

.healing journeys

Yogis share their inspiring stories
of recovery from illness.
Interviews by Liz Graham

To be struck down by illness or injury may be something that we fear in an abstract way, but it's rarely something we're prepared for. In fact, as yoga practitioners, many of us may feel that poor health is something we can actively fend off, as we strive to make ourselves stronger, less stressed and more balanced with our practice.

So what happens when the unthinkable does occur—illness, injury, accident, disease—and our bodies seemingly “fail” us?

For two local yoga practitioners, Brian King and Julie Smerdon (who share their stories of recovery from chronic illness and severe injury with us over the next few pages), their sense of self and their yoga practice were dramatically altered ... but for the better.

Both experienced remarkable physical rehabilitation, aided by yoga. But perhaps more remarkable is that their appreciation of yoga deepened dramatically during their recovery, to the point where they each became yoga teachers.

They both made other dramatic changes to the way they thought about themselves and the world around them.

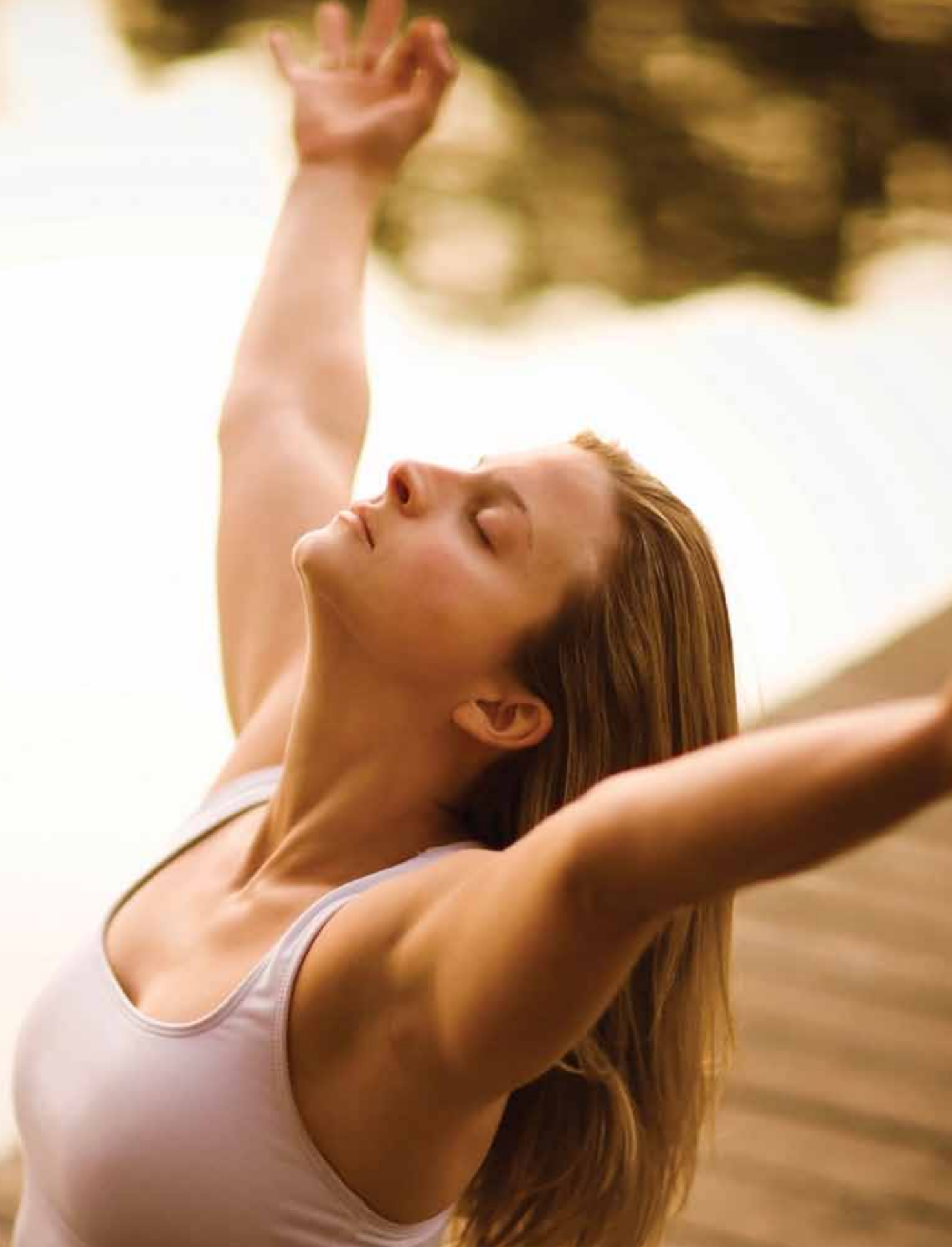
The ancient yogis called our patterns of thoughts and behaviours *samskaras*, and believed that they could be reversed or replaced with enough work. “The yogic model is that by creating new *samskaras*, and systematically strengthening them through repetition, you create habits so strong they can compete and replace older, dysfunctional ones,” explains Timothy McCall, medical doctor and yoga therapist, in his book *Yoga As Medicine*.

