

Molly Kenny

Between rock and a healing space

By Mara McLoughlin

Don't let Molly Kenny fool you with her fringe of magenta bangs and multiple tattoos. A positive hybrid of Seattle punk rock chanteuse and innovative yoga instructor, she is changing the way yoga is viewed, and covered, by HMO's across the U.S.

"You know how it's said that if you do yoga now, you did it in a past life? When I was a little girl growing up in New York City, my dad used to take me to the huge Barnes and Noble bookstore. I would just sit there and look at the yoga books," Kenny admits.

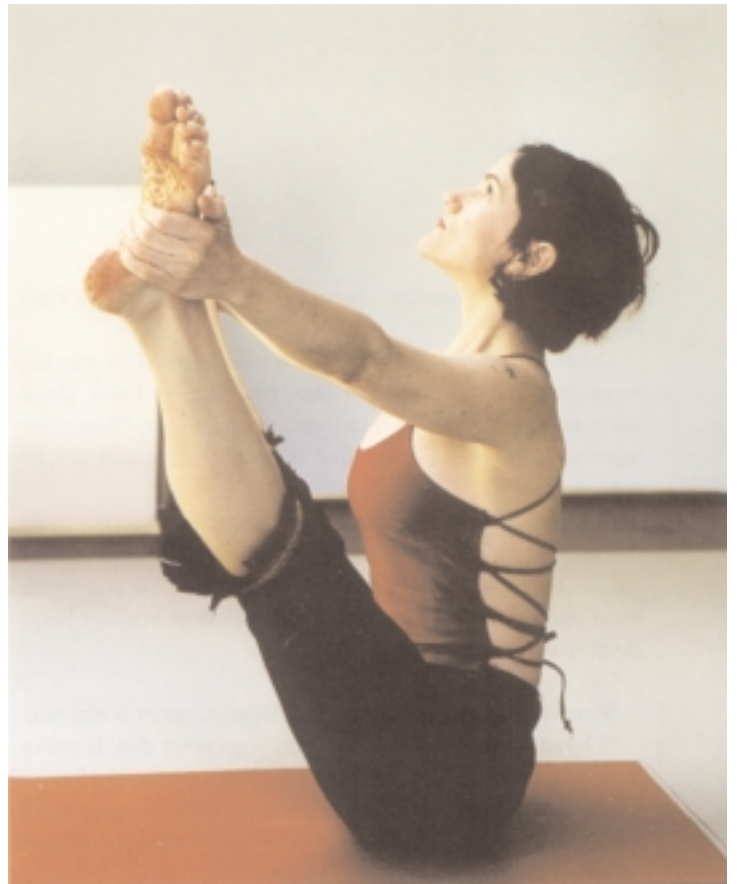
Kenny holds a Master's degree in Speech Pathology. She is also the developer of Integrative Movement Therapy, a new approach to working with her patients that is, as she puts it, "all yoga."

Upon entering Kenny's studio, The Samarya Center, located at 18th and Yesler in Seattle's Capitol Hill district, one guesses that she lives here. She doesn't, "although everyone asks me that," she laughs.

A sitting area with a futon sofa and chairs, a dining room table on which a cup of tea steams, and a bright, fully equipped kitchen create a cozy, inviting space. Behind a gauze curtain is the skylit, 800-square foot studio, with an altar that runs the length of one wall. Kenny explains that many people donated their time to fix up the studio, and points out various objects around the space that were gifts from clients and their families.

Speech-language pathology deals with any pathology associated with communication: social incompetence and limited use of language, such as that exhibited by AD(H)D and autistic children, stroke and head injury survivors, and those with any progressive neurological disease. Although Kenny sees the whole range of children and adults with communication disorders, she has become the de facto yoga therapy expert for children with Autism spectrum disorders, which make up 75% of her caseload.

Upon graduating from the University of Washington, she worked for five years in the HMO field in Seattle. She commented how during graduate training programs, "everything human is trained out of you. The intuitive human connection is supposed to be ignored. How does one measure the light that goes on behind a person's eyes?" Molly went on to say, "if it can't be empirically proven, if a checkmark on a graph can't be



made," then the clinicians are supposedly not doing their jobs.

Kenny began using yoga with her clients after being encouraged by her first yoga teacher.

"At the time I started working at the HMO, I belonged to a gym where they offered Ashtanga yoga. I started taking class twice a week. I connected strongly with the teacher, so I quit the gym and just went to her studio instead. She would always tell me that I should quit the HMO and do yoga with my clients.

"I started practicing on adults first, the stroke survivors. They were very sad, because people didn't want to touch them; people were afraid of the change this person's body had gone through. But they craved physical touch. I would manipulate their bodies through the yoga poses, and they loved it; it made them feel cared about.

"After that experience, I tried it with the Autistic and AD(H)D kids. At the time, I didn't know anyone else who was doing yoga with special needs kids, and I just thought, 'these kids are going to be able to do this.' When I saw that the kids loved it, I decided to quit the HMO, and do yoga."

Her five-year stint at the HMO provided Kenny with a client base of both children and adults. Upon announcing her decision to start something new, she confessed to the parents, "To be totally honest, I don't even know what I'm doing with your kids.' Now, I know I'm doing one of the only things that works."

Integrative Movement Therapy, or IMT is the yoga based therapy technique explored by Molly and her business partner, Stephanie Hager, who holds a Master's degree in Clinical Social Work. S.E.L.F. Educational Consulting and Advocacy Services is the umbrella business under which they provide their innovative therapy. S.E.L.F, which stands for "Self-

“How does one measure the light that goes on behind a person's eyes?”

