



Happy Practitioners Call It “Big Ass Yoga!”

As I finished up a yoga class at the Yoga Center of Minneapolis, I heard a happy ruckus outside the studio door. Making my way through the dozen or so people congregated there, I couldn't help but feel the vibe of connection and camaraderie, that bond of shared experience. I also couldn't help but notice that this wasn't your typical bunch of young, female, relatively slender, fairly flexible yogis who are often seen frequenting urban studios. Rather, these were “Big A#%!” students — round, robust, and eager to make their way into the studio for a plus-size yoga class specifically sequenced to accommodate their larger bodies.

FEELING FREE TO LOOK AROUND

In Minneapolis, yoga for bigger bodies comes courtesy of Jennifer Gray, founder and owner of the Yoga Center. Before Gray opened her studio in 2000, she frequented a yoga class at a fitness center.

She did so in an oversized white T-shirt and black workout pants, and she kept her eyes on her own mat — it was the only way she could psyche herself up to bring her then-bigger body to a class full of slender students.

“I walked in, 200 pounds and atrophied,” recalls Gray, now 40 and a mother of three. “I just thought, ‘Don't look around; it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter about anyone else.’ I was the only person there who looked like me, the only person who wasn't there working out all day, wearing a teeny-tiny outfit. I just came in and kept my eyes on the mat.”

That experience shaped Gray's intention for her studio. She wanted to create a space where anyone could practice yoga in comfort, without having to steel herself just to walk through the door. Gray knew, from her experience of losing 55 pounds and 36 inches through yoga, that learning to trust your body and feel comfortable in your own skin offers benefits far beyond the physical.

“After losing the weight, I wasn't as reactive. I didn't look for the negative as much as I had. I was freed from anxiety, which I'd suffered before,” Gray says.

Despite the intent to welcome every possible body to her studio, Gray realized that plus-sized people just weren't there. In 2006, she began to cater specifically to the plus-size set. “What are we going to call this? Big ass yoga?” she recalls quipping to her staff at the time. “Everyone looked around at each other, and said, ‘Yeah, that's a great name.’ The Yoga Center now offers seven weekly Big A#%! classes at two studios.

Gray notes that despite the sassy moniker, the class is incredibly compassionate and focused on helping students feel comfortable in their own bodies. They learn to have fun in their own skin and to trust themselves. “A big part of the class is spending time, for example, working on the pose downward-facing dog,” she explains. “Bringing your weight into your hands and your arms — there's a huge fear factor there.”



Instructors, all who've struggled with weight at some point in their lives, help students build the strength and trust they need to realize that their arms will hold them up. Soon, students advance to lifting one leg in the pose, and some even build their way into a handstand. "It's fun and really moving for people, because they're doing something for their body that is really positive. They find they can do something new just about every time they show up. They take that new outlook off their mat and into their life," Gray says.

A FLUFFY OMELET OF LUST

Meera Patricia Kerr has been big since childhood. Even during a short run of relatively skinny — but still amply curvy — days around her college years, an admirer called her his "fluffy omelet of lust." Kerr has always been comfortable with her body.

She's also long been comfortable with yoga. She spent her formative yoga years at Yogaville, the ashram of Swami

Satchidananda in Virginia, studying integral yoga. The practice encourages spiritual unity, "an easeful body, a peaceful mind, and a useful life."

While Kerr loved the all-encompassing philosophy of the practice — from the selfless service of karma yoga to the devotion of bhakti yoga — her songwriter's ear struggled with the name. While meditating on the clunky "integral" title, she heard the practice called in a new, rumbling way: b-i-g yoga. And that, to her, suggested the complete philosophy of the practice, as well as an opportunity for overweight bodies to claim a full yogic experience of pranayama, meditation, and asana.

More than a decade later, in 2002, Kerr released the *Big Yoga* DVD, and her book, tentatively titled *Big Yoga Hatha*, will be published in fall 2008 by Square One Publishers. In the DVD, she offers an adaptation of the sun salutes that has been popular among larger yogis (you can see photographic illustrations at

BigYogaOnline.com on the FAQ page).

Kerr, now 61 and pushing 200 pounds at five foot three, continues to teach private lessons, along with mainstream and plus-size yoga classes seasonally, when summer residents return to her hometown, Saugatuck, along the shores of Lake Michigan.

Her primary practice these days is pranayama and meditation, but when she does her hatha practice, she says, "I feel so blessed, so elevated, like I'm in another realm of grace. The more I do, the better quality of life I have overall, and I can be of better service to my students, to my mother, to my children — whomever I come in contact with."

Drawing on the wisdom of Eckhart Tolle, Kerr says her practice makes her feel that she is more of a blessing than a burden on the earth. Sage advice, to be sure — no matter what you weigh.

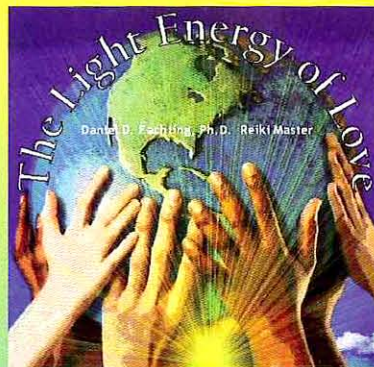
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