



Yoga & MS

A LIFE WORTH LIVING

MARTHA PATT was working in retail in the midst of Christmas madness when she noticed a blind spot in her eye. “I didn’t know what was going on,” she says. “I wrote in my diary that I was losing my eye.” Two weeks later, the symptom vanished. Martha was 21. The next December, her right hand went limp for two months. She could drive, but she couldn’t write. Next, Martha was troubled by right-sided weakness and an unfamiliar tightness in her torso. “I could tell there was something wrong,” she says. But no doctor could determine what it was. And then one morning, Martha woke up with a weak left arm; tension, numbness, and loss of sensation from her diaphragm to her feet; and relentless pain from her knees to her toes. She could hardly walk.

Martha was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS)—a chronic, degenerative disease of the central nervous system—shortly thereafter. “I was living alone,” she says. “I was 26 years old. I would go to bed and say, okay, if my legs don’t work tomorrow morning what do I do?”

Within months, her long-term partner split, her employer laid her off, and government officials advised her to apply for welfare. Martha was devastated.

“I realized I had to take care of myself,” she says, “and find a way to get health insurance.” So Martha made a survival plan.

She had been dabbling in hatha yoga for a few years and noticed that the hero pose, rocking chair, and forward bends seemed to alleviate her symptoms. She made a firm commitment to practice every day. She bought some guided meditation tapes, and used them. And with the help of the California Department of Rehabilitation, she went back to school to pursue a degree in business.

Then she gave herself three years to decide if life with MS was worth living.



Most people with multiple sclerosis wouldn’t dream of performing the postures that Martha Patt slips into in the following pages. Yet here she is, in living color—each photograph a testament to her indefatigable spirit and to the healing power of yoga.

By Shannon Sexton



Nearly twenty years later, Martha is a vibrant testament to the healing powers of *asana*, *pranayama*, and meditation. She works full-time as an accountant at the University of California, Berkeley. She's a Toastmaster, a yoga teacher, a wife, a distance swimmer, and a volunteer for the National MS Society (NMSS). Yoga, Martha says, has alleviated her symptoms, slowed the progression of the disease, calmed her mind, and boosted her spirits. Over time, this discovery gave her a purpose in life: a personal mission to enable all people with MS to experience yoga's capacity to heal and harmonize the body, breath, and mind.

"Martha is Mighty Mouse," says Iyengar instructor Naomi Reynolds. "She's the Little Engine that Could—she just goes and goes and goes." Described by her friends as tiny, energetic, and incredibly strong, Martha looks like an Olympic athlete—muscular and lean, with short, unruly red hair, elfin ears, and a smile that lights up her face. She is not afraid to wear spandex, give a speech in public, or push into a flawless downward dog. If you met her on the street, you would never know she has MS.

What symptoms does Martha experience? Imagine that a manufacturer designed rubber gloves for your feet. Open one of them up, sprinkle the insides with sand, dip your foot into the glove and pull it, like a nylon, up to your knee. Repeat this procedure on

your other leg. Then slowly, with awareness, slip your feet into shoes, walk around the room, and press your leg against a chair. You will feel these sensations from a distance—muffled, prickly. There is a ghost between your sense of touch and your skin.

On top of that, someone is pulling your hamstrings, quadriceps, and calves as tight as rubber bands that are about to snap. The tension is suffocating, it is blocking blood flow, and it never ends. Then this imaginary person takes a razor blade and attacks your legs from the knees down, scraping your bones.

These MS symptoms—loss of sensation, spasticity, and chronic pain in the legs—have haunted Martha for eighteen years. She

knows that other unpredictable problems—a useless limb, blurred vision, digestive unrest—can strike at any time.

But Mighty Mouse will not be deterred. Every day, she follows a strict yoga regimen—20 minutes in the morning and 45 minutes after work—to help manage her symptoms. "I've learned," says Martha, "that if I don't do my practice, it's not going to be a good day."



