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Dona Holleman Update

By Arthur Kilmurray

Dona Holleman's third visit to San Francisco this summer offered local yoga students an opportunity to further explore and refine many of the fundamental principles of Hatha Yoga practice that she had introduced in her previous workshops. Not content with superficial, mechanical yoga, Dona believes that a yoga practice should be an expression of our inner divinity, and her teaching touches deep within the heart and soul of her students. Yoga that flows from the center of one's being is elegant and beautiful; yoga that involves only external manipulations of the body is coarse and ugly. But Dona does not believe in making yoga mysterious or esoteric. Her directions are simple and precise, and if followed correctly, lead one to a deeper and more profound experience of one's own self.

The core of Dona's teaching involves bringing the body into a harmonious relationship with the earth's gravity. To accomplish this, the intelligence must be brought into the spinal column and down into the center of the pelvis. The body must be experienced and controlled from here. The weight must be carried on the bones, so that the muscles can release their chronic, unnecessary tension. "The body should be light," says Dona, "floating above the gravity — not heavy, sinking below the gravity."

Dona notes that psychological factors play a large role in determining the lightness or heaviness we experience. The ability to focus and concentrate our attention and intelligence is absolutely necessary to rise above gravity. Too often, our movements and actions are not focused or deliberate, but are confused, half-hearted, or inattentive. The mind and body should be totally together at all times. When, in our practice, we are about to perform a movement, that movement should first be clearly pictured in the mind. Then, when the time is right, make the movement deliberately and efficiently. Know at all times the position and action of the feet, hands, spine, etc. The position of the body should be correct before the movement takes place. Yoga students often go into

the pose first, and then make adjustments. Dona considers this way of working to be crude. Precision and attention from the beginning will eliminate the need for later corrections and will lead to more a harmonious, flowing style of yoga.

A light body is one that is firmly grounded. This fundamental point is a key to understanding the movement of the intelligence in the asanas. When the part of the body in contact with the floor becomes very heavy, pressing and sinking downward, then the rest of the body can be light.

In all sitting and standing positions, the origin of this grounding energy is the hara in the center of the pelvis. This muscular intelligence, liberated by the opening of the sacroiliac joints, flows downward toward the center of the earth. This subtle action is created by generating both a backbending and a forward bending movement around the center of the pelvis, at the same time. The tail bone and sitting bones move downward and backwards, while the pubic bone and frontal hip bones (the anterior, superior iliac crests) move forward and up. When these two movements exactly balance each other, the pelvic bone is anchored securely and the sacrum bone releases inward and upward, away from the pelvis.

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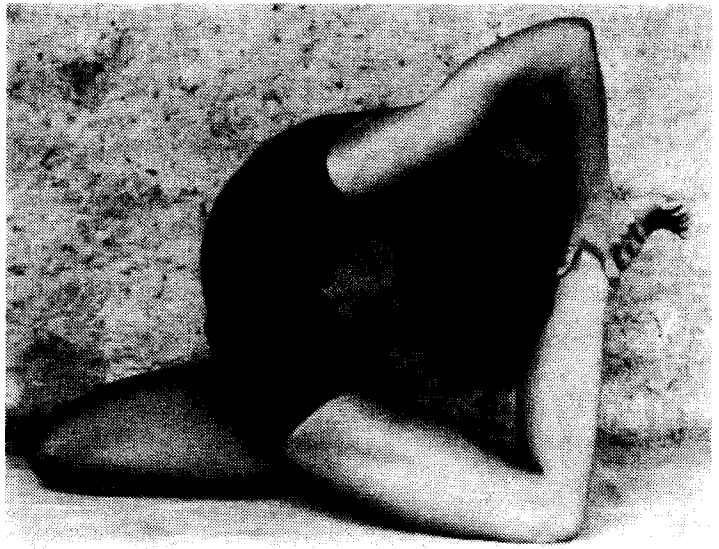


Photo by Gabriella Giubilaro

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Dona used the image of moving from the sacroiliac joints in every pose we practiced. In standing and sitting poses, the intelligence flows from the hara (just in front of the sacrum) downwards through the sacroiliac joints to the floor, to create a rebounding lift which is caught by the spine at the sacroiliac joints. The entire spine moves forward into the body, and lengthens upward, away from the pelvis. At the other end of the spinal column, this extension is carried into the back brain at the back of the ears. The sacroiliac joints and the backs of the ears are connected by the continuously flowing intelligence and always move in opposite directions — away from each other.

A wonderful way to experience this movement is through the use of sandbags or weights. While sitting in a good Lotus, with the pelvis perpendicular to the floor (or in Half-Lotus, if this is impossible), place the sandbags on the legs to make the legs feel extremely heavy. This is part of the grounding action. Then extend the tail bone and the sitting bones downward (the three-pronged plug, Dona calls it), and move the pubic bone and frontal hip bones in and up. Feel this lift flowing into the spine. Then place a sandbag on top of the head and allow the lift to flow along the spine, through the backs of the ears, and into the weight. Continue to extend upward against the weight on the head. After a few minutes, remove the sandbag from the head, and continue the upward lift. The entire upper body will become very light and may even disappear from your awareness for a while. This is the sensation we are trying to create.

In the standing poses, the feet must be placed firmly on the floor. The arches should be active, catching the rebounding lift and channeling it back up the legs and into the spine. There is a direct connection from the sacroiliac joints and the heels, and from the back of the knees to the toes.

