# There’s No Place Like Om

September 1, 2000 By Ronnilyn Pustil

Craig’s body is sprawled on top of mine and we’re both breathing heavily. Don’t get too excited—Craig’s a gay man and I’m a straight woman, and we’re not having a Next Best Thing moment. We just met a few hours ago.

So why the sudden bonding? Craig and I are at the Living with Yoga workshop in Chicago, along with 40-odd other participants, some of whom haven’t moved their bodies like this since they were kids. We’re doing partner yoga, and Craig is helping me get deeper into paschimottanasana, Sanskrit for seated forward bend, by pressing his body weight onto mine. And it feels awesome.

Most of the people here are doing yoga for their first time. A few have taken classes with teachers Michael McColly and Per Erez at the Test Positive Aware Network, a resource center for people with HIV, which cosponsored the workshop. When we’re done practicing our postures, or asanas, and breathing techniques, or pranayama, it’s question-and-answer time. “Why is yoga good for PWAs?”

“Stress reduction,” says McColly, “because we’re all living with stress from this disease.” Trust him—he knows. He’s had HIV for five years and has been studying yoga for 15. He even traveled to Mysore, India, to learn from Ashtanga yoga guru Pattabhi Jois. McColly, to quote one of the guys in the workshop, “has a wonderful aura.” It comes through in the gentle strength of his touch as he assists me in the chest-opening matsyasana, or fish pose (“It helps you open up and walk around with a bit more pride,” he says).

McColly, 43, along with Erez and instructor Terry Donovan, created this daylong workshop primarily to teach HIVers how to relax and learn to love their bodies.

“I’ve used yoga to make me feel more in charge of my body,” McColly tells us, “instead of waiting for every three months when my doctor shows me my numbers. Yoga makes you feel good from the inside out.”

The next question cuts to the chase: “Can yoga give you a ripped body?”

“Will you have the body you see in the pages of *GQ*?” asks the lithe-bodied Erez. “In my experience, no. But I like my body—HIV and all.”

“You begin to accept your body,” McColly adds. “I want to have my body.”

“Most days, yeah. But some days I want to have his body,” Erez jokes, tilting his head in McColly’s direction.

Erez leads us through some restorative poses—“the cream of the yogic crop,” as he calls them—that restore the body to its balanced state of openness, alignment and serenity, and help HIVers detoxify from their meds. Then he takes us into the chanting. We’re off to a quiet, awkward start (many of us are more used to the “We die, they do nothing” type). But after the first “om,” our collective voices spread out to fill the sunny studio: “Ohmmmmm.”

We sit cross-legged, proud and as straight-backed as we can be on the blue mats lined up in rows on the hardwood floor. With our eyes closed, we breathe into our bellies.

I sneak a peek around the room at the others—all men except for two other women—the effects of lipodystrophy written on many bodies and faces. The beauty of the workshop, I realize, is that it’s not about who’s got the best body or who can bend themselves into a pretzel. Today, at the Moksha Yoga Center, it’s about just that: moksha, freedom. About letting go and acknowledging that we’re perfect just as we are.

“Namaste,” McColly says, his hands in prayer position in front of his heart. “This means ‘the divine presence within me greets the divine presence in you.’” All of us, except for one guy sleeping peacefully on his mat, answer: “Namaste.”

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