At sunrise, she begins with a supported inversion, settles into deep, mindful breathing, and meditates. She also makes time for knee-to-chest pose, shoulder rolls, downward dog, and consistently, always, leg raises.

In short, quick movements Martha uses the force of *kapalabhati* (an energizing pranayama practice) to lift one leg perpendicular to the floor and lower it again. As she stretches her extended leg along the floor, the lifted one moves up and down, up and down, like a lever. No matter how much it hurts, no matter how much resistance she has to working so hard on any given morning, Martha tells herself that her leg cannot touch the floor, cannot stop moving, until she has completed her repetitions.

LIFE WITH MS

Several times in the last eighteen years, Martha could not raise her legs to a ninety-degree angle. In fact, she couldn't really walk. One of her exacerbations—or serious MS attacks—happens when her brain sends a message to the leg to move, but the signal gets swallowed in a nerve pathway that is damaged or temporarily inflamed. On those days—when the gift of walking becomes a question mark, a suggestion that the disease may be progressing—Martha visualizes the leg crossing the finish line anyway.

An autoimmune disease of the brain and spinal cord, multiple sclerosis affects an estimated 400,000 Americans. Common symptoms include muscular weakness, stiffness, and pain; loss of balance and coordination; numbness and tingling in the limbs; speech, vision, and bladder problems; short-term memory loss; impaired concentration; and abnormal fatigue. In severe cases, a person may become blind or paralyzed.

Although the exact cause remains a mystery, many experts believe that MS begins as an immune response mounted against an invader—a virus, perhaps—that mutates into an attack against the body itself. An army of immune cells attacks patches of myelin—fatty tissue that surrounds the nerve fibers of the brain and spinal cord. Myelin acts like insulating

material around an electrical wire; when damaged, it is replaced by lesions of hardened sclerotic tissue that can slow or block the transmission of nerve signals, causing parts of the nervous system to malfunction.

Because the location of lesions vary from person to person, MS affects everyone differently. If a lesion forms on your optic nerve, for example, you may experience blurred vision, a spot in your eye, or even blindness. And if nerves affecting left-sided movement become inflamed, you'll experience weakness on the left side of your body. The frequency and number of lesions vary as well, so while some people have rare, mild attacks, others develop acute, permanent symptoms. Even severe symptoms can rear up and then retreat without a trace.



AN IDEA IS BORN

After years of exploring yoga on her own, Martha wanted to share her experience with other people who had MS, and in 1995, she talked the Northern California chapter of the National MS Society into inviting Eric Small to present a yoga workshop at their annual meeting. A strong, charismatic man, Eric had gained fame statewide for studying with B. K. S.



yiextra.org

Would you like to watch a video clip about Eric Small and his students? Log on to yiextra.org and click on “Yoga for MS—Video Clip.”

Iyengar, drastically alleviating his MS symptoms, developing an adaptive yoga program for people who lived with the disease, and training instructors who wanted to teach them.

Tall, tan, muscular, and lean, Eric looked more like a man who had tapped into the fountain of youth than a 60-something fellow who had been living with MS for forty years. His example—and his story—infused the audience with hope. And as he led them through a yoga demonstration, skillfully integrating people at all levels of ability, they wanted more. This class, coupled with Martha’s activism, spurred her NMSS chapter to brainstorm ways to bring yoga to their members. Following in the footsteps of the Southern California chapter (with whom Eric had worked for years), they began to train yoga instructors in Eric’s teaching method and set up regular classes.

Enrollment was low at first, but slowly, interest grew. Today the chapter supports eight ongoing yoga classes. Most of the students who sign up stay on, and now there are waiting lists.

YOGA CLASS

If you walk into Martha’s “Yoga for MS” class on Saturday morning, you’ll see a handful of people from the ages of 40 to 70 chatting quietly as they settle into their spots on the floor. While you may or may not see a walker, wheelchair, scooter, or cane nearby, one thing is sure: a crowd of Crayola-colored yoga props—chest openers, bolsters, blocks, sandbags, mats, blankets, and straps—will decorate the room. Welcome to adaptive yoga.

