



Accessible Yoga in Practice by Dorte Eifer

AIEJII 19th of May 2025,
Copenhagen



**21st World
Congress**
of Social Educators

Introducing myself: Dorte Eifer

I have worked with communication at the **Center for Psychiatry and Intellectual Disabilities** since 2004, and as daily manager since 2016.

Since 2012

– I have practiced yoga and completed teacher training in senior yoga, children's yoga, mindfulness practitioner, accessible yoga, hatha yoga, and yin yoga.

Since 2014

– I have practiced yoga in residential care facilities and taught yoga to staff.

2021

– With funding from the Ministry of Health, I developed a series of accessible yoga cards aimed at people with intellectual disabilities

Yoga and Intellectual Disabilities - ID

- People with ID experience mental health disorders more frequently than the general population, and many suffer from high levels of stress and anxiety.
- Yoga can be a tool to help calm and regulate behavior, provide a sense of peace, and establish boundaries.
- Yoga is also relevant in relation to physical health, as people with ID unfortunately still have a statistically shorter life expectancy than the general population. In some cases, this shorter lifespan is due to undiagnosed serious illnesses.
- Yoga provides significant benefits to people with intellectual disabilities, both physically, by increasing body awareness—and especially mentally, by enhancing well-being and offering a tool for working on self-regulation and personal development.



Yoga Cards for Every Body

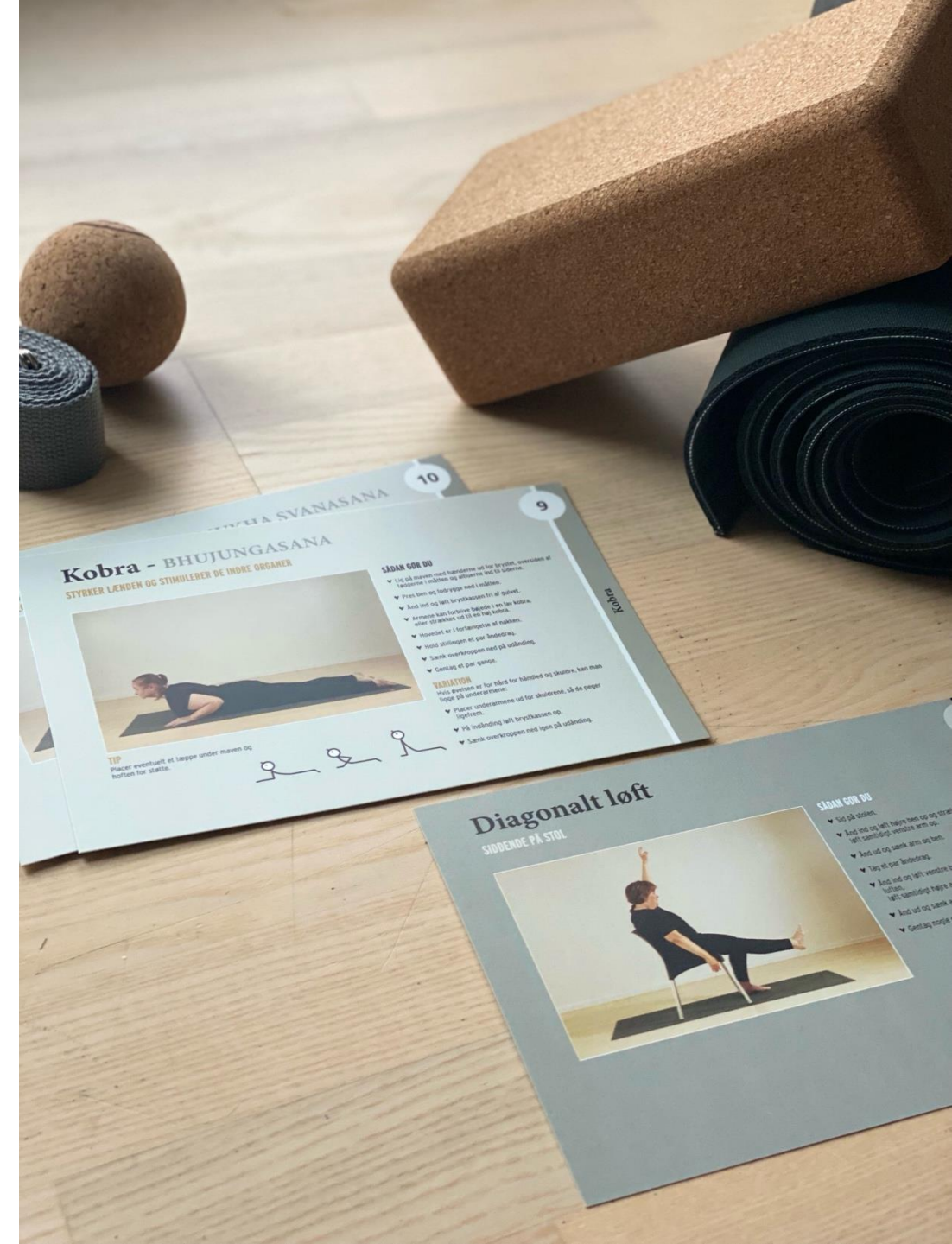
Why create yoga cards featuring people with ID?

