

Yoga For The *Special* Child

How can yoga help children with special needs?
Darlene Dowling meets yoga innovator Sonia Sumar.

WHEN SHE ENTERS A room there is no doubt that Sonia Sumar has arrived — she walks like an Amazon warrior, which shouldn't be surprising considering she is a native of Brazil. But, Sonia Sumar is actually a yogi and yoga therapist, not a warrior. She is the founder of Yoga for the Special Child, a system of yoga that uses movement and yoga asanas (poses) to help children who are born with disabilities like Down Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy, Microcephaly, Autism and other developmental disabilities, enhance their developmental process.

If you talk with her clients, or read her book *Yoga for the Special Child* you quickly realise that this system has been highly successful. In fact, it's been so successful that Sumar has been conducting teacher trainings in Brazil, London, New York and New Mexico for years. According to the staff at these locations, her trainings are often sold out, and individuals are wait-listed hoping for an available spot.

It would be natural to wonder what makes this system so special, and part of its appeal is Sumar herself. This system was not born out of an intellectual exercise or even a desire, at first, to help other people's children. It was born out of her own experiences with her daughter Roberta who was born with Down Syndrome — it all started with Roberta.

Like most parents who are told that their child is born with a life-threatening and debilitating disease, Sumar went through emotional challenges including depression,



despair and hopelessness, especially when confronted with the less than positive prognoses of the doctors she visited. She refused to give in and reached deep inside herself to find a place where she decided that her daughter would be like other children and have the same opportunities they have. And that's exactly what eventuated. When her moment of utter despair turned into hope is where their journey began

While Sumar started using yoga to ease Roberta's health issues, and increase her cognitive, muscle and central nervous system development, Roberta nevertheless died at the age of fourteen from complications with Down Syndrome.

But in those fourteen years Roberta exceeded the physical and developmental expectations of doctors, and could deftly take part in an entire yoga class on a daily basis. Roberta had more struggles and challenges than most children do, but one thing is for sure: she had the life that her mother wanted for her — full, happy, challenging and fun.

During those early years, Sonia Sumar opened her own yoga studio in Brazil and started working with children with different abilities. Since then, Yoga for the Special Child has grown, and Sumar is very busy, but she found time to answer a few questions for me:

Why do you think this system works so well with children?

I think it is because, regardless of age and ability, I truly believe in the potential of all children. That's the way I approach the child I am going to work with. And this is the approach I also try to pass on to all those who attend my programs.

How do you connect with children who can't communicate?

I come from a very traditional yoga lineage called Integral Yoga. This system which was put together by my Guru Sri Swami Satchidananda, is a combination of specific methods designed to develop all

complicating duties as important as other more "typical" people. They are just different children... I mean, it is normal to be different. Perhaps they are not here to become a successful professional in a knowledgeable field, however, their mission here is not less important than that of the so-called "normal" people.

You're so busy conducting trainings, do you still take on clients?

Another very important aspect of my work with children with special needs is that I do not refer to them as my client/patient. They are my students. Even so, I

*"... their mission here is **no less important** than that of the so-called 'normal' people."*

aspects of the individual: physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual. I just apply his teachings in my daily yoga practice as well as with all people I work with. When, instead of just practicing, you live a yoga lifestyle it becomes easier to communicate with everyone around you, on all levels.

What's your advice to parents whose children are challenged with Down Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy, Autism and other developmental disabilities?

To learn from them the real meaning of unconditional love and to understand that they are here ac-

also learn so much from them. Because I do not consider them disabled. To me, as I said before, they are just different. Having said that, I see hundreds of children every year. Everywhere I am sharing this method. In between my programs, sometimes I can work with some kids, but it is not very often.

What's in the future for you and your program?

Only God knows...

For additional information on trainings or practitioners visit specialyoga.com. ❖

