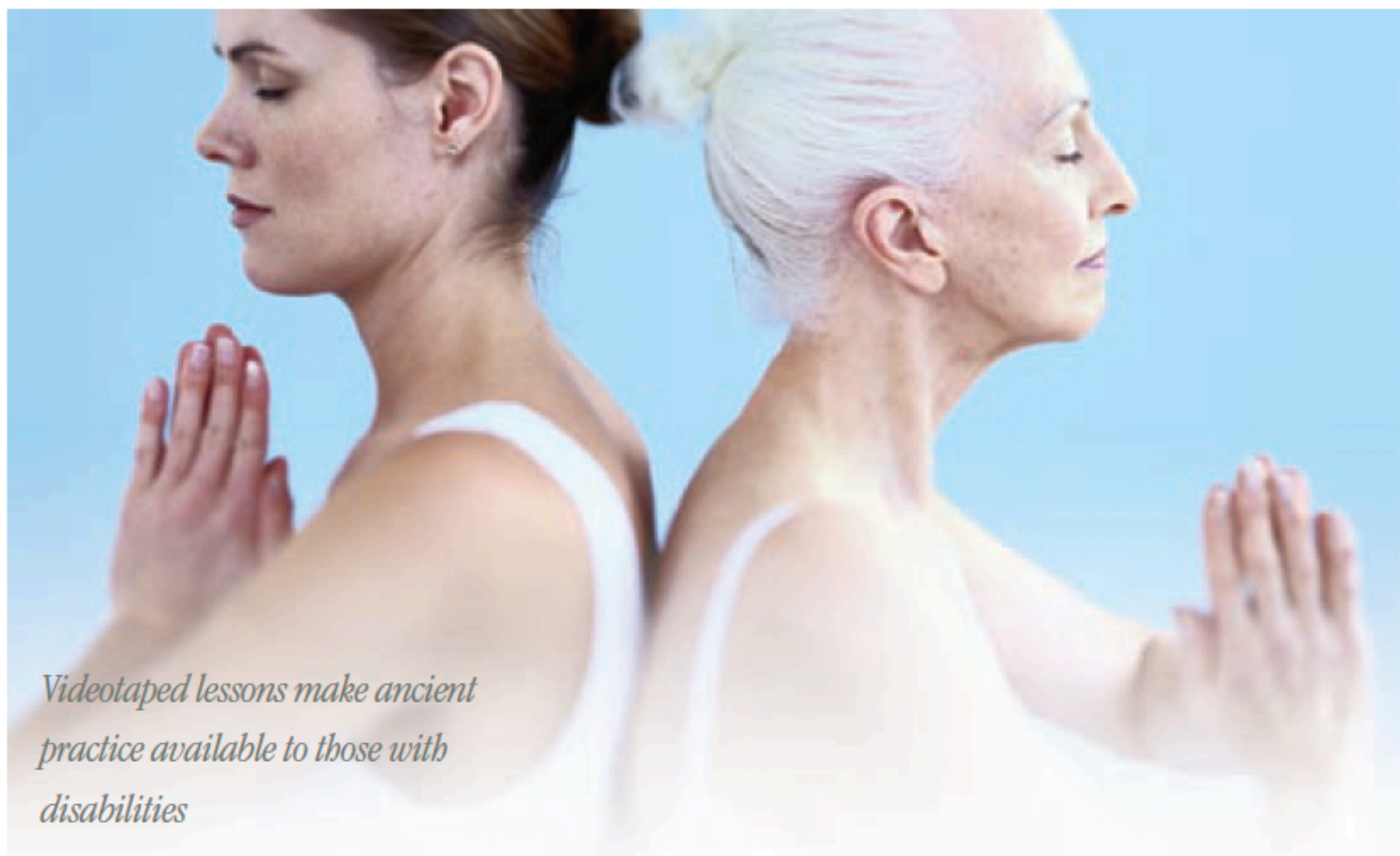


Yoga for Everyone

by Rick Bowers



Videotaped lessons make ancient practice available to those with disabilities

In the minds of most Westerners, the word yoga probably conjures up images of bearded old men with sunken stomachs sitting cross-legged in caves chanting and burning incense. At the other extreme are images of young, extremely thin and flexible practitioners like famed yoga proponent and supermodel Christy Turlington, who can turn herself into a human pretzel without a grimace.

But none of that is a necessary part of yoga, says New York-based yoga teacher Carol Dickman, whose videotaped lessons *Bed Top Yoga* and *Seated Yoga* demonstrate the 6,000-year-old practice without the culture of the East, without chants, without incense, and without the requirement of being a supermodel or world-class athlete to participate. Dickman goes against the "no pain, no gain" wisdom of gym teachers, personal trainers and coaches everywhere by stressing that yoga workouts don't have to be difficult or strenuous to be beneficial.

