Yoga Alliance - Monday Session (USYOGA1008A)

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Yoga Alliance

MAYA BREUER: I'd like to welcome you to the Yoga Alliance community sangha. It's just a pleasure. I can't see you all, but I know you're there. I want to begin by teaching Ujai breathing. It is also called Victoria's breath or the ocean-sounding breath. So let's take a big breath in, into the area, like below the navel, above the navel, fill your chest, exhale from the top down. And again, breathe from the bottom up. Exhale. And these are long, slow and deep breaths in and out of your nostrils. Bringing ourselves to a place of calmness. I want you to look at me, everybody. I'm going to raise my right hand and place it in front of my mouth. And I'm going to say Ha, with a breathy sound. Here we go. Ha. Let's make it breathy. Ha. And again, Ha. Now it's just breath. Ha. Good. Place your hand down. And that same breath that Ha, we're going to draw it back into the throat and that's going to close the upper Glottis. Do this once more. Here we go. Draw it back, exhale through the nostrils. We've closed the back of the throat. It makes a sound. Inhale. Exaggerate the sound. Inhale. Hope you can hear me exaggerating. And exhale. Inhale. Exhale. Continue. You may hear the sound just a little. Exhale. And you hear the resistance in the air and back of the throat. Try to make your inhalation a little longer. And the exhalation. Inhale. Exhale. And we'll continue this for one minute together. Ujai prana Yama. And let your breath return to normal. I want to give you three benefits of Ujjayi pranayama. The practice of Ujjayi raises body heat. The sound of the vibration calms and focuses the mind, allowing you to relax. Ujjayi breath can also be effective in reducing pain, controlling insomnia, reducing pain from my grains. There are some so I excite you to explore Ujjayi pranayama. And today, I want to welcome Candace A Jennings. Before I tell you about her, I want to read something by Joseph Campbell. Follow your bliss. I say follow your bliss, and don't be afraid, and doors will open where you didn't see they were going to be. The single most important thing I can give you for your journey is follow your bliss. I have invited my friend and colleague Candace Jennings to join me and to give a testimony today about how yoga has helped her heal. Candace is going to tell you what happened to her, but I'll tell you who she is today. Candace has trained in restorative yoga. She is an advanced yoga teacher. She studied race-based trauma with Dr Gail Parker and she's as level 2 Thai yoga practitioner. She also leads or co-leads teacher training programs and retreats with I am yoga. I am so pleased to welcome you, Candace. Welcome to the community sangha.

CANDACE JENNINGS: Thank you so much. It's a pleasure to be here. Grateful to you. Grateful to be here. Thank you for having me.

MAYA BREUER: You're so welcome. So please just tell us your story. You can begin where you would like to begin. Thank you, Candace.

CANDACE JENNINGS: Namaste, everyone. This story comes from working on building my body and getting healthy. I got a nutritionist and was losing weight and had just finished the music for my album and wanted to be healthier in my body. I had always been over overweight, but I'd always been able to move. I danced all my life, from the age of 3 until I was 48. As I started losing weight, the more weight I lost, the less mobility I had, and I recognized I was tripping as I was walking with my walking group. I was teaching dance at the university, and I'd given them some choreography, shown them how it goes, and was walking back to the music
and my legs gave out and I don't know how I got to the floor except that I was there, and got myself back up, finished the class. The more weight I lost, the more my legs started to fail me. I had never really fallen, hurt myself. And wound up getting myself to Massachusetts, where my family was, because I was kind of here by myself. I have a tribe, but no family here to look after me. So my family is like we need you to come home because we can't help you. So I go home. I go into Mass General. They tell me I have six herniations on two disks and that I needed surgery. Never been sick. I was scared, but knew I needed to walk and knew I needed to be able to sit. I couldn't walk, I couldn't sit, I couldn't stand, and I was losing the feeling in my legs. So I did the two surgeries -- I did one surgery. There was a problem, a complication after that. I had to have a second surgery to explore what was going on. I got out of that. Fresh out of recovery, I got sick to my stomach and blew out my back. And I had no feeling from my waist down. I had to do a third surgery. Two weeks later I had to have a fourth surgery. They wanted to do a forthwith and I was like we're all done. 30 days in the hospital. As a dancer, my legs are gone. Now what? I'd been teaching dance and theater and perform performing all my life. Now what? I couldn't walk, I couldn't sit, I couldn't stand, and I was losing the feeling in my legs. So I immediately started in my hospital bed. I asked them for a towel and I started exercising my legs. I would pull it in and then furb away. I would pull it in and push it away. Because I said I have a life that I want to get back to. I was driven to get back to my life. I ended up 30 days in the hospital, two months living with my brother in Massachusetts. He took care of me while I went into rehab, orthopedic, occupational. And I was walking, but I couldn't feel my feet. I think the only thing that kept me going upright was my dance. I knew where center was. I knew where my core was. I knew how to be lifted. And that helped me balance, and that was it. It was the first few years a balancing act, just knowing how to put my feet in front and hold myself together so I wouldn't fall.