The yoga cards can help make yoga's beneficial effects on body and mind accessible to people with intellectual disabilities — individuals who could greatly benefit from yoga practice but have so far lacked offerings adapted to their needs.

It's about *mirroring* and *identification*.

My hope is that many individuals with ID will see themselves reflected in the models on the yoga cards — and think:

“If they can do it, so can I.”



Yoga Cards

- The set consists of 30 yoga cards, which are double-sided.
- One side shows the pose as it is traditionally performed by participants with full mobility.
- The other side shows a variation of the pose that is accessible.

<https://oligo.nu/udgivelser/yogakort/>



Yoga – Union of Body and Mind

Benefits of yoga for body and mind



Body:

- The physical yoga exercises, called *asanas* in Sanskrit, strengthen and engage the entire body. For individuals with physical disabilities or impairments yoga can lead to improvements. Benefits occurs not only physiologically through repetition but also through the increased body awareness, a sort of ableism.

Mind:

- Experience of calming the mind, particularly through breathing exercises and relaxation technique.
- Mental aspects of yoga can help strengthen self-regulation abilities and self esteem in individuals with ID.

Yoga card programs 1 – lets try...

PROGRAM 1: FULL BODY YOGA (60 minutes) - *All poses can be done on a mat or a chair*



WARM-UP – 10 minutes

- **Card 1:** Meditation
- **Card 3:** Neck & Shoulder Rolls
- **Card 4:** Arm Stretches
- **Card 5:** Hip Circles



ON THE MAT / CHAIR – 10–15 minutes

- **Card 6:** Spinal Twist
- **Card 7:** Cat & Cow
- **Card 8:** Diagonal Lift
- **Card 29:** Child's Pose



STANDING / ON CHAIR – 10–15 minutes

- **Card 10:** Downward Dog
- **Card 11:** Sun Salutation
- **Card 14:** Side Stretch – *or* **Card 16:** Wide-Legged Forward Fold
- **Card 15:** Forward Bend



BALANCE – 5 minutes

- **Card 13:** Mountain Pose
- **Card 21:** Tree Pose *or choose:* **Card 17:** Eagle



LYING DOWN – 20 minutes

- **Card 26:** Shoulder Bridge *or* **Card 25:** Pigeon Pose
- **Card 27:** Gentle Spinal Twist
- **Card 28:** Legs Up *or* **Card 24:** Leg Stretch with Strap
- **Card 30:** Corpse Pose (Savasana)

Breathwork – the body keeps score



Our breathing is regulated by the autonomic nervous system

- **Sympathetic** – our accelerator – DOING

- **Parasympathetic** – our brake – BEING

Breathing is a tool for sensing and regulating ourselves — the body responds to our conscious effort, for example through breathing exercises.

Our breath is also a *telltale* — the body regulates itself through breath and reveals whether we are stressed or calm.

Lets try (card 2)

Mindfulness with People with ID



- Open the senses and support participants in feeling their bodies
- Be present together – and truly see one another with kind attention
- Use the breath as a calm and steady anchor
- Create small but meaningful moments of presence – a little goes a long way
- Mindfulness doesn't have to be a special activity – it can live in everyday life
- Provide safe and calm spaces for presence and peace
- Support participants in accepting themselves and their emotions
- Gently practice self-regulation through sensory and mindful experiences
- Cultivate self-care through small, repeated practices

Body Awareness and the Practice of Balance

- Balance is traditionally practiced individually on a yoga mat or, in accessible yoga, while seated on a chair. But with our target group, it can be especially beneficial to **practice balance in a circle or while holding hands.**
- Supporting one another helps build a sense of connection and community. It can also be done in pairs.
- Balance exercises are incredibly valuable for developing body awareness—and they often turn into something fun, especially when someone sways or briefly loses their footing.



