

# Ashtanga in Rwanda

Genocide survivors are rediscovering hope and happiness through a “wholly different order of yoga.” **By Anna Dubrovsky**

**Deirdre Summerbell has a policy:** no photos during *shavasana*. The director of Project Air, an organization that teaches yoga to HIV-infected women and children in Rwanda, learned that lesson one day in 2007. Her students that day were members of a sewing co-op near the capital, Kigali. Most had contracted HIV from rapists during the 1994 Rwandan genocide. “The women love to have their pictures taken during yoga, and I must have taken a million that day,” Summerbell recalls. “They kept finding other pictures for me to take.” As the women lay

down for *shavasana*, their final pose, the sun was streaming through the window. It was a picture-perfect moment, and she raised her camera one last time. *Click*.

Summerbell knew about the monstrosities inflicted upon the Tutsi minority and moderate Hutus by Hutu militants 13 years earlier. She knew about the mass killings and brutal rapes. What she didn’t know was that a student of hers had, against all odds, survived one of the church massacres that took place during the roughly 100 days of violence. She didn’t know that after ordering a group

of Tutsis seeking refuge in a church to lie down, and before killing them, the perpetrators had taken a picture of their prey. *Click*.

Her student’s flashback was immediate and intense. No photos during *shavasana*.

**Project Air was in its infancy then.** Summerbell, a teacher of Ashtanga Yoga, had only recently gotten a call from Women’s Equity in Access to Care and Treatment (WE-ACTx), a non-governmental organization (NGO) that



Yoga provides a new sense of strength and triumph for these victims of war trauma.

treats Rwandan women and children with HIV. “While WE-ACTx had a lot of success in stabilizing its patient population clinically, it encountered difficulty in helping them with their trauma, their mental health issues,” she says. “And because it’s a relatively young and small organization, it’s willing to experiment.” The physicians and activists behind the organization thought yoga might help patients in ways that medicine could not. Would Summerbell be willing to try? “My first answer was no,” she says. “I didn’t think it was a good idea.”

Summerbell, now in her 50s and based in New York, spent a good deal of her childhood in Tanzania, next door to Rwanda. She saw well-intentioned Westerners come and go from the region, creating false hopes and accomplishing little. “I thought yoga was probably not what the people needed—definitely not at the top of the list. But after I said no, the idea kept floating around in my mind. Within a week I’d reconsidered.” She knew she’d made the right decision after teaching just a few classes at the sewing co-op, created by WE-ACTx to provide its patients with a living. “One of the women who was participating came up and very, very shyly told me that she had slept through the night for the first time since the genocide,” she recalls. “And then more and more women started saying the same.” Not only were they sleeping better, but they were feeling strong for the first time in as long as they could remember. Their appetites were shooting through the roof. They were experiencing something rare in the ranks of genocide survivors: joy. “When they’re happy in class, that happiness stays with them.”

Summerbell described the work she was doing in an e-mail to a friend in New York, who, without her knowledge, forwarded it to Madonna. The Queen of Pop promptly wrote a check for a quarter of a million dollars, a donation

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that allowed Ashtanga Yoga to become a formal program of WE-ACTx. “It was the first time that a medical NGO in Africa or possibly anywhere in the world included yoga as part of its mental health services,” says Summerbell, who was asked to run the program. Last year Project Air was spun off as a separate organization, and in September it received the endorsement of a United Nations special adviser. The UN had never before formally endorsed a yoga initiative.

The yoga teachers who volunteer with Project Air reach several hundred HIV-positive Rwandans a week, including the seamstresses who taught Summerbell about flashbacks and human resiliency that first year; victims of domestic violence who practice in a small church with

a tin roof and a colony of bats overhead; and hundreds of orphaned children who gather in a mosque every Sunday to assume the stance of a warrior, rise like a cobra, hover like a firefly. Project Air has dubbed a group of teenage students the “*inyange* girls” after a white bird that symbolizes prosperity in Rwanda. Summerbell is especially passionate about working with the *inyange* girls, stoking their sense of strength and self-esteem so that they’re less easy targets for sexual predators.

