

PRACTICAL EXERCISES • NUTRITION • MINDFULNESS • LIFESTYLE & WELLNESS

YOGATM MAGAZINE

www.yogamagazine.com

ISSUE 259/ NOVEMBER 2024

HARMONY IN MOTION

**SUN &
MOON
YOGA**

**PROP
OR NOT**

**AWAKENING THE
KOSHAS**

**YOGA &
VEDIC
ASTROLOGY**

**इशद
वरइशनास**

CREATING SACRED SPACES



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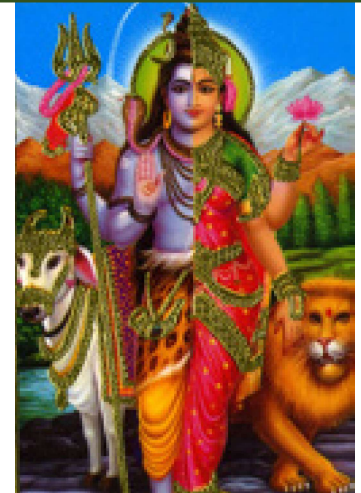
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EMBRACING EVERY BODY

5 WAYS TO MAKE YOGA INCLUSIVE & ACCESSIBLE

Words: Gillian Dodd, Yoga Teacher, Yoga
Therapist, Corporate Trainer, and BWY Tutor



One of the British Wheel of Yoga's (BWY) key objectives is to promote inclusion, ensuring that yoga is for every body—regardless of shape, size, gender, or background. By embracing diversity, we can create more welcoming and accessible spaces where everyone can thrive.

Body positivity plays a central role in this philosophy, seeking to challenge unrealistic beauty standards, promote self-confidence, and foster self-love and acceptance.

For many, yoga has the potential to be a healing practice, yet the portrayal of yoga in mainstream media often perpetuates stereotypes about the 'ideal' body. This can prevent people from even stepping foot in a yoga class. By actively promoting body inclusivity, we open the door to a wider community, helping more individuals access yoga's profound benefits.

In yoga philosophy, the practice of Ahimsa teaches us kindness, compassion, and respect for all living beings, including oneself. However, unconscious bias can unintentionally exclude people, leaving them feeling unwelcome. This bias, stemming from deeply ingrained societal conditioning, can manifest in subtle ways, whether through the language we use, the imagery we share, or the assumptions we make about what a 'yoga body' should look like.

CHALLENGING THE YOGA STEREOTYPES

A pervasive myth about yoga is that it's reserved for the slim, flexible, and predominantly white. Images across social media and in yoga advertising often feature a narrow representation of body types, reinforcing the idea that yoga is not for everyone. This image is harmful, both to those who practice yoga and those who might benefit from it.

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Yoga is not about achieving perfect shapes; it's about being present in the moment, calming the mind, and appreciating what your body can do, no matter its form.

”



My own yoga journey began in the 1970s when I was just a young girl. My dad, a coal miner and Fire and Rescue volunteer, would teach us how to breathe through difficult moments - a practice that later became foundational in my approach to yoga. He was also a St John's ambulance volunteer, and when the local doctor's surgery was closed, people would come to our house for help. My early exposure to caring for others inspired my path as a Yoga Therapist, where I could combine my passion for yoga with my desire to understand how to help bring others to wellness.

At 19, I attended my first yoga class. I didn't fit the stereotypical image of a yogi, but I didn't focus on that. Instead, I noticed the smiles around me and felt a strong sense of community. The teacher's enthusiasm and joy were infectious. She was full of life and creativity, using old Yellow Pages phone books as props to help us sit comfortably on the floor. These simple

tools made it easier for me to sit cross-legged, accommodating my thicker thighs and tummy, and allowing me to breathe more freely.

FACING DISCRIMINATION IN YOGA SPACES

However, as much as I loved yoga, I couldn't avoid encountering discrimination because of my body shape. In many classes, teachers didn't provide the accommodations I needed, and when I brought my own props to class, there often wasn't space or time to use them. I've been questioned on numerous occasions about whether I was in the right place for yoga, highlighting the unconscious bias that still exists in many yoga spaces.

