

deaf-friendly yoga

BY SHANNON SEXTON

signs of change



It's February and I'm in Austin, Texas—population: 1 million—home to health-conscious hippies, Hispanics, and shoot-for-the-stars musicians hoping to score big in the live music capital of the world. Austin is a place where strangers strike up conversations on the street as if they're neighbors in a small town; vegetarian chefs make magical meals from goods grown in organic gardens just beyond their restaurant doors; 1 out of 5 people practice yoga; and there are more acupuncturists in business than MDs.

Lila Lolling,
founder of
Deaf Yoga in
Austin, Texas

Austin also has an unusually high deaf population. About 60,000 residents are deaf, in part because of deaf-friendly employers like Dell and the Texas School for the Deaf, and in part because “like attracts like.” Most deaf people prefer to communicate in American Sign Language (ASL), a highly complex, expressive, artful language that few people with normal hearing can ever grok. Consequently, they tend to gravitate to cities where a larger number of people share their native language—and in turn, their unique culture.

I've left the silent, snow-covered mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania to meet some of the people in Austin's deaf community: social workers, teachers, accountants, and college students who have recently become part of a budding Deaf Yoga movement centered here in Austin. I'm not sure what that means, or why deaf people would need a yoga “movement,” but I'm here to find out.



Outside, at sunset, it's a breezy 60 degrees. I've just stuffed myself with roasted vegetable enchiladas at the East Side Café, where I chatted with Deaf Yoga's founder, 32-year-old Lila Lolling. She has dainty features and a splash of freckles across her flawless skin. A former sign language interpreter and a certified yoga teacher, Lila created the organization in September 2004 after she realized that it's nearly impossible for deaf people to learn yoga the usual way. "Pretend you're locked in a soundproof booth," she tells me. "Then imagine playing follow-the-leader with people outside the booth who are speaking Swahili."

I find her metaphor riveting, although I don't entirely understand it. Aren't yoga classes mostly visual? Wouldn't it be harder for a blind person to learn yoga than a deaf one? Lila doesn't think so. Blind people naturally share the same language as people with 20/20 vision. Deaf people don't.

Think about it. If you have normal hearing, you were immersed in the sounds of your mother

tongue from the moment you were born and began imitating them soon after, measuring the quality of your voice with those around you. Deaf people, on the other hand, have no natural access to spoken language; they can neither hear other speakers nor the sound of their own voices in response. They cannot hear the phonemes on which spoken language is based, so even learning the ABCs is quite a feat.

Some linguistic experts argue that ASL and English have less in common than English and, say, Japanese. ASL is a visual, spatial, gestural language with no standardized written form; English is verbal, spoken, and written. Contrary to popular belief, ASL is not a code for English. It is a unique language with a grammar, syntax, and vocabulary entirely independent of English and other tongues.

For these reasons, the language barrier between the deaf and the hearing is huge. For those who were born deaf or became deaf before they learned to speak, English is a foreign language that is



photos: Sarah Kenner; photos were taken at Yoga Yoga



agonizingly difficult to learn. Take reading, for example. When you're used to thinking visually, spatially, and kinesthetically, a flat page of words strung together in an unfamiliar order and full of foreign vocabulary looks hieroglyphic. Some deaf people become both bilingual and literate, but many don't. In fact, deaf-literacy studies estimate that the average deaf adult has a third- to fifth-grade reading level.

So chances are that if you're deaf, you can't learn yoga from a book. CDs are out of the question, and there are no DVDs in your native language. Even if you're bilingual and literate, most videos aren't equipped with closed captioning. And even if they are, you can't read English instructions on a screen and do downward dog, shoulderstand, or child's pose at the same time.

But what about mainstream classes? Your hearing counterparts will probably assume that you can lipread the teacher's instructions, but that's incredibly difficult, even for those who are fluent in English. To begin with, many sounds look exactly the same on the

lips—"b," "p," and "m," for example. And only 30 percent of English sounds are visible to the naked eye. Add in homonyms like *blue* and *blew*, along with regional accents, variability in the speed of speech, and the visibility of the speaker's mouth, and you may understand why some deaf people say that "speechreading" or "speechguessing" is a more accurate description of what they do.

But even if you speechread, a beginner yoga class can quickly slip out of reach. When you close your eyes in *shavasana*, you miss all of the teacher's instructions. How do you know when to come out of the pose? Instead of relaxing, you have to keep looking around to see what others are doing. Then, the class moves into poses where you cannot see the teacher's mouth. You miss important reminders like, "Go at your own pace; don't forget to breathe; this pose is contraindicated for...."