MAYA BREUER: You know, I think people -- I think we need to tell people what you did before this happened.

CANDACE JENNINGS: I was a choreographer. I had a theater company. I had a dance company. I had a group of young dancers called Candace's Pride. We were doing shows. I was correspond graphing and correspond graphing a musical on ballroom dance. I was very busy, and doing arts integration programs in the school system, in movement. All I did all my life was move and dance. And then this. I laid in the hospital bed mystified, like, really, this is what we're doing? Because I just finished my album. I was going to go overseas. I had a plan. Then it was done.

MAYA BREUER: You have to tell us about the album too. You leave out these grand things. What was that about?

CANDACE JENNINGS: What happened was in 2010 I lost my mom. If you've lost a parent, you know that it just rattles you at the core. So her passing made me re-evaluate my life, like what are you doing? You're doing all these things and you're making a name for everybody else in the communities that you're working in, but you ain't making a name for yourself. So what do you want to do? What do you really want to do? What would make you happy? And I had not really jumped in my music. I had a band, and every time I would perform, they're like where's your album? I didn't one one, because I was really just diving into the music. So when my mom passed, she left me some money. I first went and got my health checked, did my teeth, got my health done, all my tests. All that stuff was done. And then I went into the recording studio and
laid the music down with my keyboard player and said: OK, I have some house music on there, I have some jazz, I have some R-and-B, neo-soul, a mix, a combination of everything I love to sing. We finished the music and then I was going to work on the lyrics and then my legs went. Then everything in me that was creative disappeared. I was so frightened, because I need my legs to do all of the things I want to do. And it really gutted me. I didn't go in my art studio. I didn't listen to my music. I didn't listen to my music for probably two years. And then a friend of mine in Boston sent me a message and said: Your mother wants to know why you're not singing. And she didn't -- nobody knew I wasn't singing. Nobody knew any of that. And she said the vibrations will help your back heal. So I got on my walker. I had an altar set up for my mom and I put some music on and sang for her. I could feel my legs vibrate. With the notes my legs were going back and forth. I kept holding on as I sang, but my legs were vibrating with my voice. So that became part of the exercise too, that -- that was before yoga. That was just me getting home and trying to figure out how am I going to take care of myself? How do I find a job? How do I work? What am I doing? What am I going to do? Because my legs were everything. And somebody called me up and said: Have you ever thought about yoga? And I said, well, my neighbor goes upstairs every morning. Hot yoga. She's out of the house at 5:00. I know that that, but I never thought about it. I studied Hinduism and Buddhism in college, never once thought about yoga. And I just said, if it's going to help me get better, then I'm in. So I started kind Kundalini yoga in my bed because I I didn't want to fall. I started the spiral, L 4, L 5, waking up my lower back, bringing blood flow, changing direction, rolling around in my lower back, and it started to wake stuff up. So I got a trainer, a deep tissue massage therapist, paid them for a year out of what my mom left me, and just got a team to help me. And then somebody introduced me to Asha Sims, who introduced me to Keesha and I started. Yoga was my therapy. Because I knew I needed to keep moving. If I didn't move, then the numbness was coming back strong. So I needed to build myself up. And I lost 12 pounds of muscle being in the hospital. I lost 12 pounds. And I knew it was muscle, because I couldn't hold myself up. Maya Breuer: Yeah. If people are listening and they want to know, what did you do? You said one thing thing. You started with the Kundalini practice in the bed. And doing the Kundalini practice, did you do chanting as well? Candace Jennings: I didn't really know anything about any of it, really. Someone said do you know about this and I was like no. So I went on YouTube. I was like what is that? I knew the fulfill philosophical piece of it, but I didn't know the physical. I didn't know anything about chant. I said if it this is going to help me get better, I'm in. It did. I could feel the warmth in my back. I could feel the ease of the muscles around my spine. Everything just kind of softened and I had more feeling. Even still, things are still waking up. It's been eight years. There are still parts of my legs that are numb. There are still mornings I wake up and I can't feel my feet. But I keep going because I've got things I want to do. Yoga allows me to do that. Yoga has reconnected me to the body that's not dance. I've been dancing since I was 3, and up until the time I was 48 I danced. And I was a hoover. I danced with the Hines brothers. Maya Breuer: What do you mean you were a hooper? Let's them the audience know what a hooper is, girl. Candace Jennings: It's a tap dancer that kind of rides the rhythms they create. I knew Broadway style. I could do all of those, but this is get down, bring home your tribal essence into your feet and into your body. I had an amazing dance teacher, Frank, and he would bring the best of the best to our school and they would teach us. I was fortunate enough to -- myself, Joy Winters, Kim Munro and I were fortunate enough to be able to go to New York and dance at Maurice Hines in a show we were trying to get on Broadway called two of a kind. We were tapping, doing jazz, everything, acro acrobats because we could. That was something iour
teacher pushed in us. You're not little like the rest of them girls, but you can move, so go ahead. And I said back walk over, 5, 6, 7, 8, do it. That got us to New York. That got people interested in us because we were big girls dancing hard.

