



Yoga Samachar

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"The words *annamaya*, *pranamaya*, *manomaya*, *vijnanamaya*, or *anandamaya* are beautifully coined. The word *maya* is very meaningful, indicating its vastness, depth, and pervasiveness. It indicates something absolutely encompassed, in-filled, soaked, and existing everywhere." - Geeta Iyengar

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Every Pose Has the Whole Heart of Yoga in It

Matthew Sanford on Paralysis, Yoga, and the Mind–Body Connection

Richard Jonas

There are as many stories about how people come to yoga as there are yoga practitioners. If it is one of the hardest and most painful, Matthew Sanford's may well be the most inspiring.

His is a story of heartbreaking loss.

A freak accident killed his father and sister and left him paralyzed from the chest down at the age of thirteen. Years of rehabilitation helped him to survive but never addressed what he considered his most profound injury: the one to his mind–body connection.

His is a story of heart-lifting transcendence.

Thirty years later Sanford is an in-demand spokesperson for bodily awareness, the advocate for a revolutionary new model of physical rehabilitation, and, from his wheelchair, an Iyengar Yoga instructor.

In his moving memoir *Waking*, Sanford tells his story with the survivor's immediacy of experience. His college study of philosophy—part of a lifelong search for meaning—gives his writing its backbone of intellectual rigor, which he fleshes out with a novelist's eye for gripping detail. Of interest to us above all, however, may be his observations and unique point of view as an Iyengar Yoga practitioner and teacher.

Thrown from his family car when it skidded off an icy bridge in Iowa, Sanford broke his neck at C-1 and his back at T-4, T-5, and T-6. Both wrists were broken. His pancreas was badly injured; he couldn't eat for two months. He was in a coma for three and a half days.

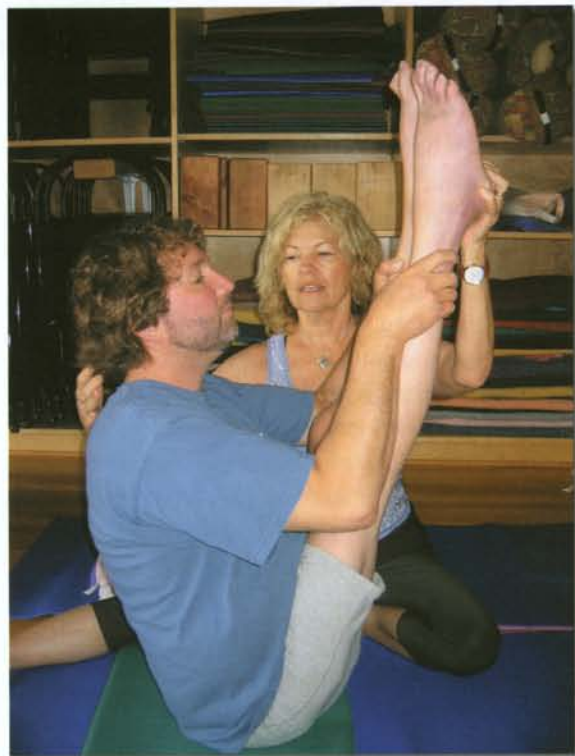
Nurses at the first hospital he was taken to, concerned about the treatment he was receiving, warned his mother that if she did not move her son, he would not survive. Transported to the Mayo Clinic, Sanford received the treatment that, in time, saved his life. First, though, it was a horrifyingly invasive assault. In *Waking*, he describes it graphically and in language with its own harsh beauty:

I am about to have four metal screws twisted directly into my skull. It is the first step in getting a half cast, the ultimate in neck stabilization. Suddenly, two other men appear from above me and hold down my arms. Two screwdrivers move towards my temples. My skin breaks, warmth runs into my hair. The pain is sharp and getting sharper. A horrible sound explodes in my head, not from the outside in, but from the inside out. The screws continue to twist into my skull

I am not in that body; there is no subject of that experience. I land in profound silence, watching a boy. He is on a table, a sheet is draped loosely over his lower body. He seems so small

At a moment of intense physical pain, the fragile state of my living was able to “move away” from my body. The potential for dislocation between mind and body was dramatically revealed. The insight, however, was not the ability to disassociate. It was the silence that I experienced while it happened. This silence not only allowed me to separate from my body, but it was also sticky enough to maintain a life-preserving connection. Somehow I stayed connected to that boy below me. The silence within my consciousness both separated me and connected me simultaneously. This paradoxical insight still guides my life.

