khakis. It was the last Thursday before Thanksgiving and six of us had showed up for gentle yoga at the Seattle Cancer Care Alliance, a class offered free to patients and their caregivers. The man was just digesting news that he'd be enduring a battery of new tests, he told us. That was stressful. Next, his neighbor reported a welcome break from chronic knee pain, and the tiny lady in the middle smiled wryly, shaking her cloud of silver hair. She was okay, too.

“And how about you, Jonathan?” asked Rippey, landing her gaze on a man in the center of the room whose head bent down toward his lap. Eyes closed, laughter tickling the edge of his voice, Jonathan replied that he awoke that morning feeling like a storm had ripped through the backyard of his brain. As he talked, I pictured one of those rubber-strip lawn chairs swinging from the upper branches of an oak tree, the domed lid of a charcoal barbecue floating in a fish pond. Dead leaves everywhere.

Jonathan, I learned later, had had a bone marrow transplant the previous February and sometimes experienced mental gaffes: confusion, disorientation, forgetfulness. He had looked down at a pen in his hand that morning and couldn't remember if it belonged to him. We spent the next 60 minutes following Rippey through breath-focused movements, seated in plastic chairs. As class went on a quiet symbiosis spread among the students, the breath seeming to travel from one of us to the next, the respiratory equivalent of singing in a round. They were helping one another, and you could sense it. The feeling was thick in the air.

Molly Lennon Kenny takes the helping-other-people-through-yoga thing more literally. Seated cross-legged in a pair of jewel-toned genie pants, Lennon Kenny described, for the attendees of a moderate evening yoga class, her day. She went to Pike Medical that morning and taught poses to a few old men, then motored over to Sand Point where she was planning a free class for denizens of a new 52-unit low-income housing project. She'd just returned from a weekend retreat where she and her staff had agreed on their goal for the next year: to change the world.

Nobody laughed. As welcoming as it is, the Samarya Center for Integrated Movement does not invite sarcasm. Lennon Kenny, the founder and director, is brinnette and tiny, with a very direct gaze. She has this hard-to-define, highly energized power, like some kind of tiny yogic superhero. And her do-gooder spirit emanates through these rooms as strongly as the spicy odor of Nag Champa incense.

Squeezed into a strip of Central District shops across from a patch of grass called Pratt Park, Samarya is part yoga studio, part rehab center. Trained as a clinical speech pathologist for autistic children and sufferers of traumatic injuries, multiple sclerosis, and strokes, Lennon Kenny partnered with her friend Stephanie Sisson, a social worker and Ashtanga yoga teacher. They figured they'd teach yoga to pay the rent while they developed a clinical therapy that incorporated yoga into the treatment of the same sorts of patients Lennon Kenny had worked with in hospitals. Nine years later Samarya is run as a nonprofit—the drop-in rate for yoga classes here is $8, about $7 to $12 less than what is typical. And while many students come only for exercise, the two sides of the business have bled together. One instructor, partially paralyzed from a stroke, first came to Samarya for yoga therapy. Yoga improved his speech and mobility and he started teaching other stroke victims; now he teaches classes whenever he's needed.

“I think of it as a clearinghouse for all types of people doing yoga,” says Lennon Kenny. “To create a more diverse population in yoga, you have to go out and get them. The other piece is, you have to have people standing in the front of the room that are African American, large-bodied, transgendered, differently abled...whatever. That’s what it is going to take to make people believe that yoga is for everybody.” To achieve that, Samarya has set up a scholarship program for teachers who, before they receive funding, must answer the question: “If we give you this training, what will you give back to the world?”

On the morning I interviewed Anne Phyfe Palmer, I noticed a book topping a stack on her coffee table, an advance copy of Poser: My Life in Twenty-Three Yoga Poses by Bainbridge Island author Claire Dederer. I’d just read it, too, and mentioned a quote from the book that kept popping into my thoughts as I went about interviewing people for this story. Dederer describes how in the first few years of her yoga practice, she focused on mastering poses. But later she learned that yoga wasn’t really about improving, or mastering poses. It was about doing yoga. “Here’s the truth,” writes Dederer. “The longer I do yoga, the worse I get at it. I can’t tell you what a relief that is.”

Palmer smiled, her eyes widen in recognition. “Yoga,” she said, “is about freedom.” The relief Dederer describes comes from the liberating knowledge that you don’t have to worry about improving, mastering, or any of that. Maybe, I thought, it’s the freedom that we find so useful. Yoga, in all its iterations, helps us confront those very insidious things—the vain worries about the hot-looking yogi doing sit-ups so much more suavely than we can, the stresses that tamp down already deeply rooted, debilitating trauma. Just by showing up and breathing we achieve much-needed space from those troubles, and that feeling alone is what everyone’s after, really. That feeling moves us through another chemo round, or inspires us to help other people, or delivers us into one night of perfect sleep. “You just keep practicing,” Palmer told me. “And it’ll change your life.”
BEND IT LIKE BUDDHA

FOLLOW THE LEADER
Most Seattle yoga teachers have practiced Kathleen Hunt’s signature style—Anusara based, with some dancing and chanting sprinkled in—at Samadhi, her legendary Pike Street studio, 1205 E Pike St, Capitol Hill, 206-329-4070; samadhi-yoga.com

Laura DeFreitas’s well-received following swears by her Nidra classes at Taj Yoga, 9250 14th Ave NW, Ballard, 206-782-9642; tajiya.com

