

# THE DARTS YOGA GROUP –

## A SUMMARY

By Annette Loudon

### Annette's Background

I commenced my own practice of yoga when I lived in remote villages in Bali in Indonesia in 1975. I then continued with my yoga practice, which I found particularly helpful during periods of extreme illness in my life. My professional life was always involved in access areas, such as adult literacy, teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, getting people with mental health problems back into education etc. My interest in yoga was also in how it could help in times of illness, probably due to how it had helped me.

In the early 90s I subscribed to various magazines from Great Britain, such as Yoga for Health and the Journal of the British Bio-medical Yoga Organization, that included a lot of research from the now Vivekananda Institute of Yoga Research. I was interested in reading and learning more about the then newly emerging yoga therapy.

In 1994 I lived in Great Britain, working with young adults with learning difficulties and adults with mental health problems, and so was able to take advantage of the yoga teacher- training offered by Yoga for Health in Ickwelbury. This organization was particularly known for its research and teaching of yoga to people with Multiple Sclerosis, so I was able to get hands -on experience working with people with varying degrees of physical handicap due to the debilitating effects of MS.

In fact, during that year, I was able to use various techniques, in particular yoga breathing and yoga relaxation (Yoga Nidra) with the street kids I was working with in Sheffield in northern England. These were young people (16 – 19) who were 3<sup>rd</sup> generation unemployed, living on estates, with fairly dysfunctional lives. The relaxation, they said, was the best rest they ever got.

Upon my return to Australia in 1995, I was really keen to teach yoga to people with physical disability, as I had seen the effects and benefits in Great Britain. I had a very strong commitment to the idea extolled by Krishnamacharya:

If you can breathe you can do yoga.

So, I contacted the MS society and started teaching people with MS. At first, I taught at the MS centre in Chatswood, then at various other locations and then in conjunction with the MS, we decided to integrate people with MS into local community classes. Many of these students remained with me, with the help of

volunteers , till I left Sydney. Brian, who made my website, is still a friend from those days

### **The DARTS class**

A friend of mine, Debbie, had become one of my students, as she had a severe neck injury. She was one of my early rehab students. My business name at that time was "Forest Remedial Yoga". Yoga changed her life, so she asked me to be a guest at the organization where she worked, Disabled Alternative Road Transport Scheme (DARTS). This organization, based in Chatswood, provides social outings for people with physical disability, who are in a wheelchair, by providing road transport to and from the activity.

From the success of that first class at the Dougherty Centre in Chatswood, we worked together to find some funding for a venue to offer a yoga class weekly. That was ten years ago and the class has met weekly ever since.

The only time students miss a class is if they are ill.

Of the six original students, all six continued. Two died in the past 18 months, but the remaining four are still part of the class that we expanded to 12 students.

### **The first class**

The six students who attended the first class all had different physical conditions or illnesses, that made them wheelchair- bound. None had ever done yoga before. The first class was in a room in the local aquatic centre, as that was the only place we could find at that time with wheelchair access to a room and a place where the bus could park.

From the start, I had the help of other students as volunteers. Anna and Bobby were two of my own students who eagerly offered to help me. They were outstanding in their ability to know how to help move limbs so that every member of those first six students could participate. Anna left only because she moved to the south coast. Bobby still attends when she can, even though she has moved to the other side of Sydney and it takes her one and a half hours by public transport to attend the class.

I remember Barbara, who had spinal atrophy, and so was unable to move anything but her right thumb, and who used a breathing apparatus to control her wheelchair, saying to me at that first session that she would just watch. I replied that yoga wasn't about watching -it was about doing. She was the most inspiring person I have met in my life, and sadly died last year. I consider her my own greatest teacher – as every minute of every day, she was faced with overcoming extreme physical difficulty, and yet she did this so successfully that at times I would forget she was unable to move.

One of the original six, Vanessa, has severe cerebral palsy. She became our class "barometer". We were able to judge how well we were breathing by how still she could become during the class. I remember the first time her body stopped jerking, she said she felt she was in slow motion for the first time in her life.

### **The early days**

From the beginning, I ran the class as I would any other class: breathing, postures and relaxation or meditation. As in all other classes, the practices were cumulative, so that by the time I left my beloved class last year, they were doing fairly advanced practices of breathing (pranayama), meditation and relaxation. They were also "au fait" with our physical postures.

Breathing and opening the chest were an integral part of the first classes, as most students had limited lung capacity due to having been in a wheelchair for years. In order to move in time with the breath, students would need to do two or three breaths for one movement. In time, we worked on lengthening both the inhalation and exhalation and the students recognising which breath they needed for the lesson; for example, if they needed energy, they would keep the length of the breath in and breath out the same or if they were feeling anxious, they would extend their exhalation.

