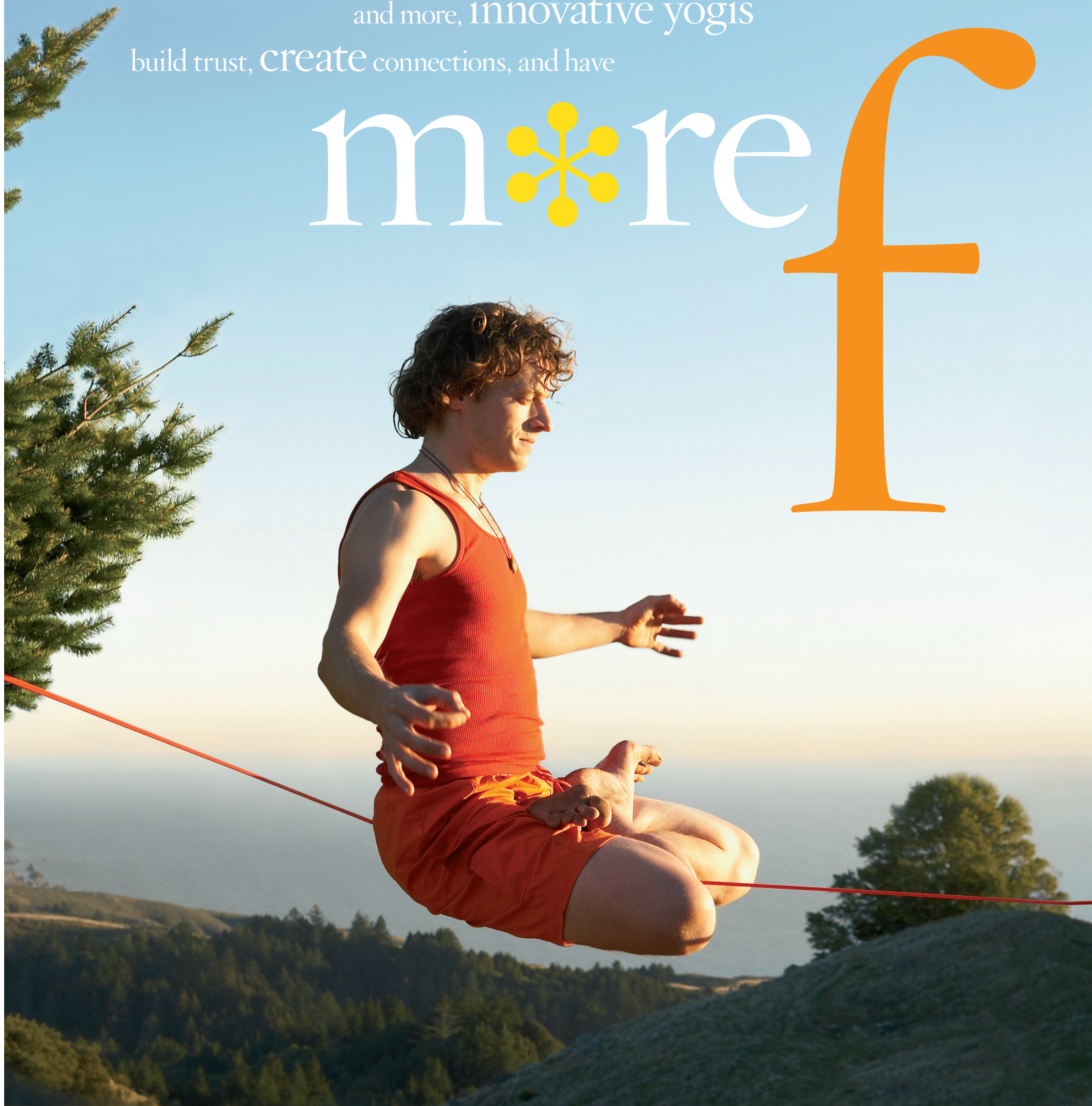


Playing with dance, acrobatics,
and more, innovative yogis
build trust, create connections, and have

m*ref



Fun

YogaSlackers Jason Magness and Sam Salwei
hone the art of living in balance, on a slackline.



“you wanna fly?”

AcroYoga cocreator
Jason Nemer asks me.

What a question—who doesn’t dream of flying?
But, truth be told, I’m a scaredy-cat.

I’m watching Nemer and his partner, Jenny Sauer-Klein, perform their acrobatic yoga feats. A small crowd of spectators oohs and ahhs over their breathtaking moves. This “flying” looks like fun, but I’m considerably larger than Sauer-Klein. I’m certain I’ll hurt Nemer or fall flat on my face. I hesitate. But Nemer smiles. “You’ll be fine, I promise,” he says. So I consent.

Nemer becomes my base: He’s on his back, feet up in the air, and I lean over and lay my torso on his feet, ready to play airplane like a kid. For a moment before liftoff, I question how I got here, why I would choose to trust a stranger this way. But I sense that Nemer, who studies with master yogi Dharma Mitra (see “Poster Boy” on page 152), is strong and stable, so I relax. Before I know it, I’m in the shape of Baddha Konasana (Bound Angle Pose), but upside down: Nemer’s feet are pressed into the top of my thighs, holding me up, while my head dangles. His hands move along my spine, treating me to a mini–Thai massage. Then he calls out another pose.

