

# YOGAChicago

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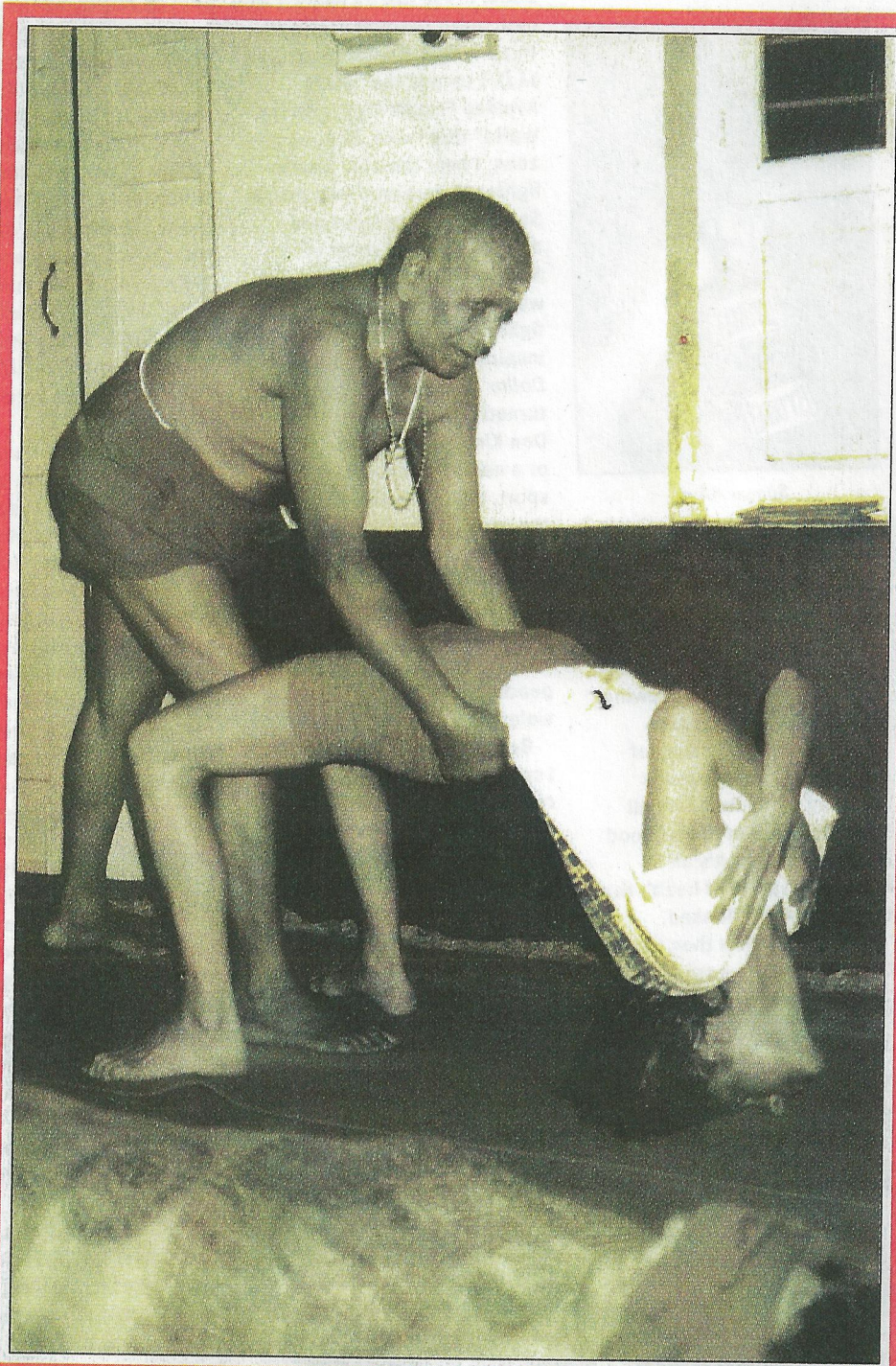


Photo by Kaili Das

*Pattabhi Jois and Amy Beth Treciokas*

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# The Path of a Spiritual Warrior

By Sumya Anani

I've been walking the spiritual warrior's path for 13 years now. It formally started August 12, 1996, the day I stepped into a boxing ring for my first professional fight.