What if you have carpal tunnel syndrome and you're doing plank pose because you didn't catch the

"I'm very energetic, rajasic. I have a lot of mental chatter. Yoga reminds me: I need to slow down. It makes me calmer and gives me inner peace."

—Joanie Hansen





teacher's warning? What if you're a woman who is menstruating and you're doing an inversion? What if you turn your head in shoulderstand to look at your neighbor and end up injuring your neck because you couldn't hear the teacher's safety guidelines?

Even if you manage to get through a class unharmed, you miss most of the instructions. Take a simple asana like cobra. You look around and see others lying flat on their bellies and lifting their heads and chests off the floor, so you imitate the pose by arching your neck and upper back. You do not catch the details, "Ground in your feet and pelvis; squeeze your buttocks to protect your lower back; belly breathe into the floor; keep your neck long and relaxed."

And meditation? Forget it. How can you relax and turn inward if you have to keep opening your eyes to see if everyone else is still sitting there doing something internally that is based on instructions you barely understand? Because there's another language barrier embedded in a yoga class: lack of vocabulary. In ASL,

the most basic terms of yoga—*asana*, *pranayama*, *meditation*, *chakras*, *consciousness*—don't exist. Finger-spelling those and other foreign concepts is tedious, time-consuming, and ineffective; yoga teachers and interpreters who spell out strings of unfamiliar terms might as well be spelling words in German. So even if a hearing yoga instructor signs to her deaf students, all parties face an intimidating conceptual and linguistic gap, making beginner asana classes hard, and more advanced practices like pranayama, meditation, and *yoga nidra* impossible.

But there is hope. Lila and her students declare that a detailed, in-depth yoga vocabulary in ASL can and will happen. People create entire jargons of ASL signs for deaf students who are studying (and later, working in) specialized occupations like computer technology and accounting all the time, they observe. Why not do the same thing for yoga?

So word by word, Lila and her students are devising a picture-based Deaf Yoga dictionary with

snapshots of newly created ASL signs for yoga terms ranging from concrete asana names to philosophical concepts in the *Yoga Sutra* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. This way, deaf people can explore the philosophy and practice of yoga in their native language.

Enter the Deaf Yoga movement: an organized, collective effort to ensure that all deaf Americans gain equal access to the richness of the yoga tradition. Fueled by Austin's Deaf Yoga organization (Lila and a dozen of her core deaf students) and supported by a growing web of other Deaf Yoga enthusiasts, as well as hearing yoga teachers across the nation, this movement is largely, as Lila puts it, created "by the deaf, for the deaf."

That is why she put together a board of six deaf students to advise and plan the organization's projects. Freelance webmaster Lisi Whitworth is designing a multimedia website geared for an ASL-oriented audience, complete with videos of deaf people signing about yoga; profiles of Deaf Yoga teachers and students across the nation; and a calendar of nationwide events, retreats, and yoga classes. Board members Bob McMahon and Don Miller are working with Lila to create yoga vocabulary signs. Bob is also working with Bonnie Ramsey and Joanie Hansen to conceptualize and plan the first teacher-training program in ASL so that both Deaf Yoga students and hearing signers can teach yoga to deaf people across the country.

A few hours after dinner at the East Side Café, I'm leaning up against a cream-colored wall in a funky, asymmetrical yoga room, about to observe Lila teach a "signed and spoken" class to a small group of regulars, some deaf, some hearing. A wall of frosted glass separates us from the parking lot. I can hear the distant whoosh of traffic and the muffled voices of arriving students who, backlit by headlights, cast shadows on the frosted glass as they walk by.

Lila sits in *sukhasana*, facing the class, eyes closed, waiting for latecomers. A few minutes later, she looks around the room and extends a warm welcome to everyone in both English and sign language.* Then, after confirming that her deaf students can see her, she begins the class.

* Because communicating to students in two languages is so difficult, Lila often reverts to a form of signing that imitates the grammar and sentence structure of English, called Pidgin Sign English. When all of the students in her classes are deaf, she communicates in ASL.

"In Sivananda Yoga, we begin with the chant of *Om*," she says, signing. "Inhale," she says, and her hand morphs into a wide-mouthed puppet that hovers in front of her face, craning its neck toward the class. Then, in one fluid movement, the "puppet" tucks its chin and closes its mouth while withdrawing toward Lila's nose. This is the Deaf Yoga sign for inhale.



Lila begins to verbalize the sound of *Om*, and as her students follow, she fingerspells the letter “O” in front of her left shoulder, dragging the letter across her chest toward her right shoulder, where it shifts into an “M.” As the students raise their voices in three communal, off-key *Oms*, I am surprised that the deaf students have the courage to give voice to a sound they cannot hear—a sound that is coming from within.

