



guiding simple
warmth
joy relax energy
bhakti
support circle
dynamic
devotion



reflect simple
group creative
teaching
helping
peace challenging bond
focus fresh



asanas diverse
life physical
breathe
awareness friends
magical
strength laugh



positive breath
relief share
determination
volunteer
settle connection
karma
loving inspire



happiness joyous
freedom living
uplifting
modify
guiding adapt
nourish evolve

Beyond the limits

Yoga for wheelies.

Wheelchair yoga is an empowering experience for all, as volunteer helper Rosie Lempriere explains.

A whizz of wheels, a clatter of chairs, and playful banter are not sounds usually associated with a yoga class. Hushed tones and quiet contemplation are more often the norm. But then the diverse group that gathers each Thursday morning in a busy community centre in northern Sydney is not your average yoga class. All students arrive in two specially adapted buses and roll in, seated in wheelchairs. Many live challenging lives and simply making the class can be an achievement. Yet once they are assembled together something magical occurs – the circle they form pulses with its own energy. For an hour, the plain, simple room is transformed by the warmth and camaraderie of the group that grows to include a teacher and volunteer helpers such as me.

Last year marked the tenth anniversary of this unique yoga experience – a weekly class that caters for the special needs of students who use wheelchairs. It was established in 2000 by the charity DARTS (Disabled Alternative Road Travel Service) for its members. Students who attend use wheelchairs for a plethora of reasons: spina bifida, cerebral palsy, stroke, loss of limbs, degenerative and neuro-muscular-related diseases. It's no easy feat; some travel up to two hours to attend, making it a full-day commitment. Many have been coming since it started. The class depends on a team of drivers and volunteer helpers who work individually with the students – moving,

straightening and supporting their limbs, guiding their movements and coordination and, most important, providing strength and support.

Shaktidhara, a teacher from the Satyananda tradition with a background in nursing and respite care, has taught the group for the past two years. Despite the well-established routines, every week has its own dynamic. "I don't know how many students or volunteers will come until I arrive," she says. "I might have as many as 24 people or as few as eight. Quite often we are short of helpers – but the group are an adaptable bunch and together we work it out. We begin by forming a circle. Students are matched with volunteers, many of whom have formed a close bond. Once the class starts, however, it has a life of its own."

Going with the flow is a quality Shaktidhara has learned to embrace as she teaches a traditional but less formal Satyananda class. "I need to walk around, demonstrate a lot, engage one-on-one with the students and direct the volunteers who are new to yoga or the class. It's a really positive and lively group and occasionally I have to encourage them to internalise, rather than socialise. Usually, the only talking is about the practices, such as if the helpers need guidance or the students need to give feedback."

The class was initially started by Annette Loudon, who taught the class for its first nine years. Annette entrusted the teaching of this very special group to

“The first time my body stopped jerking in class, I felt like I was in slow motion for the first time in my life.”

– VENESSA CRANE

[Barbara’s Legacy]

The opportunity to help with a yoga class for people with disabilities came in the midst of my yoga teacher training. I relished the chance to add a new dimension to my studies, to broaden my skills and knowledge. What I didn’t anticipate was the life-changing relationships I would develop during the process.

Soon after settling into the group I was assigned to help Barbara McEvoy, a student unable to move anything but her right-hand thumb. My short time with Barbara, a sharp and deeply intuitive person, was a profound experience. I saw how meaningful the class was to her; and how Barbara’s dedication enabled her to transcend her physical limitations. My final task in helping Barbara each week was to accurately place her right thumb on a small square touch pad that allowed her to restart the engine of her electric wheelchair – a delicate connection that was critical to her independence. The task required absolute precision, presence, and faith. One day I just couldn’t get it right. The room soon drained of students and I was left feeling inept and panicky. Eventually, with Barbara’s calm and reassuring guidance, I made the connection. “See – you did it!” she exclaimed. Clearly, Barbara was not the only remaining student.

Although Barbara died suddenly in 2008, her positive energy and vivaciousness remain a presence every Thursday. She inspired this story and I dedicate it to her.



Salute to the Sun. Students Pippie Flannery (left) and Ann Deagan (right) guided by helpers Barry Darke and Rosie Lempriere.

Shaktidhara when she took up an opportunity to work in the Australian outback. It was Annette’s tenacity and passion for helping others that galvanised the support of DARTS, and created a yoga experience that has nourished and empowered its dedicated participants. “From the moment I started teaching the class,” Annette reflects, “it was a highlight in my week. No matter how tired I felt, I always left feeling energised; such was the students’ effect on me. From the beginning, I ran the class as I would any other: breathing, postures, relaxation or meditation, using whatever modifications were necessary for each student to achieve the benefits of the practice.”

Grace Rossi attended Annette’s inaugural class and has rarely missed one since. “In the early days,” she says, “there was a lot of talking.” She admits to having approached yoga in “holiday mode” – a time for recreation and socialising. It was an experimental time for the six original students, none of whom had ever done yoga before. Also Annette was pioneering a new kind of yoga class utilising her wealth of experience as a yoga therapist and teacher. Gradually, the group worked out the best methods of moving limbs – developing a creative repertoire of modifications for practices and individuals. Routines evolved and self-awareness developed, as did the calm, quiet focus of each student. Now an experienced practitioner, Grace has a deep reverence for the internalising nature of yoga. “It

slowly became ‘me’ time,” she says, “time out during the week when I totally relax and let go of my worries and stress.”