By that time, I had already been teaching yoga for about a year. Honestly, I wasn't prepared to do any service to this amazing practice. I fell in love with yoga and just knew it was my life path. My four-year-old son and I moved to Jamaica in 1995, and I started teaching tourists in a yoga center. This was a great place to start teaching before really being ready. People would be on vacation for a week, maybe take two or three classes with me and then go. Surely I could sound really smart and knowledgeable for a few classes.

I moved back to Kansas City in July of 1996. My friend and future boxing trainer, Barry Becker, had been trying to convince me to fight for years. He welcomed me home by telling me that he had arranged my first pro fight. I had three weeks to train. For someone with the insecurity that I had, to participate in, arguably, the most dangerous and physically



Sumya Anani

challenging sport in the world seemed crazy. I was also a massage therapist. Between teaching yoga, giving massages and being a mother, my whole world was focused on healing.

I was very insecure growing up. I always say that self-esteem is the root cause of most, if not all, the issues plaguing our culture. We all need, need, *need* to feel good about ourselves. It's an important aspect of health that must not be overlooked.

Little did I know then that boxing would be a crucial "weapon" in the rebuilding of

my self-esteem. Boxing soon became an integral part of my healing repertoire.

Fast forward to today, July 2009. In the last 13 years, I won four world championships in three weight classes (135, 140, 147). I earned the "Most Avoided Female Fighter in the World" title twice, in 2004 and 2005. I beat the only female fighter to date who won over a \$1 million in the sport and appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*; she never would rematch me. Another fight I had may have been the inspiration behind the *Million Dollar Baby* movie. Because I turned down a contract with Don King, I never made money or a name for myself in the sport, despite being the best in the world in my weight class.

The comment I get most often when people learn that I'm a world champion boxer and a yoga teacher is this: "They seem so opposite. Yoga is so peaceful and boxing seems so violent."

Being involved in both worlds, I see how boxing and yoga complement each other. To me, they're the perfect yin/yang combination. Boxing taught me to defend myself from my outer opponent. Yoga teaches me to defend myself from my inner opponent: my own mind, the ego, the limitations, those places in my consciousness where I'm tempted to judge and withhold love.

My worst opponent is not "out there." The most vicious opponent is and has always been behind my forehead. Through yoga, I have faith that I can transform not only my body, but my personality too.

I frequently start my yoga classes in *virasana*, hero's pose, or in my case, shero's pose ["she"-ro]. As a student of world religions, I'm fond of

quoting sacred scriptures. The *Dhammapada*, the Buddhist "bible," says, "The man who conquers 1,000 men in battle is not as mighty as the man who conquers himself." I love how many scripture verses are about the battlefield. But the battlefield they're talking about is the inner battlefield. The plains of our consciousness are where the battles are being waged every single day, and the war between good and evil is won or lost in our mind first.

Our life is our epic battle. Like martial arts, yoga is about discovering and realizing our highest spiritual potential. Yoga, union.

In order to make a union, there have to be two things to "join together." As yoga practitioners, our official study of duality begins with the breath: inhale and exhale. *Ujjayi* means victorious breath, referring to gaining victory over our own mind. The breath is the bridge between the mind (the invisible) and the body (the visible).

The beginning of yoga is stretching muscles, but the real point of yoga is to stretch our minds, to realize that there are no limitations except the limitations we place in our own mind. Our dharma is to remove the barriers in our minds that prevent love from blossoming. Love is the promise of yoga.

The victory is in conquering and defeating all self-limiting, self-defeating thoughts of inadequacy, insecurity, judgment, resentment and doubt. These negative thoughts are the enemy.