All yoga is about the body–mind connection, Sanford says to an audience, gathered in



Matthew Sanford practices *Ubhaya Padangusthasana* observed by Jo Zukovich. From their first meeting, the two say, a special trust developed between student and teacher.

a New York City yoga studio. This Friday night lecture and reading from his book are the lead-in to a weekend *asana* workshop. Sanford taught a similar one a few months earlier at the Iyengar Yoga Institute of Greater New York.

“We’re all leaving our bodies all the time—and returning back into them,” he says. His own “leaving,” initially an instinctual survival tactic, also gave him access to what he calls “the silence.” In yoga, the silence is “the part when you become more graceful,” he says, “when yoga poses become more nourishing and there is balance to their action. That silence is at the very heart of yoga. It’s what makes a seasoned practitioner able to work with much less effort.”

Sanford’s silence may be a description of the “effortless ease” that arrives with the mastery of an *asana*, which Guruji writes about in *Light on Yoga*.

“I live with a heightened level of silence in my mind–body connection,” Sanford says. “It came to me in a moment when my back broke.” But these insights that guide his practice and teaching were hard-earned, and it was many years after his accident before Sanford could realize them. The medical establishment wasn’t always an ally.

"Two months after the injury, I began to feel a tingling or buzzing below the point of my injury," he says. Doctors, though, insisted he was in denial about his paralysis, that these were only the "phantom feelings" amputees report. Ashamed and unsure of himself, the thirteen-year-old Sanford put aside his feelings. Instead adapting himself to the traditional idea of rehabilitation, he set out to make his torso strong enough to drag his legs. Now, he says, "What they call phantom feelings are the core of my yoga practice. It's what I try to teach, what needs to be brought back into the rehabilitative process. You get a feeling of lightness after a good yoga practice. We have to try to bring that sensation to victims of trauma."

After months in the hospital and repeated surgeries, Sanford returned to his family home. The day after completing nearly a year of physical therapy, during a playful tickling session with his older brother, his neck was fractured again. More surgery followed, more therapy.

Ten years passed. Sanford graduated from college and went on to graduate school but he had been "pushed further out of my body," he writes in *Waking*, due out in paperback this spring. He felt "a deep mistrust" for his body, a deepening disconnection and chronic pain. "My body was just yelping at me," he remembers. Finally, a body worker suggested he try Iyengar Yoga.

"I started with naïveté and innocence," he remembers. "I know if it hadn't been an Iyengar teacher, I wouldn't have been able to see how yoga could be relevant for me." Sanford's teacher was and is Jo Zukovich of San Diego. "She was the right kind of teacher," he says, one "who would rethink things," adapting postures to his abilities. Zukovich returns Sanford's compliment: "Matthew is a very good student. He practiced and did not get bored." The two still work together several times a year; their bond has been "essential," Sanford says.

At the first meeting with Zukovich, there was an immediate trust between teacher and student, Sanford writes in *Waking*, so much so that he agreed to move from his wheelchair to the floor. "Can you put your hands slightly behind you and lift your chest?" Zukovich asked. "Good. Now can you do it again, but this time don't hold your breath?" When Zukovich had him sit in *Upavistha Konasana*, Sanford writes of the experience, "I am floating—not flying." He continues, "Suddenly, it hits me. This is the first time in over twelve years that my legs have been wide."

As he sat in *Dandasana*, one of Sanford's legs was much further forward and quite turned out, Zukovich remembers, "so as an Iyengar Yoga teacher, I had something 'to do.'" Using belts and sandbags, she adjusted his legs and hips to make them straighter, continuing the work in *Upavistha Konasana*, *Baddha Konasana*, and *Siddhasana*. "I taught what I knew from my own practice," she says. She consulted senior teachers Mary Dunn and Manouso Manos for advice; Sanford has also studied with Manos.

Later, teacher and student moved on to seated forward bends. "What helped the most was to go very slowly," Zukovich says. "Over time I realized I was saying the same instructions I would say to any student. One of the reasons this all worked is because Matthew was willing to work with and listen to his body, and we were able to spend a lot of time together. The instruction and alignment of Iyengar Yoga made sense to him, and his body started to take on the alignment more and more.

"We were so happy with the changes, and we started to see more possibilities. I would be practicing or looking at *Light on Yoga* and think, 'Matthew can do this or that part of a pose.' It was not so much about what he could not do but what he *could* do. Every person is different and as a teacher we have to remember and respect that, but with practice and an open heart, Iyengar Yoga works."