In the 1990s, while traveling in the USA, I stumbled upon an article featuring a plus-size model who was also a yoga teacher. For the first time, I saw a body like mine represented

in yoga. I felt inspired and decided to attend one of her classes in New York. It was an eye-opening experience. She taught me how to adjust poses to suit my body, building my confidence which helped me through some of the most challenging times of my life, including the loss of my mother and brother. It was a reminder that yoga is not about achieving a particular look or pose but about cultivating inner strength and resilience.

THE IMPORTANCE OF REPRESENTATION

Representation matters in yoga just as much as in any other field. Seeing people of different shapes, sizes, genders, and ethnicities on yoga platforms can have a profound impact on how we perceive yoga as an inclusive practice. When I began my yoga teacher training journey 15 years ago, I was still working as a corporate trainer. I had always dreamed of becoming a yoga teacher

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but was hesitant because I didn't fit the stereotypical image of what a yoga teacher 'should' look like.

After becoming a teacher, I decided to attend a yoga class to rebuild my strength and reconnect with my body to help deal with the symptoms of menopause. The studio advertised: "Everybody is a yoga body. Beginners welcome". Excited and encouraged by this, I attended the class, but once inside, we jumped straight into sun salutations and downward-facing dogs with no warm-up or modifications offered for stepping and jumping forward and back. I felt out of place, unwelcome, and even defeated. It made me realise that others might feel the same - and many may not return to a yoga class again.

WHY YOGA MUST BE ACCESSIBLE

This experience was a turning point for me. It reinforced the idea that yoga must be accessible to everyone, regardless of their fitness level, age,

or body size. Yoga is not about achieving perfect shapes; it's about being present in the moment, calming the mind, and appreciating what your body can do, no matter its form.

In 2023, I spent two months in India, where I had the chance to speak with a Swami about my concerns over how yoga is portrayed in the West. His advice was simple: "Feed people the crumbs of the teachings of yoga and shine your own light".

He encouraged me to build a community based on the authentic teachings of yoga while ensuring that each student's practice was tailored to their individual needs. His words continue to guide my approach to teaching, reminding me that inclusivity starts with understanding and compassion for each student's unique journey. This echoed the classical teachings of one of my favourite teachers of Yoga – T.K.V. Desikachar.

FIVE KEY STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING A BODY-POSITIVE YOGA PRACTICE

1. Embrace the use of props

Props aren't just for beginners—they're tools for everyone, especially if you're in a larger body. Using props like blocks, straps, bolsters, or even a chair can help you get into poses more comfortably. They offer extra support, making it easier to find balance and stability in each posture. Don't be shy about using the wall for standing poses or blocks for seated poses. Props can help you adapt the practice to suit your unique body, allowing you to fully experience the benefits of each posture without strain.

2. Explore yoga beyond the physical

Yoga is more than just the physical postures (*asanas*); it's about connecting to yourself on multiple levels. The *Koshas*—layers of being—remind us that our physical body is just one



aspect of who we are. If you're in a larger body, you may sometimes feel limited in the physical postures, but remember that yoga also involves breathwork, meditation, and cultivating inner calm. Focus on how yoga feels in your mind and spirit, not just in your body, and permit yourself to experience yoga in all its forms.

3. Find a welcoming class and teacher

The environment in which you practise yoga makes a huge difference. Seek out teachers and classes that explicitly state they are inclusive of all body types. These teachers will likely offer

options and create a non-judgemental space where everyone is encouraged to participate at their own pace. Look for classes that use body-positive language and imagery—places where the focus is on how yoga makes you feel, not how you look. A welcoming environment can make a world of difference in your practice.

4. Pace yourself and modify poses

Yoga isn't a one-size-fits-all practice, and that's especially true for people in larger bodies. Be kind to yourself and know it's perfectly okay to adjust poses or take breaks when needed. Pacing

yourself is key. Start with gentler postures and gradually build up your strength and flexibility. If you're ever unsure how to adjust a posture for your body, don't hesitate to ask your teacher for guidance. Remember that each body is unique, and your yoga practice should honour your individual needs and capabilities.