Martha brings her firsthand experience to the class, leading her students through practices that have helped her manage her own condition. Inversions, forward bends, twists, and breath awareness are great for people with MS, she says.

But teaching a class like this is no simple task. In each of her ongoing, eight-week sessions, Martha works with

a maximum of nine students, all of whom have different levels of experience with yoga, different motor skill capabilities, and a wide variety of MS symptoms. There is a core group of regulars, but one or two new stu-

dents appear for every series.

The one-hour class goes by fast. As students trickle in, Martha asks them, “How have you been this week? Is there any particular symptom anyone has that we should address in class today, or a pose that will help you through your week?” She knows that these questions are important, because when you’re living with MS, you can be fine one week and slip into an exacerbation the next.

Then Martha leads everyone through a body scan and breathing exercises as they rest in a supported inversion, their legs elevated to a ninety-degree angle along the back of their chairs. Slowly and carefully, the students move up to their chairs for a series of warm-ups, then return to the floor for some postures. As they settle into the hero pose, everyone is doing a slightly different version. From there, the room morphs into a mosaic of movement: Martha orients a new student to some poses while the more veteran students slip into their favorite asanas. The cat-cow, knee-to-chest, and reclining twists are popular choices. (Because MS affects the spinal column, Martha explains later on, any



way to stretch the spine helps the students feel better.) Together, everyone returns to a supported inversion—this time with their legs up against the wall—and then they rest in *shavasana*.

Although no studies have shown that yoga cures MS, those who live with the disease champion its benefits. Martha's students, for example, report that spending an hour focusing solely on the body and breath—amid hectic lives filled with family, work, and errands, coupled with the ups and downs of MS—can make a world of difference.

Betsy McCort, who has been studying with Martha for three years, says, "I always feel refreshed after yoga class. Plus I'm in a setting with people who are in the same situation as I am. There's a bonding and a support group that you might not otherwise have."

And veteran student Paul Pellaton says that the breathing and relaxation exercises give people with

MS coping tools they can use for the rest of their lives. "When I'm getting a little dizzy, hyper, wrapped up in something," he says, "I concentrate on breathing in and out. It's kind of like a time-out—it helps me settle down. And even though I'm tired after yoga class, it feels good to have done some movement, stretch the muscles, and do something other than sit at a desk all day." At 60, Paul is still able to work full-time as a computer programmer. The yoga class helps improve his flexibility and balance. And there are other benefits as well. Some medical experts acknowledge that yoga can improve digestion, mobility, and range of motion, while reducing the anxiety and depression that frequently accompany MS.

Students are comforted by the fact that their teacher has MS. As Paul explains, "You watch Martha demonstrate a pose and she makes it look so simple; you know, you just sort of *slide* into this position. And the rest

Resources

ORGANIZATIONS

National Multiple Sclerosis Society
1-800-FIGHT-MS, www.nmss.org

Betaseron Champions of Courage
www.championsofcourage.org

PEOPLE

Martha Patt

To contact Martha about teacher training workshops, motivational speaking engagements, or other activities that promote the practice of yoga for people living with MS, e-mail yoga4MS@aol.com or send a fax to 510-412-0903.

Eric Small

For information regarding Eric's yoga classes, private lessons, consultations, and teacher training programs, visit www.yogams.com or call the Beverly Hills Iyengar Yoga Institute at 310-275-6850.

Naomi Hiller-Reynolds

In addition to the yoga-for-MS teacher training seminars that Naomi leads with Martha, she also trains yoga instructors in teaching adaptive yoga to people with chronic illnesses. For more information, visit www.yogadragon.com or e-mail her at dragonyoga@hotmail.com.

VIDEOS

Yoga for MS and Related Conditions

Pathways Exercise Video for People with Limited Mobility

By Shoosh Crotzer, Mobility Limited, 48 minutes, \$29.50, 800-366-6038 or www.mobilityltd.com

A hatha yoga routine for anyone with limited mobility, including people living with MS. It moves from the seat to the floor and includes variations using an assistant. A 54-page instructional guidebook is available for an additional \$10.

