

# Yoga and MS

Hearing that yoga might be able to mitigate the crippling effects of multiple sclerosis, a chronic disease of the central nervous system, I seek verification in an unlikely place. I don't go to a hospital or a sterile research institute, but to a sprawling, Spanish-colonial house once owned by a Hollywood film mogul.

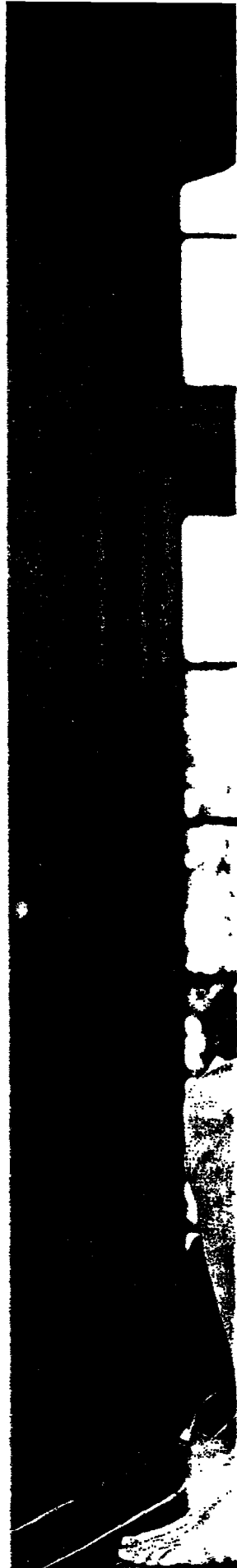
As I stop my car in front of the giant succulents that line the entrance to what is now the home and yoga studio of Eric Small, a sight-seeing van slows and the tourists, ever on the alert for movie stars in this exclusive neighborhood, crane their necks and stare. I imagine their eager question: "Is she somebody?"

Suppressing the urge to wave graciously, I walk into the side garden with its trees and fountains and enter the yoga studio, once a movie screening room. Wheelchairs, walkers, and canes line the walls, and instead of the usual murmur of students stretching and bending as they wait for class to begin, these men and women are sitting quietly on chairs, exchanging information on the one thing they have in common: multiple sclerosis.

Eric Small, their yoga teacher, is a special inspiration to them. Tall and lean, with muscular arms and legs, he is capable of physical feats most men in their 60s wouldn't dream of attempting: back bends, handstands, splits, and twists. But he, too, is dealing with MS. Forty years ago, when he was a 21-year-old

Forty years ago,  
yoga teacher  
Eric Small was  
diagnosed with  
multiple sclerosis.  
Today he's a  
vibrant testament  
to yoga's power  
to alleviate this  
often crippling  
disease.

By Loraine Despres  
Photography by Bill Reitzel



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college student, he woke up one morning and couldn't get out of bed. "My legs and arms wouldn't work," he says. "I felt as if I had been strapped down. Then my involuntary breathing stopped." Fortunately, his fraternity brothers found him and rushed him to the hospital.

At first the doctors thought his paralysis was due to polio, but after a battery of tests—and analysis of a medical history that included recurring attacks of fatigue, loss of balance, and blurred vision—he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. He's reluctant to talk about his symptoms, but admits that his condition was so severe that for a while he was put on a breathing machine.

## Discovering Yoga

Multiple sclerosis is an autoimmune disease in which the body's defense system attacks the myelin sheaths surrounding nerves. These sheaths play much the same role as insulation around an electrical wire. Without the myelin, nerves begin to short out, blocking the pathways between the brain and the body. According to the *American Medical Association Encyclopedia of Medicine*, symptoms of MS may include fatigue, vertigo, clumsiness, muscle weakness, slurred speech, unsteady gait, blurred or double vision, and numbness, weakness, or pain in the face. MS can also affect the digestive tract and cognitive functions.

In some people, the disease may consist of mild attacks and long, symptom-free periods throughout life, with very few permanent effects. Others experience a progressive series of attacks with less complete recovery after each one.

Small's condition was so serious that his doctors did not expect him to live to be 40—or if he did, they warned him, he'd be permanently disabled. With a twinkle in his eye Small says, "They're all gone now, but I'm still here."

His symptoms lessened after a few months, but he was still having trouble with his speech, vision, and walking. The drugs he took made him worse. He gave up his ambition of becoming a lawyer and instead earned a master's degree in fine art at the prestigious Otis Art Institute, where they made special arrangements for him, letting him use a first-floor studio.

While Small was a student, he heard about an experimental treatment in Scotland that included glandular shots and a special diet of grains and oil. He decided to go there, stopping in London on the way. That stopover changed his life.