"Anyone can do yoga and benefit from it," Dickman says of the Kripalu style of yoga, which she demonstrates in her tapes. "The only criterion

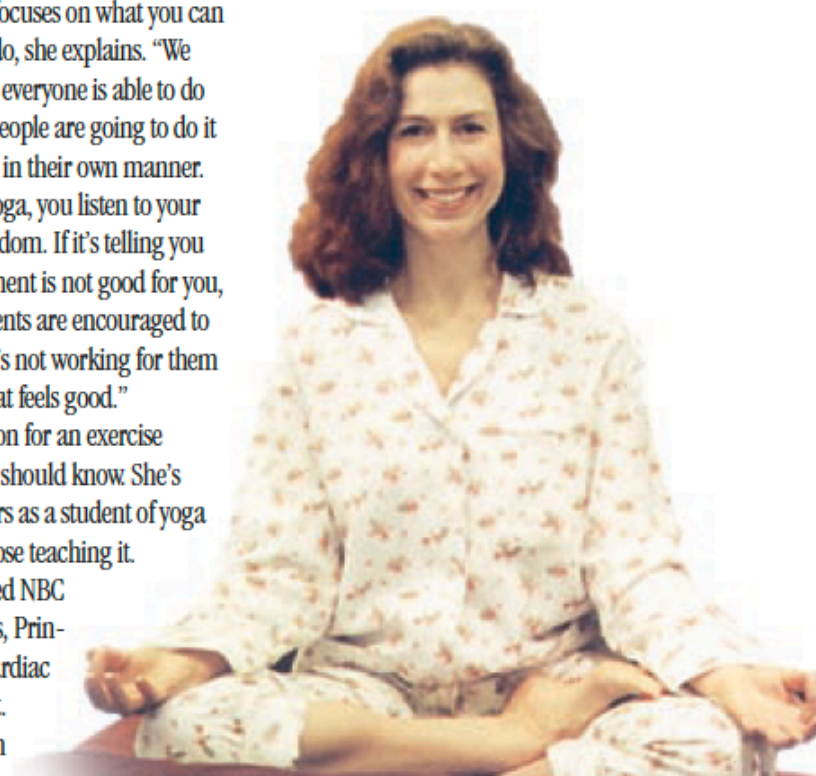
is that you must be breathing. Some people think that you need to be flexible, strong and young. Not true. There's nobody who is too old, too weak, too challenged, too stiff or too anything to do yoga."

That's because yoga focuses on what you can do, not what you can't do, she explains. "We all have limitations, but everyone is able to do some yoga. Of course, people are going to do it to different degrees and in their own manner. In the Kripalu style of yoga, you listen to your body and trust in its wisdom. If it's telling you that a particular movement is not good for you, you don't do it. All students are encouraged to change or modify what's not working for them and do whatever it is that feels good."

Not much of a criterion for an exercise program, but Dickman should know. She's spent more than 35 years as a student of yoga and more than 10 of those teaching it. Her clients have included NBC Corporate Headquarters, Princess Cruise Lines, the cardiac rehabilitation unit at Mt. Sinai Hospital, and such

notables as Tipper Gore and Raquel Welch.

But it was while volunteering to teach yoga to blind students at New York City's Jewish Guild for the Blind that she really started to prove



that yoga is for everyone, including those with disabilities. All of the students at the Jewish Guild for the Blind had other disabilities in addition to their visual impairment, and when some of them wanted something they could do when they weren't in yoga class, a light came on in Dickman's head. If she taped her lessons, the students could do yoga alone when they were at home.

To meet the special needs of students with disabilities, she came up with the idea of turning some of the traditional yoga exercises into lying or sitting poses. The resulting videotapes, *Bed Top Yoga* and *Seated Yoga*, offer viewers with disabilities the chance to participate in yoga under the guidance of a certified yoga teacher (Dickman) without having to leave home. As long as the person has a place to lie down or sit down, no additional equipment is required. Moreover, the tapes guide with such clarity that they can even be followed using audio without video if desired.

Dickman, who produced, performs in and narrates the videos, gives a step-by-step demonstration of the poses along with her verbal instructions. Her soft, gentle, melodious voice encourages viewers to relax and participate, and its soothing effect is as much a part of the experience as the breathing techniques, the postures and the exercises.

Elizabeth Cole, a physical therapist in Austin, Texas, who works exclusively with amputees, purchased both videos. She's been practicing yoga for many years and thought the videos might help her patients. "They're perfect for someone who can't assume most standing yoga positions, especially transfemoral amputees," she says. "They really answer a need, and I know they're going to help my patients. My husband and I reviewed them by actually performing the poses. We found them to be very enjoyable and easy, as well as appropriately challenging."