“Now,” says Lila, “*Kapalabhati*.” Repeatedly, she signs a sharp, staccato exhalation coupled with a slow, smooth inhalation. “Forceful exhalation, passive inhalation,” she explains in English. For a few minutes, the room is filled with the sound of breath.

Afterward, Lila leads her students through a fairly vigorous Sivananda hatha routine. Energizing pranayama, sun salutes, and a balanced sequence of asanas are interspersed with short sessions in shavasana. In poses like plow and spinal twist, where

her deaf students cannot see her sign, Lila demonstrates the posture while everyone looks on, offering both signed and spoken instructions. Then she clicks a remote-control-operated dimmer switch and the lights fade—a signal for her students to move into the pose. When Lila needs to get someone’s attention or wants the class to release the asana, she brightens the lights, and they return to a seated position so that the deaf students, again, can see her sign.

Lila makes other deaf-friendly adjustments to her class. When she needs to correct a deaf student she pulls on his mat, touches his foot, or taps the floor in front of him, depending on the pose. When one woman is in cobra, Lila drops down on her stomach and elbows, facing the student’s uplifted face, and signs instructions. While demonstrating sun salutes, she signs freely in the middle of her lunge pose, as if it’s the most natural thing in the world.

When I meet Bob McMahon, a tall, stately gentleman with silver hair, after class, he meets my eyes with warmth and confidence. I feel an affinity for him, but I can tell that he doesn’t speak English, and he knows I cannot sign. Lila is engrossed in a conversation with another deaf student and can’t interpret for us. So we meet in mute, shaking hands.

He points to his chest and utters a strange sound in a high, tiny voice. I raise my eyebrows to indicate, *What?*

He repeats the sound several times before my face lights up. “Bob!” I exclaim. I point to myself and say, “Shannon.” He nods and smiles. And then we’ve run out of things to say.





“Yoga helps me feel whole. Before, I was all scattered. It has made a big difference in my life.”

—Bob McMahon

Suddenly, I feel uncomfortable. Bob continues to hold my gaze. I can see Lila signing with the other student in my peripheral vision, and I want to choke her.

I am surprised by the extremity of my reaction, surprised even more that it recurs over the weekend, surprised that on Sunday, when Bob and I are left “uninterpreted” at a juice stand, he points to me and says, *Are you scared...* he bends his elbows, clenches his fists, and shudders as if he’s seen a ghost...*of the deaf...* he points to his ear, then sculpts the left and right hemispheres of the earth with his hands...*world?*

I give him the so-so sign, then shake my head no, then shrug, then wonder if I’m lying.

The question echoes in my head.

“Language barrier” becomes the theme of my weekend. When I interview two skilled speechreaders, our conversations have an erratic, halting feel. Both women have a hard time understanding me, perhaps because of my northeastern accent. Lila serves as my interpreter when I interview a dozen Deaf Yoga students who prefer to communicate in sign. Because she has not worked as a professional interpreter for seven years, some of her translations are choppy and abstract. One man, Nicholas Garza, is nearly lost in translation. When I ask him about his experiences with yoga, he launches into a spirited monologue, but he’s signing so fast that Lila can barely keep up. Her

interpretation of his reply is further watered down by my notetaking, which is not as fast as her speech. The translation of Nicholas’s answers, according to my notes, comes out:

“First yoga class, 10 years ago, challenge for my body, breathing. Whiplash. Yoga helps. At Austin Community College, took yoga class with two interpreters. Still things lost. They stood at sides of room. In many poses, couldn’t see them. Hard to look up at interpreters. Then I found Deaf Yoga. ASL, cool! It was great. Learned a lot. Spirituality...a wonderful thing. I feel like I’m expressed....”

At this point, Lila’s voice trails off. Nicholas continues signing for two, three, four full minutes. We watch him in silence.

Lila is flabbergasted. “I’m sorry,” she says, signing to Nicholas. “I got behind and couldn’t catch up. I couldn’t translate the grammar and sentence structure into English fast enough.”

Despite the language barriers, I learn a lot about the deaf students. Some of them, like Bonnie Ramsey, have been trying to learn yoga for 30 years by dropping into mainstream classes, pouring over books,



“Before I started taking yoga, I was going through a hard time in my life. A lot of changes, a lot of stress. Now I feel totally different! Breathing is easier, and my body is becoming more flexible. I feel like my muscles and bones are unlocking and waking up.”

