



## ANDREA CASHMAN:

# Let Your Yoga Dance® Movement for Special Populations

Heal through joy... Breathe through pain... To some, these sound too simple to work. For those practicing Let Your Yoga Dance® ([www.letyouryogadance.com](http://www.letyouryogadance.com)), these concepts are already integrated in an approach that rejoices in the rhythm of life. This modality is a fusion of yoga and breath-based movements, classic dance steps, and rhythms set to music from many cultures. A dance of the multi-dimensional self, it brings levity and healing to the seven energy centers (chakras) and entire body. As a certified Let Your Yoga Dance® instructor, I also share this work with those who find physical activity a challenge so they can find their inner dancer. Referred to as Yoga Dance for Special Populations, this particular focus helps bring inspiration and celebration to the hearts, minds and bodies of those living with physical limitations.

My first experience with Yoga

Dance was an eye opener... no mats or holding of poses – how could this be yoga? It was sometimes wild and filled with abandon, sometimes quiet and still, but students left class with a sense of peace, elation, and shared community. The goal of yoga is to connect body, mind and spirit – to loosen worries that cloud emotions and free overburdened psyches. The breath and movement form a bridge to achieve this goal, so why not do it with music, swinging arms, swaying hips and carefree laughter? Yoga Dance uses the joy of movement to tone muscles, build flexibility, endurance and cardiovascular fitness.

I was initially re-introduced to yoga at a crucial time. As a teacher, parent of pre-adolescent girls, and caregiver to parents with arthritis, Parkinson's, and dementia, my life seemed hectic. Practicing yoga helped heal the real physical ache of sadness, worry, and

stress. When my teacher worked with my father, helping him breathe and move with some sense of freedom – he loved it!! My experience, and witnessing similar responses in others, only confirmed my belief in the healing power of movement.

I then discovered my teacher, Kripalu's Megha-Nancy Buttenheim, creator of Let Your Yoga Dance®. Her motivation to extend this work to those experiencing physical challenges originally came from her student, Ed Rudman. Ed, whose story is featured in a YouTube.com video, has Parkinson's. He said a dance class he was taking "...helped lessen the symptoms and, best of all, makes me smile and laugh. People with Parkinson's don't smile much." Intrigued, Megha discovered the Parkinson's Dance classes being offered by the Mark Morris Dance Group in Brooklyn, NY ([markmorrisdancegroup.org/resources/media/2-performances/11-why-dance-for-pd](http://markmorrisdancegroup.org/resources/media/2-performances/11-why-dance-for-pd)). Combining the breath and mindfulness of yoga seemed to her the logical next step to empower her own classes for Parkinson's sufferers, as well as others in need including those with arthritis, Alzheimers, MS, cancer, depression, the elderly, and people working through the effects of chemotherapy.

In Yoga Dance for Special Populations, the energy of the music and movement of the dancers flow from gentle warm-up to a vibrant rhythm, then back to a soothing cool down and meditative moment. Class begins in a chair, with participants lifting the heart to deepen the breath, then stretching each part of the body, allowing the music to guide the movement. Students stand if able, and can utilize the support of a chair or walker, if necessary, or continue to dance while seated. They often use their voices in a sing-along and contribute their own moves.

During my training at Kripalu, teachers included breast cancer survivors and one recovering from a ruptured disk. The greatest encouragement, however, came from the octogenarians who traveled in from an assisted living development. They shared their insight with the class,

dancing and singing as if years had melted away. It was a perfect expression of how pleasurable movement helps us all reach beyond physical limitations, discover new ways to love our bodies, and allow the spirit to awaken to its inner rhythm.

### Let Your Yoga Dance® is important for Special Populations for many reasons, including that it:

- Breaks the isolation of being alone
- Increases flexibility and strength with safe practicing of repetitive movements
- Stimulates mind and spirit
- Activates the senses through deep breathing, simple movements and postures
- Increases body awareness and confidence in walking, balancing, and dancing
- Utilizes various musical rhythms, which stimulate the brain

- Focuses on the breath, naturally activating the relaxation response
- Is simultaneously fun, spiritual, theatrical, creative, and yogic, providing healing through body awareness and community — an express route to joy!

In teaching Let Your Yoga Dance® I am honoring my parents and generations that have come before by sharing the power of Healing through Joy. Come join me in the dance!

*Andrea Cashman is a Hatha Yoga Teacher and Yoga Dance Instructor. She received her teacher's certificates in YogaSpirit® 200 hour, Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health: Let Your Yoga Dance® and Yoga Dance for Special Populations. Andrea is passionate about helping students discover the holistic balance of yoga, while maintaining a joyful, safe environment. She currently teaches throughout South Central Connecticut, including at Yoga on Whitney ([yogaonwhitney.net](http://yogaonwhitney.net)), Sound Mind and Body ([fitnessandyogaforwomen.com](http://fitnessandyogaforwomen.com)) and Sound Yoga in Milford. All are welcome, regardless of physical condition or experience. Contact Andrea: 203.522.2636, [anditejas@live.com](mailto:anditejas@live.com).*

## Breathing through the Six Movements of the Spine

Andrea Cashman: "Fear and breath cannot live in the same space"

Many people have breathing difficulty because of a tendency to slump. By rounding shoulders and drawing ribs toward the pelvis, there is less space for the diaphragm to expand. This is common not only for the physically challenged, but among the general population, especially with so much time spent on computers, in cars and watching TV. The following exercises help strengthen the core and give awareness to breath to de-stress and relax.

1. Sitting tall with feet grounded on the floor, start by counting three full breaths. Focus on extending the exhalation, relaxing on the inhalation.
2. First two movements: forward flexion and extension. Extending hands out to your side, exhale as you cross hands on opposite knees, bow chin to chest, round the shoulders. Inhale as you bring hands back to sides and toward the back of the chair, lift the heart, look gently upward, squeeze the shoulder blades together. Repeat 3 times.
3. Second two movements: side flexion. Extend hands by sides. Inhale as you lift one arm up, bend to the opposite side (you can support yourself with other hand on the side of the chair), exhale as you bring arm back down to your side. Switch sides. Repeat 3 times.
4. Third two movements: twisting. Sit tall. Inhale. Turn to the right. Place left hand on the knee, right hand by the back of the chair, and exhale as you return to center. Inhale and turn to the other side. Repeat 3 times.
5. Complete the practice by closing the eyes, breathing fully and observing how your body feels.