In the inverted poses, the same connection between the sacroiliac joints and the legs should be maintained. Actively press the inner arches together and extend the bones of the legs out of the

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In The NEWS

The California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, California, honored Joseph Campbell with a doctorate for his contribution in "raising public awareness of the continuing importance of mythology."

Ram Dass, on a four-month sabbatical from his lecturing engagements, has gone to Brindavan, India, to meditate and celebrate the memory of Neem Karoli Baba.

The September 2, 1983, edition of The Miami Hurricane pictures Eve Diskin, American Institute of Yoga director, and her students doing Bhujangasana —the photograph accompanies "Yoga class now taught here at UM," an article by news editor Lourdes Fernandez. Eve's for-credit yoga class is the first to be offered at the University of Miami. The yoga course at UM was requested by so many students that Department Chairman Thomas Miller felt it was "an opportune time to try," writes Fernandez. Eve has been instrumental in popularizing yoga in this country not only through her institute, but also through her many books, as well as her teaching for the Dade County Public Schools system. •

RESOURCES

From Richard Miller, director of the Marin School of Yoga, Mill Valley, California: T.K.V. Desikachar was the guest lecturer at the Viniyoga Conference in September, 1983, in Annecy, France. It was attended by 450 people from all parts of Europe to honor the teachings of Desikachar's father, T. Krishnamacharya, who, for the past 70 years, has been sharing the knowledge of his tradition. Over 400 years old, this lineage includes Nathamuni, author of Yoga Rahasya. Released at the conference was the premier issue of Viniyoga, a magazine that will feature articles on yoga and related disciplines, based on the teachings of Krishnamacharya and Desikachar. It is in French, but Martin Pierce, Gary Kraftsow and Richard are at work to publish an American edition of this magazine, and organize a United States branch of the association within the next 18 months. To receive information about the association and magazine, you can write: Viniyoga International Association, c/o 134 Boulevard de la Sauveniere, B-400 Liege, Belgium.

Newly opened: South East England Iyengar Yoga Institute at 223A Randolph Avenue, London W9 1NL, England, 01-624-3080. Class and workshop instructors include: Diana Clifton, Kofi Busia, Jeanne Maslen, Silva Mehta. •

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sacroiliac joints. Keep contact with the pubic bone so as not to collapse the lumbar spine. In these asanas, the downward grounding energy comes from the center of the chest at the heart chakra, and flows through the arms and into the floor. The rib cage should lift up, away from the shoulder joints. The shoulder blades should be free of the spine, in order to generate the maximum lift. (This freedom is experienced in all of the asanas — the arms should always extend out from the base of the shoulder blades.) The lift is directed into the spinal column, creating a continuous extension. "Be on the back of the body," Dona constantly reminds us in Headstand. The lumbar spine catches the extension and firmly holds its normal curve. This section of the spine is often weak and unstable, but it can be strengthened and educated by the practice of inversions.

Awareness in the lumbar spine is absolutely necessary for the safe practice of backbends. Many flexible yoga students who overwork this area may not know of the danger involved. They feel that they are doing deep backbending, but actually they are slowly destroying their spines. A continuously extending lumbar that holds the normal curve will prevent injuries in backbends. The whole spine must lengthen, with the backs of the ears and the sacroiliac joints moving away from each other. In all backbends there should be one smooth, continuous curve on the front of the body from the collar bones to the knees. If the lower ribs protrude, too much of the bend is coming from the lumbar. To prevent this, keep the buttocks and the back thighs active, and move the tailbone and the backs of the knees toward each other. This work opens the front groins and maintains the integrity of the lumbar spine.

Dona had several important points to make during the pranayama classes. The first was the establishment of a solid sitting posture. Grounding the pelvis and legs, opening the sacroiliac joints, and releasing the spine upwards were practiced with sandbags,

as mentioned previously. Constant attention is needed to correct tendencies to lean or rotate. The lift-generating action must be evenly balanced from right to left and from front to back. With the spine continuously extending, the next step is to drop the chin into Jalandhara Bandha. Dona feels that improper practice of this action is the source of many neck problems. The upper thoracic and lower cervical vertebrae should not be pushed backward to bring the chin to the chest. The correct movement feels like a rotation around an axis running through the lower back ears. The upper thoracic spine and back brain should be extending upward and the head should feel light, not heavy. In a good Jalandhara Bandha, there is a continuous flow of energy from the crown of the head down through the forehead and into the back brain. This keeps the forehead descending, quieting the front brain, and the back brain lifting, awakening the intelligence of the breathing center.

On inhalation, the breath should touch as far down the throat as possible, near the bronchii. It is drawn down onto the back of the diaphragm and then down along the lumbar to meet the sacrum. The back of the body widens across the sacral and lumbar regions, and the bottom tips of the shoulder blades move down to the waist and away from the spine. The more the breath can be brought down into the posterior lumbar region, the more the upper lobes of the lungs will open. The whole rib cage widens as well. Visualize the right and left bronchii moving away from each other. On exhalation, the process reverses, slowly and with control. Maintain the upward extension of the spine. Do not let the sacrum or sternum sink during exhalation.

Dona has dedicated her lift to the study of yoga. She leads by example, not just by words, and inspires us to explore new areas, using innocence and intelligence as our guides.

Arthur Kilmurray teaches yoga in San Francisco, California.

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