Taking on such dedicated and experienced students has been an enlightening experience for Shaktidhara. “I used to worry a lot about keeping it fresh,” she explains, “but the students often comment on how much they get out of the simple practices, so we do fairly similar postures each week. Their feedback reminds me that yoga is about simplicity, regularity and focus, not about entertaining the mind.”

Most students, restricted by their wheelchairs and physical limitations, cite the postures as their favourite part of the class. Body movements and stretching, especially of the lower limbs, they say, improves flexibility and coordination. It also eases stiffness, tension, and pain. Feet asanas and massage are especially popular, students relishing the physical touch and movement, and the release of stagnant energy. For the upper body, side bends are a weekly request; chest-opening movements feature for strengthening of the breath and mind; and extroverting verbal practices, such as chopping wood or roaring lion, never fail to bring smiles to everyone’s faces.

Concentration and stillness during meditation, and breath control for pranayama, pose a wide variety of challenges for each student. Long-term

participant, Venessa Crane, sometimes finds that remaining still during meditation is a challenge when her body doesn't want to cooperate. "Repeated practice has helped me to try and relax and be calm," says Venessa. "The first time my body stopped jerking in class, I felt like I was in slow motion for the first time in my life."

Students usually approach asana practice with much fire and determination, so short, calming breathing, relaxation, or meditation practices are used at the end of the class to settle the energy. This also helps develop breath and mental awareness.

Some students use these practices as a powerful antidote to life's physical, mental, and emotional challenges. Yoga helps them to manage pain, reduce worry and stress, helps them to sleep, and relieves frustration. Judith Rance, who lives in a nursing home, says: "If in doubt, I use the breathing practices." Judith also meditates regularly to relieve tension and frustration during the long periods of waiting she experiences each day.

Ann Deagan, who – like other students – is acutely sensitive to noise, finds visualisation practices the most powerful. "When I can imagine a place where I'd like to be, I feel a sense of relaxation that I don't otherwise experience very often."

Being among such a positive and sensitive group of students is a weekly dose of inspiration for volunteer helpers. Retiree Lynn Darke, who has worked with the group for more than six years, finds that being part of the class is uplifting. "Sometimes on Thursday mornings," she admits, "I wonder if I have the energy to help; but then I get involved and soon I've forgotten I felt tired. So the class is beneficial for me as well as them – together we create a sense of peace and harmony." Lynn's husband, Barry, also a volunteer, feels it's not just the physical support but the subtle and flowing connection of head, heart, and hands between students and helpers that really makes a difference. An experienced yoga practitioner, Barry likens the role of helping students to "a meditation on awareness. You put all your concentration into what you are doing; you are a lot more aware of your thoughts and of how

you are communicating through touch. I feel like I'm practising karma, bhakti, and raja yoga all at once – action, devotion, and mental awareness".

But while students typically grow and strengthen through the class, not all flourish. "There's always some impending operation or health issue, and it affects all the students," says Barry, a deeply spiritual man. He worked intuitively with student David Collins* for many years after David was unable to verbalise – a relationship that then-teacher Annette says "moved her to tears". During her period of teaching, she adds, "it was wonderful to watch such relationships grow between volunteers and students. The feeling was they in fact became one unit during the postures". Long-term volunteer Anne Dewis remembers vividly the day "when Barry and Lynn left the class to be with David, who we knew was near death". David died in the presence of Barry and Lynn that day. Sadly, David is one of three original 'yoga for wheelies' students who have died.

Original member Grace says she feels a sense of duty to help maintain the special qualities that distinguish the group. She describes it as "setting an example" by showing support, commitment, determination, and respect. It obviously works, because membership of the group is highly prized.

The weekly class may begin with students feeling distressed, fragmented, drained or euphoric but, as it closes, resonant OMs fill a room imbued with

peace, stillness, and connection. "This class means a lot to me," says Venessa. "We do it together and share the experience. Friendships are established, and we care for and support each other's needs. We are inspired by one another and treat each other equally".

Watching and helping Venessa and her classmates, some of whom have very limited physical movement, is a weekly education for me. It highlights the simple truths that yoga is about union and truly accessible to all. Indeed, in the words of spiritual master Krishnamacharya: "If you can breathe, you can do yoga".

But during the yoga for wheelies class something much more evolves from the intimate connections made, as long-time teacher Annette Loudon once observed. "We do the practices, we share with others, we do service. Although everyone has their own personality, moods, physical and mental challenges, we come together each week to create harmony and a sense of peace within a small room."

**Name has been changed*

Thank you to the students, volunteers, and DARTS staff, and especially Annette Loudon, for sharing their personal insights and experiences; to Jemina Darke for her photography; and my dearest friend Amanda Burdon for her guidance with this story. My contact email is rosielempriere@optusnet.com.au. For copies of Practice Guidelines or a DVD of the class contact Shaktidhara at shaktidhara108@yahoo.com.au

Focusing on feet asanas, a popular weekly ritual, are regular partners Anne Dewis (left) and Venessa Crane (right).