Esteem is a Learning Fundamental,” supports their belief that “developing and encouraging the individual's self esteem is the single most important factor for increasing skills in all areas of language, learning and social competence.”

With self-esteem building as the foundation for the system, IMT embraces five other core principles: 1) structure and continuity; 2) social interaction; 3) language stimulation; 4) self-calming; and 5) physical stimulation.

Structure and repetition have proven effective in assisting individuals who face challenges concerning the brain's frontal lobe functions.

Consciousness, or how we know what we are doing; judgements in regard to what occurs in daily activities; emotional and expressive language; and memory for habits and motor activities are among those tasks assumed by the frontal lobe. Kenny and Hager both draw from their experience in Ashtanga yoga classes which follow a set posture flow, to build this structure.

Kenny used to run social groups at the HMO, which, she scoffed, were “totally fake. The medical bureaucracy is so focused on pathology. People are brought together in this rigid social experience because there's something ‘wrong’ with them.

“Therapists working within the medical bureaucracy and the ‘culture of unwellness’ propagated by HMO's are not supported by the system,” she said. “They see twelve kids a day for a half-hour session. They are overwhelmed and burnt out. How can you help someone when you have nothing to give? I know firsthand what is happening in these clinics - and it doesn't work.”

The IMT session facilitates natural social interaction, as participants share a common goal. “It's one's divinity, versus one's pathology,” she explained.

“You work with a client, a stroke survivor or an Autistic child and ask, really want to know; who is that person inside there! Once you recognize that being inside, that being inside recognizes you, too.”

Kenny's professional training as a singer - she fronts the Seattle band, Matchless - grants her a high level of familiarity with the vishuddha chakra, one of the body's seven main energy centers, located at the throat. This chakra relates to one's ability to express oneself verbally, which is difficult enough for “normal” people.

Language stimulation is a challenge for therapists working with non-verbal chil-

dren. Very often, voice and communication disorders are stress related. The IMT approach is ideal for working with non-verbal children, “because children are motivated by physical interaction, rather than the demand for spoken language on a reward contingent basis,” according to Kenny. Building vocabulary, word associations, and story sequencing are some of the ways language is stimulated in the fun no-pressure sessions.

Some of the behavior exhibited by Autistic children disturbs people around them, like hand flapping or finger twisting. These activities, known as self-stimulatory behaviors, are results of an aroused state brought on by sensory overload, or lack of predictability in routine.

However, Kenny offers that “providing students with the ability to recognize low levels of agitation, as well as a variety of options for self-calming, is an essential aspect of increasing both social competence and general well-being.” Deep, controlled breathing and chanting and singing take place in all sessions, and are valuable tools children can utilize when faced with adversity in their environment.

Just in time for a parent-child class, a three-year-old boy walks in with his mom, holding a baggie full of change. “Oh, is that for a t-shirt?” asks Hager, who was leading the class. “Did you have to break your piggy bank for that?” “I broke two piggy banks!” the boy declares proudly.

“A lot of parents don't know how to play physically, how to engage in a physical game with their children,” Kenny said. In the class, kids are sitting opposite their mothers, pretending that their mothers are candles ready to be blown out, a practice for bhastrika, or bellows breath. Sometimes parents ask what, if anything, they should practice with their children at home. Kenny tells them not to practice anything, but encourages them to simply play with their kids.

She speaks of yoga's call to service, what Kenny terms “bigger” yoga. It's not just lip service: Kenny also reaches recovery yoga to adults facing life challenges and hosts a “yoga club” for homeless children, free of charge. Kenny challenges other yoga instructors to do karma yoga - to volunteer their time to their communities.

“I can guarantee you that most yogis aren't filling their time teaching classes,” says Kenny.

All IMT sessions end with giving the children the chance to name their one best

attribute. “They can name only one, otherwise we'd be there a while,” Kenny laughs. The three traits most often acknowledged at the end of class? Beauty. Grace. Intelligence.

Through these direct self-esteem building tactics, children develop a positive sense of self-worth to carry them through difficult social, academic, and personal situations.

“These kids have never seen themselves in that way,” remarks Kenny. “They can all do things in yoga that they never thought they could do.”

Some of the information in this article is from “Integrated Movement Therapy: Yoga-based therapy as a viable and effective intervention for Autism spectrum and related disorders,” by Molly Kenny.

The next three-day S.E.L.F. Teacher Training workshop at the Samarya Center is October 4-6, 2002. Call (206) 568-8335 for more information.

Wanna be like Molly?

Yoga can be compensated by insurance companies, and Kenny figured out the back-door way to make this possible.

For Kenny and Hager, it's a matter of degrees. Kenny's advice to individuals who are interested in pursuing a “huge-ly fulfilling job in which you give and learn so much and make a living” is, use your degree. If you don't have a degree, consider taking the steps towards accomplishing that goal.

“Don't be afraid to know what you are capable of doing and assert yourself in that way. There's no reason why anyone couldn't do this,” she advises. Kenny tells how there are “universal medical codes” that come in the insurance paperwork. They are standardized, with no words - all numbers. She just sits down and fills in the little boxes that coincide with the numbers for her services. It's that simple.

Health care workers who are interested in seeing actual results with their clients can learn how to use yoga as a teaching tool. S.E.L.F. conducts weekend long teacher training courses in IMT throughout the year.