

# Conversations with Modern Yogis

# Sarah & Ty Powers

A husband and wife team based in New York City, Sarah and Ty Powers travel around the globe leading workshops, trainings and retreats that combine the insights and practices of yoga and Buddhism. Sarah is particularly known for her style of Yin sequencing coupled with a flow practice influenced by Viniyoga, Ashtanga and Iyengar Yoga. Her teachings are also informed by her studies in Transpersonal Psychology and her decades of Vipassana practice. Ty has been a yogi since 1987 and is also a practicing Buddhist. He teaches day-long retreats at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Marin County, California and is a mentor to several pupils around the world. Together, Sarah and Ty founded The Insight Yoga Institute.

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Photographed at their former home, San Rafael CA — April 3rd 2012



*Yoga is the practice of opening doors, on the physical, energetic level, and on the psychological, heart level, on the bhakti level. It is a path that helps us recognize the human habit of shutting doors as a basic premise for how we operate, our basic resistance to life, our stubbornness. Yoga gives us another choice, and one door leads to the next. At first we may just go through the physical door, yet at the end of that door there will be another that leads us a little further to something more maturing. Yoga opens doors.*

Ty Powers

*Yoga is a way to gather oneself, to kindly attend to the body, heart and mind. It is both a commitment to practice and a commitment to being conscious in all our simple moments. Yoga becomes evident in all that we do and how we experience our world and connect with other people. It is transpersonal, intra-personal and very inter-personal. If we truly want to experience the full potential of our humanity, then yoga has this kind of breadth.*

Sarah Powers

# Sarah & Ty Powers

## **I know that in your yoga teaching you're incorporating many different disciplines.**

**S:** I would like to think that how I practice and teach encompasses the diverse methods of yoga into one guiding path of awareness. There are distinct limbs, but when integrated together, they invite a sense of experiential wholeness. And everybody is welcome to choose the methods they are interested in. At whatever level of maturity they are operating from, whether more materially oriented or more spiritually, they can develop practices that awaken more awareness in that realm. As you know, there are many definitions of yoga, but I think they all eventually bring us toward a recognition of intrinsic, timeless awareness.

## **Ty, you are an experienced Buddhist practitioner. I'm interested in the connection between the contemporary Buddhist and yoga worlds in the US. How do you see these two different communities?**

**T:** You know, I'm not so certain how integrated they are. They're integrated for me. They're integrated in the way Sarah teaches. But I know many members of the yoga community have said, "Why would you bother with *suffering*?" I tend to think that the two cultures are absolutely in line with each other, but in terms of how they're understood commonly, I don't think that's always so clear. It seems that in yoga classes there is a lot of lip service given to sitting in meditation, but it isn't being enforced.

## **Why do you think that is?**

**T:** I don't know if they really understand its importance in relation to *asana*. When Sarah started moving toward Buddhism—and she was the one that pulled me in that direction—it was clear that meditation was where one began in that tradition. I do sometimes think that Buddhism may have erred on the side of pushing the body away. And that's why this combination of yoga and Buddhism seems really vibrant for me, and a lot of people, now.

## **So you think this is a trend emerging in yoga?**

**T:** I do.

**S:** I think it's also an emerging trend in the general population. Healthy living and mindfulness are more prevalent in everyday circles. I travel a lot, and people everywhere seem to be more interested in getting to know how to quiet down and relax, as well as how to relate to their own neurotic mental patterns. Most people feel better after yoga, and although they don't have to commit to any deep inquiry in a yoga class, they do eventually realize they only feel better for a little while after *savasana*, and

that they need to take more responsibility for how they are behaving and responding to life.

Unfortunately, not everyone is willing to go to the next level of personal commitment, which is what meditation takes. It doesn't have immediate gratification. It's actually difficult at first for most people. The ease and insights emerge down the line. So it requires a lot of support and inspiration from those who have made it through some of the obstacles and sustained a practice in order to encourage others to try it. I am constantly reflecting on how I can make meditation more accessible, more immediately interesting and even enjoyable. Learning to meditate in yin poses is one way I offer this.

