



Photographer: James Houston.

the power of yoga

[the story of Eileen Hall]

Susan Paget talks to **Eileen Hall** about her journey and **recovery** from breast cancer.

In December 2003, around the time of year when most people were madly running around doing last minute holiday shopping, Eileen Hall was flat on her back in the sterile confines of a hospital room recovering from breast cancer surgery – a mastectomy and the removal of her right lymph nodes. The senior Ashtanga yoga teacher, who had spent more than half of her 48 years dedicated to health and well being, was now at her personal ground zero.

Hovering in a purgatory of pain from a drain inserted into her side and nausea from morphine administered to try and

alleviate her discomfort, she was asked by a nurse to take her first walk since the surgery. Getting up and moving is an essential part of post-operative care – it helps prevent fluid accumulating on the lungs. But this was a monumental ask. Eileen couldn't lift her head up let alone put one foot in front of the other.

And then one of Eileen's first yoga teachers, Diane Currie, appeared at her bedside.

"Diane they want me to move," Eileen moaned to her friend, "but I can't move."

"Come on Eileen," Currie coaxed, "we can do it."

"So she swung me out of the bed," Eileen remembers "and she said, 'Eileen, just put your feet on the earth and feel the earth under your feet.'"

"I had tears in my eyes thinking 'this is my first yoga teacher and here she is teaching me to walk again!'"

Those first steps were a turning point for Eileen. It was at that moment she felt she was beginning to emerge from the most harrowing time in her life.

Certified by Ashtanga master Sri K Pattabhi Jois as well as Sri BKS Iyengar, Eileen Hall is one of Ashtanga's most respected teachers. Her centre, Yoga Moves in Paddington, Sydney, is a thriving studio for the ancient but dynamic form of asana. As a student, Eileen has been devoted, with over 25 trips to India for study and she has spent years exploring all aspects of yoga philosophy. Her life as a modern yogi was fulfilling and her path a relatively smooth one to travel.

But two years before her diagnosis, Eileen had a nagging suspicion something was not right. She was experiencing general soreness in her right breast. At first it was easy to attribute it to the usual aches and pains that can sometimes be a part of an advanced practice or a symptom of her menstrual cycle. She didn't have any lumps or other reasons to suspect anything.

She checked it out with her doctor anyway and was reassured that everything was fine because, as the doctor put it, "Cancer is not sore." When the soreness didn't subside, she scheduled a second appointment and again was given a clean bill of health.

Still unsatisfied, Eileen persisted with a third doctor and again, she was sent away with the all clear. It was only after her fourth appointment that a doctor was finally able to pinpoint what Eileen felt all along – that something was amiss. A biopsy was ordered immediately and shockingly came back negative. Fortunately her doctor insisted on going through the procedure again. The second biopsy and a mammogram revealed news that would change Eileen's life. She was told that she did indeed have breast cancer, the type called *in-situ ductal carcinoma*, which rather than manifesting as a lump, had spread through her milk ducts.

The condition was far too advanced for any less invasive treatment and surgery was ordered immediately. When she was given the news, Eileen shut down and went into shock.

"I spiralled so far down" Eileen recalls. "Some days I spiralled really fast. To the point where I was just dropping into an abyss. I was in a state of disbelief because I just did not think that that could happen to me, particularly with the lifestyle and practice and everything. It was like, 'Come on...it's not...!'"

One of the hardest facts for Eileen to reconcile was that after years of looking after her body and mind, yoga was no guarantee of protection against cancer.

Australia's National Breast Cancer Centre estimates that one in 11 women will develop the disease before the age of 75. Studies of what makes a woman a likely candidate continue to defy logic and statistics. Eileen has no history of breast cancer among the women in her family. She wonders whether never having children may have increased her risk. However, even having a risk factor does not necessarily mean you will develop cancer.

Searching for answers and trying to find reasons proved an exercise in futility. Eileen began to realise that some things in life just don't have an explanation.

