

when movement
BECOMES MEDITATION



the legacy of
VANDA SCARAVELLI



I first learned of Vanda Scaravelli when someone showed me a photo
BY NAN WISHNER

of her in *Light on Yoga* demonstrating *Paschimotanasana* (seated forward bend) with B. K. S. Iyengar balancing in *Mayurasana* (peacock pose) on her back. I was surprised to see a woman pictured in an otherwise traditional yoga text, and even more surprised that she was wearing a striped, two-piece bathing suit. Although I did not know then how important Vanda's teaching would become to me, in retrospect, I see how that image captures her anomalous position in the world of contemporary yoga and her determination to pursue the teachings in her own unconventional way.

Some time later I found my way to Vanda's book, *Awakening the Spine*, and was enchanted by its lovely photos—including many of Vanda in her 80s doing challenging asanas with ease—as well as by its depiction of yoga as an effortless dance with breath and gravity. But it was not until I met one of Vanda's long-time students that I began to understand that her life and teaching embodied what I had been seeking in yoga: a way to inhabit my body so that movement becomes meditation.



Vanda did not begin studying yoga until mid-life; she went on to make the practice her own, devising a way of working that was harmonious with nature and centered around rest, continual new discovery, and clear, uncluttered awareness. A true and unself-conscious yogi, she believed that learning yoga required “infinite time and no ambition,” and that the teaching of yoga could not be organized into a “method.” She transmitted hands-on to individual students what she had discovered in her own body, the way that yoga has been taught for centuries. Her life was a testament to her practice. She was healthy and active until her death at 91, after having recovered completely from a shattered hip in her late 80s. Comfortable and authentic in her interactions with others, she was, in the words of her daughter, Paola Scaravelli-Cohen, “free within herself and her soul.”

Because Vanda taught one-on-one and took on very few students, only four people worked regularly

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with her over long periods. Diane Long, her main student, was a native of North Carolina who moved to Italy in her 20s and studied with Vanda for 25 years until Vanda’s death.

Vanda’s teaching is not easily grasped from words alone, so it was not until I had the good fortune to begin studying with Diane that I came to understand the depth of the practice. When I first saw Diane, her movements made me think of the grace and lightness of a gazelle. Even though I found myself mostly unable to do the cryptic things she asked of us in class that day (“be wide, wide, wide; activate the feet; open the knees”), I was captivated by the extraordinary fluidity and relaxed strength of her body, shaped by its long apprenticeship with Vanda. What I saw in her body was exactly what Vanda’s book promised: “There is a way of doing the yoga poses that we call ‘asanas’ without the slightest effort.”

UNDOING

Vanda’s idea of effortless yoga was born of her training with two of this generation’s yoga luminaries, B. K. S. Iyengar and T. K. V. Desikachar. She was introduced to yoga when her friend J. Krishnamurti, the Indian philosopher, and the violinist Yehudi Menuhin invited T. Krishnamacharya from India to teach them yoga at her summer home in Switzerland. Krishnamacharya did not travel, so he sent two of his own students, Iyengar and Desikachar, in his place. Vanda, nearly 50 years old at the time, received daily private lessons along with her guests and found through practice that “a different life begins and the body expresses a happiness never felt before.” She continued studying with Iyengar and Desikachar for several summers and then began to work on her own in her native Italy; she was fond of saying that yoga eventually pulled her up “by the hair” and made her do it.

From her training in the anatomical precision of Iyengar Yoga and the emphasis on breath and ease in Desikachar’s Viniyoga, Vanda developed her own distinctive way of working with breath and gravity to free the spine. She distilled movement to a few essential

principles: the surrender of the lower part of the body to gravity gives back a lightness that liberates the upper part of the body. Like flowers, she said, we send down roots and grow up toward the sun to blossom. The division between the lower and upper parts of the spine is in an area she called the “back of the waist” or the “middle of the spine,” around the fourth and fifth lumbar vertebrae. The release of the spine is not something the practitioner *does*, she maintained, but something that is *given* when the body coalesces into a harmony and wholeness of movement that comes in response to deep resting into the earth. At bottom, the work of every pose is the same—allowing gravity to rest the body so the spine’s suppleness is engaged.