## **Do you think it is part of the maturing yoga world in the US?**

**T:** I think it's a result of there being more information about meditation out there, in particular more information about the brain. *Time* magazine even devoted an issue about the effects of meditation according to neuroscientists. With those kinds of facts, people are inspired to at least give it a better look.

**S:** Yes. And it becomes very encouraging for the basic, naive realist who really would like something to be proven as effective before giving it a try. I think the next wave of healthy living will be to recognize that if you're not aware of your subtle body, your breathing and how it influences the life force, and you're not able to meet your own emotions and mind states, that you will have a life of increased difficulty and suffering. I think it's a matter, as Ty was saying, of being exposed to these ideas. What we come in contact with that we collectively find beneficial begins to change what we value as a society. Yoga is very mainstream now, and I see that as a very positive direction for society as a whole.

## **In your own practice, not only do you incorporate yoga and Buddhism, but you also draw from Traditional Chinese Medicine and transpersonal psychology. How does that work?**

**S:** I'm really interested in drawing from whatever resources and methods are relevant for whatever aspect of ourselves we are developing. In terms of the body and physical health, Chinese medicine had, for me, a very succinct and almost simplified way to help me refine my personal experience. I learned that through pressurizing or pulling on the tissues, I'd be affecting certain invisible channels or meridians that link up with organ health, as well as having an effect on my emotions. Chinese medicine helped me connect the dots a

bit more. It felt so clearly pertinent to my yoga practice.

**Are these asana that you do that affect the meridians, or are they exercises from a Chinese context?**

**S:** They're normal yoga postures done in a more passive way with an understanding of how each pose affects certain meridians. Paul Grilley and his teacher Dr. Motayama are two of my influences for this. Dr. Motoyama is a Japanese yogi, Sanskrit scholar and acupuncturist. He has formulated a way to use these complimentary disciplines like transparent maps on top of each other. We can learn how to fill in certain gaps by using both the Indian and the Chinese/Japanese systems. If you want to know more about how the life force affects the physical, the Chinese are very simple and clear. And if you want to know more about how the subtle invisible worlds can affect different states of consciousness, the Indians speak on that in eloquent and poetic ways. In a way, one goes more toward immanence and one more toward transcendence.

**Do you find that the concepts of *prana* and *qi* give you different information in understanding your subtle body?**

**S:** What the Indians have helped me understand, in whatever simplified translation that I have been able to discern, is that the word *prana* can refer to the unseen vitality that affects us on the physical level, on the subtle level and on the causal level. And so it can really be something that's misunderstood if the people speaking about it aren't referring to the same level of energy, whereas with the Chinese system, they've really dissected the word *prana* into three ever more subtle aspects: *qi* (vital energy), *jing* (essence) and *shen* (spirit). When we're talking about how energy affects the physical body, we focus on *qi*. If we are talking about the building blocks of the manifest reality, or our inherited constitution, then we can refer to energy as *jing*. And if we want to talk about our deepest interrelatedness with the vast dimensions of being, then we could use the word *shen*. In this way, the Taoist map helped me to expand on my understanding of the concept of *prana*. I understood *shen* as being connected with the heart, and that the so-called spirit body could be accessed through our subtle feeling body. I learned about *jing* being connected with the kidneys, which house our overall vitality. So if I'm feeling somewhat spent and depleted, I can come to my yoga practice in a way that nourishes the kidneys best. If I am feeling easily annoyed or angry, physically toxic, or have not had a clean diet lately, then I can target the liver channels in certain poses. Incorporating the Chinese system into my yoga practice gave me added

levels of energetic and emotional relevance to make each practice session more specific.

