet they get themselves to yoga class weekly without fail. They come like soldiers each week to help themselves feel better on some level that they may not even be able to articulate. They come exhausted, they come feeling sick or achy, they come depressed, sometimes lonely, sometimes fearful, but they come—despite the long list of symptoms—with a positive attitude. And they leave feeling better about themselves and about life in some way.

If that isn't a lesson in yoga, I don't know what is. There have been times when I have dragged myself in to teach, feeling down about some disappointment in life, or discouraged and hard on myself because things aren't going the way "I" think they should. But when I can be fully present and in the moment with their experiences, without exception, I also leave feeling better or uplifted in some way because my own fighting spirit has been invoked by witnessing theirs. They are living in the way that Yogananda would have all of us live—not trying to escape our problems, no matter how dark or threatening, but rather, rising above circumstances with heroic courage, awakening the victor, the sleeping hero within.

As for my original fear of working with people who were "dying of cancer," it wasn't long before I recognized it as my own projection of fear. I saw clearly that my students at Wellspring were living more fully and with more conscious awareness than most "healthy" people I know. While most of us are caught up in the sweep and swing of external life—busying our selves under the illusion that we have lots of time—these people are dealing with a "terminal illness" that brings them front and center to the awareness of their own mortality. They are more aware of the brevity of life—and therefore the preciousness of it. They are less caught up in the delusions of our busy, fast-paced, materialistic lives. I have watched as many have tuned in to what is really relevant and meaningful for them.

Yoga as a Tool for Change

Just as having cancer has made them more open to making changes in their lives, yoga is the tool that supports them in *how* to make that kind of shift in consciousness. As one woman told me: "I had to make sure, though, that I was not making deals with the universe; that I was not coming to yoga to live longer or to 'beat' the cancer. I



needed to come to yoga so that I relate—to myself, and to being here now. Yoga is life-changing. It's about the outside versus the inside. The outside is about doing, versus the inside where you learn how to listen. Yoga helped me to hear different messages other than society's 'be productive, keep busy, then you're good.' It helped me connect with the inner voice, which says, 'It is good and essential to be kind to yourself; to rest, to nourish, to replenish and en-joy.' It takes a jolt like illness or otherwise to realize how important it is to take care of ourselves. I guess I needed that push."

Another woman offered: "As a child I felt it was selfish to sit in bed and read. Now I'm learning that I must care for myself in these ways. Yoga helps with not finding happiness out there, but inside. Besides, what is luxury anyway? Is it a new car, or is it giving yourself a nice foot bath and caring for yourself in some way? Upon reflection I feel that the happiest moments in life, the ones where I have felt the best, have been when I was doing things that were good for me, like sitting on a rock by water at the cottage, or playing an instrument. Yoga is like that."

When they practice Hatha Yoga as a "meditation in motion," all of their awareness can be brought into the present—into this very breath. They can breathe their awareness into every part of the body, as well as into their hearts and spirit. Yoga teaches them to be in the present moment—not in the past, not in the future and not in reaction. When you are facing the possibility your own death, these are essential life tools indeed.

Students Share the Benefits of Yoga

The benefits of yoga for cancer patients are endless, both physically and mentally. But rather than me spouting out the benefits of this posture or that pranayama, I thought you might like to hear some more directly from my students about what they have gained from it.

- "I had stage 1 breast cancer, and they had to remove all seventeen lymph nodes. It left me with numbness. My arm was stiff and I had some loss of use, but the yoga helped me get that back."
- "For the first time in thirty-six years I wasn't able to work, so my life was changed. Yoga helped me slow down. It helped with breathing, body awareness, self-awareness, letting go, and posture. Yoga helped me fill that space with my creativity."
- "In the beginning you are swept away with having cancer, and it is unbelievable, but it's in your face. Yoga helped with the mental stress of coping."
- "Yoga helped with the emotional ups and downs."
- "I like the fact that I can take little bits of what I learn in class, out onto the streets and into my life. When I get anxious, I remember to take a breath."
- "They put me on anti-hormone drugs, which put me into early menopause. The yoga helped make the excessive sweating and hot flashes bearable."
- "I had worked out consistently for years. When I got cancer, yoga was the one thing I could still do, and it kept me supple. I had to let go of other routines because I was too weak. Yoga was a 'kind' form of exercise."

- "Going through treatments, you are so assaulted with these chemicals. I could feel the yoga clearing the toxins out. For the next day or so after class I would generally feel better because I felt so cleansed."
- "The toxins from chemo and radiation can cause the bowels to seize up causing horrible constipation, but the yoga got me moving again."
- "While I was going through the treatments, the yoga helped me with breathing, and the anticipation of going to class gave me a lift."
- "Going to class with other cancer people is a nicer feeling because no one is judging you or staring at you. Community is important, and so is feeling at ease in the class."
- "The yoga class has become something to look forward to in the week. Amongst all the doctor's appointments is the yoga class."
- "I had my thyroid completely removed and some of my lymph. They followed that with radiation treatment, which left me with no energy. I could barely walk or talk. I had to wait several months, but once I started, the yoga helped to regenerate and boost up my energy levels a great deal. It also helped me to relax, and I can sleep better now."
- "After my second surgery I was stiff at first, with aches and pains. I had to wait two months, but when I came back to yoga it made a big difference all over."
- "I found that my concentration had been affected. I could hardly read a page. I would read the same paragraph over and over again. Yoga helped me to focus my mind. It also helped me to put my attention where I wanted it, rather than always on racing thoughts. I would let them come if they had to and let them go."
- "When the pain came, I would think 'Oh, why is it here?' But with yoga I started to think differently: 'It's there, I can handle it; it's part of my body. What can I do to make it feel better—breathing, stretching—find ways to own it?'"
- "After my eye surgery I had to remain in a face down position for ten days. You can imagine how challenging that was for the neck, shoulders, and upper back. During those days I found great relief from some yoga postures, especially the face down ones. I was grateful to find after the ten days I could add other postures, and my neck and shoulders recovered quickly."