Driving through Hyde Park, he saw a man doing yoga. Small asked his driver to stop and let him out. He had taken yoga in a gym class in school but hadn't found it very exciting. Now something about the balance and beauty of the poses spoke to him. Using two canes, he walked over to a bench and sat, mesmerized, watching this man do postures that seemed to defy gravity. He returned the next day and the next until the man gave him the name and address of his teacher, Sri Ananda.

When Small arrived at Sri Ananda's class, navigating the flight of stairs down to the studio with great difficulty, the teacher refused to take him. He informed Small that he didn't take special students. But Small was persistent. He went back the next day, negotiating the stairs once more, and sat outside the door. When the class was over, the students and the teacher simply

walked by him and went upstairs. But Small kept going back, day after day. At the end of the week, Sri Ananda said to him, "Now that I know you are serious, we can begin."

Small never made it to Scotland, never tried the glan-  
dular shots. Instead he studied with Sri Ananda, who  
gave him simple movements to do against a wall or on  
the floor. Although he still needed a cane to walk, he  
went home feeling stronger and more centered. The de-  
pression so often associated with MS had lifted.

## Enter Iyengar

When the summer was over, Small moved back in with  
his family on California's Catalina Island. He adopted  
a vegetarian diet and read everything available on hatha  
yoga and meditation.

"Catalina was perfect for me. Avalon is a small  
town—only one square mile. I had grown up there and  
knew everybody. If I fell down in the street, people

would rush to pick me up. I could walk, but I some-  
times needed a wheelchair, because I would get so  
weak."

He began taking yoga classes whenever he could with  
Swami Satchidananda, who was then teaching in south-  
ern California. And then came the defining moment  
in his life: "The doctors told my parents the disease was  
progressive, so they hired a carpenter to start build-  
ing ramps in the house. They thought they were doing  
the right thing, but it shook me up. I knew at that mo-  
ment I had to take charge of my life, so I called my  
brother and asked him to kidnap me. I couldn't make  
it to the seaplane on my own."

His brother agreed and carried him down the dock  
and helped him onto the plane. He flew to Los Ange-  
les, where he found a small hotel with a heated pool  
and began his own program of physical rehabilitation.

Drawing on his studies with Swami Satchidananda,  
he devised a system for doing yoga in the pool. Since  
people dealing with MS are warned not to get over-

## Postures for Limited Mobility

The following are classic  
yoga poses that Eric  
Small, under the guid-  
ance of B.K.S. Iyengar, adapted  
for people with disabilities  
caused by MS. Many of these  
postures would also be appro-  
priate for the elderly or for peo-  
ple suffering from other con-  
ditions, such as arthritis. The  
benefits listed are those traditionally as-  
cribed to the poses.

Practice the poses at your own pace, never  
forcing or straining. Remember that the  
goal is to enjoy the practice, not to achieve  
a particular posture. Hold each pose for 10  
to 20 long, deep breaths, then release and  
move with awareness to the next posture.



### Basic Breathing

**1** Before beginning your practice, sit qui-  
etly, spine away from your chair, feet  
planted firmly on the floor directly beneath  
the knees. If necessary, use a rolled blan-  
ket behind the back to support the spine  
in an upright position. If you're short, you  
may want to place a blanket on the floor

to raise your feet until your upper and low-  
er legs form a right angle. If you're tall, a  
blanket on the chair seat will bring you to  
the proper alignment.

Sit up straight, with your face tilted  
down, and breathe evenly and naturally  
through your nostrils. Do not force your  
breath. Sit quietly and listen to your breath-

wheelchair. Small likes to get people into regular chairs if possible. "It's important they feel they can take charge of their lives and leave the grip of the wheelchair or walker."

He begins, after a brief meditation, by telling his students to sit up straight, place their hands on their knees, and press on their hands, lifting the sternum. "Notice what you're feeling."

"A complete sense of the body," one says.

"I get exhausted, because I don't do this often," another adds.

"I feel as if I get more oxygen."

Small then leads them in a simple breathing exercise, introducing the basic elements of pranayama. "The disease excites and fatigues the brain. It's important to give it a rest by concentrating on your breathing." (He tells me later that pranayama is a very important element of the program.)

He next leads the class in a series of classic yoga poses (see sidebar) adapted for people with MS, encour-

aging them to push themselves just a bit, without overdoing it. The more flexible students go to the floor for a spinal twist, giving their chairs to those less able. Small guides the arm of one student who isn't able to raise it on his own. When another announces, "I can't do that," Small gently chides him: "While you're here, you want to say, I can do that." The student says it—and then manages to do it.