It is when he practices *Maha Mudra* that "something clicks or snaps into place," Sanford writes in *Waking*. "I suddenly feel a tangible sense of my whole body—inside and out, paralyzed and unparalyzed. I am stunned . . .

"Jo and I had discovered that alignment and precision increase mind-body integration regardless of paralysis," a discovery which shapes his teaching to this day. "I can teach a walking person the subtleties of a standing pose, for example, because of my energetic experience. I can 'feel' the pose, feel how the physical instructions are intended to amplify, guide and direct the flow of energy."

Proud of his evolving expertise, Sanford developed what he now realizes was an overly aggressive way of working. "I know the moment my yoga practice passed over the threshold into violence," he writes in *Waking*. Not long after, as he lay on his back with

his legs up in *Padmasana*, then attempted to lower them into *Matsyasana*, he heard a sound "like a breaking branch." His femur bone had snapped. Another surgery followed, a lesson about *ahimsa* was learned.

Ten years ago, Sanford began teaching what he calls "adaptive yoga" for people living with disabilities. Three years later, he started teaching more "traditional" students, those without disabilities. He founded a yoga studio in Minnesota, where he lives with his wife, Jennifer, and their young son. In another section from *Waking*, Sanford writes about a situation familiar to most teachers—with a twist:

Monday, 9:30 yoga class. As usual, I am not sure what I will teach, but I am hoping for inspiration, a sudden burst of how a particular yoga pose feels. I am looking for a feeling that can bridge the gap between my own paralyzed body and the walking bodies of my students.

Wherever he goes, Sanford is a good ambassador for Iyengar Yoga.

Speaking to nonyogis, he has them perform simple exercises to awaken their bodies, telling them: "Sit up versus slumping and you'll feel a different quality in your legs—crippled or not!" He tells the Jivamukhti yoga students he is addressing to raise their arms—but at the same time to release the trapezius down. The instruction is familiar to Iyengar practitioners but it is an "Aha!" moment for Sanford-as-teacher as these students, overenthusiastic and underconscious, struggle to revise their postures. He encourages them to persevere, telling them playfully, "BKS Iyengar is changing his relationship to gravity at age eighty-nine."

Later, Sanford gives a unique demonstration of Iyengar Yoga himself, as he shifts his body from his wheelchair to an adjacent armchair before continuing his talk. Using the lift of the pelvis off the legs taught in *Paschimottanasana* and the lift of the spine from the pressed-down heel of *Maricyasana III*, he shows his audience the "easier, lighter way" to manage such a "transfer." It's an important consideration for people with a disability, he says, especially when it must be done several times a day. Relying on upper-body strength and only pressing down is hard on the joints. "Not good," Sanford says. "Joint wear, hip and joint replacements."

Often his audiences have “preconceived notions about Iyengar Yoga being a strictly physical practice,” Sanford says. “Just by showing up, I show them it’s not true.

“I show them that Iyengar Yoga has a much wider breadth because I can’t *do* a lot of the physical postures. I’m not the guy to teach complicated yoga poses—there are wonderful *asana* teachers out there—but the fact that I can be there teaching shows you something revealing about the core of yoga, especially the core of Iyengar Yoga.” He adds with a laugh, “Someone else can teach you seventy-five *Urdhva Dhanurasanas!*”

Sanford continues: “Iyengar Yoga has done such amazing therapeutics that it’s easy to overlook another radical revolution. The Iyengar emphasis on alignment and precision is the beginning of realizing the energetic connection between mind and body. It’s so simple you forget it, but the more effective distribution of gravity integrates mind and body—even without muscular action.

“You might hear that and say, ‘Of course,’ but it’s not an ‘of course’ if you’re disabled. You feel those shifts all the time in a practice. You feel lighter. But people with a disability don’t experience that.

“Mr. Iyengar opened yoga to me,” Sanford says. The innovative use of props was only the beginning. “He broke the poses apart, he showed how they interrelate. Through *Gomukhasana*,” Sanford says, naming a pose he can do, “I see insights into *Sirsasana*,” a pose he cannot. “Mr. Iyengar showed me that every pose has the whole heart of yoga in it. That helps me sustain as a yoga student.”

People with disabilities are inspired “just by me showing up,” Sanford says. “My story helps them see and believe that something else is possible.” However, he cautions, “You can’t just come in off the street as a quadriplegic and go to a regular class.

