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LIFESTYLE MORE

YOGA WITH A TWIST

# Practice 'kissy feet' or laugh your head off

'The babies normally get all smiley and giggly, and the moms get all happy, and it ends up being a joyous class.'

SHAREE HOSOI

Itsy Bitsy baby yoga instructor



By MARIE DOEZEMA  
Staff Writer

**D**on't laugh: There really is such a thing as baby yoga. On second thought, do laugh: There's also such a thing as laughter yoga, reputed to make you happier, healthier and stronger.

Just when you thought the yoga trend could peak no higher, it does. Advertisements—for everything from antacids to shoes—use yoga as bait. Bum-hugging pants and meditation music are flying off the shelves. A yoga mat strapped to the back has become the “it” accessory—the Louis Vuitton, of sorts, for the earthy set.

Hot yoga, slow yoga, yoga for dogs. You name it, you can find it.

Sharee Hosoi, Tokyo's first certified Itsy Bitsy Yoga instructor, gets a lot of chuckles when she mentions her occupation. “Most people say, ‘What’s that?’ and then they laugh.”

And while the image of a roomful of infants chanting om is enough to illicit a giggle, that’s not exactly how it goes, Hosoi says.

In fact, baby yoga is designed not only for babies’ health, but also for child-parent bonding. “It’s about the loving bond you have with the baby,” says the native New Zealander. Most baby yoga positions—Itsy Bitsy yoga has 125 poses—involve the parents (mostly mothers) gently adjusting their babies.

“The babies normally get all smiley and giggly, and the moms get all happy, and it ends up being a joyous class,” she says.

Baby yoga aids in digestion, increases flexibility and helps babies sleep better, Hosoi says. “They (babies) are natural yogis. They only care about the moment—not tomorrow, just the present.”

Hosoi, a preschool teacher, discovered baby yoga at an education conference two years ago. After one seminar, she was hooked. “I went and immediately fell in love with the whole concept,” she says. “I wanted to help mothers help their babies.”

Last September, Hosoi went to Washington D.C. to study Itsy Bitsy yoga with its founder, Helen Garabedian.

Garabedian, a certified yoga instructor, founded the Itsy Bitsy baby yoga program in 1999 as a way to bond parents and children, as well as to aid in babies’ physical, social and emotional development. Today, there are more than 100 certified Itsy Bitsy yoga teachers practicing throughout North America and Asia.

Favorite poses include “kissy feet”—good for flexibility, “chunky monkey thighs”—helps digestion and gas release, “sit-a-twisty”—helpful with rolling over and crawling, and “I love you,” a chest-opener that helps babies breathe more deeply.

Hosoi has brought baby yoga to various schools in Tokyo, teaching in both English and Japanese, and hopes to continue to expand her business. Recently returned from a second trip to the United States for continued study with Garabedian, Hosoi is optimistic about the future of baby yoga in Japan. “I think it’s good anywhere,” she says. “But I think that Japanese mothers like to do a lot of activities with their children, and a lot of people love yoga, so combining them both should be successful.”

Somewhere along the line, giggling babies turn into stodgy adults. According to laughter yoga instructor Lisa Booth, the average child laughs between 300 and 400 times a day. The average adult? Between 15 and 20.

“It’s an innate sense. You’re able to laugh from birth. But somewhere along the line, you get serious,” she says.

Booth’s classes start with forced laughter. It feels so fake you have to laugh. That’s just the point, she says. Laughing doesn’t have to come from gag jokes and sitcoms—it all stems from within.

Booth discovered laughter yoga while watching the film, “Ayurveda” on a Wednesday in February 2004. The brief laughter yoga scene struck a chord.

“The screen was exuding two things that I wanted more of. One was the sense of community,” she says. “The other is that they were just having such a good time.”

The next morning, she turned to Google and was surprised to find that thousands of laughter clubs existed around the world. On Friday, the former market research executive attended her first laughter club. As it happened, there was one two blocks away from where Booth was then living, in Versailles, France.

“I started to let a different side of myself out,” she says. “You have to get past the ego in order to get to a place where you don’t criticize, you don’t judge, you just enjoy.”

Two months later, Booth found herself enrolled in a teacher training course in Vancouver, taught by laughter yoga’s founders, Madan and Madhuri Kataria. Madan, a doctor from Mumbai, came up with the idea in 1995. As a physician increasingly interested in the health benefits of laughter—lower blood pressure, stronger heart and immune system, better mood—he wanted to find a way to get people to laugh. Pacing in his living room before his early morning walk, he came up with a plan.

Convincing people to go along with it, once he reached the neighborhood park, wasn’t so easy. Madan and his wife, a yoga teacher, found three fellow walkers bold enough to sit around and laugh. The next morning, they laughed some more. More people came, and they laughed even harder.

The Katarias developed their idea of laughter by adding yogic deep breathing and stretching.

In 1998, the Katarias held the first annual World Laughter Day at a public park in Mumbai. About 12,000 people showed up. The first laughter day held outside of India, Happy-demic, took place in Copenhagen in 2000. About 10,000 people attended.

“Everybody needs to laugh more,” Booth says. And in this vein, the native Nova Scotian is hopeful that laughter yoga will take off in Tokyo.

Not surprisingly, laughter yoga has already caught on with some companies. If happier employees work better, how productive could laughing employees be? “A productive society is a laughing society,” Booth says, then reconsiders. “A laughing society is a productive society.”

At a recent laughter yoga workshop at Sun and Moon studio in Tokyo’s Meguro ward, a roomful of laughter yoga debutants—an equal mix of foreigners and Japanese—giggled, guffawed and ended with a 20-minute “laughter meditation.”

It was awkward, funny, exhausting and relaxing—in that order. Whenever my laughter lapsed, all I had to do was reassess the scene—cultivated, controlled hysteria among strangers—and it’d set me off on another gale.

“Everybody loves that part,” Booth says of the laughter meditation. “It just comes bubbling out of you, like water out of the ground.”

Beginning June 3, Booth, along with certified laughter leader Mary Tadokoro, will be holding monthly, bilingual laughter workshops the first Saturday of every month



Madan Kataria, Lisa Booth and Madhuri Kataria



A mother helps her child into a half-moon pose.

at Yoyogi’s National Youth Center.

For more information about laughter yoga, visit <www.nyc.go.jp> or send an e-mail to <enjoy.yoga@gmail.com>. Sharee Hosoi will hold two workshops at Lululemon Athletica in Aoyama. A baby yoga workshop is set for May 30; a tots workshop will be held June 6. For more information, e-mail <tokyobabyoga@yahoo.com>.



KAYO MORI