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# CLASSICAL YOGA IN MODERN TIMES: MARION “MUGS” MCCONNELL CARRIES FORWARD TRADITION

It is a milestone achievement for Marion “Mugs” McConnell as she celebrates her 40th year as a yoga instructor. As one of Canada’s pioneer yoga practitioners, her long career in the field is nothing short of impressive. “Mugs”, as she prefers to be called, has been instrumental in bringing classical yoga teachings to modern times, ensuring the benefits of the deeper practices are not lost.

Mugs’ first introduction to yoga was in 1973. Yoga was fairly unknown in the west, so it was not easy to find a class unless you were in the larger cities. And yoga studios were a concept not yet born, so most of her early studies came from books. Mugs’ love for yoga was instantaneous and, five years later, in February 1978, she became a certified advanced yoga instructor when she graduated from the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centre under Swami Vishnudevananda’s instruction.

Mugs’ studies did not end there. Through her search for a yoga teacher she came across a very adept yoga master from Latvia, who was living in San Rafael, California. Dr. Hari Dickman was considered a disciple by many of the great yoga masters of India since he studied numerous pathways of yoga. These included not just hatha yoga, but also raja, jnana, kundalini, siddha, and kriya yoga over a period of 70 years. Mugs was fortunate to be invited to live in Hari’s home to study one-on-one with him during the last period of his life, where he tirelessly shared with her these deeper teachings of yoga.

During the last four decades, many yoga masters have played a crucial role in her own development as a yoga teacher. The Sivananda system of yoga is where her roots lay in Hatha Yoga. Erich Schiffmann, whom she has studied extensively under, taught her



the joy of Freedom Yoga. Under Namadeva Acharya, Mugs received her certification as a Mantra Yoga teacher. Dr. Swami Gitananda’s expertise in pranayama and mudras inspired her and she continues to follow these teachings through his son, Dr. Ananda Balayogi Bhavanani. Each master has taught her something more about the depth and breadth of each yoga path.

Throughout the last 40 years, Marion has taken every effort to extend these teachings to her students, so they all may benefit from the wisdom that has been so generously shared with her. One effort to accomplish this is through her book, *Letters From The Yoga Masters*, which contains an abundance of unique yoga techniques from numerous yoga masters, passed on to her through Hari.

**“This book is a ‘must read’ for every sincere and dedicated yoga sadhaka. Mugs lays out in intricate detail some very rare techniques that are gems for all sincere students....”**

**Dr. Ananda Balayogi Bhavanani,**  
Chairman of ICYER at  
Ananda Ashram, Pondicherry, India

“One of my favorite meditations in the book is from Swami Sivapremananda” says McConnell, as she shares one of the techniques. “It includes three mantras that are intended to help awaken our consciousness to the spirit within.” Sit in a meditative posture. Breathing is free. Gradually the mind is absorbed in experiencing the inhalation and exhalation (pranas). As a consequence of concentration, the breath becomes slow.

For several minutes experience the cool air entering inside the upper nostrils and the warm air exhaled along the lower part of the nostrils. Contemplate on the unity of the cosmic prana (inhalation) and individual prana (exhalation). Inhalation represents peace, infinity, fullness, transcendence. Exhalation represents spiritual freedom, expansion of consciousness, diffusion of the individual breath. Begin to mentally

repeat the mantra “*Idam prana ayam atma Brahma*” - meaning the consciousness of prana awakens in me the consciousness of my soul, which is one with God. Continue for several minutes, feeling the breath flow in the upper and lower nostrils while repeating the mantra.

Inhaling, move the mind along the convex outline of a crescent moon in the middle of the head, from the 3rd eye to the back of the head. Exhaling, move the mind from the back of the head, along the lower line of the convex moon to the 3rd eye. Begin to repeat the mantra “*Idam prana sarva bhuteshu gudah*” - meaning through the experience of prana I experience the spiritual essence, which is in all as it is within me.