**Do you see the *chakras* relating to the meridians?**

**S:** Yes, very much so. The vortexes where energy coalesces—the *chakras*—are where the meridians draw their nourishment from. For example, the second chakra nurtures the kidney *qi*. So, I often will practice breath retentions in chakra centers that assist the meridians we are affecting in yin poses. Now it becomes a multilayered experience.

Of course, on some days just being quiet and mindful is the best remedy for all that ails us. In many sessions we incorporate both skillful means of activity and wisdom methods of direct silent observation. I do think it can be helpful to start out our practice being busy with methods so that we give the busy mind a healthy diet of *dharma* activity. And then we can more effortlessly move toward doing less and less, listening more and more, with less distraction. As we begin to gather ourselves into the center of our experience, literally into the central channel, our dualistic thoughts begin to subside, and in the quietude we will discover deeper insights.

**I wanted to ask you both about what “practice” might mean to you.**

**T:** Well, so many of us in the modern world are not gathered. There are so many influences that have caused us to scatter ourselves. Whatever practices we can do in order to re-gather ourselves, I think we need to go in that direction first, and *then* we can just let it all go.

**S:** Premature transcendence is definitely a disease of the yoga community. Until we really realize that every aspect of our experience needs to be invited into our practice, we will be unconscious of the ways we are operating from our wounded sense of self, or from a fabricated spiritual persona. So to have a *formal* practice—we can put that word before it—makes us more accident-prone to gradual maturity.

**T:** In my meditation practices over the last year or so, I've been coming out of each session and just sitting in a relaxed way, taking everything in, knowing I'm still practicing. I'm still assuming a seat, but really making it more explicit that I'm including the reality that I normally walk around in with this reality of sitting and meditating. It allows the cross-over to become less and less of a crossing over and just a continuation of mindful moments. I don't think I could have done that without a few years of meditation under my belt. I would have just continued with the mental habits that I had back then.

It seems to me that there's a degree of clarity one has to gain, or intentional skills one has to develop, before one can relax into what's actually happening. The Tibetans call it *non-meditation* or *un-meditating*. But I think the formal practice has served it up to me on a nice clean plate.

**How does this idea of a formal practice fit with our culture? Is there something else we could see as a form of practice that would help us understand it?**

**S:** In this culture, I think the closest thing would be the person who does some kind of conscious exercise and has a love of the preservation of the natural world and all its inhabitants. This may be why yoga popularization came through the fitness community, because that was the most familiar feature. I think in our modern Western milieu we have had to borrow the idea of an internal spiritual practice from Eastern cultures.

**So you think we as a culture have lost the idea of a spiritual practice?**

**S:** I think prayer is something that would be the closest thing to exploring the nature of consciousness that pervades the Eastern wisdom traditions, but I am not familiar with people in these Western religious traditions investigating their mind states and freeing themselves from discursiveness.

I grew up in Los Angeles in a non-religious family, and I didn't know anyone who had any kind of practice that was daily. If anything, it was once a week or just on a holiday like Yom Kippur or Easter. That's something I really admire about the yoga community: how swiftly they've adopted the passion for regular and consistent practice. There are plenty of other things that could fill that time and keep the mind in perpetual distraction. People who practice yoga have already devoted daily time to a practice. Once that is in place, I think it important to question our practice, because different methods have different short and long-term effects, and what you're leaving out matters. So I find it valuable to give people a map of the different aspects that different practices can target. That way, even if they're just interested in this piece over here, at least they know there are other features to grow into one day.

**The other side of that, one I see often in India, is even though people are doing their practice every day, it becomes ritualistic; it's not very creative nor, I think, transformative.**

**S:** It's easy to become mechanical with anything repetitive and then simply have habit working through us. Even with something that's meant to wake us up.

