

Teaching Yoga to Seniors

In one sense, teaching yoga to seniors is no different than teaching any other population. Just like all of us, each senior has a unique set of physical and psychological circumstances. And, since each person's aging process is unique, it is even difficult to define at what age any one person becomes a senior. Over fifty-five? Over sixty-five? Over eighty? Ninety? As I write these numbers on the page distinct sets of beliefs as to what each age represents pop into my mind along with distinct, visual images that I associate with each age. I laugh at myself, because, after twenty years of teaching seniors, I know that all of these notions that I still carry around are only partly right at best and in truth are limiting misconceptions that act as a set of blinders on me in my teaching and in my interactions with "older adults." I have known people in their eighties who fit my image of people in their sixties, and I have known people in their sixties who appear to me to be in their eighties. I have also known people aged sixty to one hundred who have a mindset that I associate with people in their thirties.

Although I am grateful that the experience of the last twenty years has placed a large, healthy crack in my preconceptions as to what aging means and although I believe that, in the future, the process of aging may change radically through breakthroughs in human understanding, at present we all have to admit that there is clearly a process that we call "aging" occurring everywhere we look. Shockingly, it is happening even to those of us who grew up in the 1960's and 1970's. In designing yoga classes for seniors, the central question we teachers must ask ourselves is this: how can we incorporate the undeniable realities of growing old into teaching our elders without being blinded and limited by stereotypical beliefs about this powerful, transformative process that we all go through?

Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of medicine related to yoga, provides useful insight that can help free us from our subconscious, limiting assumptions and beliefs while at the same time offering conceptual tools that allow us to work with seniors in a dynamic and beneficial manner. The ayurvedic paradigm for aging holds that, while everyone's personality and process of aging is unique, there are certain shared qualities and tendencies that are much more in the foreground of our lives during our later years than during our youth. These heightened qualities and tendencies offer both positive possibilities and challenges; some need to be developed and encouraged, some need to be countered or balanced, and some need to be accepted and worked with harmoniously. As we consider the insights that ayurveda provides, we may find that the styles, methods, and techniques that are wonderful for practicing yoga in our early and middle years need to shift in small

or large ways as we offer yoga to an older population. Ayurveda can thus teach us to creatively adapt and even transform yoga in order to share with our elders the physical, psychological, and spiritual benefits that yoga provides.

Instead of looking at aging as a process of enfeeblement, failing faculties, crumbling health, and growing helplessness, as our society tends to view it, ayurveda views the process of becoming old as one of increasingly manifesting *vata** in the psychophysical constitution. That is to say that it is a time of the growing ascendance of, among other qualities, refinement, clarity, and subtlety in awareness. This is the reason that in India elders are often respected as a source of wisdom and counsel and are also often considered to be the holders of a family's or region's spiritual and/or cultural heritage. From this perspective elders become a group to be valued instead of a group that is merely a burden that is to be sidelined and disregarded. Ayurveda allows us to get past a vision of aging as merely a time of decline and loss and instead allows us to see aging as a change of state that provides opportunities as well as challenges.

Some of the other qualities associated with entering the later phases of our lives, according to ayurveda, include dryness, roughness, movement/motion, and reduced resilience and brittleness. Associated with these qualities there is a tendency to become absent-minded or "spacey" as well as anxious. These qualities and tendencies, along with the refinement, clarity, and subtlety mentioned above, provide a useful set of concepts to think about and gain insights from in order to create guidelines for teaching yoga to our elders.

We can start by considering the tendency towards movement or motion. What at first may seem like a very odd if not irrelevant concept, takes on a profound resonance if we think of it in relation to attention span. As we grow old, there is an increasing tendency for the attention to move more quickly from one object, thought process, or activity to another. In creating a yoga class we can either fight this tendency or else work harmoniously with it by creating a flow throughout the class without lingering for very long on any single activity. One specific, useful technique to utilize in creating a flow of activities during the course of a class is the periodic repetition of particular activities. Just as in reading a poem many times, repetition of an exercise or pose during a class allows people to benefit in a number of ways: they receive whatever benefits the activity offers more deeply; the activity becomes more ingrained in their memories; they usually have a different, more nuanced experience of the activity each time they do it; and the

* *Vata* is one of three *doshas*, which are ayurvedic psychophysical types that manifest unique qualities and tendencies. *Kapha* and *pitta* are the *doshas* associated respectively with youth and middle age.

teacher can add new information or explore subtle variations with successive repetitions.

I have seen in my classes that working in harmony with a fluid attention span rather than fighting it can be tremendously beneficial, both psychologically and physically. People tend to feel encouraged and interested and to receive the benefits of engaging in a wide variety of physical activities. The caveat that I would add here: while students are being encouraged by the teacher to keep moving into different poses and different series they should not become unduly tired. It is wise to remember the qualities of subtlety and refinement in designing classes. Seniors generally respond well to maintaining a light touch in the work, a quality that is increasingly more appropriate and healthy than injury-inducing pushiness and heavy exertion as we grow old.