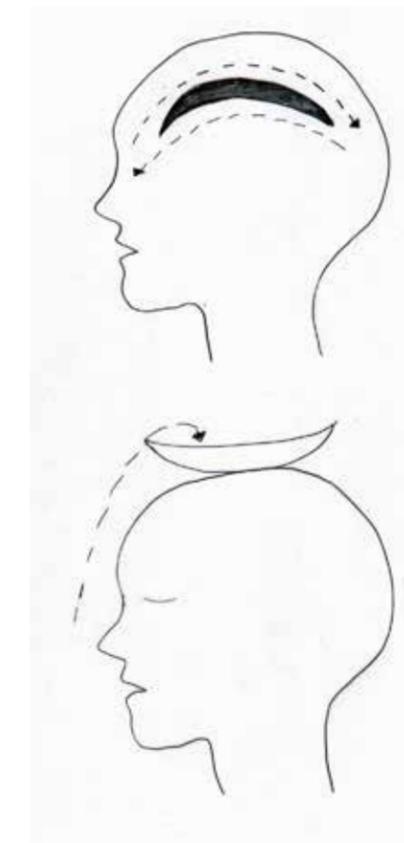
For the final phase, feel only the inhalation and the sensation of prana moving up to the top of the head and into the shape of a crescent moon. Give no attention to exhalation. With each in-breath feel the sensation of the prana flowing up and into the crescent moon bowl at the Sahasrara chakra. Mentally repeat the mantra, “*Idam prana pragnanam iti Brahma*” - meaning the experience of prana awakens in me the transcendental consciousness of God.

Conclude the meditation with the verbal repetition of Om or the Purnamadah Shanti mantra.

**“McConnell provides glimpses into the modern history and practice of yoga that no one else could have given us. She was privy to exchanges of knowledge and wisdom known to no one else.”**

**William Phillips (Shantideva),**  
disciple of Dr. Swami Gitananda and  
author of Laya Yoga Kriyas (CD).

Recently, Mugs has been recording many of these pranayama and meditation techniques and posting them on her website. “I want to make them accessible and easy to practice. It is difficult to practice a meditation by reading it, so the recordings



put all the pieces together - all you have to do is listen and do the practice.”

Another way Mugs makes these teachings accessible is through her yoga teacher training. Nearly 25 years ago Mugs co-founded the South Okanagan Yoga Academy (SOYA), one of the first schools in Canada to be registered with Yoga Alliance. The school also meets the standards of the International Yoga Teachers Association (IYTA). She has integrated many of the teachings from Hari into the 200 hour and 300 hour Upgrade curriculum, carrying on the lineage of teachings as taught to her. The SOYA trainings are held in Vancouver, Penticton, Prince George, Salmon Arm, Creston, Calgary and Mexico.

SOYA now offers a “Refresh and Reboot” program for certified yoga teachers. “Not all trainings are the same. Many yoga teachers come to us to deepen their understanding of yoga beyond asana, so we decided to invite certified teachers to attend our 200 hour programs at a discounted rate. This way they can study the philosophy and expand their teaching skills to meet international standards without paying full price all over again.”



**“After extensive research on where to take my teacher training, I knew I made the right decision after the first day of class. The SOYA program surpassed all my expectations.”**

**Tracey Short**, Calgary.

Mugs travels extensively to share the traditional teachings on yoga in workshops and weekend retreats. She interweaves asana classes from different lineages, practices in pranayama, and a variety of meditations. “When I teach people directly, the classical teachings in the book become much more accessible. It seems to take the mystery out of them and make them practical.”

This past year she travelled to teach in Latvia. With great anticipation she is waiting for the release of a documentary she participated in about the history of yoga in Latvia and her teacher, Dr. Hari Dickman. Long before Hari came to live in the USA, he established the Latvian Yoga Society in the early 1930s, teaching his students various systems of yoga. After the Soviets invaded Latvia during World War II, Hari was living in “displaced persons” camps and teaching yoga there. In 1952 Paramhansa Yogananda was able to bring Hari to the USA, where Mugs was eventually invited to study with him.

Every June Mugs and her husband Bob organize the SOYA Annual Yoga Retreat, where over 100 yogis gather to learn from a world renowned yoga teacher. This coming

**“This years’ retreat was so powerful from start to finish that I cannot find the words to express how I was feeling throughout the weekend. Powerful!”**

**Sue H.**



year SOYA will host Brenda L. Feuerstein (wife of the late philosopher Georg Feuerstein) who will be teaching hatha yoga practices to awaken the heart, as well as skills for trauma, eating disorders, grief and dying. It is another opportunity to become a part of the SOYA family.

During the last four decades, Marion “Mugs” McConnell has seen yoga grow and evolve into one of the most highly popular and sought-after fitness programs in the world. Watching her students grow and transform as they develop their skills and understanding of the yoga philosophy continues to be the most gratifying part of her career. As she celebrates this significant milestone, Mugs looks ahead to the future of yoga and everything she has to offer this dynamic practice.

Check out the SOYA Annual Yoga Retreat and Yoga Teacher Trainings at [www.soyayoga.com](http://www.soyayoga.com)

To find an event with Mugs, learn more about the documentary, or listen to the recorded techniques in her book, go to [www.lettersfromtheyogamasters.com](http://www.lettersfromtheyogamasters.com)

Upanishad Mantra technique from Letters from the Yoga Masters by Marion McConnell, published by

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