

Creating Social Change and Healing through Yoga A Workshop with Molly Lannon Kenny

By Sharon Steffensen

"Be the change you wish to see in the world." We've all seen that quote, on everything from T-shirts to bumper stickers. But how do we actually do it? From as early as Krishna's admonishment to Arjuna to "see all beings in Atman [Divinity], and Atman in all beings," we have been called to social action through yoga.

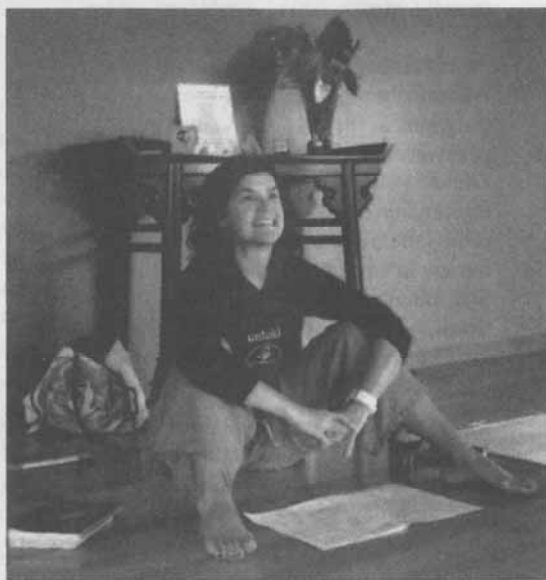
— Molly Lannon Kenny

Social activist and yogi Molly Lannon Kenny conducted a workshop on "Yoga and Social Change" in Evanston on June 3 and 4. As a former clinician who became disillusioned by the medical model that focused on pathology and hierarchy (which she felt created ego, separation, and disconnection), Molly set out to create a new model for healing that included social change involving partnership, connection, and yoga. Ten years ago she opened The Samarya Center, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization in Seattle. The center currently offers 43 classes taught by 19 teachers and 15 to 20 volunteer-led outreach programs, such as yoga for stroke survivors taught by a stroke survivor, yoga for mental health patients at the VA, as well as yoga for survivors of sexual trauma, depression, PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), and seriously ill and dying patients; all the programs are based on the same principles of partnership and connection.

In her introductory segment, Molly discussed topics such as what it means to be in partnership (as opposed to a hierarchy), how to conduct outreach programs, and what it means to be a *bodhisattva*, or yogi.

Creating partnership

Molly's *dharma*, or purpose in life, is to bring the healing power of yoga to as many people as possible through "regular" yoga classes, yoga classes for special conditions, yoga therapy sessions, and



Molly Lannon Kenny

outreach programs. Although her regular classes can include headstands, handstands, vinyasa flow, and alignment instructions, to be successful in special groups, she finds that the partnership model works best, with everyone being on an equal level. Agendas are set aside, and yoga can take a variety of forms. More importantly, said Molly, "talk to [the students], give some instructions, let them interact and have their own direct experience, rather than telling them what to do."

To reach diverse groups, we need to be willing to go to diverse communities. "Don't just invite them. They won't come," said Molly. "Why would anyone get on a bus and travel to a strange neighborhood where they look different from everyone else to practice something they know nothing about?"

When she was asked to give free passes to homeless people in transitional housing to come to her studio, Molly instead went to the homeless shelter, introduced herself, chit-chatted for awhile, and got to know a little about the people staying there. Later,

she went back, introduced herself again, talked some more, and led those who wanted to participate in some movement. Then she went back and taught a yoga class. Eventually she invited those at the shelter to come to her studio for a class especially for them—and gave them free passes at the end so they could come back on their own and join any class they wanted.

Molly emphasized the need to make everyone feel welcome when they walk into a yoga studio. First-timers feel vulnerable; it takes a lot of courage for them to make the effort to come, especially if they are from a marginalized or under-represented community. There is a difference between friendly and nice, said Molly. Almost everyone in a yoga studio is nice, but not everyone is

friendly. Be friendly.

Teaching yoga to special groups may require restructuring one's teaching style. Molly said, "Everything we do should lead to connection, not disconnection. Too many instructions lead to disconnection. Don't micro-manage a person's pose. There are reasons for precise alignment, but use discrimination about when you use it. How will it help in the situation? What is the clear objective?" In addition, Molly feels that using Sanskrit words out of context, quoting texts without contextualizing them, and making special claims about the powers of yoga create disconnection. "In social change, we have to rethink some of that," she said.