✶ BY DIANE ANDERSON

The transition is thrilling. I’m not sure how I flip over, but now his feet are on my low back, my head near his chest, my feet on the level of his knees. I’m grabbing my ankles in Dhanurasana (Bow Pose), but since I’m upside down, this backbend feels more like Urdhva Dhanurasana (Upward Bow Pose)—but with more ease, more freedom. It’s a pose I’ve done a gazillion times, yet this circle is totally new, relaxing, liberating. Each time we move into a different pose, I experience a split second of worry and I fear I’ll plummet, but somehow I don’t. At one point, Nemer laughs, Sauer-Klein laughs, and I laugh, too.

I’ve just gotten a taste of one form of fun being had by yogis who are letting loose—combining their love of asana with a passion for off-the-mat physical activities like circus arts, theater, dance, and outdoor adventure. These new yogic art forms—AcroYoga, Yoga Trance Dance, and yoga slacking among them—cultivate risk taking, trust, connection, and playfulness. Dabbling in them, I find myself laughing, feeling exhilarated. They bring back the excitement I felt back when I first started practicing—when I fell in love

✶ PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARAH KEHOE



Jason Nemer and Jenny Sauer-Klein celebrate their love of yoga, acrobatics, and circus arts with AcroYoga.



Yoga Trance Dance creator
Shiva Rea catches a wave.

do try this at home

Want to bring a more playful spirit to your practice? Try these ideas on your own.

think outside the mat

"Go out and explore the world with yoga in mind," suggests Sam Salwei of YogaSlackers. "Just changing where you practice is huge." Try taking your practice outside on a beautiful day or in a gentle rain. If you live near the beach, do asanas in the sand, or even the surf. At a park, use swings to support your backbends.

with the way asana made me feel playful and free. Somewhere along the way, my practice has become more introspective and solemn, and I've lost some of the sheer joy I once felt. So here I am, checking out these new forms. And I have to say, they're inspiring.

Circus Circus

AcroYoga founders Nemer and Sauer-Klein were both serious yoga practitioners who had been through teacher trainings when they met in 2003. But they were much more than that: He was a competitive acrobat; she was a musical theater major who taught circus arts to children. After meeting through a friend, they came together at San Francisco's Circus Center, where a kind of alchemy took place as they found themselves combining yoga with acrobatics. It doubled their fun and opened them to new ways of expanding their practices. Over time, they also incorporated Thai massage into the AcroYoga practice, and the couple now sees their unique art form as an attempt to combine the spiritual wisdom of yoga, the loving kindness of Thai massage, and the dynamic strength of acrobatics into one powerful practice.

"There are purists and there are blenders. We're blenders," says Sauer-Klein. She learned to dance, then discovered Ashtanga and com-

fall down

Fellow YogaSlacker Jason Magness encourages you to discover inversions away from a wall. "It's important to learn to fail, which usually means learning to fall," he says. His technique: Gather all the pillows in the house and cover the floor two or three pillows deep. Then try Handstand or Forearm Balance and fall as many times as it takes to get upside down and stay there. (If you've got neck, back, or shoulder problems, don't do this.)

pleted her first teacher training with leading Ashtanga teacher David Swenson. Later, she developed an affinity for vinyasa flow; putting together poses in a different order from the standard Ashtanga sequence was "totally freeing" for her. Now, she says, she's fallen in love with Anusara Yoga.

Sauer-Klein isn't just a dabbler. She's a believer in the idea that a yoga practice should change and evolve, that a solid foundation is important but that it shouldn't keep anyone from exploring new things.

Nemer agrees. After all, the great master of modern yoga, Sri T. Krishnamacharya—teacher to such luminaries as T.K.V. Desikachar, B.K.S. Iyengar, and K. Pattabhi Jois—drew on many disciplines, including gymnastics and wrestling, as he developed asana practices that continue to influence most of the yoga taught today.

Nemer and Sauer-Klein aren't the only ones whose love of yoga is matched by a love of high-flying circus acts. Some acrobatically inclined yogis have taken the practice to the sky. Michelle Dortignac, a certified OM Yoga instructor in New York, teaches Unnata Aerial Yoga using *tissu*, the silky fabric used in circus arts, which can be twisted to form a soft harness. She finds that it helps the body make better use of gravity, so that it can get into poses more deeply than it would on the ground. Dortignac opens class with Sun Salutations done in a circle, so everyone can make eye contact. "People lighten up, smile, and relate to one another," she says.

Sauer-Klein and Nemer, too, emphasize communication and a community connection in their classes, which begin with a chance for everyone to introduce themselves

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let your inner dancer out

Vinyasa flow teacher Shiva Rea suggests learning to move spontaneously. Start by chanting Om repeatedly for several minutes. Next, get onto all fours doing Cat-Cow Pose, moving your head toward your tail and your tail toward your head. "Allow your spine to meander like a river," she says. Rea's "Liberated Dog" pose, a variation of Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog) is another nice warm-up: From Down Dog, bend your knees one at a time and let your hips sway and your spine bend and flow. Now you're ready to get up and dance. Start with slower music and get in touch with the wave of movement starting at the base of your spine. "You shouldn't feel like you're doing steps," Rea says. "Let this be your yoga, that which connects you to your deepest source, and let that be joyful and free." CARMEL WROTH