

Namaste spoke with Hamsa Spagnola, E-RYT/TRM, and her longtime collaborator Achala Godino, RYT about how Gentle Yoga is appropriate for the growing population of older students, the timeliness of Gentle and Chair TT, and why teachers should think about taking this training.

Namaste: As baby boomers are aging, the population of older people is growing. Can you speak about how this training is valuable for learning to teach and serve that growing population?

Hamsa: As a baby boomer myself, at the age of 65, I can see and feel the changes in my body and the need to continue moving. Having recently had foot surgery, I was unable to do very much for three to four months. I did some limited Yoga asana that did not involve using my foot and found that, when I was ready to start going for long walks again and doing a full Yoga session, my body did not bounce back as quickly as it had when I was younger. Not only did my knees hurt from limping around for months, but my hips hurt as well. I realized that I had to be patient with myself and honor my body at whatever level I was now at. I found it very frustrating, but I didn't want to do any other damage as I was still healing. I'm still working hard to improve, but it's definitely taking longer. So, it has been a good lesson for me in patience and in understanding what our elder population is dealing with on a regular basis.

For most of us baby boomers, recovery takes longer. Arthritis, bursitis, spinal stenosis, and osteoporosis begin to set in for some; our eyesight begins to change; we wind up with various aches and pains we have never experienced before. Much as we may wish to deny or ignore the aging process, it will happen to us nevertheless. So, the best thing that we can do for ourselves is to accept rather than resist. When we can wrap our brain around the fact that we are getting older and that, yes, our bodies are changing, then we can begin to figure out what we can do to find that place within ourselves that will enable us to maintain optimal health and well-being even if we become limited in one way or another. We can learn to love and respect our bodies and begin to do Yoga in a much more "gentle" way.

Stretching is very important, as it helps to keep the blood circulating and maintains the strength of our tendons and ligaments. As we age, the circulation begins to become more stagnant, and the body begins to lose height as our hamstrings shorten and tighten. Weight-bearing poses are important for keeping the muscles strong. Aging causes us to lose muscular strength, which affects not only our muscles but our bones as well.

Lubricating our joints by keeping them moving will help to keep arthritic fingers, shoulders, ankles, toes, and hips from freezing up or locking.

Maintaining flexibility in the spine is also very important, especially since the spine begins to compress as we age, with the vertebrae coming closer together and pressing onto surrounding nerves and bones. In order to maintain the integrity of the spine, we can still do forward bending, backward bending, lateral bends, twists, and inversions in a modified way.

Restorative poses are wonderful as well to help us relieve stress and to replenish and refresh our bodies and minds.

Meditation and pranayama are especially important because they are key in helping us to maintain healthy organs, control our blood pressure, relieve headaches, increase our lung capacity, and keep us in a calm and peaceful frame of mind, which will enable us to deal with stressful issues in our lives.

As baby boomers, we are coming into a very special time of our lives that should be welcomed and not feared. So what if we have to move a little more slowly? We can take more time to smell the roses and enjoy our lives. The key is to keep moving without forcing the movement or stressing the body, which can create injury. That's where honoring the body comes into play. Know your body and its limitations.

Namaste: Many older people, even those who love Yoga and have been practicing for many years, find they have developed conditions like osteoporosis that limit the ways they can use their bodies. Students are worried about injuries, and teachers are concerned about helping their students stay safe as they practice Yoga. Do you address some of these health and safety issues in the TT so that teachers may be better prepared to work with older students?

Hamsa: Absolutely! As a matter of fact we will be offering workshops specifically addressing osteoporosis, scoliosis, multiple sclerosis, spinal issues, joint issues, and the like.

Achala: The exciting news is that not only can people with these conditions practice Yoga safely and comfortably, but their Hatha practice will mitigate the symptoms of their conditions and, in many cases, reverse a degenerative process. For example, we have seen clearly that a regular Hatha practice that emphasizes weight-bearing poses not only slows down demineralization of the bones but also actually stimulates ossification, or the laying down of new, healthy bone tissue. Back pain, arthritis, scoliosis—all these conditions can be helped by a regular Hatha practice appropriate for the condition.

Namaste: A big issue for older students is balance. How do you work with standing poses to adapt them for older students?

Hamsa: Balance is definitely an issue as we age. Besides our developing arthritic issues of the feet as we age, the skin on our soles begins to thin, which puts extra pressure on the bones in our feet, causing discomfort, so sometimes simply standing for any length of time can be painful, especially for our elders. That is why many of them don't like to take their shoes off. Holding on to the back of a chair or placing one or both hands on a wall and doing some very simple balancing can be helpful. Simply rising up and down on the balls of the feet several times and then staying up on the balls of the feet for a few seconds can be fun as students begin to let go of the chair or wall. It's all about their focus and their fear. Lifting one foot off the floor a few inches is also a challenge for them, but utilizing the wall or chair as their support gives them a sense of confidence.

Achala: Challenging though balancing poses can be, older adults must practice them. Many injuries in seniors are the result of falls, which could have been prevented with better body awareness and body mechanics. Teachers in the training will learn how to make balance poses safe and fun, so that their students will regularly practice these poses and, over time, improve their balance.

Namaste: Does the name Gentle Yoga mean that the class is easy and not very challenging?

Hamsa: The class is easy in the sense that all the asana can be modified in order that the students' needs can be accommodated by the use of whatever props may be necessary. It can also be challenging because of the amount of stretching we do, to which they may not be accustomed. It's not so much about completing a specific series of asana as it is about addressing every part of the body. We usually start by doing some warm-ups for the spine and some modified breath work. It is also a more meditative class. Most students feel wonderful after a Gentle Yoga class. They feel relaxed and restored yet energized.

Namaste: If you sit in a chair, doesn't that mean that you can't move very much? How do you, as teacher trainers, help teachers learn to make a class in a chair interesting for students?

Hamsa: You'd be surprised how much can be done sitting in a chair. Not only can we adapt most of the asana to the chair, but we offer joint work as well. If they are able, we do standing poses, always utilizing the chair and sometimes the wall. Occasionally we work with two chairs to mimic working on the mat. They get as much out of using the chair as they would out of being on the mat.

Namaste: Beyond the opportunity to serve older students and fill a very important niche, what are some other reasons why teachers should think about taking this training in 2014?

Hamsa: In my opinion, this work is invaluable for all Yoga teachers. It is a fact that they will encounter a student at some time or another who has an injury, who has had surgery, who has arthritis, neck issues, back issues, knee issues, or hip or knee replacements, is recovering from cancer, has Alzheimer's, or is disabled or elderly. Especially with our baby boomer population growing, these things are inevitable. So, to me, it only makes sense to know as much as we can in learning how to adapt and modify the asana in order to address the needs of our students. After all, isn't Yoga about the union of body, mind, and spirit? What better way to serve our students, when they are in need of assistance, than to help them create that balance of body, mind, and spirit?

My husband and I made up a saying that we strive to live by:

LDT: Live for today, Don't fear tomorrow, Thanks for yesterday!