

YOGI WRITINGS: Heather Edwards

I'm so excited to write about my recent experiences with yoga. I'll try not to preach to the choir too much. Two years ago I woke up from an unrelated major surgery with severe sciatic pain. The surgery went well but the sciatica persisted and became almost crippling. I tried everything. I tried rest, ice, heat, back exercises, stretching, constant piriformis stretches and asanas. I went to chiropractors, myofascial release practitioners and physical therapists. I corrected bad habits in my posture and gait. I had 5 different spinal injections with steroids and all sorts of medications. I went to 2 back surgeons in Visalia, and in Fresno, at UCSF, and UCLA. I went to neurologists and physicians specializing in physical medicine, pain and rheumatology. They said I had spondylosis and vertebrae L4 and L5 move forward because of a previous accident or a congenital defect. I also had stenosis, ruptured discs and extensive arthritis. They said this could only be fixed with an extensive surgery that included disc fusion, bone grafts, and "cages". I was not up for another major surgery since 20+% of patients have additional fusions after their first surgery. Finally one neurologist at UCLA said I could wait and see what happens since my foot and leg had not lost any strength yet.

I read several books on the pelvic floor and took two classes. I started out just trying to figure out what in the world the pelvic floor was. I did what I thought was pelvic floor exercises but it felt more like I was doing isometric exercises instead of actually lifting my pelvic floor. Finally I was able to loosen my pelvic floor from some old adhesions and actually lift my pelvic floor muscles. I was simultaneously introduced to spinal stabilization exercises by my physical therapist and Brenda. Spine stabilizing exercises strengthened the tiny muscles around my spine, the multifidus, and all the pelvic floor muscles including the transverse and oblique abdominal muscles. At about the same time, with Brenda as my guide and teacher, I started practicing pranayama. I was worried that I was starting pranayama too soon since my asana practice never developed past beginning



asanas. Thankfully I was wrong. My beginning asanas allowed me to inhabit my body and to become aware of the subtle ways my body and nervous systems are working together. The precision of my practice, thanks to Brenda, allowed my mind to quiet and engage the subtle muscles enough to sit in pranayama. I needed to have strong spinal stabilizing muscles including the pelvic floor to be able to sit physically and correctly without effort for 45 minutes everyday. I was doing spinal stabilizing and pelvic floor exercises before, but it wasn't until I was sitting in pranayama everyday that these muscles became strong enough that my sciatic pain disappeared. It has been nine months and the pain has not returned. All the many other benefits of a strong and engaged pelvic floor and a pranayama practice seem to be revealing themselves daily.

I know many people have had very successful spinal surgeries. I am only talking about my journey where what looked like a dark tragic accident at first actually forced me in a direction that has provided so many unexpected gifts. I love pranayama and the precise asana practice that I was nudged into. My life is so much richer. My wish is that I always see apparent tragic situations as an opportunity. This is no small wish but it comes with such big rewards. Namaste