MAYA BREUER: I love that. I'll have to use that, big girls dancing hard.

CANDACE JENNINGS: Mm-hmm.

MAYA BREUER: That's fabulous.

CANDACE JENNINGS: African, Afro-Cuban jazz. So that's where you got to meet me, was the mix of bringing my yoga physical therapy and learning what yoga really was and the philosophy behind it and the language of it, all of that mattered to me. And then because I was a dancer, the Afro-Cuban, the history of that dance and our tribal energy, that ancestral energy that is already in me, I brought together to do the workshop for you at yoga retreat for women of color.

MAYA BREUER: I was just going to mention that. When you were introduced to me and it was suggested that you come to teach at the yoga retreat for women of color, I was like, Hm I don't know. I was nervous because I couldn't fathom how someone could be paralyzed and then move into what you've moved into. I believed the person who -- that was Keesha -- who encouraged me to bring you in and I trusted her and I said we're going to go with this. I want to tell the audience, it was just bliss. That was pure bliss to see this woman lead us and move her body, when you could never imagine there was a time that you couldn't move your body at will. It was just exciting. A person has asked: What have the medical doctors said about your recovery?

CANDACE JENNINGS: They told me that I would heal within six months to a year. That wasn't the case. They wanted to do a spinal fusion. That was it for me. I was like, enough. I don't want any more done. They told me at that point if you don't have this done, you'll never walk again. I was like what? I walked in here. I have another plan in my mind and I haven't been back. That's the truth.

MAYA BREUER: So they don't even know what's happening with you today?

CANDACE JENNINGS: No. And I just didn't want to be picked and prodded. It was enough. It was traumatic. Because I'm legs. That's my work, right? My legs are my work, and they were gone. If you couldn't do it in four surgeries, then we're all done. We're done. I've timed out and we're not doing any more. I'll find something else. It's yoga. And I was a walker anyway. When I came to you, I think the first time I taught I was on my walker. The next time I came I was on my cane.

MAYA BREUER: That's right.

CANDACE JENNINGS: I wanted to come without my cane, but I know where my walls are in my house. So when I'm out in public, it's a push. If somebody pushes me, I'm down. Because it's a balancing act still. I have my center, I have my core, I can move. But if I'm thrown off of that, I could be really thrown off of that. But it was such an honor to be able to teach for you and present for you, and the response from everybody.

MAYA BREUER: Oh, everybody was so thrilled. Someone said: Was the paralysis from the waist down? And when the body started waking up, what were the first signs of feeling and movement that let you know you were on the right track?