All through the class, Small patiently explains the therapeutic effects of each pose, asking each student how he or she feels. Laughter erupts often. At the end of the hour, Small tells the class they have moved all their organs, improved their bodily functions, and released stored energy, making it available for spiritual awareness.

After class, students are invited to talk to me if they wish. I expect them to talk about how yoga has strengthened their muscles and improved their balance, but many launch into discussions about the improvement to their inner bodies instead.

ing you. Picking up your legs with your hands, stretch your legs out across the seats of both chairs. Bending forward at the hips, rest your hands on top of the opposite chair back. Spread your fingers. Do not grip.

### Wheelchair Variation

**5** With the wheelchair locked and the safety belt fastened around the waist, place your hands firmly on the seat of a folding chair and push it away from you. (If you are extremely stiff, place your hands on the chair back.) Now push the chair diagonally, first away from the right knee, then away from the left, to get a cross stretch.



### Cobbler Pose

**6** This pose strengthens the urinary tract and relieves sciatic pain.

Position two chairs facing one another. Cover the seats with sticky mats. Sitting on one chair, bend your knees and draw your legs up, bring the soles of the feet together, and let the knees open away from

each other. Hold on to the back of the chair facing you, keeping your spine erect.

### Warrior Pose

**7** This pose opens the chest and builds strength and balance.

Support your right buttock and most of your right thigh along the very edge

of a chair or wheelchair. Your right foot should be directly under your knee. Kneel with your left knee on the floor or supported by a block if needed. If necessary, tall people can pad the seat with a blanket or mat to get more height.

Your left buttock is off the chair, with your inner thigh pressed into the edge

where there are often one or two people with MS practicing with those who do not have the disease. Small feels it's important not to set students apart. "If you do that they will feel less empowered." So if Edelsohn can't do a standing pose in the middle of the room with those who are more adept, she does the pose leaning against the wall. If she can't touch her toes as she once could, she simply works with healthy beginners who also need to use blocks and chairs.

"MS is like other chronic diseases," Small says. "There are no guarantees. But with yoga you can learn to cope more effectively. And of course there are the intangibles that most people who do yoga experience—serenity, focus, and an increased sense of well-being."

Audrey Goldman of the Multiple Sclerosis Society (Southern California chapter) agrees. As a spokesperson for the Society, she is careful to say that no diet or exercise regime has been shown in double-blind studies to cure the disease. But, she says, "Yoga can certainly help build strength and endurance as well as improve

breathing and mental attitude. It can also ameliorate some of the serious secondary effects of the disease that are caused by loss of mobility, and it can increase range of motion."

Asked about yoga as opposed to other exercise programs, she says, "Yoga is particularly beneficial because the breathing and meditation skills give people tools they can use for the rest of their lives. When people commit to a program of yoga, they feel they are doing something for themselves. They get back a sense of control over their lives and their health, after having lost so much."

"Doctors often send their patients to our program to help them reduce stress," adds Pam Hirshberg, who heads the yoga program for the MS Society.

Just before I finish this article, I receive a call from Ann Reese, one of Small's students who didn't have time to talk to me after class because she had to get to her job as a librarian. "I'd been dabbling in yoga at the Yoga Center when I was diagnosed with MS," she says,

as is comfortable. Stretch your arms straight out to the sides. Lift your left hip. Bending from the right hip, stretch your whole torso out over your right leg. Put your right hand on a block or a chair seat if you can't comfortably reach the floor. Raise your left arm up, balancing against the wall. Repeat on the other side.

### Spinal Twist

**10** This pose relieves back aches.

Sit sideways on the right side of a chair with your feet directly under your knees. (If you are tall, it may be necessary to put a blanket on the seat. If you are short, place the blanket under your feet.) Raise both hands in the air, biceps parallel to your ears. On the exhale, bring your arms parallel to the floor, shoulder height, as you turn your torso to the right. Keeping your knees even and together, place your hands on the top of the chair back, elbows wide. Gently pulling with the left hand and pushing with the right, turn



your left ribs toward the chair back and the right ribs away. Your sacrum remains quiet. Your nose should be in line with your heart. Repeat on the other side.

### Backbend

**11** This pose opens the chest, aids breathing, and counteracts the ten-



dency to roll the torso forward and down. Place a sticky mat on the seat of a chair. Sit with your buttocks on the edge of the chair and the bottom of your shoulderblades resting on the top of the chair back. Keeping your feet on the floor, extend your legs, toes up, heels pushing forward. You might want to place a rolled up