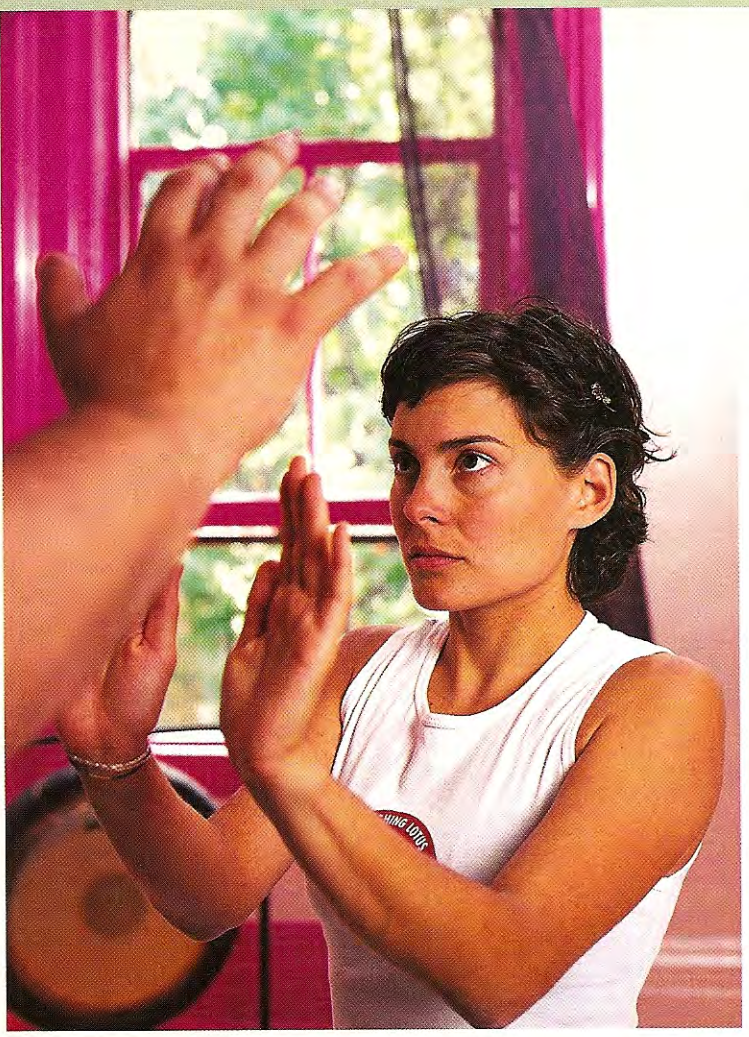

Best Defense

The confidence and strength learned from yoga can help you defend yourself against violence.

Amy Ippoliti, above, says that yoga helps people defend themselves by teaching them to stay present.

AT FIRST GLANCE, yoga and self-defense seem like an odd combination. After all, isn't yoga supposed to be about opening the heart, achieving peace, and practicing *ahimsa* (nonharming)? Anusara Yoga instructor Amy Ippoliti has asked herself this very question, and come up with an answer: In order to achieve freedom, she reasons, people must be able to protect themselves. As Ippoliti's teacher and mentor John Friend puts it, "In order to experience the fullest freedom of our hearts, we must say 'no' to that which dishonors us, cloaks our beauty, blocks our happiness, diminishes our health, weakens our self-esteem, disempowers us, and significantly reduces our psychic savings account."

In a sold-out, inaugural "Yoga of Defending Your Self" workshop, sponsored by the Laughing Lotus Yoga Center in downtown Manhattan, 100 women learned the basics of disabling an attacker in the event of a mugging, after two yoga teachers from Laughing Lotus were threatened by muggers. Ippoliti, who has a background teaching "Model Mugging" self-defense seminars, focused on how to avoid an attack by using the power of the gaze, the breath, voice, and stance. Physical tactics, she stressed, are a last resort: "The first rule of self-defense is *never* fight for material possessions. The highest form of self-defense is not to have to fight."

Class started with chanting to Kali and Durga, incarnations of the warrior goddess, for inspiration, followed by a simulated mugging where students used the tools they learned to fend off a "mugger" coming at them.

"Yoga is about being present in the moment," says Laughing Lotus teacher Elena Brower. "In order to defend yourself, you must be present and prepared for anything." At the end of the workshop, one woman stood up to thank everyone for their support. Her best friend had recently been raped and murdered, and she'd signed up for this workshop to honor her memory by ensuring that, if need be, she'd be able to fight back.

Even the ancient texts say that sometimes fighting back is necessary. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna counsels the revered warrior Arjuna to do battle in the name of goodness, purity, and justice. "Don't yield to impotence!" he urges. "It is unnatural in you! Banish this petty weakness from your heart. Rise to the fight, Arjuna!" Visit *www.laughinglotus.com*.

—Katherine Pew

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