Monday through Thursday at noon, pretzel-person Troy Lucero leads students through the purifying Ashtanga series at Velocity Dance Center, 1621 12th Ave, Ste 100, Capitol Hill, 206-325-8773; velocitydancecenter.org

Notorious scolder Richard Schachtel has been aligning Iyengar yogis for 30 years at The Center for Yoga of Seattle, 2261 NE 65th St, Ravenna, 206-326-9642; yagseattle.com

KEEP ON MOVING,
DON’T STOP
Be Luminous still has that new-yoga-studio smell, and the center-paced vinyasa classes keep even the most athletic yogis on their toes. 900 Lenora St, Ste 120, South Lake Union, 206-682-9642; beluminousyoga.com

Expect to skim limbs with your neighbors in packed, fast-paced classes at flow-style standard bearer Shakti Vinyasa Yoga, 2238 NW Market St, Ballard, 206-297-9642 and 10245 Main St, Ste 104, Bellevue, 425-646-9642; shaktivinyasayoga.com

It’s no boys allowed at posh Vera Fitness in Greenlake, where teachers sprinkle traditional aerobic exercises into their energetic yoga classes. 6845 33rd Ave NE, Greenlake, 206-453-4632 and 701 N 36th St, Ste 330, Fremont, 206-632-4900; verafitness.com

Bribe yourself into a challenging hatha or flow session at Urban Yoga Spa with a postworkout massage or pedicure. 1900 Fourth Ave, Downtown, 206-420-0222; urbayogaspa.com

CHECK OUT THE HOTTIES
"Bikram" is a trademarked name that can only be used by affiliated studios, but you’ll find a very similar style at SLU’s Breathe Hot Yoga, 2230 Eighth Ave, South Lake Union, 206-682-2949; breathehotyoga.com

The tattooed and sinewy sweat in fairly tight quarters at Bikram Yoga at the Sweatbox on Capitol Hill, but the Shoreline studio is spacious and has showers, 1417 10th Ave, Ste B, Capitol Hill, 206-860-9642 and 20019 Aurora Ave N, Shoreline, 206-546-4900; sweatboxyoga.com

Strip-mall studio Bikram Yoga Bellevue has a big airy classroom so you won’t drip on your neighbors, and parking is a (much-needed) breeze. 526 120th Ave NE, Bellevue, 425-637-9642; bikramyogabellevue.com

Take power vinyasa or hatha in the heat at Hot Yoga of Laurelhurst or try trendy yin, taught in cooler quarters. 3513 NE 45th St, Ste M, Laurelhurst, 206-522-5080; hotyogaoflaurelhurst.com

Heated for Bikram-style and power sessions, The Ashram in Kirkland chills out for “cool” yoga, plus children’s classes augmented by snacks and stories. 12637 NE 85th St, Kirkland, 425-829-9642; theashramyoga.com

NEIGHBORHOOD TYPES
Seriously gifted instructors and some of the friendliest vibes in town make Eight Limbs Yoga Centers consistent favorites in the four neighborhoods where they’re found. 500 E Pike St, Capitol Hill, 206-325-8221; 6801 Greenwood Ave N, Phinney Ridge, 206-432-9609; 7435 35th Ave NE, Wedgewood, 206-523-9722; and 4546 14th Ave NE, Wallingford, 206-265-9642; eightslimbs.com

California Ave SW, West Seattle, 206-393-9642; blimbysyoga.com

Queen Annes sign up for gently led, soothing hatha classes in a dimly lit space called Home Yoga. 315 First Ave W, Lower Queen Anne, 206-270-9642; homeyogaseattle.com

Madrona mummies keep their limits whittled at Mountain Flow Yoga, a vinyasa and power studio, 3308 E Spring St, Madison, 206-380-2588; mountainflowyoga.com

Inside Yoga Centers’ naturally lit, hardwood-floored studio, owner Aadi Palkhivala watches over a soothing, all-are-welcome pura practice. 2255 18th Ave NE, Ste F, Bellevue, 425-746-7476; yogacenters.com

Students at YogaLife tend to take classes based on their favorite teachers, whose classes run the gamut: Ashtanga, vinyasa, hatha, and restorative are all offered. 7200 Woodlawn Ave NE, Greenlake, 206-529-0581 and 8 Boston St, Queen Anne, 206-283-9642; yogalife.com

The gentler pace may surprise power people, but Yoga Tree’s emphasis on proper alignment helps Fremont yogis keep their practice pretty, and the butter-yellow studio is a cozy place to pass a wet weekend morning. 4250 Fremont Ave N, Fremont, 206-545-0316; yogatreecom

KINDER, GENTLER YOGA
Sufferers of chronic pain swear by the therapeutic practice at Planet Earth north of the ship canal. 418 N 35th St, Fremont, 206-365-1997; planetearthyoga.com

The $8 classes at Samarya Center would be a bargain even if they weren’t populated—and taught—by the warmest, most welcoming yogis in town. 1804 E Yesler Way, Central District, 206-568-8333; samaraycenter.org

The best way to bide your time until happy hour at neighboring Anchovies and Olives: check out the life-affirming Anusara practice taught at Seattle Yoga Arts, a longtime Capitol Hill favorite enjoying new modern digs inside the Pearl Apartments. 1340 15th Ave, Capitol Hill, 206-440-3191; seattleyogaarts.com