Being a bodhisattva

Molly began a discussion of the concept of the *bodhisattva*, which means one who is dedicated to the ultimate welfare of all beings, or anyone motivated by compassion, by describing volunteers at her center who "find their energy through giving." One workshop attendee shared how good she feels after teaching yoga on

a voluntary basis at a nursing home. She said she receives so much more from the residents than she can imagine they get from her.

Molly described a bodhisattva as one who has the attitude of "I feel so full and filled with the desire to serve. I feel so humbled by the body, mind, and soul and circumstances I was born into. I am so grateful for the opportunities and to have the money to go and study yoga. I feel so blessed by all of this that it is my life's orientation to be a better person. I want to serve and help other people. That's my life."

She also pointed out that many people have an idea about doing volunteer work through yoga, but are not truly acting from the place of bodhisattva. "The reasons outreach programs fail is that the [volunteers] were not ready to be that servant," said Molly.

Yoga teacher or yogi?

Molly's standards for yoga teachers are high. "Anyone can be a yoga teacher," she said, "... but the intention should be to be a yogi. That's a bodhisattva.... Yoga teachers are a dime a dozen. Ten percent of the people in the US practice yoga. If 100 percent of them actually acted like yogis, do you think that would make palpable change in our culture? Service and compassion means 'I am the same as you.' If you come to help me, you are wasting your time. If your liberation is bound up with mine, let's get to work."

To become a bodhisattva or a yogi, Molly said, "We have to dig deep into our prejudices and motivations and see how we think we are better than someone else." Through an exercise we did with partners, Molly showed how we tend to "distill people into a limited scope of identity": Polish, African American, mother, yoga teacher. "We all do this," she said. "It's part of our collective consciousness. Often we meet a person and we sum them up based on something we see, something we heard. It is hurtful and limiting to ourselves and others."

To overcome this tendency, Molly suggested we practice *svadhyaya* (self-inquiry). We may have fears, prejudices, and ideas about people of color, gays, transgender people, homeless people, vets, or people at the end of their life, said

Molly. "Acknowledge [those fears] and then start to break [them] down." It takes courage to look at our fears and prejudices, but we must do it with compassion for ourselves "including the racist or homophobic parts of ourselves," said Molly. "When you are not compassionate, you deny, defend, and judge. You have to have compassion: 'I do have this streak of racism, homophobia, etc.' 'I do have that fear of gang members.' 'I am afraid of old people. I don't want to be like that.' Bring it up and look at it, and then you can work with it. Otherwise it goes underground, and you pretend you are not any of those things."

When we have deep compassion toward ourselves and the courage to look at our fears, then we can authentically connect with others and uplift them from a place of connection and equality. "When we are our authentic self," said Molly, "there is no one we cannot work with. We know, at a profound level, that even with our differences, we are all the same. Our differences, such as they are, simply allow us to appreciate, encourage, and acknowledge the struggles of others. We try to be too

politically correct. Be genuine and authentic, and own that I am both different and fundamentally the same as you. Be 100 percent genuine, and you will be successful."

Molly Lannon Kenny will lead an expanded version of her workshop that includes yoga therapy, classes for special conditions, and activism December 2-4 at Prana Yoga Center in the Western suburbs, co-hosted by Yoga Among Friends. For more info or to register, visit pranayogacenter.com or yogaamongfriends.com.

Molly has written extensively and has been published in multiple issues of The International Journal of Yoga Therapy. She has been featured in The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, The Seattle Times, Yoga Northwest, and Yoga Journal, as well as on the BBC, NPR, and MSNBC. She is Vice President of The International Association of Yoga Therapists and is chair of the committee charged with creating educational standards for the field. Molly is the creator of Integrated Movement Therapy®, an approach to yoga therapy, and has played in rock bands for 20 years. Molly's website is samaryacenter.org.



Transform Yourself!

**Classes • Workshops
Certification Programs**

- Advanced Yoga Studies
- Yoga Teacher Training
- Ayurvedic Educator Training
- Ayurvedic Practitioner Training
- Ayurvedic Body Therapies

**Now
Accepting
Applications
for Fall 2011**

Kathleen Wright (Yoga): 708 989-1329
Patricia Layton (Ayurveda): 708 870-1204
Conveniently located in LaGrange, 1 block from Metra train
140 N LaGrange Rd, Suite 17, LaGrange IL 60525
www.bhavanainstitute.com

RYS • RYT 200 & 500