

# Leading the Blind: Yoga for the Visually Impaired



If you have a breathing body, you can practice Yoga.

Limitations may curtail the style or type of practice you can do, but ultimately, Yoga is an inside job.

By Jaymie Meyer

These are the goals for the program in which I have worked as a Yoga teacher for the past three years:

- Helping clients develop better understanding of their illness.
- Enhancing clients' ability to cope with stress.
- Assisting clients in remaining in the community.
- Preventing psychiatric hospitalization.
- Preparing clients for entry into vocation and rehabilitation.
- Introducing clients to educational, recreational, and social resources.

In addition to having mental health issues, the clients are visually impaired or blind. When this weekly teaching position opened, my first instinct was to jump at the challenge. I had regular experience teaching an *asana* class at Integral Yoga in New York City, and I had also worked with private clients. I knew that if I accepted the assignment, I would need to learn how to adapt *asana* practice for the chair. Yoga for the blind is typically taught in a chair because it supports spatial awareness and security.

After my initial enthusiasm ebbed, I realized that I had no experience with the blind, not to mention individuals with emotional or developmental problems. Truly, my only contact with the blind was the empathy and respect I extend as a fellow human being — offering a wide berth on a city avenue so as to avoid a person's cane, helping a blind individual cross the street, or giving up a seat on the bus.

All of a sudden, I had to relate to the blind and teach them. Little did I know how much my notions of their limitations would be challenged, or that I would soon be learning as much as I taught.

Before beginning, I had an extensive meeting with Lucy, the departing Yoga teacher. She helped me understand *asana* adaptations for the chair. What no one could prepare me for, however, was the wide array of behavioral issues I would face.

My first class was a disaster. The clients resented that Lucy had left. They didn't like the idea of anyone new and were quite vocal in expressing their disappointment. Five minutes into the first session, Sally, who is partially sighted, said, "You're not Lucy. I hate you!"

Instinctively, I knew that I needed to practice *ahimsa* (nonviolence) in the face of hostility, but it wasn't easy. I felt

my face flush and my body tense. I took a deep breath and said, "I'm not Lucy and I'm not trying to be, but I am trying to do my best. If you give me a chance, maybe we can work this out." She wanted none of it and stomped out of the room, slamming the door.

The room was silent. Finally one student spoke up and offered an apology for her classmate. We returned to the centering and three-part breathing techniques that begin each class. It wasn't long before we were interrupted by Glenda, who is partially sighted. As she entered the room and approached an empty chair, she tripped on someone's cane.

"Shit," she yelled and kicked the cane. It went sailing through the air, and landed clear across the room.

I had been warned that Glenda could be a problem. I was also advised that I could choose to have a disruptive student removed at any time. I began to wonder if I'd made a mistake accepting the position. I wasn't afraid, but I did feel frustrated. Teaching at a Yoga institute, or privately, felt like a piece of cake compared to this. But I had a choice. I had studied the path of Yoga, and here was a real-life situation putting me to the test. *Ahimsa* (nonviolence) and *satya* (truthfulness) were essential. I also wanted to practice *karuna* (compassion). Who was the student here, anyway? And who was the teacher?

While I felt it essential to be firm, I wondered if this approach would make the situation better or worse. I took a deep breath and said, "Glenda, what you just did is not okay. It is totally unacceptable. That cane wasn't put there to trip you—it was an accident. Yoga is nonviolent. If you want to stay in this group, you must play by the rules. Would you like to stay or leave?"

Glenda thought about it for a moment. Perhaps she was used to being removed, or perhaps she wasn't used to being given a choice. We sat quietly and waited for her to respond. When she spoke, she said that she would like to remain with the group. The pressure in the room decreased. That day, Glenda turned a corner, and we began to build trust within the boundaries of the student-teacher relationship. In fact, from that moment forward, I felt that I began to build a certain trust with all the students.

Three years later, much to everyone's surprise, Glenda has become the equivalent of the class leader. She sets up the chairs before I arrive, escorts people who are less-sighted than she is to the restroom, and flies out of her seat to flip the cassette tape when the music stops during class. Glenda's actions are more aligned with cooperation, support, and kindness. In a word, she is not only practicing Yoga, she is living her Yoga.