Yoga for Arthritis

Pathways to Better Living with Arthritis and Related Conditions

By Shoosh Crotzer, Mobility Limited, 52 minutes, \$29.95, 800-366-6038 or www.mobilityltd.com

A hatha yoga sequence designed for people with arthritis, MS, and other conditions. Five models demonstrate the poses at varying levels. For those who need it, the entire routine can be done in a seated position. Also available in Spanish.

Yoga with Eric Small

Adapted for People with Multiple Sclerosis or Other Disorders

National Multiple Sclerosis Society, 1999, 100 minutes, \$15, www.yogams.com or 310-479-4456

Chiefly directed toward experienced yoga teachers and therapists, this video provides a complete therapeutic program for people living with MS, based on Eric's studies with B. K. S. Iyengar. It includes yoga sequences for people with varied physical ability levels; some postures require a helper. Martha is featured as one of the models.

of us are like, 'Look, I can barely bend from the waist!' But it also says, 'Look, this is what you can accomplish.'”

A CHAMPION OF COURAGE

In 1999, Eric Simons, a Boulder, Colorado-based mountaineer, climbed the highest peak in South America to prove that people with MS can still accomplish amazing things. His feat inspired Berlex Laboratories, Inc. (the makers of an MS medication called Betaseron) to create a grant-giving program that “recognizes the extraordinary achievements of people with MS and provides financial grants to support their inspirational work” (www.ChampionsofCourage.org). Since its inception, the program has given more than twenty-five women and men grants of up to \$7,000 to help them accomplish their goals. Martha Patt is one of them.

In 2001, she won a Betaseron Champions of Courage grant to offer two yoga seminars in Colorado—a state that, inexplicably, has the highest rate of MS in the country. With the help of Naomi Reynolds, an Iyengar Yoga instructor and student of Eric Small, Martha took the NMSS-inspired yoga program “on the road” to Denver and Fort Collins.

More than ninety yoga instructors and people with MS attended. Because the Colorado seminars were so successful, Martha won a second grant to conduct the same program in Chicago in October 2003—and she’s taking Naomi with her.

“The goal of these workshops is to connect students to teachers,” says Naomi. “We say to the students: this is the MS Society, this is what yoga can do for you, these are teachers who can teach you. Usually a regular class develops from there.”

The seminars last from one to two days. For the first half, Naomi conducts the teacher training. She explains what MS is, covers the common symptoms and complications, and describes the course of the disease. Then Martha steps forward and talks about what it’s like to live with MS and how yoga has helped. Her presence is an inspiration in and of itself.

Next, Naomi introduces postures that help alleviate MS symptoms, explains how to adapt them, and outlines appropriate sequencing for a class: 15 minutes of breathing and centering, an energizing



warm-up, a standing pose, a seated pose, a backbend, a hip opener, a twist, and 15 minutes of breathing and relaxation in shavasana. Her template is a highly adaptive, slow-paced class that includes people with all levels of ability, so that trainees can integrate special-needs students and accommodate everyone.

For the second half of the seminar, the teachers get a chance to put what they’ve learned into practice. Martha and Naomi invite prospective yoga students into the room for a hands-on classroom experience. Students gravitate toward a teacher who lives near them, sit down in chairs, and participate in a breath awareness session. Then Naomi calls out a pose, demonstrates it, and tells the trainees to lead their students through the pose. She and Martha circulate and offer additional assistance.

“When class is over,” says Naomi, “the students are on a yoga ‘high.’ There’s a really happy, peaceful, can-do feeling in the air, because people with a similar illness are coming together to do something that empowers them. They’re strengthened physically and emotionally, and that’s what yoga is all about.”

