

ConferenceCorner

Images of Yoga— A Reflection on the Accessible Yoga Conference

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By Linda Varnam

Have you ever noticed a yoga image in the media and thought, “That is not my yoga practice,” or “I will never be able to do that”? As Chris Stigas mentions in his article “Yoga Is for Everybody and Every Body” in the 2018 conference publication *Accessible Yoga Journal*, we live in a culture concerned with being “image perfect.” Rather than being authentic, our images present repeated moments “until the desired outcome of awesomeness is captured.” When yoga is commonly represented in this way, the message becomes that it is an exclusive practice based on body type and perfection. This diminishes access to the valuable resource of yoga as an accessible and available means of creating opportunity for optimal health and spiritual growth for everyone.

As a lifelong student of yoga, I am interested in a practice that supports my inevitable journey through many changes in my physical being, including the final passage of dying. As a yoga therapist and yoga teacher, I am passionate about the creation of safe, welcoming, and inclusive environments for anyone who desires to access yoga teachings. For me, attending the Accessible Yoga Conference—and presenting on effectively integrating breathwork into any teaching scenario—was an incredible experience of being an active participant in a movement advocating for a diverse yoga culture.

The inspirational founder of this grassroots organization is Jivana Heyman, C-IAYT. He has put his beliefs about equal access to yoga into action, and the Accessible Yoga movement is leading the charge. The conference was an opportunity for people with a similar vision to come together to learn, dialogue, and reflect. The workshops, panel discussions, and lectures provided a varied format for developing new skills as a student/teacher/therapist. Listening to the voices and words of those who feel underserved and excluded also provided an invitation to reflect on how belief systems, including my own, contribute to inclusivity and, sometimes, to exclusivity. I truly enjoyed the session “Grounding, Breathing and Releasing the Spine: Yoga Practice that Is Accessible to All,” with Tama Soble of Esther Myers’ Yoga Studio in Toronto. The emphasis on applying this basic conceptual framework as a foundation for self-inquiry and exploration was empowering. This approach removes the focus on the outer image of the yoga posture as the goal for practice.

In her presentation, “Yoga for Stress Related Illnesses,” Shailla Vaidya, MD, touched on other aspects of yoga that include compassion as a practice. (Read more here: www.theyogamd.ca/msc.) Cultivating self-compassion is a pathway to cultivating compassion for others. Which brings us to one of the ultimate goals of yoga: to be of service. This valuable yogic tool can often be overlooked and mis-



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lr: Dianne Bondy, Jivana Heyman, Mary-Jo Fetterly.

understood as we are inundated with images that persuade us that yoga is a practice for self-improvement on a physical level only. As Heyman stated in his opening remarks, “If we are only practicing yoga for ourselves . . . then is that yoga?”

The learning expanded from the sessions and continued with many inspiring conversations with other attendees. Ryan McGraw of Access2Yoga commented on this cogently, “What was remarkable about the [Accessible Yoga Conference] was that all of the attendees were there for one common goal, which was to bring yoga to people of all abilities. There is a feeling of openness, collaboration, and that we want to share ideas among all attendees to spread accessible yoga.”

One of the highlights for me was to participate in the attempt at the world record for the largest Accessible Yoga class. During the class, I looked around and saw what might have been perceived as a messy and imperfect image, as everyone in the room participated in a way that was available and meaningful to them in the moment. To me it was a totally perfect image. You can view the June 23 class, pictured here, on Yoga International’s Facebook page.

For more information on Accessible Yoga International and to learn how to become an Accessible Yoga ambassador, go to www.accessibleyoga.org. **YTT**



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