



AcroYoga founders Jason Nemer and Jenny Sauer-Klein

Learning to Fly: A Foray into AcroYoga

BY LAURA BROWNE
PHOTOS BY ANDREW SCHMIDT

As I prepared to enter my first flying yoga pose, I thought, "My face could go crashing down onto his." Or if we were totally off balance, onto the naked shiny wood floor. Looking into my boyfriend's encouraging brown eyes, I inhaled deeply—but in a moment of resistance, mind racing, I couldn't launch myself. I became six years old playing airplane with my dad. Then reminded myself that I wasn't scared then, maybe I shouldn't be now.

A blend of partner yoga, acrobatics and Thai massage, AcroYoga is the creation of Berkeley residents Jason Nemer and Jenny Sauer-Klein. Joined early on in the arc of its synthesis by longtime yoga practitioner and Thai masseuse Carolyn Cohen, AcroYoga has offered classes locally since 2004. The practice takes you to the edge of your strength, balance and agility and then rewards you with the therapy of Thai massage, and it continues to find its audience. Today, Jenny and Jason travel internationally to train new teachers and spread the practice beyond the Bay Area.

The credentials of the founders inspired my confidence. Sauer-Klein had trained with ex-Cirque de Soleil artists. Nemer had been an acrobat since age 12 and had redeveloped compulsory exercises for

Olympic athletes and performed in the opening ceremonies of the 1996 Olympics. "A lot of adults have mental blocks about what their physical body is capable of," says Jason. "But seeing them revert to a childlike mind and being excited about not knowing where it's going to go, is what I love about this practice."

I enjoy yoga and am generally in good shape. I can climb to the top of a climbing wall and have practiced Thai massage. But having never tried partner yoga before, and not knowing just how up close and personal I'd be getting with a stranger (singles—you'll be paired with someone if you come alone), I asked my boyfriend Robert to come with me.

Getting Started

Led by Rana Lee Araneta and Core Instructor Carolyn, our evening at Yoga Tree began perched cross-legged in a circle knee-to-knee with 28 other adults in leggings and tank tops. Outside, on Valencia Street, people were having a different kind of fun on a warm Friday night in the Mission District, but in this space we were here to practice together. It felt special. In the quiet, softly glowing room, the slender brunette Araneta spoke: "Tonight is a special night and a great time to sow new seeds."

Arms linked, we rose together as a circle and lift-

ed our knees sideways into tree pose. Swaying gently, the support of the group's centrifugal force held up the individual, so there was no fear of falling.

Seated again with legs outstretched, we scooted forward with our buns until our feet touched playfully in the center like spokes of a bicycle wheel. Doing a deep forward bend and holding each others' toes instead of our own was just enough out of my comfort zone to spike my alertness, but also smile at the childlike playfulness of the situation. We were then told to disperse to our respective sticky mats for partner yoga.

Facing our partners, we began sun salutations. Normally I'd look into my third eye, but I was staring into my partner's eyes. And instead of focusing on my breath, I was aware of another person. A strictly solo yoga practitioner until now, this felt foreign. But yoga became play as, his back to mine, we carefully sank into mirroring chair poses, using the tension between our backs to "sit" on an air chair. We turned around and repeated the pose facing each other, grabbing opposing arms and sitting, standing and switching to the other arms, and sitting, faster, faster, until we flowed effortlessly as one. We stood facing our partners with arms outstretched, forming a bridge, dipped in unity toward the oversized purple and saffron Ganesh mural like an accordion of paper dolls.

AcroYoga Drop-in Classes:

- Beginner class Monday 7:05-8:45pm.
Seventh Heaven Yoga, 2820 Seventh Street, Berkeley
- Level 2/3 class* Friday 8:00-9:45pm.
Yoga Tree Valencia, 1234 Valencia @ 23rd St., San Francisco
- AcroYoga Flying Basics Tuesday 7:30-9:00pm.
Class 5 Climbing Gym, 25-B Dodie Street, San Rafael

*Headstand, supported handstand, and previous yoga experience required



The author gets a flight lesson from Jason.

"AcroYoga is an emotional journey as well as a physical journey. The satisfaction is huge for people who shy away from something, thinking it's too difficult, then doing it." — Carolyn Cohen, instructor

Flying

Following a demonstration of the first AcroYoga pose, we were unleashed to experiment. My butt rose toward the ceiling as I delivered myself into downward dog. His hands grounded on the floor in front of me, Robert lifted his feet to my hips, mirroring my pose in the air. As he pushed back, my hands levitated off the floor. Circling my wrists and arms in a dance, my face hovered above the floor with trepidation. It seemed to defy gravity; we were warmed up to fly. My reverie was broken by Carolyn's voice. "Can I see by a show of hands who has been a base?" she asked. "Who has flown before?"

"An airplane?" My partner asked, only half-joking. I shot him a wide-eyed look that said now was not the time for jokes. "If you don't know what I'm talking about, you haven't," she said. I whipped around to see the advanced flyers in the air, arms gesticulating with grace.

So that we could follow suit, Robert lied on his back with his feet below my hipbones. Holding hands, I took a breath and ignored my inner voice telling me I could give myself a concussion. I torpedoed above him and folded over, my head over his. I was up, but my quivering hands still gripped at the floor and I felt heavy. I knew I had to surrender and go limp, but again, letting go could mean a nosedive. We readjusted and aligned so that my torso was dangling now, legs spread, face pulsing with blood. And when I finally gave in, we discovered the perfect balance so I wouldn't wobble and fall. My back opened up and I became light. "Good," Carolyn said, as she circled the room, checking on us. I had noticed that the more I resisted within the pose, the harder it became. As for my fears, I decided not to listen. To my surprise, it worked.

Then we switched and I took the role of the "base" and trembled at the disproportionate weight I had to support. The trick was to find the "sweet spot" of perfect 90-degree alignment when the leg bones stacked over the sacrum, and then to stay focused. As a reward for being the base, I got my "leg love." I hummed as Robert used Thai massage techniques to pull my legs from my body, smoothly rotating my feet inward to outward, tracing a figure eight with my legs. The class came to a close in a circle ceremony as elegantly as it began; a single candle shone in the center of the room.

We looked around the circle at the people we had practiced with. Afterwards, I noticed multiple couples hugging, maybe feeling a little closer, skin basted with post-yoga glow.

Laura Browne is a San Francisco freelancer who's written for Yoga Journal, practiced meditation and yoga in India, and studied Thai massage in Thailand. She found AcroYoga to be a challenging, yet ultimately relaxing experience and definitely fun to share with a partner.