

Beyond BALANCE

*How two women found yoga
and discovered it offers more than meets the eye*

by Dana Logan

Sharon McClinton came to yoga late in life. When she was 50 years old, she found herself concerned that she might develop osteoporosis as she aged. She discussed her fear of weakening bones, and the aging process in general, with her husband, a chiropractor. "You know, I really don't want to get osteoporosis. I want to remain flexible throughout my life," she recalls. "He said, 'You should try doing yoga.'"

That was 16 years ago and today, a strong, healthy woman has moved from yoga student to yoga teacher. "I just had no idea how much it would impact my life," says McClinton.

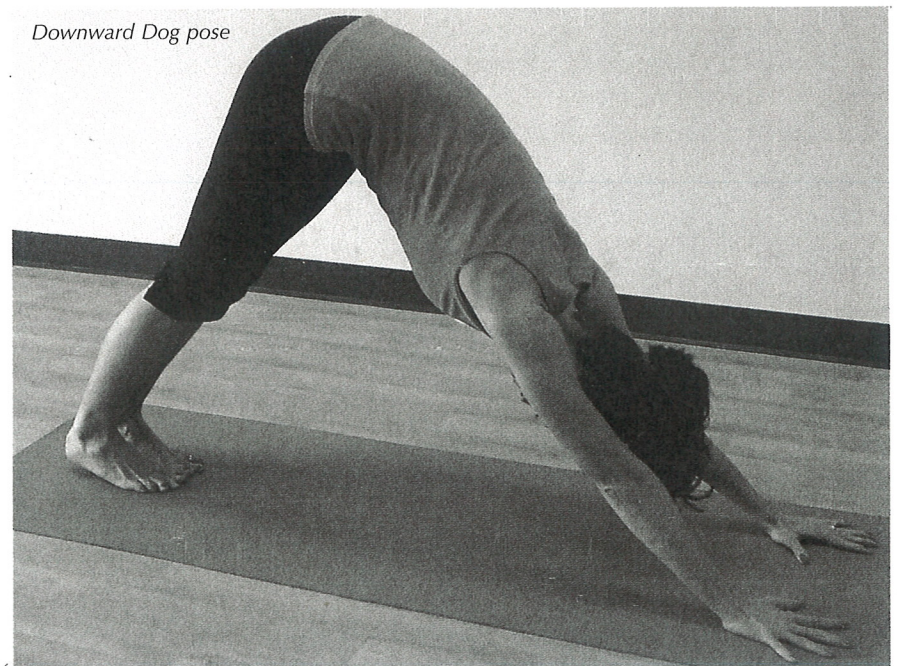
She went looking for the physical benefits that yoga might offer. She thought it would make her bones stronger, perhaps make her body more flexible, and hopefully prevent the osteoporosis that she feared. While she says it's true that her body is stronger and more flexible now than it's ever been, what she found in practicing yoga was so much more than that.

"What I discovered was that yoga is only in part about the postures, it's more about unifying your mind and your body with your breath. So once you start paying attention to your breath and how it moves you, you end up becoming much more aware of your body," she explains. "Certainly it's a body practice, but yoga, for me, is so much more. It really deals with your mind, your spirit, and unifying you." But her practice goes beyond that. McClinton says that yoga teaches her humility and compassion, not only for others, but also for herself.

McClinton says that her practice isn't confined to the yoga studio or the mat. All that she gets out of yoga follows her throughout the day. "Even though I'm not doing downward facing dog or other poses during the



Lori Tillman, yoga instructor at The Workout Company in South County demonstrates several yoga poses. Shown here, Upward Dog pose.

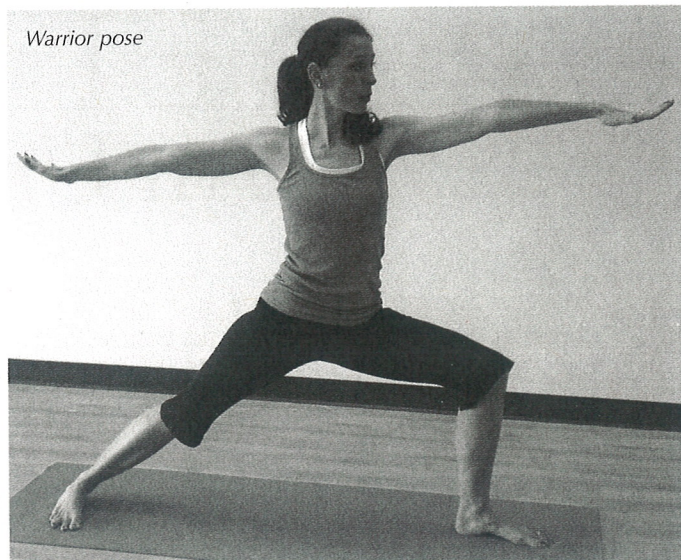


Downward Dog pose

Cobra Pose



Warrior pose



day, I'm still breathing. I am still letting my breath lead me, I'm still noticing what I'm doing and how I'm doing it."

In fact, she says that the biggest difference that yoga has made in her life is the awareness of her own body, compared to how she was 16 years ago. "I am becoming more and more present in my body. It's like a greater awareness of my body." For her, that awareness brings beauty to her life and her journey. "I would have to say that I am aging gracefully. We cannot prevent aging, that's just part of us, but to age with grace and awareness is probably the best gift of all."

Michelle Maue has run Bella Yoga, a yoga studio in Clayton, since 2003, but she's been practicing yoga for 12 years. When she began practicing, she says that she didn't like being in her body. "I wasn't truly at home here in this body," she says. "So I thought, well, let me just try a yoga class because I know if I can calm myself down, I could probably be a much better support for my family." What she found was what she calls "an overwhelming sense of spiritual connection to something bigger than me."

Maue says that this connection has helped her through some potentially dark moments in her life. Times when things could have turned really destructive, but instead, she was able to say, "OK, if not for me — if I'm not willing to take this next step for me — then I'll take it for this bigger picture

that I know I'm connected to. I need to let myself be drawn toward that level of inspiration."

Maue believes that the physical benefits of yoga she's experienced are connected to the spiritual benefits. She had once been plagued with back problems, something she explains as a fallout from experiences that she had repressed and from holding in negativity. But her yoga practice changed all that. "I started to unlock the secrets. I could feel the tangible energy. You're coming alive and you're feeling the energy bodies and the currents running through you and they're starting to line up."

She explains that energy bodies are surrounding your physical body and you start to unlock some of the blocks with deep, continuous breathing. It took nearly four years, but there hasn't been a trace of the back problems since. Like McClinton, yoga has brought much more than physical benefits to Maue's life.

"Being open and humble is one of the gifts of yoga, I get to listen to my vulnerable places. When I slow down and I listen to my breath, I get more quiet and I'm able to then see those places that I need to work on." While the postures of yoga are important, Maue sees more value in the spiritual and emotional challenges that the practice pushes her to conquer.

"I don't focus on physical anatomy as the central theme and I never will. It really is about the language of soul to

me. This isn't about trying to perfect the posture as much as it is about unlocking hidden weaknesses in our life," she says.

In fact, Maue believes that people might not expect just how valuable finding one's own weaknesses can be. "I think a lot of people in this culture would be surprised to find out that their vulnerability and their soft spots are actually treasures waiting to be revealed."

Tree pose

