

Tuesday, 09 August 2005

## **As it becomes more mainstream, yoga is not quite the mental stretch it used to be**

**JILL FELLOW** - Daily Herald

A few years ago, Orem resident Dawn Kay and a friend said, "Let's do yoga."

They found a class in Orem and spent two hours a week in peaceful, dimly lit yoga studios breathing and bending.

A few months later, Kay found herself in the middle of a master's degree program and working full-time while she cared for her husband, who was recovering from brain surgery.

She said she held on to her new yoga tradition despite all the chaos in her life.

"My world was sort of crashing in," she said while sitting on a thin red mat at the White Mountain Yoga studio in Orem. "But two times a week I would come here and forget it all."

Frances Tolman, a young-looking 62-year-old from Provo, said her three years of yoga have strengthened her muscles, prevented pinched nerves and "chased away the blues."

"When we do yoga," she said, "we connect the spiritual and emotional with the physical. It puts me in tune with the energy in my body ... and at the same time it is the most strenuous of all the physical exercise I have ever done."

The word yoga means "to yoke," and it refers most commonly to the uniting of one's body, mind and spirit. The time-tested art is based on Eastern metaphysical beliefs and for many practitioners is both a philosophical as well as a physical way of life. Most yoga disciplines involve holding a variety of body positions -- or "asanas" -- that center the mind and help breath travel throughout the body.

Since the yoga craze erupted in the United States in the late 1960s, people across the country have tracked down instructors, videos or books to teach them the art form and have, in turn, accomplished much more than flexibility. Practitioners have used yoga to do everything from relieving depression and calming anxiety to creating better digestion and healing injuries and illnesses.

And Utah County "yogis," as they affectionately call themselves, are no different. Local residents use the Indian tradition of personal awareness to build spirituality, find peace from physical and emotional pain or even just to get in shape. Yoga's possibilities are vast and endless, said Syl Carson, the founder of White Mountain Yoga and a certified instructor in several forms of the ancient practice.

Two of those practices -- Ayurveda Yoga and Polarity Therapy -- will be the topics of a three-hour workshop on Saturday from noon to 3 p.m. The \$50 workshop will use the two Eastern philosophies to teach clients yoga-based tonics for various physical and emotional ailments, and problems including chronic pain, insomnia, anxiety, depression and digestive disorders.

"People live with pain and problems because they think they have to," Carson said. "But they have the power to take control of their bodies and to be enlightened in ways that can bring back peace and comfort."

Carson is a Utah County native who was diagnosed with both rheumatoid arthritis and fibromyalgia, a painful joint and muscle disorder, about 10 years ago. She had a 2-year-old son at the time but could barely get out of her rocking chair to play or interact with him.

"It broke my heart," she said. "I wanted to be there for him, but I hurt everywhere."

An Indian rheumatologist recommended yoga, and although at first it was hard to move and breathe through the pain, she said many of her symptoms began to lighten and eventually her fibromyalgia completely dissipated.

"The idea of being good and compassionate toward a body that has kind of rejected you is very hard at first," she said. "But as I made that connection, I felt so much better."

Yoga not only took away her physical pain but it helped her cope with the grief of having an imperfect and ailed body, which made her see and understand the vast effect the activity could have on many suffering individuals, Carson said.

She opened White Mountain in 2000, where she teaches a variety of yoga strategies, coaches instructors, holds workshops and performs Thai Yoga Therapy -- a type of one-on-one yoga that involves massage, acupuncture, stretching and meditation.

Stephanie Golding, a 41-year-old registered nurse at American Fork Hospital, goes to Carson for a Thai Yoga Therapy session every month. She, too, has rheumatoid arthritis and said the sessions, on top of weekly yoga practice, relieve much of her pain and prevent her from becoming stiff or immobile like many

people who have her disease.

"It is a very unusual experience," she said. "You think 'massage,' but this is a whole different deal. It is a different level of stretching and flexibility, and it is very meditative and pensive."