Vanda believed that poses required “undoing,” having no goal, and going *with* the body rather than pushing or telling the body what to do in a linear fashion (which causes movement to be fragmented).

Although Vanda's principles may appear simple, she insisted that they could not be structured as a method; the practitioner must always find a new way to begin again.

As I have learned by studying with Diane, Vanda's practice requires a different kind of hard work from the careful attention to the details of asanas that was the focus of the yoga classes I had previously taken. Undoing tension is an intense process; letting go of old patterns of holding and effort requires a tremendously strong release. "Relaxation" in Vanda's vocabulary does not mean collapsing; undoing is not passive but alert and attentive. There is a great sense of resolve in the body's invitation to gravity, and there is always more to let go. As tension is released and joints become free, new, deep muscles awaken; the feet, especially the heels, come alive and make strong contact with the earth in an almost prehensile way. Increasingly, movement takes place on the spine rather than in the large superficial muscles that are accustomed to working (such as the quadriceps). And even as so many things are changing on a fine motor level in the body, attention must always focus on the wholeness of the movement.

THE HEART OF VANDA'S TEACHING

Vanda taught Diane not to focus on executing the poses, but instead to cultivate a set of conditions that allow the body's natural intelligence to awaken; in addition to "rest" and "undoing," these conditions include a sense of rhythm, which has a coaxing quality. When Diane teaches, she often repeats invitations to certain parts of the student's body to drop and to others to lighten or widen again and again, always starting over or moving to a new way of engaging the whole body until release, however small or subtle, comes through the spine. She stresses that it is important not to try to hold onto this sensation or push it farther, but instead to begin again with an attitude of receiving. Although there is rhythm, there is no formula, and the attention should never be allowed to become dull.

As the body undoes tension, the practitioner discovers a movement of extension along the spine that is sometimes referred to as "the wave" because of Vanda's repeated descriptions of it as a wave-like

motion. Vanda used many natural images in her teaching; in addition to waves, she spoke of whirlwinds and volcanoes, trees whose roots grow deeply down as their trunks and branches grow up, waterfalls that drop powerfully and rebound into clouds of increasingly light spray, flowers that blossom without striving. In an article published in *Viniyoga in Italia* in 2000, one of Vanda's students, Elizabeth Pauncz, recalls lessons in which she and Vanda "studied how birds used their feet in taking off into flight or landing and then practiced that same technique in *Tadasana* [mountain] which would lead to *Urdhva Dhanurasana* [upward bow]." Diane remembers lessons in which Vanda had her stand "on a stick, like a bird standing on a limb" or gently rock back and forth like a little boat on the water.



SONG OF THE BODY

There is a way of doing yoga poses that we call "asanas" without the slightest effort. Movement is the song of the body. Yes, the body has its own song from which the movement of dancing arises spontaneously. In other words, the liberation of the upper part of the body (the head, neck, arms, shoulders, and trunk) produced by the acceptance of gravity in the lower part of the body (legs, feet, knees, and hips) is the origin of lightness, and dancing is its expression. This song, if you care to listen to it, is beauty. We could say that it is part of nature. We sing when we are happy and the body goes with it like waves in the sea.