“I say to people, ‘You need to know that this is possible and try to find a teacher and get to know them. You have to develop a relationship.’ When I started

with Jo, we did together a good year or two. I spent another year just observing her class, then I started to adapt my poses.” When the class does *Sarvangasana*, for example, Sanford does a version of supported *Setu Bandha*. “It took years for us to get into a rhythm,” he remembers.



“I live with a heightened level of silence in my mind–body connection,” Matthew Sanford says. “It came to me in a moment when my back broke.”

Now, as a teacher of adaptive yoga, “I’m trying to get not just that person with a disability but their caregiver and their family to start thinking about basic stuff which can help: passive chest openings, breathing more through the nose. Someone with a disability may or may not become a yoga student [in a mainstream class], but just planting the seeds is important. Alignment matters. Pay attention to how you’re sitting and how your chest is lifted. Pay attention to the mind–body connection.”

To receive the benefits of the *asanas*, people with disabilities need to experience the repetitive actions of them again and again. Often that requires a great deal of assistance. “We have to find a way for someone with cerebral palsy, say, to develop a mind–body practice and hope that it catches,” Sanford says, “hope they get a glimpse of the freedom and the ease that come from more proper alignment.”

The rewards are great: “I have learned so much from teaching people who need adaptive help. It trains your eye. It profoundly helps your teaching, and you can bring that back into working with a ‘normal’ student. It’s not just trying to give yoga to someone who needs it; it’s part of your study as a teacher.” But, Sanford adds, “My warning, my

caution, is to keep it simple. Trust the yoga. Don’t try to do anything heroic.

“Teachers tell me, ‘I gotta get you into *Sirsasana*.’ I broke my neck two times. I’m not sure that’s going to come.” What interests him instead, Sanford says, is asking, “What are the benefits, what is the feeling of *Sirsasana*? How can you bring those benefits to someone who can’t go upside down?”

“The principles of Iyengar Yoga are nondiscriminatory in a way no other yoga I’ve encountered is. It makes you love the method!” Sanford quotes one of Gurujii’s maxims from *Tree of Yoga*: “You only need two things for a yoga pose, a sense of direction and gravity.” He never says muscle flexion! Think of *Adho Mukha Svanasana*,” Sanford goes on, warming to his theme. “It’s not the muscles working all different ways. It’s the body lifting out of the wrist—it’s the direction. That makes you explore the heart of what we’re trying to teach.”

Sanford’s life experiences have brought him to his life work: trying to transform physical rehabilitation using a yogic approach.

When his family car skidded off the bridge, “It was my consciousness, not just my body, that got injured,” Sanford says. “It was my consciousness that needed help to be brought back into the world.” Now Sanford hopes to bring that help to others. “We have to change the relationship between the physical therapist and the patient,” he says, “from one where therapy is done *to* the patient, to one where mind–body awareness is being taught, back and forth.” But, he admits, bringing this approach into the mainstream of rehabilitation will be a “paradigm shift.”

His theories are about to receive a real-world test, with a three-year pilot program at the Courage Center, a rehabilitation facility in suburban Minneapolis where he has taught yoga for ten years. “This is the next step,” he says. Sanford will instruct rehabilitation professionals in his approach. Outcomes for the patients they work with will be measured carefully.

As a young person with a disability, Sanford benefited from increased spending and new technologies, such as improved wheelchairs and better curb access, which arrived with the injured Vietnam veterans returning home. “Now vets are getting torn apart in Iraq,” he says. “There’s injury plus trauma, and there’s their ability to reintegrate into society to be considered.” A mind–body approach is needed, he says. He hopes funding will once again follow need.

But Sanford believes that the stakes are even greater than a revolution in rehabilitation. “Unless that state of unifying action and silence makes it into our world, I don’t

think the human race will survive,” he tells his New York City audience.

“I was just a guy doing yoga with a paralyzed body,” he says to laughter from the crowd. “Now I have to raise money, I have to talk to doctors, I have to get the message to the healthcare establishment.”

It’s the work of “two hundred lifetimes,” he says, “but the innocent thirteen-year-old boy in me says it’s possible.” What’s more, “to balance all those things is a yoga pose,” Sanford says, “and the lightness of yoga is not a burden. It is a freedom. It is an honor. Everyone has a mind, everyone has a body, and when we make that connection, that is a healing. mind–body integration is a movement of consciousness. It can wake up healthcare. It can save the planet!”

