



Growing Good Yoga through Hug-asanas

By: Laura Collins

On your next exhale, ease yourself gently out of the stretch.” Kelly McKibben beams at the students assembled in the 1920s brick bungalow that is home to Good Yoga Studio. “Oh, that was such a delicious squeeze and soak for all your organs. They’re thanking you!” Located on a tree-lined street in West Asheville, the studio is also Kelly’s home, where she lives with her partner Greg and their cats. Purple mats arranged with bolsters and blankets grace the gleaming wood floors in what once would have been the living and dining rooms in the welcoming home. Soft lighting from decorative wall sconces adds to the quiet ambiance of this gentle yoga sanctuary.

“Put all of your fingers together in the *mulka* mudra,” Kelly continues, demonstrating one of the hand poses that she frequently uses in her classes, “and send some good energy to your digestive system which you’ve been massaging with this last set of stretches. Now take several more breaths to integrate the work we’ve just done.” She nods enthusiastically at those of us gathered around the room.

“Isn’t that yummy?” No matter how your body feels, it’s hard not to smile when your yoga teacher looks at you with absolute delight, like a friend who has just given you the best chocolate bar ever!

This fall, Kelly celebrates her tenth year of teaching full-time in her home studio. A teacher in the Kripalu tradition, she shares extensive anatomical knowledge during her classes, but her focus is much broader than the physical body. As she encourages her students to become more aware of our own bodies, she reminds us how the yoga poses affect our energetic and emotional bodies. Each week Kelly knits together themes of mental and physical work, from letting go to firing up, explaining what joints and muscles we’re working while reminding us of the inner work she’s gently prompting. “In Kripalu,” Kelly tells me one morning on a brisk walk through the neighborhood, “the focus goes beyond any one school of yoga and invites insights from transpersonal psychology into the practice of yoga. That’s what speaks to me.” Apparently it speaks to her students as well. Kelly has an enthusiastic and loyal following that stems in part from her desire to make yoga accessible to everyone, not just skinny young women or people comfortable with woo-woo spirituality. “My attitude is: you are welcome here. Come sit on my porch and get to know each other. It’s that Western North Carolina ‘y’all-ness’ that I embrace.”

Her website’s testimonial page overflows with glowing accolades. “I’ve taken lots of yoga over the years and your class has been my all-time favorite. Really. You obviously have found your Calling, your heart shines through when you are teaching,” writes one student.

So how did Kelly find her calling? “I got really sick,” she tells me. Though Kelly grew up with a mother who taught yoga, it wasn’t until she was in her 20s and suffering from anxiety-related illnesses that she dove into her own purposeful yoga practice. “Where my light bulb came on was in the depths of my illness and eating disorder. I was a brain on a stick. Yoga connected me to my heart.”

Yoga invited Kelly to pick up the pieces of her fragmented life and restore a sense of wholeness. It’s this sense of personal wellbeing that Kelly wants to share with her students. “I think of myself as a health educator. Yoga is a platform for wellbeing.”

Working for The Nature Company at the time of her illness, she requested a transfer to one of their Hawaii stores. She intended to give herself a retreat from the intense energy of New England where she had lived all of her life. Kelly imagined that she would stay in Hawaii for a few months and then return home renewed.

She stayed six years. While there, she began to teach yoga in a beautiful pavilion in a Chinese cemetery. Some of her students recognized her gifts and offered to help her pursue teacher training. Over the next few years she traveled back and forth between her home in Hawaii and Kripalu in the Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts.

Eventually, the desire to return east led her to Asheville. In Hawaii she had met Greg while studying A Course in Miracles. The two of them loved mountains and the cycle of four seasons. Kelly had grown up hiking in the Northern Appalachians through her youth, and Greg's large family hailed from West Virginia. Looking at a map, she followed the Appalachian Trail south toward gentler weather and landed on Asheville.

For a while Kelly worked part-time jobs while teaching a few yoga classes. Her first classes were at the Unitarian-Universalist Church in North Asheville. "I still have students in my classes who started with me at the UU Church," Kelly tells me. Instead of the usual "yoga bunnies" who can twist into exotic poses, Kelly enjoys working with an aging population and has yoga therapy and senior stretch classes in her weekly line-up.

"I love the vital baby boomers and retirees, people from their 40s into their 80s. I work with post-menopausal women, students with chronic fatigue and hip replacements, people who feel pudgy or out of shape. I enjoy finding ways for each body to adapt to the poses. We all need to see ourselves as whole beings: psycho-emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical beings. I like taking that integrative approach."

Kelly takes teaching yoga seriously, but it's her light touch that sets her apart. Every class includes some good laughter medicine (what she calls haha-sana) and students are encouraged to moan and groan as needed. "Hug-asana" is a frequent pose, as Kelly invites students to wrap themselves in love. It's all part of her attention on student self-care. And then there are her scones. From the beginning she has baked scones for her students, based on a Kripalu recipe that she constantly tweaks. It's yet another way her students get to massage their digestive organs.

After building her home studio business over the years, Kelly is adding a class at the Reuter Center this fall. She set up the yoga program at the College for Seniors years ago when they first developed the wellness department, but stopped teaching there when her own practice got too busy. She's excited to be teaching at the Reuter Center again. "I missed it. They're my peeps!"

On October 22 Kelly will celebrate the 10th anniversary of Good Yoga Studio (see ad page 9) with a brunch and benefit back at the place where her local teaching began: the UU Church of Asheville. Good food, spirited Appalachian music, and a room full of fans of Kelly's lively humor-filled yoga classes will raise money for Riverlink's Wilma Dykeman's Riverway. To find out more about the celebration and Good Yoga, you can visit www.goodyoga.net. And see ad this page.

Laura lives with her son and their dog in West Asheville, where she writes, leads rituals, and tries to practice hahasanas and hugasanas on a daily basis. She can be reached at laura@thewriteidea.org.

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