When we practice asana, we go up and meet the resistance in our body face to face, just like meeting an opponent in a ring. We learn the art of non-resistance, surrendering to the resistance instead of fighting it.

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## Spiritual Warrior

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We take this lesson off the yoga mat into our meetings with people and situations in our life.

This was the message of one master's life. Jesus said, "Love your enemies, do good to those that curse you." Jesus understood that if you mentally harbor any thought of ill will or hatred, toward self or others, it will grow like any seed when planted. Reaping what you sow refers to cultivating states of mind. You attract whatever is in your consciousness.

Yoga helps me witness my thoughts so I can take an active part in creating my reality. Changing my mind, the inner world, is the most powerful way of causing change in my outer world. Who do I want to become is the question I face every day.

We develop physical muscles by exercising. People around us give us opportunities every day to develop our spiritual muscles. The person who cut you off in traffic gives you the opportunity to

develop muscles of patience. The person who was rude to you at work gives you the chance to develop muscles of kindness.

Your parent, sibling, friend or partner who snapped at you or said something unkind helps you develop muscles of forgiveness.

They are your teachers. Their lesson for you is love. These are opportunities to develop character and make deposits in your spiritual bank account.

The contemplative practice of yoga helps us explore our human personality, be honest about our strengths and weaknesses and develop into the men and women we're capable of becoming. Yoga is about exploring and expanding our potential to love and serve.

You are the hero or shero of your life.

Look for the goodness in others even if they don't always show you their best. Practice tolerance and be kind. Find time for silence. Remember you have opportunities every day to impact lives for the better.

Look for the everyday experiences that will develop your spirit. Be grateful and count these as your blessings.

Welcome to the path of a spiritual warrior. This is my path, and this is your path too. Namaste.

**Sumya Anani** will lead her annual *Spiritual Warrior yoga retreat* in Negril, Jamaica, December 6-13 ([sumya.com](http://sumya.com)). You can read more from her in the book *Yoga in America*, by Deborah Bernstein, 2009 ([lulu.com](http://lulu.com)).

Sumya will be leading classes in Chicago on Saturday, July 25:

*Stretch and Strength: Yoga and Weights to Sculpt and Tone*, 9:30-11:30 a.m., \$25, at Executive Sports & Fitness, 77 W. Wacker, Mezzanine 3, [lifestart.net/executive](http://lifestart.net/executive), 312.849.2322.

*Yoga for Athletes: Go to the Next Level in Your Sport*, 1-3 p.m., \$25, and *Boxing Class: Develop Habits of a Champion*, 3:30-5:30 p.m., \$25, at *Aesthetic Studio & Spa*, 800 N. Milwaukee Avenue, [soulisticstudio.com](http://soulisticstudio.com), 312.226.SOUL.

Bring a journal or paper to each class. Sumya will talk about the importance of mental training and preparation for the fights of your life (whether in or out of the ring). Each class will finish with meditation and journaling on where you've been (the past) so you can move in the direction you wish to be (the future) by being more focused on the present moment (now).

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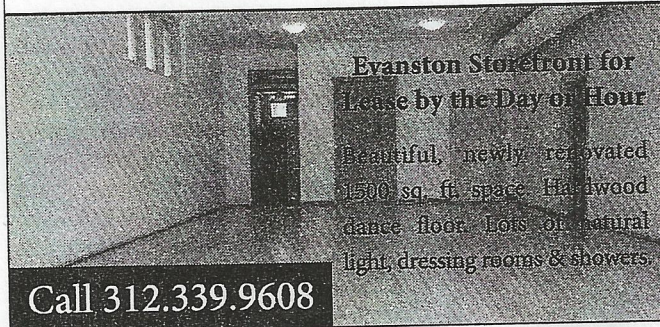
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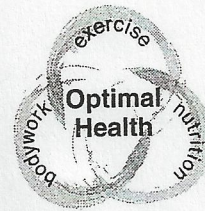
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