

# Where Yoga Begins

A Paralegic Yoga Teacher  
Tests the Frontiers of  
Mind-Body Integration





BY ANDI MCDANIEL

Most people would consider Matthew Sanford a living miracle. Nearly 30 years since the car accident that killed his father and sister—and left him paralyzed from the chest down—the youthful 40-year old is a yoga teacher, sought-after speaker, and newly anointed author of *Waking: A Memoir of Trauma and Transcendence* (Rodale, June 2006). He's also a dedicated husband and father.

As we share a table at a sunny, neighborhood café—he in his wheelchair, I in one that's stationary—he wears a big, easy grin, like someone with a wonderful secret he's dying to share. As it turns out, Matthew's secret will change the way I think about yoga, disability and, for that matter, life in general. And it just might do the same for you.

### Yoga for Any Body

Glance at the cover of any yoga magazine, or an ad for a trendy new line of yoga wear, and it's easy to typecast how yoga is *supposed* to look—a nimble 20-something in an elegant backbend, or a roomful of well-behaved downward-facing dogs sheathed in tight, cropped black pants. But the most convincing examples of yoga's power don't necessarily fit this mold. As Sanford phrases it, "Yoga moves through any body." And if anybody should know, it's Matthew.

After 12 years of simply tolerating his disability—essentially dragging around everything below his shoulder blades "like a head on a stick"—Matthew decided there had to be a better, fuller way of understanding his body. At the time, his only strategy for coping with his disability was the western medical model, which typically encourages people with spinal cord injuries to overcome—or compensate for—their paralysis.

Perhaps it's his unusually tender heart, or maybe his irrepressible curiosity—but Matthew wasn't content knowing just one-third of his physical being. At the time of this realization, he was in graduate school, studying philosophy at the University of Calif., Santa Barbara—one of many stages in his long search for answers. He recalls explaining his decision to take a leave of absence to his graduate advisor: "I have to take care of my body. I'm coming apart."



Not long afterward, Matthew met his lifelong teacher. Jo Zukovich, an Iyengar yoga practitioner, had no experience working with students with spinal cord injuries—and in fact, neither did any other yoga instructor he could find at the time. What Matthew and she were about to explore was uncharted territory. Luckily, Jo had what Matthew calls "an uncanny ability to empathize into another's body." To teach Matthew, Jo would have to connect intuitively with his experience of paralysis.



But first, the pair faced some basic obstacles—like figuring out how Matthew would get from wheelchair to yoga mat and back again, on a daily basis. Also, from years of physically compensating for his injuries, Matthew's body was totally out of alignment. With his upper body hunched to the left, and his weight resting on his right hip, Matthew would sit on his mat so crookedly that one leg was three inches ahead of the other. Much of Matthew and Jo's early work focused on simply



tracking his body into a straight line.

Luckily, as early as their first meeting, Matthew began to feel tremendous benefit from the simplest of yoga poses. Upon "taking his legs wide" for the first time, Matthew experienced a rush of energy he hadn't thought possible. Then, prayer pose facilitated a sense of upward energetic release. Gradually, he began to feel what he calls "an energetic awareness—a tingling, a feeling of movement, not outward but inward, a sense of hum" throughout his paralyzed body. He explains it this way: "The mind is not strictly confined to a neurophysiological connection with the body. If I listen inwardly to my whole experience (both my mind's and my body's), my mind can feel into my legs."

Of course, Matthew will never regain muscle control in the lower two-thirds of his body, but what he does experience suggests that a meaningful—and tangible—connection exists beyond the scope of the spinal cord. "I do not have the luxury of confirming my presence through flexing muscles," Matthew says. "And yet, I still experience a level of integration."

Today, when Matthew sits on a yoga mat, legs crossed in lotus pose, he is a vision of grace and balance. Jo is consistently amazed. "The things he can do now—and make look so easy—were so difficult back then," she recalls. In fact, despite Matthew's lack of feeling throughout his abdomen, his practice has enabled him to develop some abdominal control that gives him increased mobility. And while he still wouldn't giggle if you tickled his feet, Matthew's lower body glows with presence and life.

### An Out of Body Society

To witness Matthew's facility with his body—a body he admits is a "hard one to live in"—is to feel awe at the human spirit, to be reminded that it can thrive even in unimaginable adversity. Matthew's bright spirit has attracted all sorts of wonders into his life, from his wife Jennifer—whom he's known since childhood but had never dated—to his extroverted six-year old, Paul, whose playful eyes peek out from under an abundant crop of thick, blonde hair. Matthew asks me towards the end of our conversation, squinting under an intense June sun, "At its core, living is a sensation, isn't it?" Trauma or not, I know that he means it.