There are other less emotionally charged but equally important considerations for teaching the visually impaired. One essential ingredient is clear verbal communication. Obviously, you cannot rely on physical demonstrations to get your point across. Standard Yogic terminology may also be confusing. This was the case one time when we were practicing *chin mudra*, a Yogic finger position. While the majority of the students knew and understood what they were doing, a newcomer who was most attentive brought both hands to his chin. When I realized that the new student was simply following my words and literally holding his chin, I explained the correct position. Together, we

had a chuckle about the misunderstanding, and I thanked him for helping me to be a better teacher. Awareness of every word and concise communication are two of the greatest gifts that I have received from teaching the blind.

Even when you are spot-on specific with your words, sometimes a student may need a gentle touch to guide them. I believe it is essential to ask permission to touch. I do this anew in every class that I teach, even when working with long-time students. It is especially essential when teaching the blind, because they may not realize how physically close you are and you don't want to startle them.

What has been most eye-opening for me is how curious the blind are in exploring the breathing techniques (*pranayama*) and the meditation practices (*dhyana*). Generally, in my experience with sighted students, there is less of a natural proclivity to 'go inside' and explore stillness. Partially sighted or blind students are already predisposed to an inner world and have a degree of comfort in exploring that realm.

During class, I try to allow space for questions and discussion. One student in particular likes to talk about the scientific research being done on the benefits of Yoga. I make it clear that I am not a doctor, but we often discuss the physiology of stress and how specific Yogic practices can help them to cope with stress in their lives. Most importantly, I try to impress upon them that Yoga is not just for class time, but something to take away and incorporate into every aspect of their lives.

The administrator who oversees this program acknowledges that being able to relax and control impulses or disruptive emotions are very important skills for this population. Practicing Yoga, she says, helps the clients deal with the myriad of difficulties in their lives.

David, a three-year veteran of the class, put it best when he said, "At night when I do Yoga, it puts me to sleep. I lay on the bed and it's like I'm on clouds. When morning comes, some people need a cup of coffee; my wake up call is a cup-of-Yoga."

I believe that Yoga is a universal language with the potential to benefit all, regardless of physical or emotional challenges. If you have a breathing body, you can practice Yoga. Limitations may curtail the style or type of practice you can do, but ultimately, Yoga is an inside job. Perhaps that is why the blind, with their rich inner world, take to it with such enthusiasm and joy. □

*All names of individuals have been changed to protect privacy.*

**Jaymie Meyer** is a certified Integral Yoga and stress management instructor, a Relax and Renew® restorative yoga trainer, and a professional spokesperson. She has been teaching both private and group classes for over 6 years in New York City and Westchester, at work sites, universities, health clubs, and the Integral Yoga Institute. Contact: [Jaymie@att.net](mailto:Jaymie@att.net), [www.jaymie.com](http://www.jaymie.com).

#### Continuing Education And Video Recommendations

*Yoga for the Rest of Us:* [www.PeggyCappy.com](http://www.PeggyCappy.com)

*Armchair Fitness Yoga Health:* [www.ArmchairFitness.com](http://www.ArmchairFitness.com)

International Headquarters for Integral Yoga: [www.yogaville.org](http://www.yogaville.org)

## Therapeutic Yoga Teacher Training

Alignment  
Anatomy  
Physiology  
Energy  
Detailed Instruction

**Nicole DeAvilla, RYT**

Over twenty years of experience  
Expert, practical instruction

The Expanding Light and SF Bay Area

[www.expandinglight.org](http://www.expandinglight.org)  
[www.SMCmarin.com](http://www.SMCmarin.com)  
[nicoledw@comcast.net](mailto:nicoledw@comcast.net)

**Private Instruction Available**



## transform your career!

**Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy** offers an opportunity for a fulfilling career that combines ancient yogic wisdom and contemporary body-mind psychology.

**Get the professional edge.** Change lives by exploring emotions on the mat and become a Certified Phoenix Rising Practitioner.

#### 2006 TRAINING WEST STOCKBRIDGE, MA

Level 1: June 2-6      Level 1: Aug. 11-15  
Level 2: June 7-13    Level 2: Aug. 16-22

#### 2006 TRAINING OTHER LOCATIONS

Asheville, NC      Level 1: Aug. 4-7  
Seattle, WA        Level 1: Aug. 4-8  
Seattle, WA        Level 2: Aug. 10-15  
New York City     Level 1: Sept. 16-19



**PHOENIX RISING**  
yoga therapy training

For certification details and new programs call **800.288.9642** or visit [pryt.com](http://pryt.com)