



Photography by Hilary Nichols

clare finn

by laura noss

path of grace

Upon entering Clare Finn's morning class at 4th Street Yoga in Berkeley, Calif., you won't find a tightly packed studio filled with trendy students donning the latest threads from Hard Tail or Lululemon. Nor will you find competitive yogis practicing full scorpion before warm-up even begins. You're more likely to encounter an energetic group of middle-aged women dressed in old t-shirts,

well-worn yoga pants and colorful socks waiting patiently for class to begin with beautiful, exaggerated smiles and warm, open faces.

As Clare enters the room and class gets underway, she gently guides students through a string of asanas, bringing the room's attention back to the body. Students slowly reacquaint themselves with each limb, wisp of hair and muscle

lining their stretched frames. Deep, yogic inhales interspersed with smooth, long exhales expand and collapse naturally. Clare weaves her way throughout the class making firm and confident adjustments. Students succumb to the simplicity within each movement, and as the end of class nears, they gracefully settle into a restful savasana.

As does her class, everything about Clare Finn's yogic path exudes ease. Born in Ireland, Clare moved to Baltimore, Md., with her family as a child. At fifteen, Clare stumbled across what would become her first yoga teacher, a book entitled *A Simplified Course of Hatha Yoga* by Wallace Slater. The book instantly appealed to Clare, and after studying and perfecting each pose within its pages, she graduated from the text and began pursuing group classes. Her passion continued to form as she explored a growing number of yogic disciplines, finally discovering Iyengar. Clare recounts, "I was studying Kundalini with Swami Satchidananda, and then a friend introduced me to Iyengar. That was it, I had found my guru."

Clare's path unfolded into teaching just as elegantly as her practice. In the early eighties, while attending the Community Center in Orinda, Clare's teacher asked her to substitute for his class one day. As she guided students through sequences, Clare drank in a new relationship with yoga, recognizing her yogic path was about to evolve even further. In 1987, Clare received her teacher's certification in the Iyengar tradition.

Long before the proliferation of yoga studios in the Bay Area, Clare and two partners, teachers Richard Rosen and Rodney Yee, opened Piedmont Yoga Studio. Clare, Richard and Rodney were practicing regularly in those days, but beyond the YMCA, they were not able to find many other yoga centers. Clare recalls of the early days, "When we started, it was a draw. We did everything, we cleaned the floors, did the bookkeeping and made sure students were happy." This

year, Piedmont Yoga Studio celebrates its twenty-first birthday.

In 1992, Claire co-founded 4th Street Yoga in Berkeley and now with nearly twenty years of teaching under her belt, she is able to draw a wide range of students into her classes. From seven-year-old girls to women blooming in their late sixties, Clare says that regardless of age, her students' practices have more in common than you might expect. "While there may be a variance in sheer physical presence," she explains, "as we move into practicing asanas, there really is no difference. I look around and can see that tension in the body is the same amongst students, regardless of age." Clare expands by saying, "I believe there is a place within each of us that wants to open and find joy. That's why we engage in this practice."

Following the loss of her father, Clare turned to Tibetan meditation to deepen her practice. Today, she infuses many Tibetan methods and by using this framework, she aims to experience and understand her students on levels beyond the yoga they are currently practicing. "In learning as much as possible about your students," she says, "you are better able to serve them." As a teacher, I see not only the body but I see the form of the person as well, the way they lay their mat down and the energy that surrounds them." With her newest perspectives, Clare is able to bring a greater awareness to her students.

As she has grown older, Clare has enjoyed new dimensions within her practice. She says, "The best part about getting older is I can see that it's not about my teaching or my practice, it's about how I can offer myself to others." A world away from the frontlines of the latest yoga trends, Clare's passion for teaching remains a timeless endeavor. Wearing comfortable clothes and bringing a humble air to the studio, Clare's mission is simple—to bring herself and others to a quiet place where the soul can expand. ●

A Closer Look...

What is your favorite pose?

"I don't have one—there are too many postures to have a favorite."

What is your least favorite pose?

"I don't have one of those either. They all need a little more practice."

What are you currently struggling with the most in your yoga practice?

"Pranayama. It is most difficult to teach and practice."

Name one involuntary change that has occurred in your life as a result of yoga.

"The sheer joy of being in the body; I came into this practice for the spiritual and I discovered the physical."

How are you contributing to the one change you want to see in this world?

"I am being kinder to people."

What mantra speaks to you most?

"The Tibetan mantra 'Om Mani Padme Om.'"

What is your favorite indulgence?

"Massage. I healed my broken ankle using it, and now I visit a masseuse every six weeks."

What word in the entire English language embodies your essence?

"One word to describe myself is just not enough for an Irish person."

If you could teach anyone in the world, who would it be?

"Someone who would like to be taught by me."

Above all else, what is the one thing you want your students to step away with after your class?

"A sense that they feel better in their own skin. In feeling better, they can send that out to the people around them."