But what Matthew's experience demonstrates



When Matt Sanford began practicing Iyengar yoga with Jo Zukovich in 1991, there were few available resources on adaptive yoga. Today, the field is still relatively new—but thanks in part to Matt and Jo’s pioneering work, future students won’t have to start from scratch. Here’s a head start:

- Matt’s website, [matthewsanford.com](http://matthewsanford.com), offers detailed information about him, his yoga practice and his new book, *Waking: A Memoir of Trauma and Transcendence*. A series of videos on adaptive yoga is currently in the works—for more information, stay tuned to the site.
- The Iyengar style of yoga is particularly adaptable for people with disabilities. As Matt says, it “does not discriminate.” To find an Iyengar teacher near you—or books, videos and other resources, visit [bksiyengar.com](http://bksiyengar.com).
- The benefits of yoga for people with multiple sclerosis (MS) are getting increasing recognition. To find out more about yoga for MS, visit [yogams.com](http://yogams.com) or go to [yogasite.com](http://yogasite.com) and click on “Yoga for MS.”

about mind-body integration is not limited to incidents of trauma. “What’s the difference,” he asks plainly, “between someone in a wheelchair and someone who sits at a desk, for eight hours every day?” His point, of course, is that many of us detach from our bodies on a regular basis; such is the nature of the modern world. As we grow ever

more familiar with the virtual reality of our computers and cell phones, inevitably we become more detached from our physical realities. As Matthew explains it, “We can no longer rely on the natural course of our lives to manage the mind-body relationship, to maintain a sense of inward presence.”

How then, are we supposed stay in touch with

our bodies? Through programs called “Bringing Your Body to Work” and “Yoga at the Desk,” Matthew teaches corporate employees about the value of maintaining presence in the body. “Your body is your most underutilized asset,” Matthew tells them. “It’s the best home your mind will ever have.”

### From Here, Yoga Begins

In addition to the outreach programs and able-bodied yoga classes he teaches through Mind-Body Solutions, the nonprofit he founded, Matthew also teaches an Adaptive Yoga class at the Courage Center, a well-known rehabilitation organization in Minnesota. The class, which is based on the Iyengar principles of alignment and precision, is one of few in the country open to a variety of disabilities. [See sidebar for existing resources on adaptive yoga].

Rather than comparing his students to their “normal,” able-bodied counterparts, Matthew teaches to the mind-body relationship that students actually have. “I just look at what they’ve got,” he says. The simple acknowledgement of what is, Matthew explains, “constitutes a level of nourishment that they don’t usually get.”

Teaching yoga to students with disabilities—ranging from cerebral palsy to multiple sclerosis—has deepened Matthew’s respect for the transformative power of yoga. With the range of challenges presented by each student (including students with brain injuries, some of whom have

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difficulty remembering poses week to week), Matthew's class isn't the portrait of serenity ("more like organized chaos," he jokes). Yet it is perhaps the ultimate illustration of what yoga is all about. After all, a physical disability is essentially "mind having a hard time moving through body," he says. "Which is just an extreme version of what we all experience."

*He began to feel what he calls "an energetic awareness—a tingling, a feeling of movement, not outward but inward, a sense of hum" throughout his paralyzed body.*

Throughout the adaptive yoga class, Matthew reminds his students to approach their practice from a place of acceptance. "From here, yoga begins," he says. For students with severe physical disabilities, yoga begins in a difficult place. But yoga moves nonetheless, through any body that takes the time to open the door.

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## TOP 10

### BEST SELLERS

1. **Letting Go of Stress**  
Emmett Miller and Steven Halpern
2. **Sacred Space Music**  
Constance Demby
3. **Power of Now**  
Eckhart Tolle
4. **Chakra Suite**  
Steven Halpern
5. **Tonal Alchemy**  
Steven Halpern
6. **Tibetan Master Chants**  
Lama Tashi
7. **New Earth**  
Eckhart Tolle
8. **Ask and it is Given: The Law of Attraction**  
Esther & Jerry Hicks
9. **Getting Unstuck**  
Pema Chodron
10. **Meditation for Beginners**  
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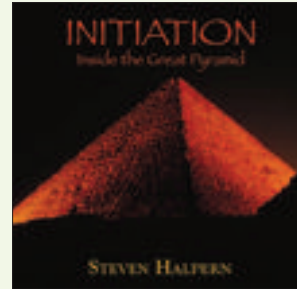
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