Joint rotation and spinal movement were all essential aspects of the early classes, as well as postural alignment. From the start, I taught hand mudras during breathing and relaxation processes, as well as the hand mudras to help the breathing into the lower lungs. Relaxations were usually guided visualisations, and then slowly Yoga Nidra was introduced.

At first, the class included a lot of chatter and gaiety as we worked out methods of moving limbs and introducing practices that were appropriate for each individual. At the end of each term, we would have a specialist class that the students would choose. One such class was disco yoga; we dressed up in disco clothes, brought in disco music and used that as the theme of the class. So, the class postures would be developed around the music, the relaxation would be around our favourite song etc. Another theme was beach yoga, and so the visualisation would be us sitting around a rock-pool at the beach and looking into that rock-pool, we would choose yoga postures that would remind us of the beach, or even invent new ones of our own, such as the Seagull.

When it was someone's birthday, we always did a visualisation imagining some kind of present we could give them, then we told them what it was – a ride on a dolphin, a sunny day, a beautiful flower.

Students loved the visualisations and relaxation practices, as some of them were young people in nursing homes, who had lost their youth to the debilitating effects of their illness. It gave them a tool to use in times of distress in their own lives.

## Progression

As time went on, we increased the number of students and DARTS advertised for more volunteers. Those volunteers still attend the group to this day. It was essential that I knew each volunteer and that they knew how to move the limb of the person to whom they were assigned on any particular day. It was of course imperative that I ensured no volunteer hurt themselves either. The class was a yoga class, and not a social chit-chat, so it was also essential that socialising was done before or after class, not during.

As I said previously, in the early classes, there was a lot of talking as we worked out together each person's abilities to move. As this was worked out and I knew what a student could do, and how to treat that person safely, the class became very quiet and focussed. In fact, the only talking was either an instruction from me or one of the students letting their volunteer know what they could or couldn't do that day, or in turn a volunteer asking them for guidance.

It was wonderful to watch the relationship between volunteer and student grow over the years, so that they in fact became one unit during the postures. Barry and the late Robert were a wonderful example of this. As Robert became more and more frail, Barry, an experienced yoga practitioner himself, knew exactly how to move him and keep him smiling by a kind of intense awareness, and sense of service to Robert. This relationship moved me to tears. When Robert became too ill to attend class, Barry and his wife Lyn went to visit him in his nursing home and took him a bunch of flowers from the class, and Robert died in Barry's arms. Robert had no-one else in his life, and yet died with such love – this is yoga.

The set-up of the class has always been a big circle with students and volunteers sitting in the circle. We started with our breathing, then assigned the volunteers to each student, did the postures, then the relaxation.

At times, there could be 24 people in the room, at other times, if there were not many volunteers available for that lesson, there may have been me, 12 students and two volunteers. Arranging such a large number of people meant that we did have to maintain "mouna" or silence, apart from the need, as mentioned above, to tell each other if something wasn't appropriate for that day. On those days when there weren't many volunteers available, I had to have extreme flexibility with my teaching to ensure the postures chosen could always be done safely without volunteer help. I repeatedly told the volunteers that they were always welcome, but must not worry if they couldn't come for whatever reason. I feel this really helped to maintain the loyalty of these wonderful people. Bobby, who was my first volunteer, even travelled from South Cronulla to help when she moved there several years ago. Again, an example of the service or Seva, that this class created.

During the postures part of the class, at times we moved so that we could use a wall or a table or a chair to help a posture. This needed to be done in an orderly and

quiet way, with awareness, or it could practically be a riot! We have done a lot of team-work, in pairs, small groups or larger groups. Sometimes we added massage. At first, I always had music, but as the years went on and the group became instantly quiet, I only played the music as they were entering the room.

As all students were in wheelchairs, some of them wanted to do their yoga on mats. They would bring their mats into class and we would get them onto the mat. This required a lot of people as, following OHS of the DARTS organization, we needed two people to help each student, and then often two people to help each student once they were on their mat. For this particular class, this proved impossible and took up too much of our class time, so we decided as a group that it wasn't realistic to continue this practice.