CANDACE JENNINGS: I think the first thing was -- this was probably the most challenging part, was when I first got out of the hospital, I couldn't feel when I had to go to the bathroom. Absolute horror of horrors. I would be like oh, I've got to go to the bathroom. The moment I stood up, bottomed out. I was absolutely horrified. So when I could feel it, that I had to go and I could get myself to the bathroom, that was the first sign. Then I started getting -- you know how when you get on an arm and it falls asleep and you get that tingling? That tingling started in waves of different places, down in my thighs. And it would sting. The other thing that's
happened, you know how you get a good workout and your muscles ache? Now that sensation feels like rug burn. When I work my muscles, it's a stinging sensation, but I know I've worked my muscles. So I'll take that over feeling absolutely nothing. It's gotten knee a place to just tolerate different sensations and different kinds of pains because I'm feeling something, where I felt absolutely nothing. And every so often, something will release. The -- I used to get spasms because my muscles were so over overworked that when they relaxed they immediately wanted to turn back on. It's been an interesting journey. All of that has diminished. Two weeks ago I had my first restorative yoga class where my body didn't spasm.

MAYA BREUER: I want to read to you -- someone said: Thank you. You are an inspiration. Blessing to you.

CANDACE JENNINGS: Thank you so much.

MAYA BREUER: And someone said: I took a class with Candace this past Thursday evening. She played a song during savasana that she chanted to, and OMG, it took savasana to a deep and beautiful place. Someone else says: You are an inspiration separation. Thank you for sharing your beautiful story. Thank you. Really helpful information. And I'm going to have you give us a little sample of movement with you, Candace. If you want to give us a little bit of music and then we'll --

CANDACE JENNINGS: Sure. The piece that I brought to yoga retreat for women of color awakening the feminine through after row Cuban movement. That's also where my injury is. It takes that Kundalini energy. We'll do that. We'll put the music on.

MAYA BREUER: OK.

CANDACE JENNINGS: I'll get my eyes first so I can see.

MAYA BREUER: Go, girl. Get them. (music plays)

CANDACE JENNINGS: Ground your feet. Settle them into the floor. This was a big part of it too, really feeling my feet, because when you're doing African African-based movement, everything is about being connected to the earth, to the ground. So I could step my right foot, now step my left foot, and right, and I'd let my body go with it. I needed to find my dancer again, right? So I'm grounding my feet. I set my feet down. I feel that rhythm. I inhale. I exhale forward and I'm making a small circle with my lower back and I'm just spinning over and around my hips, over and around my sacrum, inhaling as I come back, exhaling as I come forward, and letting that warm up and bring blood flow to the lower back. And when we come back to the front, we're going to change directions, and sweep back the other way, feeling that opening. And each time you exhale, you should be able to bring you further down, further back and expanding that circle, that energy and that cyclic energy, right? Bringing that to us. Then we come back to center. Grounding our feet. If you have your hands on your knees, we'll do seated cat cow, because it comes from contribution and release of the body, think about yoga is cat cow. We round our back and release our heart forward. Inhaling, exhaling, round our back into cat. Inhale. You can add the arms with that. Arms go back with the release. Exhale, contract, draw the arms in. You can bring them into Mudra. Arms come back. Release that heart energy. Exhale, contract, bring the hand to heart center. Cross the arms and come back to center. Spine long. And exhale.

MAYA BREUER: That was just delightful, Candace. I hope everyone participated. Really wonderful.

CANDACE JENNINGS: Thank you.

MAYA BREUER: Can you tell us, what are the three postures that you do regularly? What do you do regular regularly? In case there's someone out there having a mobility issue. Maybe they can learn something from what you know now about yoga.

CANDACE JENNINGS: For me, everything is L 4, L 5 area. I have an eight-inch insignificance.
So -- incision. Everything has to do with movement. I'm shifting my hips from side to side, tucking my pelvis over. Releasing the lower back feels like lightning going down my legs. That's something I just revisited. I'm also just moving, massage myself. That's what I teach when I teach my soul stretch class. It's about applying deep stretch yoga but taking the moment to rub what is uncomfortable. It's your body. And to really dig deep and to release those aching, tight muscles that can just be shifted by applying pressure with your fingertips or a thumb or your knuckle. Breathing into those areas that feel tight in a posture. So you could be in a recline. One of the things that feels great for me is cat cow. I do it seated, standing, on table tabletop. There's so many ways to play with that. I love reclined pigeon, where you bring -- you have one leg is bent, the other one is bent here. But I always straighten this leg because then it stretches way back into the lower back for me. And then it's an uncomfortable one for most, but Malasana squat, the opening, that pelvic tilt. There's so much about that that gets right into where I'm uncomfortable. And opening and making space, right? Every inhalation makes space so that your body can reset itself when you exhale. And the same thing happens this those postures postures. You're inhaling tight, feeling that resistance, making space. When you relax, you're freer in those areas. So cat cow, pigeon and Malasana.