“Sickness shows us what we are,” goes the old Italian proverb. Sickness, for all the pain, isolation and despair it brings, also has the capacity to rapidly simplify our lives, to shine a light on what our priorities are and to open up the door to new and more positive *samskaras*. Yoga may just be an ideal companion for recovery from poor health, because it too works towards personal transformation, but takes a more incremental approach.

“Yoga is a path,” says McCall. “The longer you stay on it and the more heart you put into your journey, the farther it can take you.”

Liz Graham is the editor of *Australian Yoga Journal*.

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Brian King on Mount McKinley in Alaska in 2009, four years after his accident.



King of the mountain

When Brian King, 44, had his right foot crushed by a two-tonne excavator in a work accident five years ago, doctors weren't sure he'd walk again. With the help of Bikram yoga, which he'd started practising six months before the accident, he not only proved them wrong, but has also made sweeping changes to his life. He turned his back on his contracting business and pursued yoga teaching; he's climbed some of the highest mountains in the world to raise money for his daughter's school; and has transformed his attitude to yoga. Married and a father of two daughters, Brian lives in the Hills district of Sydney and teaches yoga at Northside Bikram in Lane Cove.

Injury is a bit like grief in a way: it's personal. At the end of the day, it's up to you whether you lie in your bed or get up and get better. And to get better, you have to love yourself, because otherwise you're not going to try as hard.

I returned to yoga a few months after my accident. Breath by breath, posture by posture, I worked through the pain to open my foot back up again, to improve the blood flow. I practised three or four times a week, but did other things to aid my recovery: I swam regularly, I stopped drinking alcohol for four-and-a-half years and I stopped smoking entirely.

There were no "milestones" in my

recovery, the improvement was so incremental. It's like learning a posture—one day you realise you can do it, but you don't know how you got there. I can say, though, that within a year, I was walking normally again. And last year, I ran the City to Surf [a 14km running event].

Before the accident, money was my number-one thing. I really loved it. But then I ended up flat on my back for the first time in a long time, and it forced me to think about a lot of things. I realised that I was actually going nowhere, so I started to wind up my company. Doing yoga, I became more sympathetic to the people around me. Before, I wouldn't

have given anyone else much thought. But I started to want to give back to the world. I just didn't know how.

It was in 2008 that I had the idea to climb the highest mountain on each continent, called the "seven summits". For me, climbing the mountains was part of a change that was going on. It became a fundraising effort for my daughter's former school [Erin, 12, was born profoundly deaf, and for several years attended St Gabriel's School in Castle Hill, which at the time was a school for the hearing impaired], but that wasn't my original intention. I had read a lot of books about mountaineering, I used to do climbing before the accident, and it was something I really wanted to do again. Being such a goal-driven person, I think I needed something to focus on.

In 2009 I climbed Aconcagua in South America and Mount McKinley in Alaska. Both were very tough. On Aconcagua, my

rucksack and gloves were literally blown off me on the way up, so on summit day I survived by sucking on a pebble to keep the moisture in my mouth. My pranyama exercises, I believe, helped me with avoiding altitude sickness, and the doctor at base camp commented on my heart rate and O₂ levels being so good. On McKinley we were blessed with fine weather and got out without mishap.

Right before I climbed McKinley, I did my Bikram teacher training in California, and it was here that I met my wife, Claudia. Our daughter Mia was born in June this year. Now being blessed with a second daughter, who is only a few months old, I'm not sure if I'll be able finish the seven climbs. The mountains are not the priority they once were. We'll have to see.

I wanted to teach yoga as another way to give back. I've been doing it now for over a year. Obviously, it's a lot

"To get better, you have to love yourself, because otherwise you're not going to try as hard."

more satisfying bringing people through the Bikram yoga system than it is just chasing money! I look upon teaching as good karma and I am blessed by having exceptional teachers/tutors and students around me.

When I first started yoga, I was your average gung-ho guy who wanted to "kill" the postures. I actually hated yoga for a long time. I resented being told what to do. I didn't like other people being better than me. But when I got injured, it was a whole new experience. I had to take things in an easier way. Still, it wasn't until I did my teacher training that I really accepted how hard yoga is, that I became

at peace with it. Now, I tell me students, it's OK to feel these emotions in class, just recognise it and try to sweat it out. I also say that the slower your yoga journey, the better off you'll be.

A lot of things have happened over the past five years, and I still haven't digested it all.