As the students became more used to our yoga practices, we began each class with three Om chants. We repeated these at the end with the Shantih chant. At different times we would include other chanting. The students really enjoyed doing their seated Salutes to the Sun with the mantra and bija mantra associated with Salutes. As with my other classes, we sometimes spent a term where we moved into posture with a mantra. Interestingly, a favourite vocal posture was the practice of chopping the wood-students would take it in turns to make a sound as their axe dropped, that we all had to verbalise. Also the Lion posture was a favourite. I have found this to be true in all classes I have taught to disabled people – they love having a chance to vocalise, as they are so often in non-vocal situations where they are meant to be passive and obedient.

Meditative practices were also gradually increased. Starting with mindfulness practices, we progressed to witnessing (Antar Mouna), so ham repetition on the frontal and spinal energy channels. Chakras were also introduced, and various chakra meditation practices. Pranic visualisation was a favourite, especially in times of the illnesses that students encountered. Students really liked Tratak or candle meditation. I remember the class becoming so still and silent during one tratak, that we went over time before slowly coming back to awareness. Another yoga teacher, who was helping on that day, was so moved that she told the class she had never experienced a whole group creating such a peaceful and sustained atmosphere during meditation.

We tried various venues for our class and finally found a room which was part of a community centre with good toilets, ease of access for wheelchairs, bus parking , and that was located near a shopping centre so that students could then go and have lunch and do some shopping. This in turn had a very positive effect on the shopping centre; some shops built ramps for our students to enter their shops, some cafes would put their tables and chairs together so that the class could have lunch together. Again, I feel this is a reflection of the community aspect of yoga that we try to create.

## **Yoga**

I always called this class "my Thursday morning class". I have never called it "Yoga for people with disabilities" or "Wheelies yoga". I actually didn't differentiate it from my other classes. Whatever the theme for that term, I have taught the same to this class, using whatever modifications were necessary for each student to achieve their version of the posture or other practices.

In all my classes I taught modifications for individuals and this class was no exception, so different movements were done differently for many of the students. With Barbara, for example, who was fixed in her chair, we developed modifications to do twists and side-bends and even the Cat posture.

On days when we didn't have many volunteers, students would move what they could and visualise their limbs moving during the postures. As they were such a dedicated group, these sessions were just as successful as the lessons when we had a full quota of volunteers.

For Pranayama, sometimes I or a volunteer would help a student by using our fingers on their nose for alternate nostril breathing (nadi shodana) or on their ears for humming- bee breath (brahmari). In visualisation, I would say "imagine you are sitting or lying under a waterfall, or going through a rainforest", so it would be up to them to imagine if they were in their wheelchairs or not.

As the class progressed and volunteers learnt how to move students' bodies, the class became more focussed and quieter and extremely peaceful to teach. I asked several guests to come, such as a friend to do "kirtan" (singing of chants) with the group. The students loved kirtan and would spontaneously dance in their wheelchairs.

At one time, DARTS had some Indian exchange students working for them, so those students taught the class chanting, and explained the role of yoga in their lives in India.

We also arranged trips to the Satyananda yoga ashram at Mangrove Mountain, which they loved.

Students from this group attended special nights or days I held for my general classes, so that my more able-bodied students and these students would do a class together.

### **Care of the class**

Each student filled in the usual questionnaire that I give to all my yoga students. I also wanted medical clearance for each student. It was essential that I know about each condition or disease the students had, as well as the nature of their medication. Although students don't always act according to their condition, until a

thorough knowledge of each individual student is developed, it is essential to proceed carefully. For example, people with MS feel the heat, so on hot days, cooling postures may need to be given. Students with cerebral palsy who are constantly in motion can enjoy benefits from slower yoga postures; they can also benefit from pnf stretching for their calves and hamstrings before doing a forward bend. People who are very stationary in their chairs can benefit from mobilising their joints and gradually increasing the number of repetitions.

The effects of medication can also happen quickly and so, although it appears that a student may be handling a series of postures, they can suddenly become overheated, so there needs to be awareness around this. Students' medication can also have the effect of their going to sleep in the relaxation a little more quickly than students without medication.

It was imperative that I knew each student and knew whom I could put with them as a volunteer. This is important for all teaching of yoga. For example, one of my students had spinal bifida, and his neck was very badly affected, so it was essential that his neck be in alignment in all his movements and that no sudden movement be made on his neck. It also meant that his body had to move slowly in a controlled way, and if he raised his arm, we were vigilant about the effect that movement had on his neck. If a student had pain, it was important that they didn't go to the point of pain.

In time, students were able to monitor their own bodies and slow down or stop if they were overheating. This particular group of students would also watch out for each other at first, until each student felt safe enough to be able to speak for themselves, if they were ill or having a bad day.