**With this idea of practice becoming habit, I am interested in your notion that practice has to be monitored.**

**S:** We need external and internal guidance. We need to spy on ourselves and acknowledge and adjust when we have fallen into laxity or an uninspired practice. We need teachers to re-inspire us for sure, and I think we have to surprise ourselves and go outside our comfort zone by practicing some methods longer than usual, or adding others that we usually avoid. We definitely need teachers at certain times all along our journey of awakening. We need input. We need each other. Until we rest consistently in a recognition of our natural vast clarity, we're going to need continual influences, because it is human nature to close down, to become more rigid, to be less spontaneous and less available to surprise and creativity. I have found that it is through a dedicated practice that we gradually awaken the inner authentic guidance that we can begin to trust more and more. I find it essential to have spiritual mentors and spiritual friends where we can ask questions and have heartfelt discussions. We can also ask questions of our own practice, like what is the fruition of what I've been doing thus far? What are my obstacles to being aware, and what are my habits that keep me locked in place?

**Where does your use for and understanding of psychology come into your idea of practice?**

**T:** There are two prongs that I think are essential: the transpersonal and transcendent insights married to how it meets the personal—a recognition of where our personality stops us, where our family of origin issues stand in the way of transcendence. That work is critical. I think one of the reasons we're seeing so many people run into problems maturing on the path, even though they are dedicated to an asana practice, is that the psychological aspects of practice have not been attended to enough.

**S:** Western psychology, and especially transpersonal psychology, has a way of speaking to the core wounds that we carry of abandonment issues, neglect and abuse. When we learn how to meet these vulnerable places within us, along with the understanding that we're being held by a deeper nature all the time—even when we can't access this—we begin to intuit a richer, more accurate truth about ourselves. We begin to hold our heights and our depths with equal interest and care. How this might look during our practice is to be in a yoga pose for a few minutes while gently sensing how we are feeling inside. And not just how we are feeling immediately in this pose, but in general, about ourselves. Adding the inquiry—

what am I trying not to feel?—and giving ourselves time to let what we have suppressed reveal itself and be met in the light of awareness in a tender, non-judgmental way, all while cocooning inside in a floor pose.

**T:** So there's a process always of descending and ascending. And too often in spiritual communities I've seen that there's only the interest in going up and out. Which, by itself, actually produces a bigger shadow.

**S:** If an attitude of “harmony addiction” is promoted by the teacher or the students in a learning environment such as a yoga class, it can actually be re-traumatizing for some people, because it can trigger a core wound for someone who feels like they don't belong. It makes them believe they have to present a yogic personality to be part of that community. They don't feel supported for being authentic, which is what caused many of the primal wounds they carry in the first place.

**T:** It's reinforcing the mask that was created to absorb the pain initially. “I have to be nice to be loved.” “I have to be in harmony.” “I am eternally grateful.” Sometimes you have to tap into how you're *not* grateful before you can really be grateful.

**You were saying the yoga world lacks maturity.**

**T:** Yes. But I do see it changing. I think that people are at a crossroads. There certainly are a number of practitioners who have been doing it a long, long time and are now starting to recognize there's something more than just asana. When it began here in the West, yoga had an ethic of discipline that was really strong and beautiful, but it also came with a kind of authoritarian father. So it lacked kindness and compassion. I know for myself, beating myself up used to feel like the correct voice, instead of listening behind that message into the more authentic voice. This deeper voice has discipline also, but understands all of the wounds that have gone into the stubborn me that I was.

**S:** Supplanting inspired devotion with rigid discipline is prevalent in all the religions and spiritual traditions. It seems inevitable as something becomes more concretized and codified.

**T:** Yes, and of course it is in Buddhism as well.

**S:** It's pretty hard to avoid. That kind of aggrandized authority seems to trigger respect from many students

because it sounds like and can look like it integrates mastery, even when it doesn't. But when we become more in touch with our *hara*, our intuitive belly center, we will be more in touch with the methods that work best for us and able to discern genuine integrity from false facsimiles, discarding from traditions whatever aspects are no longer life enhancing.

**These different way of being a teacher, different way of learning, are some of the things that I think contemporary American yoga is introducing into the practice.**

**S:** Yes, our willingness to question authority without losing respect for it is changing the yogic landscape in numerous ways.