



henry

In 2002, a parent from my son's class approached me and enquired about the benefits of yoga for children. We spoke at length and some time later she asked if I would be interested in doing a one-on-one session with her son. Although in a mainstream school, Henry has cerebral palsy (CP) and at that time was graduating from his wheelchair to a walking frame. Due to his limited mobility, Henry had difficulty in physically keeping up with the other children in the participation of school sports. His mother, with the school's consent, thought it a good idea for Henry to do yoga while the rest of his counterparts tackled the bats and balls.

SO BEGAN MY RELATIONSHIP AND friendship with eight year old Henry. Every Friday, I would arrive at the school just after lunch to find Henry and his aid waiting eagerly outside the reading room where we would practice. Henry walked with a walking frame especially designed for children with CP. His calf muscles and achilles were very tight. This resulted in his heels being too high off the ground, causing him to walk on the balls of the feet with bent knees. He was unable to stand on his own and balance on his feet, so his aid would assist by manoeuvring the frame whenever there was a step or uneven ground to tackle. When he turned 10 years old, Henry had

an operation to correct this and to straighten his ankles. Up to that stage, he received Botox injections every six months to help relax his tight muscles and improve his mobility.

YOGA CLASS BEGAN WITH REMOVING THE splints which helped to straighten and support his legs. Henry has a slim, slight build, and combined with his inner glow and shining spirit, it was easy to lift him when I needed. He got around by himself most of the time by crawling or walking on his knees. Henry's attitude and enthusiasm made teaching easy. He was always willing to give things a go and together we'd explore the poses to discover his potentials and limitations.

Mostly, I would concentrate on lengthening the back of his legs and strengthening his upper body. Through the poses, Henry learnt the names of various muscles and bones in his body. "Ouch Vim – my hamstrings are talking to me!" he would volunteer earnestly. Or, with a giggle, "I'm trying Vim but my humerus doesn't want to budge!"

Our lessons were a combination of asanas (using names of animals and shapes as much as possible), visualisations, stories, and games. We would draw pictures, travel to far-away countries on a magic flying carpet, chant *Om*, and count the chimes of the Tibetan bells. The activities were endless.

In 2004, another boy with cerebral palsy the same age as Henry arrived at the school and consequently joined our Friday yoga sessions. It was when this second child arrived that it occurred to me how much Henry had improved. Slowly, quietly, and surely the yoga was changing Henry's body. With a second student I could measure how much Henry had progressed.

The back of his legs were smoother and his movement fluid. He could now wriggle his toes. He was alert to not holding his breath like he did at the beginning. His mother commented that she had noticed how much better his posture was. His aid commented that his concentration and focus in the classroom had improved. The twitching and sudden jerky movements, which are typical of someone with CP, were not as frequent. The care and thought he applied to each action was evidence of the focus and concentration he had developed over time. Also, his self-esteem soared. To ask Henry to demonstrate or explain a pose to the newcomer was the highlight of his day.

AS A SPECIAL TREAT, ONE TERM I photographed the boys during a session and sent the photos to them during the school holidays. I asked the boys what they thought when they received the

photos. In a slow, slurred voice (his speech is slightly affected by the CP), Henry answered “I was so proud of myself”. My heart melted. I simply smiled and replied, “We’re all proud of you Henry.”

OUR YOGA SESSIONS CONTINUED FOR another two years until the boys left for high school. Henry came to visit me during one of his school holidays, after starting at his new school. Our yoga session was full of old, familiar asanas which sparked memories of a happy time in his junior years. When the lesson was over, we walked in my garden. As I

held his hand to assist him (he only needs his frame for long walks now) he commented on the veggie patch, announcing that when he finished school he would like to be a landscaper. In a typical childlike manner, he gave me advice on care for the fish in our home-made fish pond. It occurred to me that – just as the yoga which had slowly, quietly, and surely transformed Henry’s body in an inexplicable way, I too was transformed by this softly spoken, happy-go-lucky young man whose zest for life and care for nature is an inspiration.

HENRY IS NOW 15 YEARS OLD, ENJOYS horse riding and swimming, and is doing very well. It has been a joy and privilege to know Henry and I wish him continued success.

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