

# Reviews



**Nicole Culos-Reed, PhD, and Susi Hatley-Aldous.**  
*Yoga for Cancer Survivors.*  
 Set of 4 DVDs. \$29.95.  
 Available at [www.fitter1.com](http://www.fitter1.com) and 1-800-348-8371.  
 Reviewed by Kelly McGonigal, PhD.

There is growing evidence that Yoga can help cancer survivors recover from the symptoms of cancer and the side effects of treatment, as well

as improve quality of life and well-being. *Yoga for Cancer Survivors* is the first widely-available set of DVDs based on this growing evidence.

The set contains seven 75-minute gentle Hatha Yoga sessions designed by Susi Hatley-Aldous for a research project directed by Nicole Culos-Reed, PhD, at the University of Calgary, Canada. Since 2002, the project has documented the benefits of gentle Yoga for cancer survivors, with participants reporting significant improvements in physical strength and function, mood, stress, and quality of life.

The seven sessions (titles below) each emphasize a different theme, but include a similar developing vocabulary of practices.

1. Introducing the Basics
2. Connecting to Your Body and Breath
3. Developing Ease, Stability, Strength, and Flexibility
4. Opening Your Heart and Chest
5. Building Relaxed Resilience
6. Experiencing Meditation in Motion
7. Feeling What Your Body Wants

As a Yoga teacher who has worked with cancer survivors in a wide range of settings and stages, I know that

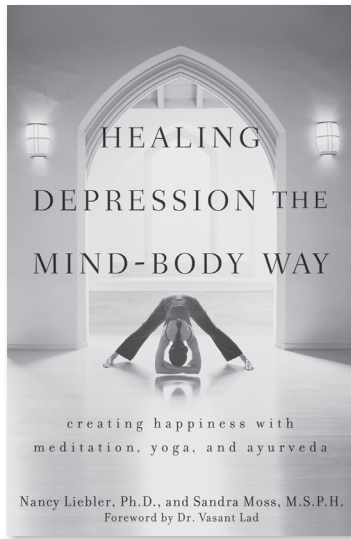
there is great variability in what survivors will want or be able to do. Most DVDs and Yoga classes assume a certain level of strength and energy that not all cancer patients or survivors have. This DVD series stands out for its accessibility; the opening practice is gentle enough for just about anyone to do, even someone dealing with extreme treatment-related fatigue.

The practices do become progressively more active, including standing postures and gentle backbends, for example. But the entire seven-practice series would still be considered quite gentle by most teachers' standards. Practices begin and end with relaxation, transitions are slow and mindful with many opportunities to rest in awareness of the body and breath, and the breath plays a central role throughout. Many standard postures are simplified to their key elements or modified, such as using the wall for support.

The production value of the DVDs is basic but elegant. The practices are modeled by one student in a studio space with a view of nature. The instructions are given in a clear, comforting voiceover. The overall feel of the DVDs, from content to production, is spacious and inviting in its simplicity.

This set of DVDs will be extremely useful for cancer survivors just beginning a Yoga practice, or those needing a more gentle practice than what is available in most DVDs, studios, and gyms. It is also an excellent resource for Yoga teachers and researchers interested in developing a program for cancer survivors. I believe the value of this DVD set goes beyond the cancer community; the DVDs would be appropriate for those with any chronic illness, including chronic pain, HIV/AIDS, or heart disease. They offer compassionate and intelligent practices that can help anyone befriend the body and rediscover a sense of inner well-being.

*Kelly McGonigal, PhD, is the editor in chief of the International Journal of Yoga Therapy and serves on the advisory board of Yoga Bear, a national nonprofit offering Yoga to cancer survivors in hospitals and Yoga studios.*



Nancy Lieber, PhD, and Sandra Moss, MSPH. *Healing Depression the Mind-Body Way: Creating Happiness with Meditation, Yoga, and Ayurveda*. Wiley, 2009. Paperback, 288 pages. \$16.95. Reviewed by Amy Weintraub, MFA, ERYT-500

This excellent resource rests on the multidimensional understanding of depression offered by Yoga

and Ayurveda, sister sciences that are thousands of years old, as well as the modern field of psychoneuroimmunology.