Sanford’s presentation is complete. People gather around—to hear him talk longer, to ask a question, simply to be closer. People in wheelchairs and walkers seem drawn to him; having heard his story, they are anxious for him to witness their stories of accident and injury, of physical therapy, of pain.

A woman walks up haltingly and talks about a childhood car accident and decades of rehabilitation. Sanford listens intently, leaning in toward her, deeply engaged. Suddenly he snaps upright, becomes the authoritative Iyengar Yoga teacher. “Stand evenly on both feet and you’ll have less pain in that hip,” he says, indicating the one which is dropped and pushed forward in her off-kilter stance.

Also in line is a pleasant-looking middle-aged woman who asks, timidly, if Sanford remembers her. Maia Kickerpil is the body worker, mentioned in *Waking*, who first suggested Sanford try Iyengar Yoga. Seeing her again, he breaks into an apple-cheeked grin. “You’re the one who made all this happen,” Sanford says exuberantly as the two embrace. ■

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Pranayama: An Interview with John Schumacher, Founder and Director, The Unity Woods Yoga Center

Lori Lipton

LL: In *Astanga yoga*, *Pranayama* is the fourth limb. What’s the significance of it being fourth in the path of yoga?

JS: Well, of course, there are eight limbs in Patanjali’s classic *raja* yoga. The first two limbs, the *Yamas* and *Niyamas*, set a foundation for all practices of yoga. They are the restraints and observances undertaken to work on one’s relationship with the external world and one’s relationship to one’s own internal world. The third limb, *Asana*, is crucial as a preparation for the fourth limb, *Pranayama*. People often ask why is it important to do *asana* before *pranayama*.

Patanjali says the accomplishment of *asana* is necessary before beginning the practice of *pranayama*; it is, in fact, the only limb that has a prerequisite. The practice of *asana* prepares the body physically for *pranayama* by creating mobility in the rib cage, pliability in the tissues of the lungs, toning the diaphragm, strengthening the spinal muscles, and creating flexibility in the hips so that seated *pranayama* is possible.

Asana practice also sensitizes the practitioner to subtle movements, actions, and sensations in the body and begins to train the *sadhaka* how to make subtle adjustments. And perhaps most important, *asana* practice tones the nervous system, so the practitioner is able to handle the increased energy that comes from the practice of *pranayama*. I think it’s important to note at this point that although *pranayama* deals with the breath and different breathing techniques, it’s really about learning how to control and direct the flow of *prana*, the life force, the cosmic energy.

It’s as if we come into the world with 110-volt wiring, and *pranayama* is a 220-volt current. We have to begin through *asana* practice to step up the capacity of our nervous system, our wiring, to handle the increased voltage that eventually comes through the

proper practice of *pranayama*.

After having made significant progress on the third limb, one is ready for the fourth limb, *Pranayama*, which is, in many ways, the gateway between *bahir-anga* yoga and *antaranga* yoga—the external practices and the internal practices. Of course, *pranayama* works with the body, with the breath, and with the voluntary physiological processes of the body. It also works with the involuntary physiological processes in the body and with the emotional and mental bodies, so that the practitioner is then transitioned from the external to the internal through the practice of *pranayama*.

LL: When you talk about the different techniques in *pranayama*, what do you mean?

JS: There are a variety of different *pranayamas*, different ways of adjusting the breath and by so doing, affecting the flow of *prana*. The techniques for the beginner are necessarily quite different than the techniques employed by the seasoned practitioner.

Pranayamas and the techniques for beginners are geared toward increasing sensitivity and awareness of movement of breath and body, of gradually expanding capacity, and of building up stability in the practice. In the Iyengar method, we begin by lying down because relaxation and receptivity are essential qualities for the proper practice of *pranayama*.

Guruji says that one can use will power—in fact, must use will power—in the practice of *asana*. But, he says, the use of will power is inappropriate in the practice of *pranayama*, that softness and receptivity are the essential qualities. By lying down, the beginner, through *Savasana*, can come to a state of relaxation. And in the framework of that relaxed state begin to practice different *pranayamas*. Because lying down is easier than sitting, it becomes possible for the practitioner to observe with increasing sensitivity how the breath moves, where it moves, the subtle rhythms, the balances and imbalances that occur in the body, in the breath, and in the mind. Through basic practices such as *Ujjayi* and *Viloma*, capacity is enhanced and depth comes.

Once these fundamental *pranayamas* become more familiar and understood, the student begins the practice of sitting. Sitting intensifies the effects of the