Yoga quite literally has prised open my soul and made me realise the divine is contained in all of us, that we are all sacred and precious. It has helped give me the tools to deal with what is, on the face of it, quite a crazy world. Yes, I fail everyday in the game of life, but by keeping with my practice, it shows me a way forward. ➤





▶ Heart wide open

Diagnosed with the autoimmune disorder Ulcerative Colitis at 13, US-born Julie Smerdon spent much of her youth dealing with intestinal bleeding, chronic diarrhoea, weightloss and excruciating pain. After a 12-year remission, the symptoms struck again at age 37, in 1999. She was having tests to see if a colon-removal operation was her only option, when the doctors discovered a serious heart condition, needing immediate surgery. Two more operations to remove her colon followed over the next three months. A former fitness trainer, Julie immersed herself in yoga, studying and training in Power yoga and then Anusara yoga. What started out as a physical rehabilitation mission became a spiritual journey. Julie, 48, is now a certified Anusara teacher and owner of Shri Yoga in Brisbane, where she lives with her husband, Layne, and her three children.

I've learned to love even my "broken" parts, and trust my body's ability to heal.



Julie Smerdon in Eka Pada Urdhva Dhanurasana (One-Legged Wheel Pose) in Brisbane this year.

I would go through every bit of my journey again if it meant I could be where I am in my life today. Yoga has given me a deeper appreciation for what a gift our bodies are, and life is.

Before my operations, I had an on-again, off-again relationship with yoga. I used it for cross-training. Looking back, I was trying to get mastery over my body, having been sick for so long beforehand.

When I got home from the heart operation, I was so weak that I couldn't take a shower without stopping halfway through to lie down and rest. Then I discovered that abdominal surgery is 20 times more painful and harder to recover from than heart surgery. That's when I got serious about yoga.

Breathing, and just the simplest movements, made a profound difference, even while I was in hospital. My intention was to use my yoga class as a stepping stone back to my former fitness regime, but I kept coming back to it. I didn't know why, but I always felt expanded, full and happy afterwards. The first time I did Urdhva Dhanurasana (Wheel Pose) was huge for me. I could actually feel the tingling of my scar tissue breaking up. After having so much trauma to the front of my body, opening up so fully in that pose was ecstatic for me. It still is, every time I do it.

Yoga allowed me to tap into my inner knowledge and trust. One of the first ways I exercised that was by ending my marriage. Everyone thought I was nuts, but I knew that it was right. That was the first decision I made as an adult that was right only because it was right for me.

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I first pursued yoga teaching because I thought it was really helping me, and I wanted to share it with others. But I felt like a round peg in a square hole. I didn't fit the teacher "profile"—I like pink lipstick and high heels; I enjoy a glass of wine. Then when I met [Anusara founder] John Friend in 2003, he talked about how all of us are unique manifestations of spirit, and that this is something to celebrate. That felt right.

Anusara yoga has taught me that bodies are good, not something to be subjugated to achieve higher states of consciousness. I used to be totally divorced from my physical body. I viewed it as a bitter disappointment and I used exercise to beat it into "submission". Although my body looked good, I think I actually despised it. Even my early days of yoga were about subjugation of my body.

I remember telling John that I couldn't feel my core, and he told me to go home and meditate on my belly, to put my hands on it and breathe into it. I did that and it was profound. I started to cry for half an hour, thinking, "There you are!" That was the start of a higher level of tolerance for myself, and that only happened in 2005.

My illness put me on my Anusara path, and it's also how I met my Aussie husband. We first connected on an online support forum for people having their colons

removed. We've been married eight years and moved to Brisbane last year.

I understand now that embodiment is a gift rather than an impediment. Life is a divine spectrum and all of it—dark and

light together—deserves to be embraced.

I have great energy now. The gnawing in my gut I'd felt for so long has gone. I've learned to love even my "broken" parts, and trust my body's ability to heal ❀

Yoga for recovery

With the right amount of research, you can find a style of yoga to help you in your recovery. **CAROL KRUCOFF**

CALL AROUND Contact local yoga studios, wellness centers, and even churches and community centres. Classes designed for people with specific health conditions are increasingly common. In addition, classes labelled "Gentle Yoga", "Yoga for Seniors", or "Yoga Therapy" may be appropriate and are likely to include students with a wide range of physical issues.

START YOUR OWN If you can't find a suitable class, ask local studios whether any of their teachers is qualified to teach special-needs students. If a studio receives enough such requests, it may create a class; if not, you may find an instructor willing to offer private lessons to you or to a group.

LOOK ONLINE The Australian Association of Yoga Therapists lists members at

www.yogatherapy.org.au. A web search can yield teachers trained in Iyengar yoga and Viniyoga, noted for adapting practice to people with health concerns.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK Whether checking out a publicly offered class or considering private instruction, ask your prospective teachers about their training and experience. Have they had extensive training and been teaching for at least three or four years? Generally, the longer they've been practicing and teaching, the better. It's also useful if they've had special training in therapeutic yoga. Have they worked with someone in your condition? Such experience is a plus, but not a necessity. Your comfort, rapport and communication with the teacher may be just as important.

TALK TO YOUR DOCTORS Ask your health-care providers if there are any precautions you should take in your yoga practice and communicate these to your teachers.