“Martha is a snowball of yoga momentum,” says Naomi. While they were traveling to Colorado for the first BCC-funded seminar, she remembers, Martha

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For more photos and information on Martha Patt, visit yiextra.org and click on “More on Martha Patt.”



Martha helps one of her veteran students, Paul Pellaton, settle into a few poses that relieve the symptoms of MS.

was already plotting her next seminar. And before they've even landed in Chicago, Martha is making a list of groups around the country who are interested in their program.

"Martha is the motivator," Naomi says. "She gets the gigs and organizes them." At the seminars she serves as the "assistant and inspiration" while Naomi teaches. "We make a good team because I know yoga, but I don't know MS. I can tell people, 'This is what it's like to work with people with MS,' but Martha has that firsthand knowledge and experience."

Martha is gaining fame as an MS ambassador. She has stepped up to the microphone in front of hundreds of people at an MS Walk, told her yoga story and demonstrated asanas; she has manned a booth at an NMSS wellness fair and handed out lavender-scented eye pillows she sewed with her own hands, along with a flyer about yoga and MS, "to get people thinking." She's an advocate for Betaseron and a speaker for NMSS. She's also a visionary.

"We've already picked our next spot for a seminar," she says, and giggles. "Baltimore, Maryland." Martha and Naomi want to reach the East Coast, and they both have friends with MS who live in the city. "Now," Martha says, "all we need is the funding."

HERO'S POSE

Martha's favorite pose is *virasana*. At the end of her evening practice, she kneels on the floor, sits between her heels, straightens her spine, and sinks into sweet relief. This posture, she says, is one of the only ways she can soothe the relentless pain in her legs. (When she says the words "pain" and "legs," there's an audible ache, a regret stretched tightly in her throat.) In *virasana*, Martha remembers the purpose of yoga: to experience, in stillness, the subtle dimensions of self that lie beyond the body and its various failings, beyond the breath and the mind. As she begins to turn inward and meditate, Martha taps into the courage, nobility, and strength that drive her life and her work. Now, as she speaks, her voice rises with hope.

Vira, by the way, is the Sanskrit word for hero, warrior, champion. In *virasana*, the energy of the body is directed upward, imbuing the practitioner with



NEXT STOP: CHICAGO

On Saturday, October 18, Martha and Naomi will lead the next “Yoga for MS Workshop” with the help of Martha’s second Champions of Courage grant. The seminar will take place about an hour outside of Chicago at North Shore Lights at the Hotel Moraine, 700 North Sheridan Road, Highwood, Illinois 60040. The teacher training is scheduled in the morning and the yoga workshop in the afternoon. For more information, call the Greater Illinois chapter of the NMSS at 312-421-4500 or 1-800-FIGHT-MS.

endurance, alertness, and fortitude. According to the scriptures, a person who practices virasana develops indomitable will and cannot be subdued; she is destined to attain victory.

“Martha has a natural modesty that many yogis would do well to emulate,” says Saraswathi Devi, Martha’s current yoga teacher. “She’s soft-spoken, cheerful, and loving in an unostentatious, undramatic way. She has a natural ability to remain open to other people’s struggles.

“These are all values that come from Vedanta philosophy and from the practice that she devotes herself to. Martha’s ability to work hard and her inspiration to share with others is clearly a result of her daily discipline.”

And her discipline has paid off. About three years after she was diagnosed with MS, Martha met her

future husband, Bill. And instead of “checking out of this world,” as she puts it, she threw herself a 30th birthday party. Since then, she has touched the lives of hundreds of people with her quiet optimism and endurance, as well as her efforts to introduce yoga to the greater MS community. And her health? It’s good. Her last exacerbation was in 1993.

Martha is a modern American yogi—cheerful in the face of suffering, dedicated to her spiritual practice, and devoted to selfless service.

“I don’t want to compromise anything,” she says, “I want to give my best. And the hardest thing is when I can’t. But I have to remember, I also have MS. I know I’ll be OK as long as I stay close to my yoga mat.” ●

Shannon Sexton is the managing editor of Yoga International.