### **Early difficulties**

The biggest difficulties were technical. Each student was picked up in turn by the DARTS bus, and then brought to yoga, and then in turn taken back. So, it was a full day out for each student. This always humbled me, that a student could be on a bus for hours for a one- hour yoga class. This could mean that, if there was a delay with a carer not having a student ready, the bus would be delayed. So, if a bus was late, I still wanted the class to have a full hour yoga class, and so I would often finish the class a lot later than it should have, so the students wouldn't miss out.

In time, this happened less and less. Unless there was some extreme delay, we would start the class on time and finish on time. Other difficulties that could arise would be the need for a student to go to the toilet, even if in the middle of breathing or a relaxation. As time went on, as in all classes, the other students could totally turn off to this situation, which in itself became a practice of letting go of disruption.



One funny thing that happened was once Barbara's wheelchair literally went into a spin, round and round in the class, as one of the buttons had got stuck. It was really hard to catch the wheelchair to stop it. We always thought it would make a good cartoon, terrible at the time, but funny when we eventually got it to stop!

With this class to function, it was imperative we had volunteers. It is the nature of DARTS that volunteers go on the outings with the members. When it came to yoga, this meant that we could have different extra volunteers each week, which at times was helpful and at times was difficult, as they didn't know anything about yoga, or the students, and yet were still there to help. We were able to improve this by advertising for volunteers who had experience with yoga. They then became a core of volunteers that could offer a model of behaviour in the room. In fact, the volunteers told me that they loved coming to this class and in fact felt a part of the yoga class themselves – indeed to watch them during the class was an outstanding example of the incredible service they provide – Seva Yoga, from a loving heart. Without this extraordinary group of people, the students would not have progressed to the level they have been able to. I call them my “angels”.

Another unforeseen difficulty was matching the correct volunteer with the correct student. One of the students really liked flirting with males, and if I gave her one of the male volunteers, she would giggle all class. Another didn't like males helping her and only wanted females. One student didn't like a particular volunteer. These are real problems in a class of this nature that depends so heavily on volunteers for support. I did in fact write out a type of summary for volunteers as to how the class proceeded and exactly what was and was not expected of them.

Although the above may have presented initially as problems, by working them out together, the class seemed to develop a trust in knowing that things could and would be worked out rather than not dealt with, and that dealing with problems positively is also an important aspect of yoga.

## **Effects of yoga**

After about four or five years, most students were enjoying improvement in their bodies. I wrote an article which said:

We have noticed the range of movement in side-bends and twists has really improved over the years. We also witnessed some great break-throughs, such as: Robert, early 50s, being able to lift his leg with his hands ( we are now aiming for him to reach his foot); Lena no longer wears a neck brace and moves her torso more, so that she can do a Cat posture unaided in her chair; as well she is able to lift her arm; Grace can now hold her head up for longer and actually practises some of the postures at home; Helen is able to lean forward in her chair without fear of falling; Vanessa is able to maintain total calm in her body for a whole lesson.



However, after nine years, physical decline due to the nature of their illnesses was more apparent than physical improvements. As I said previously, we have had three deaths. Two students with spina bifida have had complicated operations, Helen with MS and who is a young woman in a nursing home, has declined markedly.

In spite of this, they still love the physical component of the class. Due to the repetition of various postures, the way they approach them is easier even if their range of movement is less.

With a group of people who are permanently in wheelchairs it is essential to do the full yogic breath and the postures with the breath. Chest openers and spinal movements and leg stretching are important to open up all the areas of the body that are usually compressed and confined.

The only movement that is difficult from a wheelchair is stretching the front of the thigh and hip area. With some students, this is possible by sitting on the edge of their wheelchair and taking one leg back, but for some, this is too difficult, due to lack of mobility or heaviness or lack of balance in the wheelchair.

### **Highs and lows of my teaching**

From the moment I started teaching this class, it was a highlight in my week. In nine years, I missed one class, when I had to attend the funeral of a young friend. No matter how tired I felt, I always left this class feeling energized, such was the students' effect on me.

We learnt together how to move each body, how to organize the students and the volunteers with the least amount of fuss.

We had fun and special events, we had classes inside and outside, we mixed with other students for parties. We always had a fun Christmas party. Our local paper ran an article on us.