The authors, a psychologist and an Ayurvedic practitioner, compare the body-mind to an ecosystem that cannot be brought into homeostasis by separating physical and mental health. Ayurveda and Yoga promote prevention, often diagnosing and righting imbalances that precede illness. "Symptoms," the authors say, "which Western medicine treats, are a last stage in the disease process."

The authors cite a recent review of the scientific literature that shows that the most commonly prescribed category of antidepressants is only slightly more effective than placebo treatment. The book outlines current medical evidence that supports the need for a treatment approach for depression that "activates our own self-repair mechanism."

The book provides a compendium of information for self-care based on the Ayurvedic system. The authors promote a program that includes releasing the constrictions and balancing energy. "When blockages in our physiology impede the smooth flow of energy, we become ill." The suggestions in this book help the reader assess those obstructions at their source and begin to unblock them.

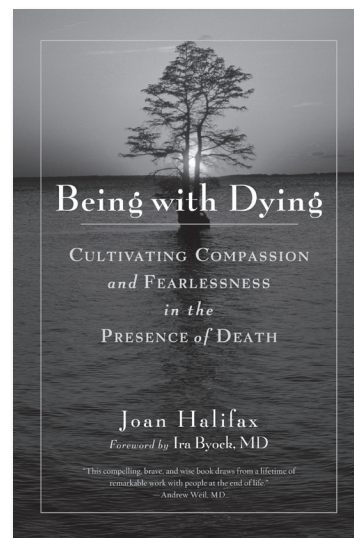
Cases studies are presented for each of the three types of emotional imbalances that contribute to depression and are aligned with our basic constitutions (*doshas*). Following the readable case narratives, the authors offer recommendations for specific and individualized Ayurvedic treatments, lifestyle changes, Yoga postures, breathing exercises, and meditation for each of three types of depression.

It is gratifying to me personally to read how the authors explore Yoga postures (*asanas*) in *Healing Depression the Mind Body Way*, providing individualized variations in the physical, mental, and spiritual focus, depending on the

practitioner's constitution and emotional state. The effects of the poses on all the systems of the body are described, but the authors include additional suggestions based on their energetic understanding of the pose. They show how self-inquiry within the pose can enhance physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual awareness. This additional focus, say the authors, "is why Yoga poses are considered consciousness-based interventions and a powerful agent for change."

In clear and demystifying language, the authors of *Healing Depression the Mind-Body Way* have given us an essential tool for treating depression holistically. The authors meet depression with fundamental Ayurvedic wisdom, Western scientific understanding, and suggestions for reader self-inquiry. The many prescriptions for self-care from the Ayurvedic tradition empower the reader to develop her own plan to achieve and sustain her optimum mental health.

Amy Weintraub, MFA, E-RYT 500, is the author of *Yoga for Depression* (Broadway Books) and founding director of the LifeForce Yoga Healing Institute. She is a leader in the field of Yoga and mental health and offers professional certification in LifeForce Yoga® Practitioner Trainings for Depression and Anxiety.



Joan Halifax. *Being with Dying: Cultivating Compassion and Fearlessness in the Presence of Death*. Shambhala Publications, 2008. Hardcover, 204 pages. \$22.95. Reviewed by Stephanie Sisson, LICSW, E-RYT.

"As you will see," Joan Halifax, PhD, writes in the introduction to *Being with Dying: Cultivating Compassion and Fearlessness*

in the Presence of Death, "I have not made much distinction in this book between living and dying." She aims to take us beyond mere theories and ideas to confront our own beliefs and fears related to death and dying, to learn from living about dying and to learn from dying about living. As a Zen teacher and founder of a Zen center in New Mexico, Halifax presents her experience and insight from 40 years of working with dying people from a Buddhist perspective; yet her book guides readers in a process of self-inquiry that takes us

right to the heart of one of the *kleshas* described in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*—*abhinivesha*, fear of death and clinging to life.

Halifax combines didactic presentation of concepts and illustrative stories from her work with a practical exercise or meditation at the end of each chapter to facilitate personal experience and exploration of the concepts. One will get the most out of *Being with Dying* by treating it as something of a workbook rather than a textbook, taking the time to contemplate the questions and practice the meditations offered. Meditations range from simple breath and body awareness to cultivating qualities such as equanimity and meditation on one's own dead body. In the very first chapter, for instance, the meditation is titled, "How Do You Want to Die?" Halifax gently urges the reader throughout the book to look plainly and honestly at death, because it is an inevitable part of life.