—Vanda Scaravelli, *Awakening the Spine*

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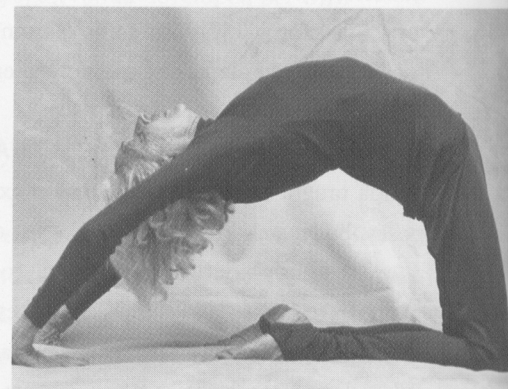
These are only a few of the creative means Vanda used as she found a unique way to teach each student. "She was a very unorthodox teacher," at times very forceful and at other times very gentle, Diane says. Lessons might involve breathing with the arms draped over a broomstick, studying a photocopied image of the lungs before practicing breathing, or examining photographs of Krishnamacharya with a magnifying glass. Diane remembers a student being told to run around the house twice, apparently to "wake the body up." Elizabeth tells the story of a friend who once came from Rome for a lesson and "was invited to stretch out in *Shavasana* [corpse pose] where she remained for an hour and a half." Vanda was delighted that the friend had slept so well and told her, "It is the best lesson you ever had!"

Diane says the heart of Vanda's teaching is "not about making people conform to the pose" or imposing a "philosophy or a technique on someone"; instead, it is about "bringing into play the relationship between the earth and the body's aliveness." How this is accomplished is highly individual: "Some bodies need to be brought to rest more. Others need to be awakened," Diane says. "You must be very simple," and teaching must be "playful. It's almost as if you have to trick someone into having more ease with their body. You have to watch how they are implementing your suggestions so that it's not linear."

This approach can result, as I have experienced during my own lessons and observed when Diane teaches others, in enigmatic instructions. I recently heard a student say after doing a twist, "So the use of feet and knees is to find release?!" Diane's reply: "You have to bring awareness of the ground into what you're doing. But movement is round, so it takes time for the ground to bring aliveness to different parts of the body." Diane reports that her own questions would often be brushed away with a "light

gesture of the hand," by which Vanda would indicate that "it wasn't important." Vanda believed that yoga requires always going beyond whatever we think we understand.

Vanda's breathing practice begins with developing a relationship to the breath as it is and letting go of any effort involved, rather than imposing formal exercises on top of pre-existing patterns of tension. As tension is released, the breath can deepen and strengthen so that the spine grows with each exhalation. "I'm given the inhalation," Diane says, teaching breathing to a class. "It wants to come, it wants that state of reception. In breath, you discover what letting go can be; that's what the exhalation is." In time, Diane explains, breath naturally meets the poses rather than being employed in a prescribed way or deliberately coordinated with movement. Vanda's student Sandra



Sabatini, who was particularly interested in this aspect of the practice, wrote *Breath: The Essence of Yoga*, a collection of poetic sketches that express the simplicity of Vanda's approach to breathing. The book is threaded with images of waiting, listening, letting the breath blossom, and coming to a quietness that allows movement to be inside, on the spine.

APPRENTICESHIP

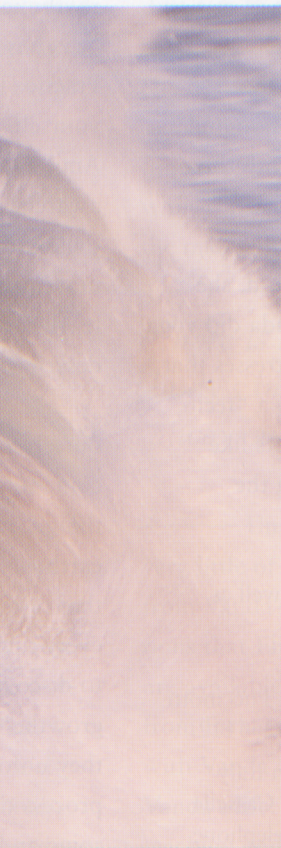
What I saw in Diane's body drew me to study with her; in the same way, Diane was drawn to study with Vanda because of what she saw in Vanda's body. Her introduction came when she was invited to a dinner at

Vanda's house after they had met briefly many weeks earlier at a *tai chi* demonstration in Florence. On the night of the dinner, Vanda opened the door, and, as if no time had gone by since their previous meeting, led Diane by the hand to the bedroom where she demonstrated her favorite backbends (into which she could drop repeatedly from standing with no apparent effort). "I had never seen anyone move with so much beauty and grace, strength and relaxation," Diane recalls. Vanda, then age 67, had been working on her yoga for nearly 20 years. She invited

Diane to study with her. "She was looking for somebody to teach," Diane says. "She was ready. She saw how important it was. She wanted a disciple." Diane was also ready: "I knew from the beginning that I had found what I was looking for," she says, "a way to clarity, a way of working with the body that was beautiful and intelligent."