"I came to appreciate pretty early on that it wasn't the *why*, but *where* it was taking me. And I think that if I got caught up in the *why* so many things would come up, so many different events, so many possibilities. It was absurd."

"At that point in time, prior to surgery, it was just hopeless. Because I found I was just beating myself up, saying how could that happen to me? But that wasn't what I needed. I needed to just move through this. I was kind of on a flow, on a bit of a journey."

At first though, Eileen had to hit the bottom and let the shock of the diagnosis sink in.

"The evenings were the most difficult when I was lying in bed and as I'm single it was very difficult not to feel that aloneness."

But Eileen was soon to learn that she was far from alone. Once news got around to the yoga community, she received calls and

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notes from all over the world. Devoted friends, who she refers to as angels, stepped in and took control in daily aspects of life. Some friends cooked for her, others cleaned. She was showered with books and flowers and aromatherapy treatments. Pattabhi Jois, who Eileen has a fatherly bond with, sent his love from Mysore, India and promised that he would look after her and help her get better the next time she returned to study.

One angelic friend visited with her dog so Eileen could have regular amounts of unconditional love from a four-legged friend. For Eileen, letting friends in and sharing her vulnerability was a huge lesson in letting go of the independent parts of her life she once prided herself on. At the same time, she also learned to stand firm and say no to people who may have meant well but were unable to support her emotionally when she needed it the most. She also made sure that every choice she made was right for her when previously she might have not given a second thought.

"I needed everything positive around me. So many times in life I had done things that seemed just okay to do. It became more important than ever before that each decision I made I felt good about."

After the initial mental trauma evolved into acceptance, Eileen was able to see that she did have options on how to approach this crossroad in her life. Surprisingly, where she had once questioned the protection that yoga had provided to her, now the benefits of her daily practice began to subtly reveal themselves.

Eileen's intuition, from years of introspection on the mat, turned out to be an essential tool in taking charge of her destiny. Being diligent about getting further opinions on her initial diagnosis, versus accepting the word of the doctors who misdiagnosed the cancer, may have saved her life. Even choosing her surgeon was an exercise in faith and gut feeling. When given the choice of a doctor with typical credentials or one who climbed mountains, she chose the surgeon who understood how to push beyond physical and mental limits, Dr Max Coleman.

Years of practising how to be purely in the moment were also put to a real life test. The breath, so vital to yoga practice, became a lifeline to cling to when Eileen was at her most frightened. In a letter to her friends announcing she had breast cancer she wrote:

"In amongst the terrifying thoughts there were times of profoundness and stillness, of immense love and overwhelming insights as the myth of my own immortality was shattered. My identity of who I thought I was, was now disintegrating. My identity structured on past memory and future imagination was now placed in the present moment of a single breath."

Leading up to her surgery, practice on the mat took on a different form. In Ashtanga, discipline and spending years on the same poses on a daily basis is all part of the philosophy. Eileen instinctively let herself go outside the Ashtanga vinyasa square, and only focused on poses that nurtured her. Her practice, which had always been a life priority, suddenly took on a sacred and healing aspect.

"My asana practice was an opportunity for me to be very centred," Eileen explained.

"I didn't go to the school. I didn't want the energy of other people. I just wanted my own energy so I would just practice in a dark room. I was doing lots of shoulder stands, lots of inverted postures, lots of supported postures just to keep me steady."

Eileen began to look beyond *asana* (the postures), putting her focus on meditation and *pranayama*, the yogic breathing exercises that move *prana*, life force, through the body. She also found empowerment in educating herself as much as possible about cancer and sought comfort from those who had been there and survived.

"I knew one of our students who had breast cancer. She was all clear, but she had breast cancer 10 years ago, and she was a great support."

Eileen prepared herself for surgery. It would be her first time in hospital. On the eighth level of Sydney's St Vincents Hospital, just a few blocks from her yoga centre, her 'angels' transformed the sterile room into a place of calm. There were

flowers and a supply of fresh fruit and juices. They rubbed essential oil on her feet. A giant coffee table book full of pictures of peaceful Buddhas lay open at her bedside. Eileen was scared but ready for the next part of this strange journey.