- **Try doing an airplane pose: lift one leg back while your arms extend out to the sides in a downward motion**
- **Try rocking back and forth on your feet—up onto your toes, back onto your heels**
- **Try holding hands and moving up and down bending the knees when going down, raising the arms going up**

Supporting the Development of Balance

- Exercises that **move from the top of the head down to the soles of the feet**, and those that involve moving up and down, are especially beneficial for developing balance and body awareness.
- **Forward bends** (such as in Sun Salutation), inverted poses where the head comes below the heart (like Downward-Facing Dog), and **backbends** (like Cobra pose) are also physically enriching and help the body grow and develop.
- **Coordinating the right and left sides of the body**—both arms and legs—can be very rewarding, but also quite challenging for many people with developmental disabilities. It's important to experiment gently and meet each participant where they are.
- For some, simply lifting one arm into the air, lowering it, and then switching to the other arm to repeat the movement may be enough.
- Always remember to allow space for each person's own pace and way of doing the movements!



Relaxing the body – lets try

Rub your hands together, then place them over your eyes – or on your cheeks if you're wearing glasses. Feel the warmth of your hands on your face.

Gently massage your cheeks.

Close your eyes.

Relax your face, your shoulders, your whole body.



It can be helpful to scan the body, part by part, to increase body awareness:

Feel how your feet feel heavy, your legs feel heavy. Your hips are heavy and relaxed.

Feel your belly – warm and relaxed. You let go, relaxing your chest. Your shoulders hang down, heavy and loose. Your hands feel heavy. Your whole head is heavy – your tongue, your jaw, your eyes are relaxed. Your whole body is heavy, warm, and relaxed.

Relaxing the mind – lets try



- *Find a happy thought, or a place that makes you feel good. A person who makes you smile. Let your thoughts and body relax. Give yourself a gentle smile.*
- *Now imagine a day when you feel sad or angry. You may tense your whole body just a little – remember that feeling – and then breathe oooooout... Let it go.*
- *As you inhale, try to recall your happy thought, your happy place, or your happy person. Let that memory help you. Breathe calmly. Feel happiness and relaxation returning. Smile. Come back to that happy thought.*
- *Try to remember: you can guide your thoughts... your body can relax. Take a deep breath in, and slowly exhale. Now feel your whole body. How does it feel?*
- *Thank yourself for taking time to do yoga. Give yourself a smile. Finish by gently massaging or patting your legs and arms to wake the body and loosen up again.*

Yoga card programs 2



PROGRAM 2 – CALM AND RELAXATION (Approx. 30 min)

 Focus on peace of mind, breathing, and presence

Card 1: Meditation

Card 9: Breathing exercise

Card 6: Twist

Card 14: Side stretch

Card 29: Child's pose

Card 28: Legs up

Card 30: Corpse Pose

Props: bolster, blanket, chair, wall.

Yoga card programs 3



PROGRAM 3 – STRENGTH AND BALANCE (Approx. 45 min)



Focus on motor skills and body awareness

Card 4: Arm stretch

Card 8: Diagonal lift

Card 11: Sun salutation

Card 13: Mountain pose

Card 20: Warrior III

Card 22: Triangle

Card 26: Shoulder bridge

Card 27: Universal stretch

Card 30: Corpse pose



Variations: Use a chair for balance and support along the way.

Yoga card programs 4



❤️🌸 **PROGRAM 4 – THE HEART OF YOGA** (Approx. 30 min)

A gentle, loving program with a focus on connecting with body and mind

Card 1: Meditation

Card 5: Hip circles

Card 6: Twist

Card 25: Pigeon pose

Card 28: Legs up

Card 30: Resting pose

Props: bolster, blanket, chair, wall.

What is accessible yoga?

Everyone can join in – the yoga exercises can be adapted to each individual, so that everyone, regardless of functional level, can benefit from them.

This accessible form of yoga is especially well-suited for people with developmental disabilities:

- It is adaptable to every body and mind
- It makes space for those who may not be familiar with how their body functions
- It accommodates situations where cognitive abilities may occasionally affect the ability to follow the exercises



Unity in Diversity

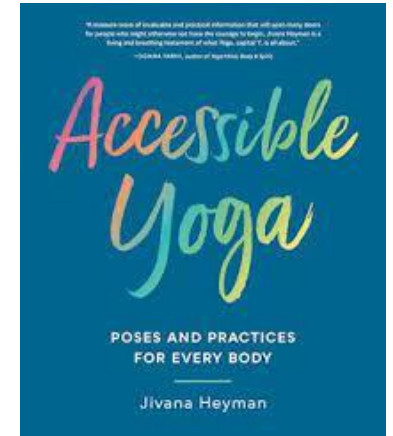
The founder, Jivana Heyman, started the Accessible Yoga movement in 2007 with the intention of making yoga accessible to everyone, regardless of background, abilities, or skill levels—

It is a form of yoga that is inclusive on many levels.

A core principle of accessible yoga is that a diverse group of people can participate in the same class.

The instruction is adapted to each person using props such as blocks, straps, chairs, or a wall—or by changing the orientation of the pose; for example, a standing pose can be practiced while sitting or lying down.

