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SUMMER ISSUE 2011 • VOL. 5



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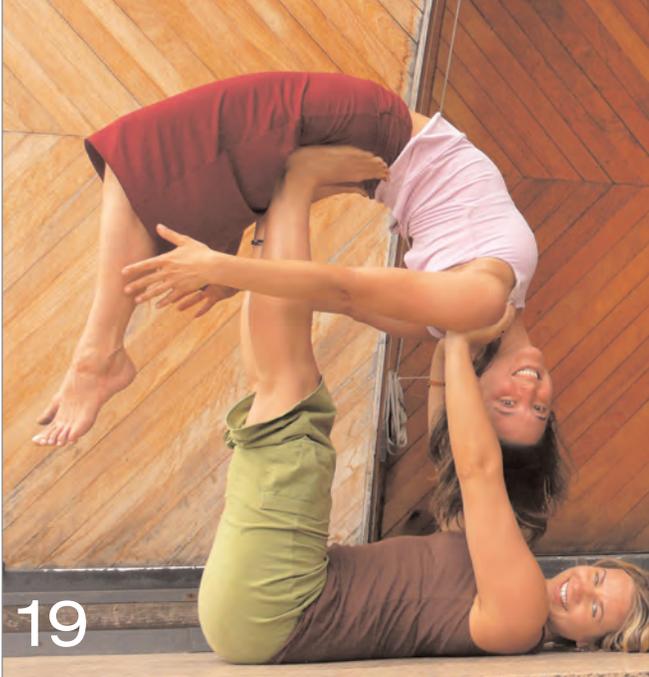
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Third Eye Insight: Fitness for the Blind

An “Eye Opening” Experience

by Nicole DeNardo

Yoga encourages us all to look within, to sharpen our focus inward while allowing thoughts and distractions from outside our body to float away. In this spirit, our teachers often remind us not to focus on the practice of our fellow students, but instead to be completely engrossed in our own experience. However, it’s inevitable that most of us take in all of the stimuli around us, including the postures of other students, even using what we learn from watching others to help our own practice. Consider how different your practice would be if you were unable to use sight to help shape your practice.

Sensei Devin Fernandez was already a well-trained martial arts and yoga practitioner when he began to notice changes in his eyesight. Even though he was diagnosed with a rare eye disease that will eventually cause blindness, he was determined not to allow this experience to rob him of his practice. As a result he and partner Kim Fernandez founded Third Eye Insight (TEI), Fitness for the Blind, located in West Islip, NY. Their program provides free classes in yoga and martial arts to the blind or visually impaired to help others with similar issues and show that literally anyone can do yoga.

One of TEI’s instructors, Jackie Mazzarella, found that teaching the blind has helped her become a better teacher. She finds that she must be very specific in her instructions. “I am learning to express myself,” she says “and learn which verbal cues work best.” In some ways, the fact that the students can’t see can be helpful to their practice. She finds that her students are more in tune with their body, something that many sighted yogis struggle to achieve. Mazzarella teaches vinyasa, alignment and Kundalini based styles to her students and will occasionally teach class using chairs because it helps students feel grounded.



Sensei Devin Fernandez

Meditation is also an important part of TEI’s offerings. Through meditation, they give their blind or visually impaired students a tool for dealing with their daily stressors. It is common for blind or visually impaired individuals to have heightened perception from other senses. This can, at times, be a stressor because it can be challenging to ignore distracting sounds, especially when you are unable to see their source. Sensei Fernandez explained that pranayama (breath control) and meditation helps the student to let go and learn to “just breathe” when in a frightened situation. They also learn to relax and pay attention to their body, become centered, and have a quiet mind.

Practicing yoga has also helped the students emotionally. “Students came in timid, and then became confident physi-

cally and mentally. You can see the attitude change in their voice,” observes Sensei Fernandez. Mazzarella adds how she tries to add positive messages to her yoga class. “We try to take the path they have been given and turn that into a positive. They become stronger.” Sensei Fernandez adds, “They learn to step out of their comfort zone. They go to the movies and do other activities. They begin to do things they have not or wouldn’t have thought about doing in the past.”

Thinking long-term, the Fernandezes would like to create a facility where they can grow and offer more classes such as Tai Chi. In addition, Kim Fernandez explains that she would like to spread the idea to other associations in other states and countries. TEI graciously accepts donations to offset the cost of their free classes and is always looking for teachers to volunteer to teach any style of yoga to their students.

If a sighted person would like to experience a class, they must use a blindfold and give a donation (suggestion of ten dollars). This levels out the playing field for the blind/visually impaired students, however, it has also proved to be an “eye-opening” experience for the sighted students. Sensei Fernandez tells a story of a visually impaired mother who brought her two sighted daughters in their mid 20s to a class. After practicing with a blindfold on, the daughters began to cry because they didn’t realize what their mom was going through.

The founders and volunteers at TEI have clearly embraced the true message of yoga and are expressing their devotion to its principles by positively changing the lives of others. If you would like to learn more about TEI, have an interest in taking a class for the visually impaired, or would like to learn more about teaching or volunteer opportunities visit thirdeyeinsight.org. 