At times during the first half of the book, it seems almost to be a primer on Buddhism, with death and dying serving as the content for exploring the Buddhist principles. The second half of the book, however, delves into the difficulty and complexity of death, before, during, and after it occurs. Halifax credits Bernie Glassman with teaching her three tenets that form the framework for the work she does: not-knowing, bearing witness, and compassionate action. The second part of the book provides very practical ideas for helping individuals, loved ones, and caregivers navigate uncharted territory. Necessarily, this compassionate action can only occur when one is grounded in not-knowing and bearing witness.

Halifax conveys such spaciousness and acceptance as she writes about both the beautiful, peaceful deaths she has witnessed and the deaths that involved feelings such as denial and anger. She describes the desire many of us have to "die well" or have a "good death." It struck me how we so often spend our lives trying to do things right, and that this unrealistic expectation can follow us right to the deathbed. This also means we have the opportunity to heal and find freedom until our last breath.

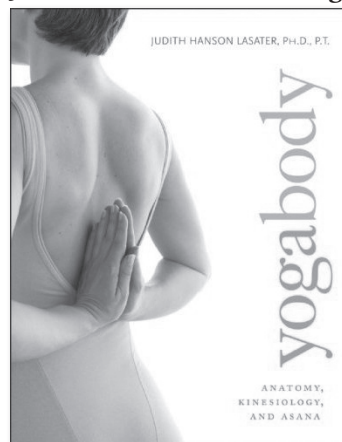
*Being with Dying* is, in fact, quite similar to books by Stephen Levine, such as *Who Dies?* and *Healing into Life and Death*. Levine also has a great deal of experience in the field and shares an Eastern spiritual viewpoint; many chapters end with meditations. As someone who provides training to Yoga therapists and teachers, hospice volunteers and caregivers, I am happy to have another reference, additional tools, new language, and more stories. This book has already been added to the reading list for our Bedside Yoga™ program for Yoga teachers interesting in serving in hospices.

The book jacket accurately states that *Being with Dying* is a helpful resource "for all those who are charged with a dying person's care, facing their own death, or wishing to explore and contemplate the transformative power of the

dying process." I would add that any Yogi invested in *svadhyaya* (self-study) will enjoy this book. Halifax confirms my own experience that working with this population is a powerful spiritual practice in itself, an opportunity to practice being present with the reality of the present moment, whatever it might contain.

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**Judith Lasater, PhD, PT. *Yogabody: Anatomy, Kinesiology, and Asana.* Rodmell**



Press. Paperback, 210 pp.  
\$29.95. Reviewed by Kelly McGonigal, PhD.

The anatomy and physiology of Yoga practices is a topic too large for any single book to tackle comprehensively. Fortunately for the field, a number of excellent books have tackled specific aspects of the topic. For example, Ray Long's *The Key Muscles of Hatha Yoga* uses outstanding illustrations to explain how the muscles of the body work in, and are affected by, different postures. Susi Hately-Aldous's *Anatomy & Asana* focuses on how the body works as a system, and how to avoid injuries in *asana* practice. Leslie Kaminoff's *Yoga Anatomy* considers what is happening in the body and breath in the most commonly practiced postures, and how to use this knowledge to understand why individuals experience challenges in a pose.

Given the number of excellent books on the anatomy of Yoga, one might think that all that can be said about this topic has been said. However, Judith Lasater's new book, *Yogabody*, makes a very real contribution to the field by delivering new information in a new way. This makes it a worthwhile addition to the libraries of even teachers who have a full shelf of Yoga anatomy books.

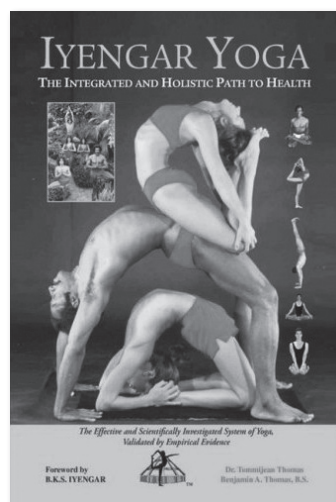
*Yogabody* provides an introduction to the building blocks of the musculoskeletal and motor systems (bones, joints, nerves, and basic terms), and is then organized by region of the body (the vertebral column, the lower extremity, the trunk, and the upper extremity). These regions are further broken down into functional units, such as the shoulder girdle, and the pelvis, hip joint, and femur. For each of these functional units, Lasater describes both the