Learn more: <https://www.accessibleyoga.org>



Adapting the poses

Accessible yoga is practiced at a slower pace and with a calm, patient, and exploratory focus to help each individual find the right poses for them.

Change orientation

A yoga pose that is originally done standing or lying down can be made accessible by changing its orientation—for example, doing it lying down instead of standing, or sitting instead of standing or lying down.

The pose should be adapted to the person—NOT the person trying to adapt to the pose!

In order to modify a pose so that everyone can participate, it's important to ask yourself:

- What is the essence of this pose?
- What is the effect in the body?
- What elements make up the pose?



Adapting the poses



Sometimes only part of a pose may be possible. For example, a seated sun salutation where the use of the upper body and folding forward from the hips over the legs is achievable.

Use props

The most obvious prop in accessible yoga is **the chair**, which supports the participant's balance and is especially helpful if leg strength is limited.

The wall is also a highly stabilizing partner for many poses.

Or **the bed**, in the case of bed-bound individuals, where one-to-one yoga exercises can be guided.

In addition, blocks, balls, straps, blankets, and bolsters are used to support movement, extending the ground, and create excellent opportunities to incorporate calming sequences into the practice.

Lets try a pose in different accessible variations

The Yoga Teacher's Own Practice

- A yogic mindset is built on qualities such as: Kindness, non-judgment, acceptance, trust, and inner calm.
- Connecting to one's own emotions and thoughts → sensing internal states
- Connecting to the body → sensing the physical self

Yoga as a bridge-building tool

- Creating (more) harmony between body and mind → promoting low arousal, balance and calm in both yourself and the individuals you work with → cultivating acceptance, kindness, compassion, and trust
- Relating to someone who may struggle with relationships → **yoga as the shared third space**

The Heart of Yoga

For people with disabilities or special needs, it can be incredibly rewarding to discover that they are able to practice yoga.

The improved physical strength and increased bodily mobility that develop over time are highly beneficial.

It's also important to note that yoga is not just about the physical poses—*asanas*.

The essence of yoga lies in the connection to the *mind and heart*—and mental balance can be achieved whether one uses a yoga mat or a chair, a wall, or even a bed for support!



FORLAGET OLIGO



PUBLISHED BOOKS IN DANISH:

Udviklingshæmning – en grundbog, 2018

Udviklingshæmning – en grundbog bind 2, 2020

Seksualitet og udviklingshandicap, 2021

Børn og unge med udviklingshandicap – en grundbog, 2024

De dømt med udviklingshandicap, 2024



LITTERATURE

Jivana Heyman: Accessible Yoga, 2019

Sonia Sumar: Yoga for the Special Child, 1998, 2013

Shawnee Thornton Hardy: Asanas for Autism and Special Needs, 2015

APPS

Insight timer

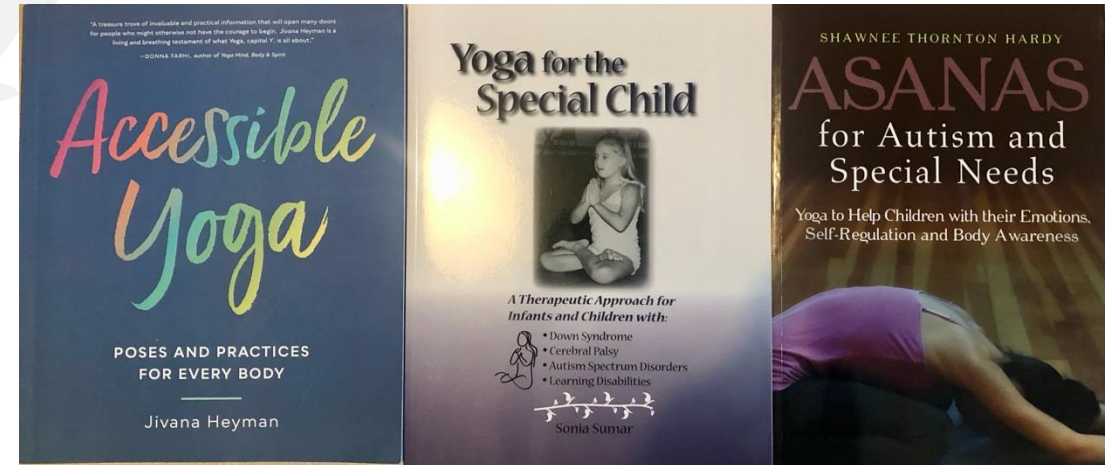
Calm

MUSIC

Deva Premal

Snatam Kaur

Nirinjan Kaur



CONTACT

Dorte Eifer
Center for Oligofrenipsykiatri
www.oligo.nu
info@oligo.nu

For slides e-mail me:
dorte@oligo.nu