—Bonnie Ramsey

coming soon

Deaf Yoga DVD

The first-ever video to guide deaf students through a basic hatha class in American Sign Language. Suitable for all experience levels. Available Fall 2005.

Signed and Spoken Sivananda Yoga Retreat

At the Barsana Dham Ashram in Austin, Texas, November 11-13, 2005, deaf and hearing yoga students will get acquainted with the traditional teachings of Sivananda Yoga. Space is limited; early registration recommended.

National Deaf Yoga Retreat

Students who are fluent in ASL will come together to explore yoga at the Crossings Retreat Center, located in the beautiful Hill Country of Austin, Texas, March 3-5, 2006. All classes will be guided in ASL.

Deaf Yoga Teacher Training

Five of Austin's Deaf Yoga students began participating in the first Deaf Yoga teacher-training program in August 2005. The training involves a long series of weekend intensives and four required Deaf Yoga classes per week, in which trainees are encouraged to deepen their hatha practices and begin student teaching. A national teacher-training program is in the works for 2006.

To register for an upcoming event, purchase a DVD, or view a more detailed calendar, visit www.deafyoga.com.

and noodling around in their living rooms. But many of the concepts—breathing, meditation—were too hard to grasp in English.

When Bonnie started taking Deaf Yoga classes nine months ago, she tells me later over e-mail, she was really stressed out. “I was breathing shallowly, and my body was so stiff I was beginning to get arthritis,” she says. “Now breathing is easier. I feel like my bones are unlocking and waking up, and my muscles and veins are too. I’m exploring meditation. I want to teach Deaf Yoga students (and of course, I welcome hearing students, too) in the near future.

“When I took yoga in the 1980s with a hearing teacher,” she says, “yoga seemed very hard. Impossible for the deaf. My second experience was with an interpreter and a hearing teacher, but it was still hard to follow. I struggled with the breathing. I could not watch the teacher demonstrate the pose because I had to look at the interpreter to see what the teacher was saying. And in meditation, I had to keep opening my eyes to see if they were done yet. It was really frustrating.

“Lila was the first person to explain yoga to me in sign language, how to breathe. Now I experience, I understand. She moves around the room and signs where I can see her. Her explanations are clear, and she doesn’t skip the little details. I’m not frustrated anymore. I can really relax because of the lighting signals,



I don't have to keep opening my eyes or wait for someone to tap my shoulder. When the lights come on, I know it's time to come out of the pose."

Why does the deaf world need yoga? For the same reason everyone else does. Bonnie explains: "Just because we don't hear doesn't mean that our minds are quiet. They aren't! Our minds spin in turmoil just like everyone else's. And we don't have the benefit of hearing about possible solutions on the radio on the way to work." This is why the people in Austin's Deaf Yoga organization want to spread the word about yoga to their friends. Because, as aspiring Deaf Yoga teacher Don Miller points out, "many of us lack access to spiritual traditions."

I'm finally beginning to understand the force behind the Deaf Yoga movement. Westerners with normal hearing can drop into a yoga class, sign up for a prestigious conference, enjoy a retreat at an ashram, and seek out internationally known teachers for study and advice. They can devour an endless assortment of CDs, DVDs, and books on hatha yoga, ayurveda, meditation, even ancient texts translated into their native language. Deaf people face a labyrinth of obstacles just to grasp the yoga basics.

According to Lila's research, only eight other certified yoga teachers in the United States offer classes

to deaf students in ASL. Google "deaf + yoga" and you'll get a mere dozen hits, and most are for Austin's Deaf Yoga organization. Comb the Web for deaf people who teach yoga to the deaf and you'll get a big fat zero.

But word is spreading fast, says Lila. Increasing demand inspires her hope in the program. Deaf Yoga has the potential to extend far beyond its epicenter in Austin, she tells me. She and her students hope their organization will eventually touch both the deaf world and the mainstream yoga world on a national level.

Imagine going to a yoga conference and attending a lecture by a deaf yoga practitioner, interpreted by a hearing person. What can a deaf practitioner teach you about your body and mind, about putting the teachings of yoga into practice? The men and women behind Deaf Yoga envision a time when deaf students can not only attend hatha classes, conferences, retreats, and teacher-training programs of all styles, but can also serve as teachers to the deaf and hearing alike.

Because, as Bob explains to me on Sunday in an Austin park, when it comes to the deaf-hearing spiritual dialogue, *We have only...he sets his fist, fingers-down, on the picnic table and scratches the back of his hand with a thumbnail...scratched the surface.* ●

Award-winning writer Shannon Sexton lives at the Himalayan Institute in Honesdale, Pennsylvania. She is the senior editor of Yoga International.