The yoga they practice is far from easy. Developed by the late Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, Ashtanga Yoga consists of several fixed series of postures, the easiest of which can tax an athlete in tip-top shape. “There are no surprises in Ashtanga, and

for the people that we work with, this is an important thing,” explains Summerbell, who edited the English translation of Jois’s *Yoga Mala*, the seminal guide to Ashtanga, and co-wrote a book about the master. “Since the sequence of poses is always the same, they can begin to internalize it. It becomes their own much more rapidly. And amazingly enough, it’s precisely Ashtanga’s difficulty that is the key to its appeal for these women and girls. These are people who have been so injured, so assaulted, that they’ve given up on themselves in many cases. Even when they’re young, they believe they’re old. It’s not just a mental thing—the body begins to feel dead. Given the opportunity to do something as challenging as Ashtanga, they become impressed with themselves.” When women, who have been raised to talk slowly, walk slowly, and work constantly, manage a backward somersault or a jump-through transition, their elation is infectious.

They clap and clown around for each other. “To teachers who want to come and volunteer I say that you will never, ever have a better yoga class than these, because you’ll never find more enthusiastic or more grateful students,” Summerbell says. “It’s like a wholly different order of yoga.”

The trouble with teaching Ashtanga to an impoverished, often malnourished population is that it exacerbates hunger and thirst. Project Air volunteers travel with bananas, boiled eggs, bread, and drinking water in addition to hundreds of pounds of yoga mats. “It’s not a very effective system, and it’s very expensive,” Summerbell says. Among her goals is developing a highly portable, calorie-dense food made with locally grown nuts. The women that Project Air works with could then be trained to make the product to generate income for themselves. She also hopes to teach them a simple cost-free way to disinfect water.

Summerbell’s not content to limit Project Air’s efforts to Rwanda. “I’d like to go into countries where it’s very dangerous to be a woman—as many of them as possible.” First on her list: eastern Congo, which *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof recently called “the world capital of rape, torture, and mutilation.” Violent anarchy has prevailed for a dozen years, fueled in part by an influx of Hutu extremists after the ascension of a Tutsi-led government in neighboring Rwanda. The death toll has climbed into the millions. But killing isn’t the only tactic of marauding militias. “The favorite

weapon of war in this conflict is rape, because it’s cheaper than bullets,” Summerbell says. “But it’s not just rape. It’s a whole new horrible level of rape. The rapes are designed to sever the internal barriers between the reproductive organs and the bladder and the bowel so that the women become double pariahs. They’re not only social pariahs because they’ve been raped, but by tearing them up inside, they make the women incontinent, so they stink and nobody wants to get near them.” Many die alone of infections. Project Air is endeavoring to partner with a pair of small hospitals that perform fistula operations to repair the damage.

Late last year, the organization launched a campaign to raise \$1 million, urging yoga schools around the world to donate a minimum of \$100. The sum would allow Project Air to continue its work in Rwanda and expand into eastern Congo over the next two years. “If we don’t succeed in raising the money, we’ll have to fold, which would be heartbreaking,” Summerbell says. She’s counting on the yoga community to keep Project Air afloat while she builds relationships with foundations and corporations. “These relationships take time to develop,” Summerbell says. “Yoga being used in this way, in these settings, is truly novel as an idea to many people, and we meet a lot of resistance and skepticism.” On her to-do list: collecting concrete data that illustrates the program’s effectiveness in mitigating mental health issues. “We need time to demonstrate that skepticism is unwarranted.” ■

## How to Help

To donate, visit [project-air.org](http://project-air.org). Ashtanga yoga teachers interested in volunteering in Rwanda or eastern Congo can write to [volunteer@project-air.org](mailto:volunteer@project-air.org). Volunteers work in pairs. The senior teacher of the two must have at least 10 years of experience as an Ashtanga practitioner with five years of teaching. The standard for assistant teachers is seven years of Ashtanga practice with three years of teaching, but anyone with a long-standing practice in another style of yoga would be welcome. Project Air asks for a minimum commitment of three months.