MAYA BREUER: Wonderful.
CANDACE JENNINGS: Down dog, all of that length lengthening of the lower back, the paddling of the legs legs, all that stuff is super for lower back stuff.
MAYA BREUER: Wonderful, wonderful. Garland is not my favorite posture. That's not one of my favorites, but it's a good one.
CANDACE JENNINGS: It's a good hip opener.
MAYA BREUER: If we think of pranayama, how have you incorporated the breath into your daily life?
CANDACE JENNINGS: That's interesting. I heard a gentleman tell his story, same kind of back issue, but he had been doing yoga. And his rationale when he was in the hospital, why am I here? The same questions I asked. He said: All I had was my breath. And in that then. -- I didn't know that then. I know I had my dance breath. That was not the same. Now breath is medicine. It really is medicine. It's that expansion -- especially now, we're dealing with this pandemic, and it's all about the loss initially until it will becomes something else. Initially it's all about the lungs and being able to breathe. That exercise of really expanding the breath is huge. That's oxygen. And it's also making space and it's also an internal massage when you're in a twist. It does so much. It's really what you've got. It's what you've got at the end of the day. So it's the thing that calms you. It's the thing that settles you. It's the thing that grounds you, that guides your movement. It's huge.
MAYA BREUER: Absolutely.
CANDACE JENNINGS: It's absolutely huge. And yoga has taught me that.
MAYA BREUER: Yes, yes. And people are -- someone says: Thank you for all you have done, Candace. And it's Sabrina. Someone says: I teach yoga and that back release while sitting was great. Do you have leg strengtheners that can be done from the chair? Something that strengthens the leg that can be done from the chair.
CANDACE JENNINGS: The lead here is I am not in a chair that I should be exercising. It has wheels. But sit to stand is huge. Being able to engage the core, being able to come up, sit up, pull everything up and then slowly guide it down. I can't do this in the morning. I can't settle myself down. When I get into a chair in the morning I'm plopping. So it takes me to do sit to stand is to strengthen the thighs, to strengthen the core engagement, to have that energy awareness that we're -- I have a private client, and one of the things I tell her is we can't dump into our joints. Not at this age, right? We have to feel that engagement of the thighs pulling up,
that engagement of the thighs working, so that when we go to sit up, we're here. And I do it slow motion so that I know I have the control. And I'm in chair pose, right? I might stay here to feel my engagement in the feet, to feel my engagement in my thighs, to squeeze my thighs together, to feel that engagement, and then I sit myself back down. It's about the awareness. Awareness has been my mantra for at least three years. I've been on the yoga journey -- so I injured myself in 2017. I got into -- 2012. I got into yoga in 2015. So it's only been five years since I've been on this yoga journey, and it's all about awareness. When you get on your mat, it's your time to be with you, aware of how you're feeling, aware of how you're emotionally feeling, right? How are you spiritually feeling? It's all about the mind body spirit. So taking the time to really honor. I honored every step of this journey. I honored the tears and the frustrations. I honored that voice in my head is a says I may never dance again, until I did, and I had to get past my vanity. That's the other piece.