Though yoga is said to have spiritual and physical components, it is mainly practiced in the West as a form of physical fitness. Proponents say that it helps rejuvenate the body, increase circulation, relieve stress, increase concentration, exercise the internal organs, increase flexibility, and even make people look younger (Dickman's 59, but looks considerably younger). They also say that it can help people stop smoking, lose weight and sleep

better, as well as enhance their creativity.

"It's never too late to get the benefits of yoga," Dickman says, "because the body wants to be healthy and at its best. There are postures that help with constipation, thyroid conditions, respiratory and circulatory concerns, and even osteoporosis, which I have had for three years."

Cole cites two major benefits of the practice. "It teaches you how to fully breathe and relax, which is good for stress, and how to stretch," she says. "In the disabled population, and even in the general population, we don't do enough stretching."

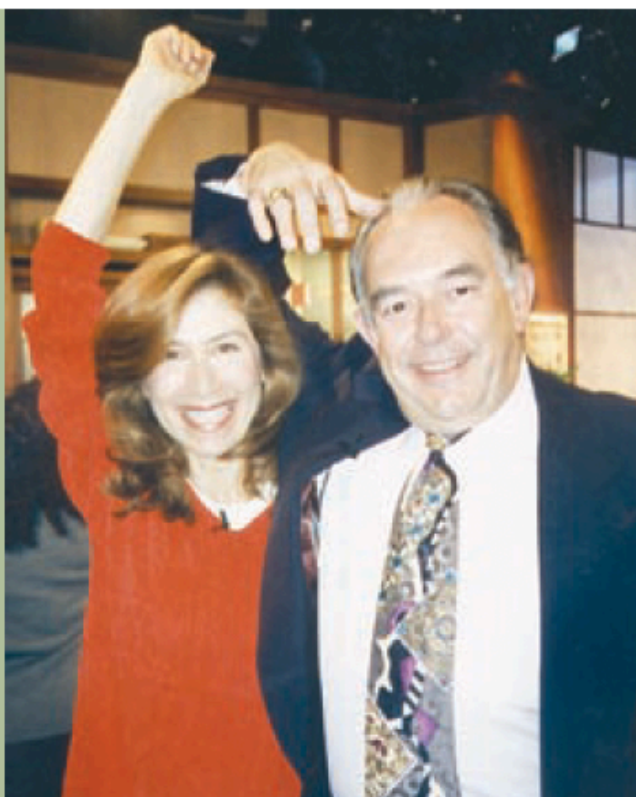
Dickman believes that part of the reason for the rising popularity of yoga is that people have lost some faith in the medical community.

"Now, insurance companies are reimbursing for yoga classes for certain conditions," she explains, "and classes are being conducted in the corporate environment. Employees benefit from stress reduction and often return to work with increased creativity and a clearer mind."

It's also a very portable exercise, she says. "Once you learn many of the yoga poses and stretches, you can do them anywhere and anytime." Dickman sometimes does them while standing in line at the bank, at the supermarket or traveling.

"People are unquestionably more interested in yoga today than they were several years ago," says Dickman. "I started teaching yoga more than 10 years ago at NBC and many people were hesitant." That's all changed now, she says, as actors, singers, sports figures, judges, business people and regular folks have begun to give the ancient practice a try. Among celebrities who do it: David Duchovny, Jane Fonda, Madonna, Candice Bergen, Woody Harrelson and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

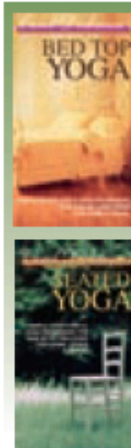
"A lot of people who were doing aerobics and hard impact sports were getting older and their bodies were wanting something a little kinder and gentler," Dickman explains. Yoga, she says, fulfilled that desire.



Dickman teaching yoga to Robin Leach on "Alive & Wellness" (December 1995)

"Yoga is different from so many other forms of exercise like aerobics, tennis, jogging, and lifting weights," Dickman points out. "My experience is that they can leave me feeling a little depleted. With this method of yoga and these tapes, when you finish the yoga practice, you feel renewed and you feel wonderful. And that's the special magic about yoga. There is a feeling of fulfillment and well-being that you get after a yoga session that I think people don't find in other forms of exercise."

"There's a reason why yoga's been here for 6,000 years and why people are doing the same postures that they did all those thousands of years ago," Dickman continues. "It's because they have validity." 



Resources

Bed Top Yoga and *Seated Yoga*. Videos. Order by calling toll-free 1-888/267-5669, ext. 8135, or on the ACA Web site: www.amputee-coalition.org