I often interviewed students to find out what they felt the benefits of yoga were to them. This often astonished me, with comments such as:

The breathing and so ham chant help me sleep at night, especially since my wife died – Clinton (who has spina bifida)

I'm aware of holding my head up instead of letting it drop – Grace (degenerative disease)

The hour of yoga each week is like a deep rest – Ann (spinal bifida)

The breathing gives me peace – Judith (stroke)

It feels like blood is flowing where it should – Barbara (spinal atrophy)

At times in the relaxation I experience a deep sense of peace – Pru (head injury from car accident)

I use the breathing when my arthritis flairs up – May (rheumatoid arthritis)

Helped me to think about breathing and helped me to think about the placement of my body.–Barbara

The breathing has taken me beyond the limitations of my disease - Helen (MS)

...sometimes when something is difficult I find myself not breathing, so now I breathe....nadi shodan helps me breathe at night –Lena(MS)

..it's been amazing to see the ability our bodies really have..- Vanessa (cerebral palsy)

Yoga is a very peaceful and joyful activity..- Phillipa(degenerative disease)

### **The lows were the deaths of four of our beloved students.**

#### **Handing over the class**

When I had the opportunity to do volunteer work in central Australia, I decided to close my classes. While I could refer most of my general students to other teachers, I would not leave the DARTS class until I had found a suitable replacement.

I meditated on who should replace me. I kept getting the same message that Shakti dhara whom I knew through the local Satyananda yoga centre, would be the right person. I knew she had the yoga skills, but I wasn't sure if she would have the organizational skills to run this class, which at times can have so many people together in one space, and that needs a lot of direction and checking. Then I spent Easter at the Mangrove Mountain ashram, and saw her organizing the huge food lines for dinner each night. I knew she had all the skills!

I asked her to take two weeks to really think over if she would like to take this class, as it was a huge commitment. After she agreed to take the class, she spent a term of ten weeks attending the class, getting to know the methodology of the class, the students, the volunteers, the organization of DARTS.

I knew that, if I had found the right person, it would be a smooth transition, as the class structure existed, the volunteers and students worked well together, and disabled people I find are very pragmatic. They have a lot of change in carers and situations and seem to adapt well to that change. I also firmly believe that it is good for people to experience different teachers of yoga. I also trusted my choice as it was made from meditation.

When I returned to Sydney six months later, I asked if I could assist the class as a volunteer and say hello. It was wonderful to be back with the class, and just as wonderful to see that Shakti and the class had gelled so well together – she was indeed exactly the right person!

Of course, it was sad for me to leave my beloved class, as we had been through so many happy and sad times together, so much effort to find the right venue, so much effort to get funding for the venue and find people as generous as our wonderful pool of volunteers. But I only ever smile when I think of them. I try to send them a card each term, which can be difficult as we are often in very remote areas.

For me they epitomise what yoga is in all the ways I have outlined above. They do breathing, postures, pranayama, meditation and relaxation. They chant and do kirtan. They have created an identity in the community where the venue is, they share with others and through them we can do service. Although each has their own personality, moods, physical and mental challenges, they come together each week to create harmony and a sense of peace within a small room, after spending hours on a bus to get there.

## **Practices**

### ***Breathing***

Lower, middle, upper ribcage breathing

Lower, middle, upper ribcage breathing with chant of a-u-m

Full yogic breath

### ***Postures with many, many modifications, using chairs, people, walls etc.***

Rotation of joints

Chest opening

Side-bends, forward bends, twists

Climbing the rope, rowing, circling as in stirring

Ab strengtheners

Cat, dog variation, hanging cat on wall

Salutes to the sun, with and without chants

Tree posture, Eagle, Dancer – singly or in pairs or groups.

Group yoga,

Our own inventions!

## **Pranayama**

Alternate nostril breathing (Nadi Shodan)

Humming- bee breath (Bhramari)

Cooling breath (Shitkari and Sheetal)

## **Meditation**

Tratak

Mindfulness – sounds, smells, touch, etc

Witnessing (Antar Mouna)

So ham meditation

Chakra meditation and practices

Prana practices

Visualisations – all kinds

Guided meditations

## **Relaxation**

Tense and release

Yoga nidra

Many others

## **Other specialist teaching**

As well as this class, I have been committed to students with all types of physical and mental impairment having access to yoga. I have taught yoga to individuals and groups with all kinds of illnesses, intellectual and physical disability, from minor to extreme. I also teach specialist classes to women having treatment for breast cancer, for whom I have made a DVD and am currently writing a book. I have also taught yoga to the profoundly deaf, to people on parole, to elite disabled athletes. As with the DARTS group, the feedback is always positive.

“Pain is a part of life, but to be a slave to pain is not a part of life. When we are slaves to our suffering, we identify with weakness and limitation, with the words ‘I can’t’, but when we identify with strength, with the words ‘I can’, then goodness, wisdom and will- power combine to become more dominant, and in pain, the infertile self becomes more dominant.” Swami Niranjan  
Yoga issue 1 2002

November 2009