Diane had lessons one, two, or three times a week at Vanda's home in Fiesole, outside of Florence. Arriving toward the end of Vanda's morning practice, she was often invited to watch and touch—"see how light this is," Vanda would say, or "feel how strong this is." Lessons would last one and a half to two hours. Vanda "would drift in and out, come and go to the kitchen, as I would continue to work. It was the hardest I had worked in my life. How intense and deep and strong it could be—she'd elicit that."

Diane's process of finding her way to the places that Vanda had discovered was not easy, however. Before meeting Vanda, she had mastered many yoga poses and could even perform 108 consecutive backbends, thanks to an Iyengar teacher with whom she had been studying. "But when I went to Vanda," she says, "I



found I couldn't do even one backbend. I couldn't even stand the way she showed me." Vanda used few words in teaching. "She would say 'open the knees' or 'rest' or 'now we must be like little birds on a limb stretching our wings,' and I would try to do what she said, and then I would look at her body and at mine in the mirror and see that I hadn't gotten it." Over and over again, as Diane walked an hour through the olive groves from Vanda's home back to Florence, crying because she thought she would never understand, she struggled to find the enigmatic combination of rest and resolve that Vanda had discovered. It was many years, she says, before she began to feel confident that she would be able to continue working on her own and honor Vanda's request that she go further with the practice because "there's so much more to learn."

After Vanda's death, Diane left Italy and began teaching in the United States. She found, she says, that a "funny diluted idea of how Vanda did yoga goes around." In her own teaching Diane stresses that Vanda's approach cannot be structured into a "technique" and that an overemphasis on concepts like "grounding" produces "heaviness," missing the

lightness that was apparent in Vanda's practice. The so-called "wave," she says, is a byproduct of creating the conditions for movement to be whole; it is a consequence of a number of forces being brought into play rather than an effect to strive for.

MOVING MEDITATION

Vanda's practice of cultivating the conditions for movement to be whole cultivates the conditions for awareness and being to be whole as well. After many years of rhythmically inviting "rest" and "undoing," Diane says, "there is no longer a sense of linear movement." Practice becomes about "your own state of being with yourself. It's not mechanical; it's reflective: Am I rested? Am I keeping tension?" The main challenge is to "bring awareness to the body without bringing 'busy-ness' to the mind," cluttering it with details that will cause movement to be fragmented. Although Vanda did not teach the *Yoga Sutra*, her yoga is what the *Yoga Sutra* describes—a means of calming the mind's fluctuations.

Yoga as Vanda understood it is a way to free ourselves from habit and certainty. "Every time you come to something," Diane says, "you don't know anything...every time I start, I don't even know what the earth is. I just know there's something way deep down that rests me and that holds me. I have to start anew every time, stop and start over. From the earth, I have to discover what sitting is, and then I have to discover growth." The poses in Vanda's yoga are incidental—they unfold (or not) almost as an afterthought in the process of finding rest and receiving the release of the spine and wholeness of movement that can result.

The training of attention at the heart of Vanda's approach makes the practice of asana synonymous with meditation. Her student Rossella Baroncini summarizes it this way: "By consciously entrusting ourselves to the action of gravity and by letting our breathing expand, we learn to let go of the things we no longer need and renew ourselves in every moment." She says that Vanda taught her to "look forward, being completely free from conditioning, memories, misconceptions," and that "yoga is freedom and love." Once when I commented to Diane about the amazing open, relaxed quality of Vanda's hips in a

Resources

Diane Long's travel and teaching schedule as well as information about her video can be found at www.dianelongyoga.com.

Elizabeth Pauncz's New Yoga Center is at Via Puccinotti 15, Florence 50129, Italy, telephone 39-055-4255112.