5. Adopt a mindset of self-compassion

It's easy to fall into the trap of comparing yourself to others, especially in a yoga class where you might feel like the only larger-bodied person. But yoga is about self-compassion, not comparison. Celebrate what your body can do today and give yourself permission to practice without judgement. Focus on how yoga makes you feel, not on what you look like or whether you can achieve a particular posture. The practice is yours, and it's meant to make you feel empowered and at ease in your body.

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Gillian Dodd is a Yoga Teacher, Yoga Therapist, and Corporate Trainer, passionate about creating accessible yoga spaces for everyone. She offers workshops and training across the UK and online for BWY.

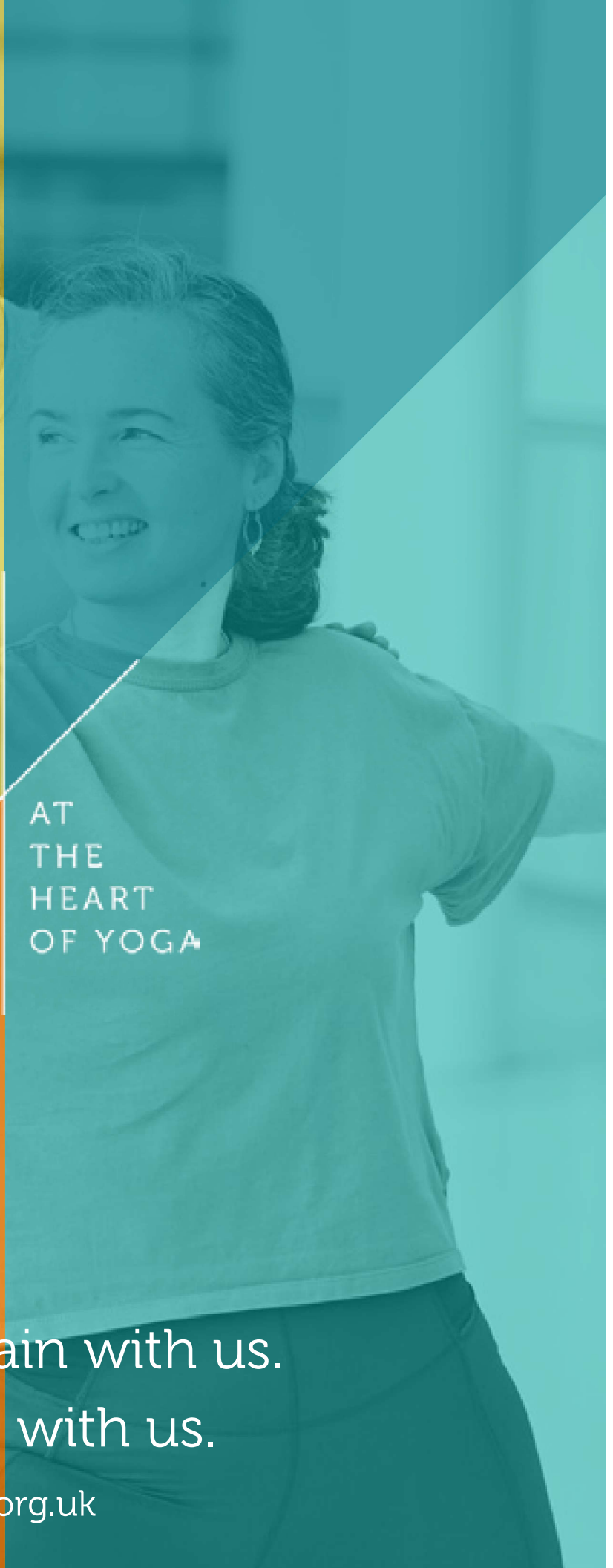
Join Gillian for a residential retreat in Northumberland, focusing on Yoga for Plus Size Bodies, on 30 March 2025. Learn more: <https://portal.bwy.org.uk/trainings/399>

Visit her website: <https://www.yogafbyi.com/about>

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