"As the anaesthetist was putting the drops in I said, 'Look you know, will I remember anything?' And he said, 'Well, if you do, then I've got a real problem.'"

After the surgery and overcoming her body's initial reluctance to move, Eileen began to heal herself from the inside out. Since she was still relatively bedridden, she found listening to meditation tapes helpful. She also instinctively launched into her yoga practice, this time in her mind.

"In actual fact I was doing my asana practice every morning. But I was lying in bed and I was visualising it and I was breathing each movement. So I was inhaling arms up – of course I couldn't lift my arms; exhale hands to floor...So I was visualising and I was moving my body to the breath.

"By the time I got to Janu Sirsasana C (head to knee pose, 3rd variation), I was absolutely exhausted, so I had to lie down to take Savasana," Eileen laughed. But there was a reason for the mind work, beyond visualising poses.

"I was moving the prana through my whole body, particularly the chest area – allowing that breath to move through me."

Six days after her surgery, Dr Coleman gave her the news that the cancer had not spread and she would not need further treatment. The next step was recovery, which because of the loss of movement and discomfort resulting from surgery can often be as traumatic as the diagnosis. But again for Eileen, the benefits of a dedicated yoga practice surfaced at the right time.

Slowly she started at the beginning of Ashtanga's primary series, which after maintaining an advanced practice for so many years, was like getting to know an old friend again. Aptly described as *Yoga Chikitsa*, which means 'yoga therapy', the primary series is designed to align and purify the body.

"My whole practice has been about recovery," Eileen says. "I'm much more intuitive – I'm listening now. Before I would say, okay it's Friday, it's a primary day and then on Sunday I'd say okay it's an intermediate day and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday it's third series," Eileen explained.

"Practice is a totally different concept now. It's moving my prana, my life force, and I'm not as rigid in it as I was. I'll wake up and I sit and I do my pranayama and I'll think about what my body wants to do. And there's some times when it's just fine and there's some days when I pull back and I just do long inverted postures. So it's very rich at the moment."

Doctors also confirmed the benefits of Eileen's practice. They were especially surprised by how much mobility she had regained. But Eileen was not surprised at all. "It's inevitable," she explained. "You have such a sense of memory to what the body does, to how the skin moves, to how the muscles move. You just remember that."

Continuing her recovery through her yoga practice, Eileen has also taken on a

new enthusiasm for ayurvedic therapies and contemplative practices. She has especially found a strong connection with the process of *Sankalpa*, which is a visualisation method for self-inquiry.

"When I went through this I lost complete identity of who I was," Eileen said. "So I tried to find out what really inspired me and what was really important to me – and I came to realise that that was part of my healing."

Whether dealing with the ordinary dilemmas of daily life or contemplating the bigger questions, Eileen now takes a closer look to ensure that every choice she makes is right for her. "What really matters in life? What was it that I really want to do? But you know what? Without this cancer, I don't think I would've gone down that path. I don't think I really would've asked myself that deeper question."

The experience has transformed her teaching, giving new inspiration and insight into sharing her love of yoga with others. "I'm more compassionate," Eileen says, "It gives me so much nourishment to be in there."

On a Sunday morning five months after taking her first tentative steps from her hospital room on the arm of her yoga teacher, Eileen is seated in Padmasana (Lotus pose) with 30 students. Candles are lit, the sweet smell of Nag Champa incense swirls, giving an atmosphere of sanctuary to the room. Eileen explains to her students that today she would like to spend time with them exploring pranayama before delving into their Ashtanga practices.

"Many of you come here because you have a sore back, or you want to work on your flexibility or your hamstrings, and that is fine," she says gently. "But what we're really doing when we practise yoga is moving prana – that's what is really happening."

She then leads the class in the traditional Ashtanga chant to honour teachers of the past and then stands to prepare to teach, feeling the earth beneath her feet.

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