The tendency towards movement can apply to the way individual exercises or activities are carried out as well as to the overall structure or design of a class. In my experience seniors respond better to rhythmic movement in postures** and to “posture flows” than to statically held poses. Static poses tend to exacerbate brittleness and reduced resilience and can result in an increased incidence of injuries; flowing movement within a single posture and/or from one posture to another tends to foster resilient strength.

Dryness and roughness in aging are concepts that are perhaps more obvious to us than movement. We certainly easily perceive both dryness and roughness in the skin as we get older. These two qualities clearly show up in the joints, as well. I believe that the two main reasons we shrink as we get older are poor posture and joints that are drying out. The drying of the disks in the spine is said to particularly affect height. Many people mention osteoporosis as a reason for growing shorter with age, but I find it hard to believe that the bones shrink in length as they get less dense.*** Roughness exists in the joints, as well. We call it osteoarthritis. Roughness and dryness in the joints point us towards creating a style of yoga for seniors that focuses on joint health. That is to say we want to emphasize moving every joint in the body through its full range of motion in order to stimulate the flow of lubricating synovial fluid and also emphasize exercises that keep the joints spacious, strong, and aligned in order to minimize the ill-effects of osteoarthritis.

Brittleness, reduced resilience, anxiety, and spaciness and absent-mindedness can be addressed in a yoga class, as well. These qualities speak to creating classes that, instead of focusing strongly on stretching, gently foster supple strength that

** While holding most yoga postures it is possible to perform subtle or large movements that prevent the body from becoming rigid and tightening up while in the pose.

*** If anyone has definitive data on this one way or another, please let me know.

supports increased resilience in muscle, joint, bone, and, yes, even nerve. Our nervous systems can become tightly wound and brittle, which causes us to experience increased reactivity, anxiety, and lack of resilience in facing life's inevitable challenges. Along with fostering supple strength, it is beneficial for seniors to do exercises to enhance body awareness and improve their ability to live in their bodies instead of being dissociated and disconnected from their physical sensations and feelings. I believe body awareness exercises, which include feeling the ground under our feet or the chair under our sit bones, not only help increase personal resilience, but also help reduce spaciness and absent mindedness. They also increase our ability to be grounded and to be engaged with the circumstances around us.

I trust that this very brief overview of the ayurvedic paradigm for aging and its applications to teaching yoga is helpful and provides food for creative thinking. We have not looked at specific techniques that might be useful or dealt with specific, germane topics like balance, meditation, breath, appropriate poses and their adaptations, practical anatomy, and common conditions that affect seniors. These and other topics will be looked at in depth at the upcoming May workshop at Yogaville. I wrote this essay with the hope that it sparks your own unique style, creativity, imagination, and insights in your approach to aging as well as in teaching yoga to seniors. If I have done my job well the word "senior" should now possess new meaning and significance.

When we broaden our understanding and change our mindset towards aging and the aged, aside from becoming better teachers, some evidence suggests that, in fact, we may change ourselves for the better, not just psychologically and morally, but physically. Our attitudes affect not only the manner in which we relate to our elders and teach them yoga, but may also, remarkably, influence our own aging process. Consider the following excerpt from a Wall Street Journal article about a recent study conducted by Yale University and the National Institute on Aging.

"...social psychologist Becca R. Levy and colleagues looked at surveys taken by 386 men and women in 1968, when they were under age 50, and then studied their subsequent health records. Nearly four decades later, the subjects who had held the most negative stereotypes about older people (answering "true" to statements such as "older people are...feeble...helpless...absent-minded...make too many mistakes") were significantly more likely to have had heart attacks or strokes than those who held more positive views. In the negative group, 25% had cardiovascular events, versus 13% of the positive group."

Starting to Feel Older? New Studies Show Attitude can be Critical (WSJ 10/17/09)

Evidently, if in our early years we broaden our perceptions and alter our vision of aging to be positive instead of negative, we have a significantly better chance of staying healthy in our later years. We would be wise, therefore, not just from an elevated, selfless yogic perspective but from the level of simple self-interest alone, to examine our attitudes and consider adopting a more tolerant and thoughtful outlook on aging. The manner in which one perceives and treats one's elders may be a predictor of one's future...

We would all do well to cultivate the ayurvedic understanding that growing old is not as much a process of decline as it is a phase of changing gears into a different mode of life that offers new possibilities and challenges. The insights offered by ayurveda can help us accomplish the transition to becoming valuable, healthy elders relatively easily and harmoniously. We do not want ayurveda, or any other system, to become yet another prison for our perceptions. However, I think we would be wise to utilize the wonderful, creative framework ayurveda provides in order to become friendly with the process of growing old and to help us assist others to age well in our yoga classes.