MAYA BREUER: Oh, yeah.
CANDACE JENNINGS: I told Keesha, I don't want to go to Kerpala with a walker. But that's all I had. But she said but you can teach with a walker. I said I can. She said so teach. So I had to get past myself.
MAYA BREUER: But also, the yoga is about knowing yourself. So you got past that false self that wasn't really Candace, because Candace will teach, Candace can be herself anywhere.
CANDACE JENNINGS: That's right.
MAYA BREUER: You define that through yoga.
CANDACE JENNINGS: I was telling Keesha, I've always been known as Candace the dancer all my life. Now she's not that. And I had to embrace that reality. But now she's Candace the yoga teacher.
MAYA BREUER: That's right.
CANDACE JENNINGS: But she's also Candace the writer, the singer, the artist.
MAYA BREUER: She's Candace.
CANDACE JENNINGS: That's right.
MAYA BREUER: And she expresses and allows herself herself. And we are so happy that you're here expressing. Candace, I want to read these to you. This is my teacher. Beautiful flow. Candace is an awe awesome teacher, so knowledgeable. She's my teacher.
CANDACE JENNINGS: Oh!
MAYA BREUER: Candace is an inspiration. And then someone says: You all are pure joy. Thank you for your powerful testimony, Candace. Greetings and blessings from South Carolina. Thankful to YA for bringing these beautiful sessions to us all. It's just been a blessing to have you join us on the community sangha today. And I would like to ask the guests: What is something you would like -- something from deep within -- not that everything hasn't been deep that you've been sharing, but something that you want to leave with our audience. We have auto few minutes. -- a few minutes. You can take a breath. Why don't you hum a song for us? Let us hear your voice. Do a little song song. Wonderful.
CANDACE JENNINGS: Let me turn this off. One minute.
MAYA BREUER: OK.
CANDACE JENNINGS: # (Singing)
MAYA BREUER: Ashay. You are a testament -- I'm reading -- to the power of the human spirit. Thank you for your journey. I too lost a parent recently, and it is a self-searching reality for me too. I connected to that as well. Very beautiful. Thank you so very much for your courage and strength. Such an inspiration. I had a real breakdown yesterday. So much weight and holding around all we're amidst currently. I felt defeated and victimized. Afterwards felt better. Woke up
today even more open. And here listening to you have become reempowered and reinvigorated, my purpose and energy to keep moving forward. Namaste. Beautiful Beautiful. What a beautiful blessing. Namaste. That was beautiful. Is your album available to stream?
CANDACE JENNINGS: Not yet! Again, this all happened -- it will come. I have one song I'm trying to figure out how to share it. It's from an album called ascension. It was the title track for a song I did for a big band, actually. I was part of a 25-piece jazz band and they chose my song, which was a cappella, which blew my mind. I have that one song that I'm trying to find so I can get it out there. I will make sure it's available when that time comes. It took a minute to get back to --

MAYA BREUER: You're back.
CANDACE JENNINGS: Yeah. It just took a minute because I didn't know what was going to happen. People were like why don't you do this? I was like I need to be able to run. Right now I can't even run. That was my narrative for a minute. I need to be able to run. If something pops off, I need to be able to run, wherever that is. I'm stronger and better.
MAYA BREUER: And you can run. What did you say about dancing hard? What was the word?
CANDACE JENNINGS: Big girl dancing hard.
MAYA BREUER: That's what we want to leave with our audience. Big girls dancing hard. Somebody just said: She's back. And they're just going on and on. I got into yoga a few years ago and now I'm embarking on a new part of my journey where I'm teaching. So thank you so much for speaking your truth. Your singing brought so much peace and strength. Before I teach my class tonight. Someone said she's Baaack. Beautiful and love voice. Thank you for sharing. Greetings from Canada. Namaste.
CANDACE JENNINGS: Namaste.
MAYA BREUER: Someone said: I so appreciate you both. What a beautiful gift you both are. Thank you.
CANDACE JENNINGS: Thank you.
MAYA BREUER: And beautiful session. Lovely words about how breath is medicine. Couldn't describe it better. Thank you very much. And we will end with strong, beautiful, and we will carry you love. They're just coming in. Candace A Jennings, it has been such a wonderful moment to have you here with us on the Yoga Alliance community sangha. And let us lead everyone in the chanting of om. We'll bring our palms in front of our heart in mudra and you lead us in the chanting of om.
CANDACE JENNINGS: We're going to take one breath, one cycle in and out. And on the next inhalation, we're going to inhale deep and release the sound of om. Om.
MAYA BREUER: Shanti shanti shanti. Peace, peace, peace. And we say Jabaguan.
CANDACE JENNINGS: Thank you for having me. It's been an honor and a pleasure. Thank you, Yoga Alliance Alliance, for allowing me to share. Thank you for all the beautiful words, everybody. Thank you so much.
MAYA BREUER: Namaste.
CANDACE JENNINGS: Namaste.