

# YOU & ME™

## Maria Gunstone talks about her 'special' yoga



### When did you get interested in yoga?

In my teens I went to art college and studied graphics and fashion. Then, in 1972, I suffered multiple injuries in a car accident, which left me feeling that I had lost everything.

Nine months later, I took up yoga

and found there was 'light at end of a dark tunnel'. I saw a way I could improve both my physical strength and my concentration. After three years of intensive practice, during which I gained more mental and physical control and strength, I decided I wanted to make a career in yoga and became qualified to teach.

Since 1975, using creative integration group work, I have combined my art training with my knowledge of yoga for disabled people to devise the YOU & ME Yoga system. I have produced several teaching materials to facilitate safe meaningful practice.

### How did the association with 'special needs' arise?

I was fortunate to literally walk into a newly created job teaching yoga at the SELTEC College for Adults, in Lewisham (in 1978-79). I agreed to do a trial period with a college contract, to see if yoga would be suitable for a small group of students in the special needs department.

Most people with learning difficulties do not take readily to change, so you can imagine the challenge with this group, who were all in their thirties and for the first time in their lives being asked to activate their atrophied bodies into new bodily positions of yoga. It took a while to win their confidence and persuade them to move their bodies. The introduction of yoga techniques involving easy breathing, relaxation and chanting gradually started to develop the group's interest. Over time, the members progressed physically and mentally at their own pace and in their own way. During the six years I spent working with the group, they blossomed beyond expectation. Not only did they develop more control of their bodies, they became more sensory-aware of

different parts of the body and also cultivated their imagination and self-image by visualising being well and happy. Some group members proved capable of guiding the rest through a few simple warm-up movements, yoga postures and breathing, and gave competent instructions for relaxation.

I found it was best to keep instructions simple, and use straightforward language appropriate to the individual's level of understanding. From the yoga exercises, students gained noticeable strength and stamina with improved dexterity and coordination. They were interested in learning about body language and its movement, about breathing in and breathing out through either the nose or the mouth – the latter is necessary because some people are not physically able to breathe through their nose. The students were also interested to learn about the connection of the diaphragm with the breath and through breathing practice they gained an awareness of the wonderful energy and life-force within the body.

### How did this lead to YOU & ME Yoga?

This work became very interesting and worthwhile for me. In fact, it helped me win a Churchill Fellowship to go to India in 1984 to investigate yoga for disabled people. I discovered yoga was just being introduced into the Indian Special Educational Needs Curriculum by Director of Special Needs in Tamil Nadu, Professor Jeyachandran. His special educators were teaching the same techniques to children as I was teaching teenagers and adults.

These marvellous experiences spurred me on to spread the word. By collating my findings and visual evidences the YOU & ME Yoga system was established in 1988. I started teaching yoga to staff in special schools, day centres, homes and hospitals and various residential training centres.

In different parts of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, YOU & ME has been taught, by teachers whom I have trained, to thousands of students with special educational needs ranging from profound and multiple disabled students to students with mild learning disabilities, right across the age range. These include students with Down's Syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, spasticity, paralysis, visual, aural and speech impairment, and psychiatric and/or behavioural problems.

### Has the system developed?

Working with different people and groups, I have learned from their questions what next to work on and include in the system, i.e. what postures to use, when to do the practices, and how to practise. The YOU & ME system has been developed through listening, discussing, corresponding, analysing, sharing ideas, and offering learning opportunities to one and all. I have always been very ready to respond to suggestions for improving the system, which usually means simplifying the knowledge and the techniques.

From research and experience I found that no one posture has a specific therapeutic effect for it is necessary to tone up all the bodily functions by using a series of movements for each of the main body areas. I devised the YOU & ME Whole-Body-Movement system comprising of carefully selected and arranged techniques which do not require much balance or physical effort, so as to be within the capacity of students with learning disabilities.

Whole-Body-Movement is designed to exercise and strengthen the different parts of the body by means of carefully chosen and arranged sequences of movement. The sequencing of Postures in the system is based on the principle of Vinyasa which is based on Desikachar's organised structured approach, implemented in the Indian Special Needs curriculum in 1985 by Professor Jeyachandran. Whole-Body-Movement involves a sequence of Postures from warming-up, through a main posture, and then winding down. Based on the effective Indian system, we also use sound to help the students breathe correctly and in unison. Relaxation is also an integral part of the system.

### What is the significance of colour?

The ethos of YOU & ME Yoga is use of colour which can help motivate learning, by separating one meaning/thing from another. The body is coloured in one of the spectrum colours to help students understand that yoga is a meaningful experience for the whole of their being. The use of colour helps people with learning disabilities distinguish the different parts of their body, even though they may not be able to communicate through language, they can usually recognise and identify the different coloured bodily areas. Shifting attention from one coloured part of the body to another makes it easier for them to become more receptive and alert, and

to adapt to change within both the body and the mind. In this way life energy circulates, and there is a blending process of different aspects of a person's being, resulting in an unfolding meaningful experience.

There are 20 postures which are appropriately coloured in one of the spectrum colours. Bearing in mind which part of the body is mainly involved and affected, and has to be used when performing a particular Posture. In the YOU & ME training materials there are more than 2,000 variations of the basic techniques, as performed by various students themselves!



*YOU & ME Yoga certificated programme consists of 3 Levels with gaps to allow for study and practice. It is accompanied by a comprehensive set of teaching materials, which are also available separately by mail order. Training and consultation with Maria is recognised as CPD for yoga teachers and for therapists working in special needs.*

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### LONDON SCHOOL SEES POSITIVE EFFECTS IN 10 MONTHS

Jo Osbourne, a senior physiotherapist reports: "The star group was started at a mainstream primary school in East London, where there was a group of children aged seven to nine with learning difficulties some with diagnosis, some without, but who show specific behavioural tendencies that impact on their learning. The group meet on a weekly basis and, in discussion with the Inclusion Officer (for children with special needs), we felt YOU & ME Yoga would meet their needs.

The children learnt a variety of joint looseners, yoga poses, breathing and relaxation techniques. They thoroughly enjoy the sessions and participate to their best ability. Initially, many found it difficult to close their eyes during relaxation, choosing to place their hands over their eyes instead. After 10 months, many children can keep their eyes closed for longer – this is quite an achievement and suggests their body awareness is improving. The Inclusion Officer says the yoga sessions are having a wider impact – many children are starting to concentrate better in class, showing that yoga has positive implications for learning.