basics of structure (e.g., bones, joints, and connective tissue) and function (e.g., range of motion, action, and relationship to *asanas*). The illustrations are clear and helpful. Each chapter also describes common injuries to each region, and the inclusion of nerve information allows Lasater to explain experiences of tingling, pain, and loss of feeling that may come up in *asana* practice. This information will help Yoga students and teachers intelligently adapt postures to address challenges and reduce discomfort.

The core anatomy and kinesiology information in the book is similar to what you might find in a good kinesiology textbook, but Lasater does not forget who her audience is and peppers each chapter with stories and insights about Yoga practice. Yoga teachers will especially thank Lasater for including “Experiential Anatomy” sections throughout the book. These sections provide specific exercises for embodying the ideas described in each chapter. Lasater includes multiple suggestions for how to teach each idea one-on-one or in a group class. She also provides strategies for using knowledge of anatomy to understand what is happening in an individual student’s body—for example, looking at a student’s feet and ankles to understand what is happening in his or her hips. These experiential anatomy explorations, which make up perhaps 20% of the book’s pages, are the most original and useful contributions of the book, and would alone justify purchasing the book.

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**Tommijean Thomas, PhD, and Benjamin Thomas. *Iyengar Yoga: The Integrated and Holistic Path to Health*.** Xlibris Corporation 2008. Hardcover, 588 pages. \$36.99. Reviewed by Sonia Sierra Wolf.

With the recent explosion of books written about Yoga, many of them are no doubt collecting dust on the bookshelves. There are some

that stay off the shelf and will be referred to time and again. *Iyengar Yoga: The Integrated and Holistic Path to Health* is one

of these. From its provocative cover to the powerful and inspiring photos of the Thomas family spanning 25 years, to its methodologically sound research studies, this is a gem of a book. This is not a light book. It is a serious work, and the authors stress that Yoga is a matter of determined effort, devotion, and surrender.

Authored by Tommijean Thomas, PhD, and Benjamin Thomas, both advanced-level Iyengar teachers who regularly study with the Iyengar family in India, this book is a result of many years of devoted practice and years of teaching hundreds of students.

There are nine chapters, and each chapter is worthy of serious study. One is introduced to (or can review) basic anatomy, philosophical concepts, and the *Yoga Sutras*. There is a detailed examination of the main *asanas* and how to approach them. Chapter 3 focuses on the two *asanas* that are glossed over in many classes as well as in books, *tadasana* (mountain pose) and *savasana* (corpse pose). There are nine pages devoted to *savasana*, which is considered to be the most difficult pose in the Iyengar system. Sequencing is an art in itself and is one of the hallmarks of Iyengar Yoga. The book gives a guide to 15 sequences, from beginning to advanced. The book also gives the reader a glimpse of the authors’ interaction with B.K.S. Iyengar and his son Prashant, a profound Yogi and philosopher, through stories and interviews. All in all, there is a treasure trove of information here. *Iyengar Yoga: The Integrated and Holistic Path to Health* is a comprehensive and thorough compendium of Iyengar Yoga.

The distinguishing feature of this book is the results of many years of research. The authors studied the effects of Iyengar Yoga on three different groups: novices (those new to the method), long-time practitioners, and teachers. A fourth study compared the groups, and, as expected, the physical, psychological, and emotional benefits increased with each successive group. The results of this painstaking enterprise are well-documented using standard measurements, as well as two unique-to-Yoga measures designed by Tommijean Thomas.

The Thomas’s have opened the door to anyone who wants to deepen his or her practice or learn about Yoga. Originally, much of the material was used as a textbook for college students new to Yoga. Now coupled with the research findings, the authors have expanded and produced a noteworthy text that will serve as a valuable reference for years to come. I expect that this book will find its way into teacher training programs. If you are a teacher, or a serious student irrespective of the style of Yoga you teach, this is a must have.

*Sonia Sierra Wolf is a graduate of the Iyengar Yoga Institute of San Francisco’s teacher training program. She lives and teaches in San Francisco and has served on the Institute’s Board of Trustees.*