### **The misunderstandings**

Yoga's meditative tradition kept it from becoming part of the Brigham Young University community aerobics program when the activity first became popular nationwide, said Barbara Neal, program director.

"I think people just thought it was a meditating activity, and not exercise, and sort of a scary Eastern religious thing," she said.

It is now a major part of the intramural aerobics program with several power yoga classes being held every week on the LDS Church-owned campus for students and community members.

The same misconceptions also worried local marketing executive Eric Bennett when he started yoga after getting whiplash in a car accident about four years ago. He assumed the meditation was religious and that it might not jell with his Mormon faith.

"I was kind of worried that if I mentioned it at church, people would think I had gone off the deep end," Bennett said.

But he said he soon learned that experienced, local teachers are able to bring in some important Eastern philosophy while tailoring it to a primarily Christian class of yogis.

Bennett's other fear of yoga -- the fear of the "not-so-flexible" -- is another common misunderstanding.

"I have never been a flexible person, never been able to touch my toes," he said. "I thought I had to be able to bend like a pretzel, but that is not the case. You work to your capacity."

Bennett and Carson both used yoga to ease soreness, but Aaron Hales, a 27-year-old banker in Orem, said he has never had much physical pain. He said he just started yoga about five years ago on an impulse.

"I had heard yoga was about focusing on yourself and getting inside yourself, and as a young guy moving in 16 different directions, I wanted that."

Hales said he was in shock to discover that although the emotional aspect of the activity was exactly what he expected, it was also physically hard work.

"I was kind of excited to just sit and stretch," he said. "But I really like that I get a workout, too. It is not an easy class."

### **Medical yoga**

The stretching and muscle building that make yoga so strenuous are also the qualities that attract professionals from various medical fields to the activity. Dr. Silas Bennett from the Active Life Chiropractic Clinic in Lehi said he recommends yoga to many of his patients who have injuries or chronic pain.

Most people's pains or injuries are a result of tight muscles that either tear or help pull joints out of place, he said, which is why he gives most patients specific stretches to do between chiropractic sessions on top of his yoga recommendation.

"Stretching or yoga cannot always heal things alone," he said. "But along with chiropractic, it can relieve a lot of the pain."

Golding said many of the clients she cares for in the surgery recovery department of the hospital could benefit from regular yoga practice. She said it also could help prevent many of the sports-related accidents.

Though Golding started yoga to relieve arthritis pain, she found the breathing exercises she does almost completely relieved her seasonal allergies as well.

"You just never know how it can help you," she said.

### **The breath of yoga**

Breathing is at the heart of yoga, Carson said. During yoga, clients are taught to breathe in and out through their nose with various lengths and kinds of breaths. There are at least 12 traditional yoga breaths or "Pranayama," which translates into the words "life force" and "control." They can be practiced as a yoga session on their own.

"I can do a Pranayama session for 20 minutes and be totally sweating at the end," Carson said.

The sound of nasal exhale is a common noise to be heard at yoga classes around the valley whether they are taught in traditional yoga studios, like at White Mountain, or in gyms, recreation centers, dance studios or even churches.

"Some places are more conducive to a positive yoga experience," Carson said. "But instructors do what they can."

Lighting during the Eastern practice is most often kept very low, and in many places yoga mats -- and blocks and bolsters to help the less flexible -- are

provided.

Elizabeth Jensen, a mother of five, teaches free yoga classes at a church in Provo in order to get enough practice time to become an advanced instructor. She said the No. 1 reason she teaches yoga is because she worries about people's mental health.

"We put ourselves through a lot," she said. "I know if I don't exercise, I get depressed. There are many women like that."

Jensen said that although she loves the art of yoga and her personal practice of it, she is teaches it to help empower people to take care of themselves at both old and young ages.

"This is not just about being a yoga instructor," she said. "This is about being an instrument in healing people's emotional, physical and even spiritual illness."

Jill Fellow can be reached at 344-2553 or [jfellow@heraldextra.com](mailto:jfellow@heraldextra.com).