I have known I had MS almost as long as I have been doing yoga. Taking yoga classes started out as a fun activity to share with my partner at the time. She had a bad back and needed a gentler activity than the rugged hiking or hours of frisbee throwing that we both enjoyed.
Now, after 20 years of MS progression, I use a cane, braces on both legs to help with walking and standing, a mobility scooter, and hand controls for driving. Yoga is now much more than fun: it helps me stay strong and flexible, it is the basis for important connections to a community of MS comrades, and it helps me learn compassion and acceptance of my own body and other people. But mostly, yoga lets me experience, express, and expand my physical and mental vitality; it also provides me a lovely sense of well-being.

You may have seen a picture of Madonna with her leg behind her neck. Many yoga poses look way too difficult for a person who may have weak muscles, reduced flexibility, limited mobility, muscle spasms, and not much energy. Today I practice “gentle yoga” with Iyengar yoga teachers who have modified the poses. Students are in chairs (including wheelchairs) or standing with a chair or the wall nearby for support/balance, or on the floor with or without back support from a wall. All of my teachers in the last seven years have some knowledge of MS and/or training from teachers committed to tailoring yoga practice for the benefit of people with MS.

Twenty years ago, when I was 30, I could swim a half-mile and jog three miles in the same day. I exercised to be healthy, strong, and to look good. But I didn’t pay much attention to how my body felt as I exercised. Oh, I noticed if I got a cramp, and always liked the good feeling after exercising. And in my first yoga class, I was too busy checking out other students’ superior strength or svelte bodies to follow the instruction to focus on my breath and awareness of my own body as I entered and held each pose.

I don’t know exactly when it dawned on me that my physical losses because of MS did not have to mean I couldn’t be physically vibrant, strong, and flexible. But at some point, I started actually listening to yoga teachers when they said that if you keep doing the poses, they get easier. They get easier because your body has capacities you don’t know about unless you pay attention to them. But who wants to pay attention to stiff or spasming legs that have increasing difficulty walking? Did I really want to focus on this faltering body?

As they say, “denial ain’t just a river in Egypt.” Denial helped me pretend for years that I was not afraid of or limited by MS, even as what I described as my “funky feet” couldn’t distinguish between clutch, brake, and gas pedals. In a period of five years, I switched from standard to automatic transmission, and then to hand...
controls in order to drive. I am guessing that I am not the only person who thought that as long as I didn’t act like a disabled person (whatever that means) then I wasn’t disabled.

It took a particularly scary exacerbation, coupled with panic attacks landing me in the hospital in 2002, for me to face what this sad charade was all about: my unwillingness to acknowledge, accept, and grieve the permanent loss of the me who could hike or swim a half-mile.

When I was finally sad and grieving, I was also hugely relieved. Pretending that everything was hunky-dory was exhausting. Actually peeking inside myself and seeing what was what, freed me from all that desperate and useless effort to act as though MS wasn’t doing what it does.

In the rehab hospital, the physical therapists were surprised that my weak legs were so flexible and muscular. I had been taking gentle yoga classes for about three years at that time and used my teacher’s stick-figure drawings of poses to practice on my own as I recovered. I was also in psychotherapy, which helped me get acquainted with myself (needless to say, an ongoing project). In that process, I discovered I had the nonphysical strength to face myself, and a means—yoga!—to explore my physical, emotional, and spiritual capacities.

I had been stuck hating my body, feeling robbed, full of envy toward people strolling/running/cycling by. The feeling that all the good stuff was in the past grew out of my refusal to tune in to my life, and especially my body, as it really was.

So even though I now get too fatigued to walk (with braces and cane) more than two or three blocks, and my 25-foot walking speed has slowed from when my neurologist first timed me, I have become strong and flexible enough to attain the V-shaped downward dog pose and hold it for about 20 seconds. In downward dog, only the feet and hands are on the floor and the butt is in the air. The teacher may attain this in one fluid motion, starting on hands and knees. With the teacher’s guidance I can get there, but only if I’m willing to listen to my body and be patient.

Some days, when I have the energy, I try a standing pose, and when I have less energy, I do modified versions in a chair. That downward dog I am so proud of can be done over the back of a chair with your weight supported by the wall where your heels rest, and by the chair, where your upper body and head can rest. Sometimes I do the modified version even if I have the energy for the regular dog, to give a better stretch to my arms.

Teachers, and sometimes students,
Eric Small: Yoga guru for people with MS

Eric Small was diagnosed with MS in his 20’s. Soon after, he became a student of yoga as a way to help him manage the effects of the disease. He has been teaching internationally for over 40 years since then and has developed both yoga and wellness programs for the Society’s Southern California Chapter that reach thousands of students with MS. For more information, visit www.yogams.com.

Eric’s passion for helping people with MS through yoga is finding new expression in his about-to-be-published book, Yoga and Multiple Sclerosis: A Journey to Health and Healing. Yoga for people with MS is presented through photographs (see samples on this page) and descriptions of adapted poses along with explorations on their effects, advantages, and contraindications. There are also posture recommendations for fatigue and spasticity.

The book is coauthored with Dr. Loren Martin Fishman, a certified Iyengar yoga instructor and assistant clinical professor in Rehabilitation at Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons. Contact Demos Medical Publishing at www.demosmedpub.com or 800-532-8663 for more information.
devise many ingenious ways to modify poses and accommodate limited strength, flexibility, and energy so that even significantly disabled people can enjoy the benefits of yoga.

Our teacher often begins class asking about our energy levels today and any aches or pains or new symptoms. She may ask what poses or parts of the body we want to work on. She sometimes starts with a breathing exercise that helps us transition from the effort and flurry of getting to class to a calmer, more inwardly focused mode. As she leads us through the movements of a pose, she might say: “Stretch your arm toward the sky, any amount,” or “Can you straighten your leg, and if you can’t, that’s okay too.”

The last pose of the class is always “savasana,” the “corpse pose.” It is considered the hardest pose because it asks us to let go of all effort, become quiet, follow the breath, and relax completely. In savasana, we are asked to focus on the effects of today’s poses, and each time our mind wanders away from following the breath, we are to bring it back to the inhalation and the exhalation. After five or 10 minutes, our teacher asks us to deepen our breath, slowly roll over to one side and rest for another moment before sitting up. She may also say: “Feel how good you feel at this moment and take that with you into the rest of your day.”

Yoga is not about attaining the buff and svelte body I so envied when I first took a class. It asks what your body, just as it is, can do today. Even if it is less than you could do yesterday, you still get the benefits. Yoga has helped me make friends with my body, instead of seeing it as the enemy.

I have been taking yoga with many of the same people for about three years. Many of my classmates have experienced some worsening of symptoms. It feels liberating to exercise with people who have various limitations, but who are undaunted by them. We are willing to challenge ourselves physically, despite occasional uncooperating limbs. (Being rescued by our teacher or by each other is just part of the fun.) We also share information about mainstream and alternative MS treatments, our doctors and other practitioners, what’s going on in our lives and what’s going on in the world. For some of us who have become sedentary, the class is a way to ease into mild activity in a supportive environment. Others get more of a workout. We all get to be part of a shared activity with people who understand the physical experience of MS. Not surprisingly, we laugh a lot.

Susan Dobrof lives in Oregon. A longer version of this article appeared in the Spring 2006 Wellness E-Newsletter published by the Society’s Oregon Chapter.