

ECHO 2009

The Laughing Frozen Hiker, by Leigh Meredith, CLYT

We are born to laugh. We can't avoid feeling better after a good belly laugh. But what if we have nothing to laugh about? We laugh at nothing, for no reason. By laughing at nothing for no reason, we revive our spirit of play. We create our own fun, aerobic exercise and a new yogic discipline.

We usually wait for an outside influence to help us laugh... a funny movie, pets, silly babies. Our daily logic dictates: "Something is funny, therefore I laugh."

However, Laughter Yoga posits we don't need any outside influence to help us laugh. We can laugh without a sense of humor. If nothing is funny, we laugh in spite of it all. As we practice laughing at nothing during laughter sessions with others, things often become very funny.

Laughter Yoga was developed about fifteen years ago in India by a Mumbai physician who knew he needed to laugh to survive the stress of his job. Since then, Laughter Yoga has spread to over 63 countries with 500 laughter clubs in the United States. This success speaks to our global need to reduce stress, elevate mood, and increase immunity - and health in general. For more information on the innumerable health benefits of laughing, please visit: www.yogalaughs.com.

Haysa or Laughter Yoga is not typical *Hatha-style* yoga. We don't employ any strenuous postures and laugh at the same time. Our deliberate discipline of laughing becomes our meditation and door to deep relaxation.

We start with some clapping exercises to activate the meridian points in our palms. Then we play "laughter games", which are short, silly episodes of child-like playfulness to get our laughter warmed up. Pranayama or yogic breathing is also a part of most sessions.

The session crescendos into a laughter meditation, during which everyone laughs continuously for about 5 minutes. Then we easily sink into deep relaxation during the silent meditation, lasting 6-7 minutes. After completing a session, many people find it difficult to remember the worries and pain that arrived with

them to class.

With practice, laughter becomes more natural than stress and panic. Contentment and peace replace annoyance and dissatisfaction. I have a story about this phenomena.

On a cold day last February, I went on a hike; just a little Sunday excursion off Skyline Drive. I was with a great group of friends. It was a 9 mile loop hike. Winter rains had swollen the streams, erasing the usual “stepping stones”. So we resorted to other ways to cross.

The first of these was a long shaky log, where I promptly fell and plunged completely under water. With the help of others, I managed to get out of the stream. Landing on my pack in the stream had saved me from injury. But, I was very cold and all of the extra dry clothing I had brought in my day pack was drenched.

My first reaction after all of this drama was to laugh. Hard. I couldn't help it. When we get into a habit of laughing, we start to see ourselves and the world with much more levity.

As we continued to hike along, I started to get “weird” cold and exhausted. That's when I started weeping. I went from weeping to laughing to weeping to laughing. Jere, the leader, kept wiping away my tears. I started laughing with each step I took. Step. “Ha.” Step. “Ha ha.” Eventually, a sense of calm took over and I was fine for the rest of the 5-mile hike.

During the return hike, the group split up along the way and lost touch with each other. When our group returned to the cars, we realized none of us had driven. All of the drivers (and the keys) were abiding with the “lost” group. We waited in the cold wind.

Within minutes, a young couple from West Virginia pulled up at the overlook and asked me to take a picture of them. The guy had many piercings and the young woman was pregnant. After hearing my story, the young man started taking layers of his shirts off and literally gave me the warmest shirt off of his back. Then they asked what else they could do to help.

I was scheduled to lead Laughter Yoga later that afternoon and was running out of time. I asked my new friends for a ride back to Charlottesville. They were happy to take me. We rode along in their somewhat beaten up car, chatted, and occasionally stopped for me to take pictures of them. It was fun. I filled their tank, got into my warm SUV, and arrived exactly on time to lead Laughter Yoga. I was wearing spandex, but I was there!

I wanted to share this because it's a real world example of how intentional prolonged laughter can truly fortify us to survive emergencies and opens our world to take chances without fear. We come to rely on our intuition much more than our logic because laughing for no reason makes logic take a back seat. We live more in our authentic selves. It's nearly impossible to laugh and think at the same time.

Oh, and about laughter building immunity – I didn't even get a sniffle from this.

A friend recently said she thought the cure for cancer was right under our noses, we just hadn't found it yet. I agreed but didn't say I thought it was "preventative", prolonged laughter. A growing body of academic research is supporting this. By building immunities, increasing helpful neurochemicals, reducing stress and helping us live spirit-centered lives, Laughter Yoga must surely contribute to sustaining the most wonderful life for each of us.