



ERKKAJOOGA

SAFE AND HEALTH-PROMOTING YOGA

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INTRODUCTION

EQUALITY IS CREATED TOGETHER

Yoga can be defined as *a holistic practice suitable for anyone interested in their health, wellbeing, and spiritual growth*. The benefits of yoga include improved overall health, increased relaxation, body awareness, and enhanced mobility and concentration.

Core elements of yoga practice include *asanas* — *standing, seated, and reclining postures* — and *pranayama*, *which involves breathing exercises*. Asanas are believed to strengthen and stretch muscles, tendons, and ligaments, while also stimulating the nervous, lymphatic, and metabolic systems. These postures are thought to enhance balance, strength, and flexibility while promoting mental calmness.

A growing body of research highlights the many benefits of yoga. Today, even medical professionals may recommend yoga as a self-care method for addressing stress-related conditions, such as insomnia or anxiety.

However, the opportunity to practice yoga and access its benefits is not equally available to everyone. People with so-called *special needs* may face barriers to participating in yoga classes. These obstacles can include fast-paced instruction, unclear guidance, or large group sizes. Smaller group settings, slower instruction, and clearer communication can help make yoga more accessible for everyone.

Have you ever been in a fitness class where you struggled to follow the instructor's directions? Have you tried to mimic others because you didn't understand the instructions? How did that make you feel? For people with developmental disabilities, autism spectrum conditions, or even mild brain injuries, this experience may be all too familiar.

Everyone has *the right to access* the information and opportunities they need — delivered *in ways that work* for them.

Accessibility means designing services to meet the needs of all users.

Erkkajooga aims to **make yoga accessible to everyone, regardless of any limitations they may have**. We believe that everyone should have an equal opportunity to practice yoga. The word "yoga" itself means *bringing together and connecting*, which guides us in this direction.

It is essential for yoga instructors to adapt their guidance to meet the needs of each participant, allowing everyone to experience competence, inclusion, and equality in their practice.

Our Erkkajooga program began as a small group for people with intellectual disabilities. To our great joy, it has expanded to several cities over the years. The name Erkkajooga was chosen by the original group members, for whom the word 'Erkka' (which can be translated as 'special') holds a positive and meaningful significance. This name reflects the inclusive spirit of the program, emphasizing that yoga is for everyone, regardless of their individual circumstances or needs. The term special celebrates diversity and focuses on the strengths of each practitioner.

The Erkkajooga team trains not only yoga instructors but also *peer instructors with intellectual disabilities*, who, for example, teach yoga in their own housing units. This approach helps make yoga *more accessible* by lowering the threshold for participation.

We believe that training peer instructors is crucial, as people with disabilities are often seen only as recipients of support. By providing opportunities to teach, we empower individuals to become active contributors, thereby strengthening equality.

This book is intended for anyone interested in accessibility, inclusion and adapted yoga.

There is a wealth of research on the many benefits of yoga, yet the opportunity to practice it is not equally available to everyone. A person who needs *additional or specialized support* in their yoga practice may, for various reasons, be excluded from guided yoga classes.

ErkkaJooga aims to make yoga accessible to anyone who wishes to practice it, regardless of their abilities. This book provides comprehensive guidance for practicing yoga in an accessible, safe, and health-promoting way. It has been written as clearly and simply as possible to further support accessibility.

We hope *yoga teachers* will *find inspiration* in this book — to meet every yoga practitioner as an equal and to *feel empowered* to explore together with the yogi the most suitable way for them to experience yoga.

Our goal is to offer insight and encouragement on how yoga can be adapted to meet the needs of a wide range of individuals. Most of all, we hope this book will reach people with intellectual disabilities. We hope they will find joy in the beautiful images, feel a sense of inclusion, and — most importantly — be inspired to explore yoga with confidence and curiosity.

Equality is created together.



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