Sandra Sabatini teaches at various locations in Italy and elsewhere and can be reached by mail at: Cassella Postale 7, Bacchereto 59015, Prato, Italy or telephone 39-055-8717007.

Rossella Baroncini teaches in Florence and can be reached by mail at: Via Cimabue n.28, Florence 50121, Italy, telephone 39-055-665451, or chidambaram@internettrain.it.

Esther Myers' Yoga Studio is located in Toronto, Canada; the video *Vanda Scaravelli on Yoga* can be purchased through her website: www.estheriyoga.com.

yiextra.org

To read *Yoga International's* review of *Vanda Scaravelli on Yoga*, an intriguing documentary about Scaravelli's life and work, visit yiextra.org and click on "Vanda Scaravelli: Video Review."

photograph of her in *Padmasana* (lotus pose), Diane replied with a smile: “unconditional love for the world.” Vanda had an “essential simplicity, straightforwardness, matter-of-factness...that was her spirituality,” Diane says. “It was poetic and terse.”

VANDA'S LIFE AND LEGACY

Vanda's presence was a testament to her practice and the self-realization to which it had led her. “The most wonderful thing about being with her was her lightness of being, her self-contained contentment,” Diane says. In a tribute written after Vanda's death, Elizabeth says that Vanda “invariably found a way to go with events so that resistance was never created.”

A tiny woman, roughly 5'1” and almost always barefoot or wearing flip-flops, she enjoyed demonstrating the power of gravity. “When she felt like being silly about it all,” her daughter Paola remembers, “she would say, ‘lift me’; you could lift her like a feather. And then she would ‘ground’ herself, and not even a large man could lift her.”

She was a paradoxical mix of graciousness and sensitivity to other people's social position but unconcerned about convention or formality for herself. Although she had an aristocratic upbringing and was known to many as “La Signora,” she would never use her title or position in any way. “She was always just Vanda,” Diane says. A renowned hostess, Vanda gave grand dinners at which famous friends like Fellini, LeBoyer, and Aldous Huxley might rub elbows with locals who had given her a ride when she was hitchhiking home. At these events, it would be no surprise to find her off by herself, reading a book. “She liked to put people together and then disappear,” Paola says.

According to Paola, Vanda deeply trusted yoga to sustain and heal the body. “If she was sick or when she fell” and shattered her hip, “her constant question was ‘how soon can I do my exercises?’ because she knew that they would heal her. Once she was hit by a car and bounced off the hood. She went home and curled up like a little animal and did her breathing. Within a week, she was fine.” Vanda refused anesthesia for root canals and once for the removal of a tooth; all the dentists in the office came to watch in amazement.

Diane believes that Vanda saw these occasions as opportunities to “play” with breathing and pain.

Vanda was perceptive and candid in her interactions. “There was a quality in her that listened to what was underneath what you were saying,” Diane says. Elizabeth adds, “There was no predicting what she might say or think. She cut through all details.” A phone call with Vanda “might not last more than thirty seconds. She usually hung up without saying ‘good-bye,’ and at times this could happen while a person was still in the middle of a sentence.”



There is a great sense of resolve in the body's invitation to gravity, and there is always more to let go.

Unfortunately, Vanda's legacy is sparse, and very little of her practice has been documented. Aside from Vanda's and Sandra's books and a few small editions that Elizabeth has published, only two videotapes are available; one, with footage of Vanda, is available from Esther Myers, a Canadian teacher who worked with Vanda at intervals over the last several years of Vanda's life. The other is an informal video of Diane teaching and practicing filmed by one of her friends.

Although there are few opportunities to study with someone who can transmit Vanda's teachings, Diane offers this comforting insight: yoga as Vanda understood it brings us “back to something that the body knows, an original state of well-being.” For this reason, Vanda was torn about whether to title her book “*Awakening the Spine*” or “*Reawakening the Spine*.” The capacity that Vanda's yoga touches is present in all of us, just waiting to be given the conditions to flourish. ●

Nan Wishner writes and teaches yoga in northern California. She can be reached at nwishner@mindspring.com.