The Miracle Story

The most incredible story is that of my student Neil, who has been battling cancer for five years now. Originally he had kidney and bladder cancer; he had a kidney removed and his bladder operated on, and the chemo cleaned up the surrounding tissue. Two years later he was diagnosed with stage 3 prostate cancer, metastasized into the outer bladder. They suggested a removal of his prostate, but he didn't want that. Instead, he opted for external beam radiation.

Then he became part of a study group undergoing "Brachy Therapy," in which they implant little radioactive beads right into the prostate, so that there is a constant pulsing of radiation being given off. The symptoms were huge: nausea, abdominal bloating, headaches, fatigue, and lots of pain that would



start at the source and radiate up into other parts of the body. There was pain in the pelvic girdle bone, the perineum, and testicles, sacral-lumbar pain, moving up to the mid-thoracic area, and a needle-like pain in his lower ribs. Neil had been taking prescribed morphine every day for the pain, along with some anti-anxiety drugs, sleeping pills, muscle relaxants, and anti-nausea medication. On top (or perhaps because) of it all, he was dealing with anxiety attacks and depression.

When he came to yoga, Neil said he felt an improvement after the very first class: a minimizing of the back pain, and it lasted for one day. After the first week of class, he began to practice a few postures every day at home. After four weeks, the pain was diminished for two or three days after the class. By the end of the eight-week course, the pain was diminished for three or four days.

Neil continued to take several eight-week cycles of class with me. After his second cycle, the back and pelvic pain continued to diminish, and the thoracic needling went away completely. The abdominal pain, bloating, and nausea were markedly reduced. By the third cycle, the effects of the yoga would last longer, sometimes a week. He was also able to reduce his medications substantially.

The anti-anxiety/depression meds went from 800 mg to 500 mg per day. The sleeping pills went from 100 mg to 50 mg per day. The muscle relaxants and anti-nausea meds went from daily to “as needed.” And most astonishing of all was the fact that he was able to get off the morphine completely.

When Neil’s doctor, head of oncology and urology, learned of this miraculous pain reduction through yoga, his initial thought was that Neil must have been on the placebo drug in his study group. He was not. Then his oncologist, also in disbelief, privately phoned Neil’s psychologist to find out if he had been put on some other drug that may have been affecting his treatments. Of course, there was none.

Neil’s pain never went away completely, but it did go from what he considered to be an 8 out of 10 (10 being the maximum that anyone could handle) to a 2 or 3 out of 10.

Since that time, Neil has had a relapse with his prostate cancer, which caused him to become so badly anemic and exhausted that he had to stop his asana practice for a while. Nevertheless, he continued to do the breathing and relaxation practices at home until his physical strength was somewhat restored. Amazingly, his back pain never returned to what it was. He told me, “Maybe I am an anomaly in this way, but I want people to know that yoga may help them reduce or even eliminate medications. My whole general outlook improved, fatigue lessened, and the pain reduction meant the world to me.”

Neil is now back in yoga class and feeling better again.

In Summary

I would like to say two things to other Ananda Yoga teachers who may be considering working with cancer patients. First, I feel Ananda Yoga is probably the most suitable style of yoga for this particular group because it has certain components that other styles don’t have. All the aspects of Ananda Yoga help these people to have a full body/mind/spirit experience. What better time to have help tuning into the Divine,

than when one is facing a life threatening illness? And just for the record, other yoga teachers offer other styles at Wellspring, but it is the Ananda class that has a waiting list of people wanting to take it again.

Second, I want to express just how absolutely inspiring and rewarding it has been to work with this group of people. Hearing the trials of their personal journeys with cancer, and how yoga helped them to cope, has melted my heart. They have taught me so much about life, courage, love, and about how yoga supports us in our process of becoming more conscious. Never in my life have I been so inspired to stand up to my own fears, weaknesses, bad habits, and doubts as I have been after working with these people. They have been shining examples of bravery, courage, and perseverance. Their receptivity and positivity are contagious.

As teachers we give them the tools and create the sacred space for the experience to happen. We are loving, safe, caring, respectful, encouraging, and positive. We guide the yogic experience and teach them how to create it for themselves. The real magic happens when they open the door to that process—to the divine energy and presence within themselves—and use their will power to take charge of moving forward with that.

For me, this whole process has been a lesson in love, especially self-love. I have realized that to practice yoga is to practice love, acceptance, compassion, and surrender. It is a practical application of will power that allows us to tap into, or draw upon, an ocean of love within us. It helps me to come into relationship with myself, discover my truth, and recall my goodness and my divine nature. As I have witnessed this process in my students, their fighting spirits have reminded me that it is my sacred duty to connect inwardly, and to find and give love and support to myself in the same way that I give to others—and in the same way that God gives to all of us. Through teaching at Wellspring, I have realized that this is what yoga is for me.

I offer my love and gratitude to all of the people at Wellspring. ♦