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PELL CITY —

Julia Cook had concluded a community yoga class at her local studio and was chatting with some of the participants as they were leaving.

“It’s so relaxing and energizing,” one said to her. “I’m so happy you are here in Pell City. You are a gem.”

Cook, a native of Russia who came to Pell City via Moscow and St. Petersburg, was unfamiliar with the word.

“Like a diamond,” her yoga student explained. “A treasure.”

“Oh, you’re beautiful,” she replied with a smile. “You’re great. Love yourselves,” she added as a salutation as the class members left the studio.

It may seem an unusual parting remark, but Cook believes that how people view themselves influences how they deal with others.

“When you spread your love, you spread yourself. You are serene on the inside. If someone yells at you or you argue with someone, you will not take things personally. You will recognize that the other person acted because of a lack of love. They do not love themselves, so they do not know how to express it. When you fill your body with love and gratitude, you can send it outside to the person who has issues with you. Love is healing energy.”

While sipping hot tea, Cook, in her soft European voice, explained the purpose of yoga, dispelled common misconceptions about it, and identified a product to which more Russians than Americans are addicted.

About Pell City Yoga Center: Open since November, the studio is located at 1822 Cogswell Avenue, Ste. 204. Community classes are scheduled Mondays through Saturdays, and Cook schedules personal sessions by appointment. For the full schedule, visit www.yogapellcity.com or call 205-332-5330.

What is the most common misconception people have about yoga? “There are several. That all you do is sit cross-legged and hum. That it is some sort of religion. That it is just exercise. Yoga is not any of those things. It is a way of living. It is a path, a journey.”

In what way? “Life is our journey. Yoga is about life. It is not a competition, and there is no goal in yoga. When you have a goal, you do everything to reach that goal. But once you’ve achieved something, it’s over. Life shouldn’t be like that. Yoga teaches you to listen to yourself and your body, to live in the here and now. Life is not smooth. It has ups and downs. When you are down, sometimes you do not want to do anything. Yoga can help you recover and get back up.”

How important is finding the right yoga instructor? “When I started yoga 10 years ago, my first teacher was a young guy who was new to teaching, but he was good. Some people do not find the right teacher right away. They may then say they don’t like yoga, when it may have been that the teacher was not right for them. Each teacher brings their own personality and how they perceive everything to it, so it is important to keep trying until you find the teacher who is the best fit for you. And when I teach, I grow together with my students. I learn also, and I like it.”

How yoga can help boost self-esteem: “We often are very hard on ourselves, but never judge yourself. Judging is negative energy. When you make a mistake or do something stupid, before you judge yourself, stop. Immediately stop. We all make mistakes and do stupid things. You did what you have done. Stop worrying about it. It is useless. It doesn’t help to suffer.”

The mirror exercise: “The world is a mirror. When you look at it, you look at yourself. So try this exercise. Shut the bathroom door, look at yourself in the mirror, and with sincerity and feeling, say to the person in the mirror, ‘I love you. You’re so great.’ If it’s hard to do, just try to look into your heart, to see your heart, and tell it, ‘I love you.’ It may be hard at first, and you may say the words without real feeling, but before long you will surprise yourself about how much better you feel and how much better you see the world.”

How she describes herself: “That’s a very hard question. I would say that I am a positive, open-minded, easy-going person.”

Coming to America: “When I got here, I thought I knew English, but the Southern accent was very hard for me to understand. Being here in Alabama has been very good for me to practice English.”

An observation about American society: “You have much more addictions here in America than in Russia. There is a comfortable life, and so many things to become addicted to. Food, alcohol, so many things. It is sad, because addiction is lack of love to yourself. But Americans are less addicted to tobacco than people in Russia are. Americans smoke much less.”

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