

Teacher to Teacher

Interview with Sarah Powers and Tim Miller

by Fernando Pages Ruiz

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NOWADAYS, YOGA CLASSES can be found at many locations and at all hours of the day. These classes often provide a convenient, ready-made yoga practice within a friendly and supportive environment. Yet many yoga teachers insist that developing a personal practice outside of the classroom environment remains an essential step toward deepening one's experience of yoga. Because the motivation to practice alone can be difficult to sustain, we asked teachers Sarah Powers and Tim Miller how they inspire themselves and their students to do their yoga homework.

Sarah Powers offers classes at the Deer Run Zendo in Corte Madera, California, where she teaches a blend of yoga styles and Buddhist meditation techniques. An international yoga teacher for more than 15 years, Powers draws inspiration from the twentieth-century yoga master Krishnamacharya.

Tim Miller directs the Ashtanga Yoga Center in Encinitas, California. A student of yoga for more than 20 years, Miller was the first American certified by Pattabhi Jois to teach the Ashtanga tradition. Like Jois, he teaches six days a week and leads workshops internationally.

Yoga Journal: If you already attend two or three classes a week, why add a personal practice?

Tim Miller: Home practice says a lot about an individual's strong motivation and high level of commitment. It's a luxury to go to a yoga class and practice with like-minded people under the guidance of a highly trained professional. Without meaning to sound trite, home practice develops character.

Sarah Powers: I encourage people to take classes, but mainly for ideas and inspiration - to pick up a few new tools for their yoga tool kit. Then I tell them to go home and use these tools to enhance their personal practice. I see classes as an adjunct to home practice, not vice versa. Yoga truly becomes your own when you rely on the strength of your love and dedication primarily and not on the structure of a class.

YJ: What's the difference between a personal yoga practice and doing a few favorite asanas every day to keep limber between classes?

TM: Yogis designed the practice to change consciousness -to deepen awareness of one's self and the world that surrounds us. In my experience, this just doesn't happen from keeping limber.

SP: The difference between simple stretching and yoga comes in the state of consciousness with which one performs the limbering asana. Silent observation doesn't come easily when we surround ourselves with distractions. So the quiet space and time created within the practice room, as well as within one's own state of attention, become the aim of daily practice. It's an opportunity to free the mind.

YJ: How do you encourage your students to take their practice home?

SP: I like to do it by example, through my enthusiasm for the practice. I encourage students to find their personal yoga rhythm, so they don't interrupt their training just because their teacher is out of town. Eventually the inspiration must come from one's individual investigation of yoga. I hope my students realize that ingrained patterns of distraction come right back whenever we skip a practice or two. These patterns become insidious. But just 10 minutes daily can help. So, I encourage people to start, even with small pocket of time. From there, commitment grows easily. Mindfulness becomes a way of living -not just an isolated practice on the mat.

“YOGA DEMANDS IMMENSE DEDICATION AND HONESTY –
BUT IT DEMANDS FLEXIBILITY AS WELL”

TM: I certainly agree with Sarah, but in the Ashtanga tradition we do it a little differently. We don't encourage home practice, per se. Our practice reflects the methods developed by Pattabhi Jois, my teacher. He teaches six days a week, providing students with individual instruction in a class setting. Students of all different levels practice yoga under his supervision. This method, called the Mysore style, combines classroom practice and personal commitment. It's different that a guided class, though, where the teacher sets the pace and provides motivation. In a sense, the aim in Mysore style is developing a personal practice, but doing so with supervision.

YJ: So you discourage home practice?

TM: No, no, I don't discourage home practice, but I know that people prefer classes because the environment there is supportive. In my experience, most people get more from attending class regularly than from practicing at home. But as I said earlier, classes are a luxury. Many of us travel or just can't get to the yoga studio often enough. We need to practice in hotel rooms, living rooms, and even outdoors. As far as encouraging my students to be consistent in their practice, even when classes are not available, I remind them that the true yoga begins when they leave the studio. Yoga is all about being awake, being mindful of your actions. Any action done with a high level of awareness is, essentially, yoga. Mindfulness and personal practice are synonymous and define a lifestyle, not a fitness craze.

YJ: When encouraging students to do their homework, do you take their life style, schedule, and other personal circumstances into account?

SP: Being sensitive to the rhythms of life reflects hatha yoga in the sense that it merges inner balance with outward harmony. I vary the way I teach so that people can see choices and then choose from a broad repertoire when practicing on their own. If someone has hiked all day, the body may need a soft, yin practice. If they've have been at the computer all day, the body may need some vibrancy and movement. Having investigated various practice, I draw from all of them to find balance. Yoga demands immense dedication and honesty, but it demands flexibility as well.

TM: Certainly I take into account a student's lifestyle, age, and also the amount of time he or she can devote to practice.

YJ: So do you recommend different routines to accommodate the time each student can allot to personal practice?

TM: In the tradition I learned, asana sequencing is specific and progressive. We always begin with Sun Salutations and continue with standing poses, followed by sitting poses and then inverted ones. So if someone has a limited amount of time to practice, I would recommend starting at the beginning and doing as much as possible in the prescribed sequence. An exception here is after an exhausting day, then I recommend some finishing poses, followed by sitting and pranayama.

SP: I like to apply commitment to practice on a days-per-week basis, rather than the length of each session I try to leave my schedule free in the mornings

for yoga, but I have a daughter whom I home-school. Sometimes morning practice gets aborted. Then I just pick up where I left off in the afternoon. It was different before I was a mom, I could practice without interruption. Now I find that even five minutes of being within -relinquishing the distracted mind- will replenish me and bring me into deeper awareness. While I don't think daily practice has to be long, for me four hours is ideal.

YJ: You recommend four hours daily?

SP: Four hours is what I love and is what I give myself quite a lot. Four hours will enlarge your spiritual bank account. Then, when that's not doable, you make a withdrawal. That's why I encourage people to go on retreats, relinquish their schedules, and replenish their inner store.

YJ: Do you encourage entry-level students to develop a personal practice right away, or do you wait for a basic level of skill to develop first?

TM: I encourage people to learn Suryanamaskar (Sun Salutations) first, because I think it's a really time efficient way of practicing. You can thoroughly change your mental frame with is minutes of Suryanamaskar. Along with standing poses, these form the foundation of a yoga practice.

SP: At first, coming to class is essential; otherwise, we tend to practice yoga with the same habits that drive our unconscious life. But I also encourage beginners to start a home practice, including modified Sun Salutations, simple breathing exercises, and concentration disciplines. These simple practices can benefit beginners while they continue learning and coming to class.

YJ: After so many years of doing yoga, how do you keep your practice fresh?

TM: We get comfortable too easily. We become attached to the form of our practice and forget the process it facilitates. Yoga represents an evolution designed to remove habitual ways of being. Years ago, what motivated me was mastering the advanced series and getting into tricky postures. But in time, the practice became less of a challenge as a form of gymnastics and more of a challenge as meditation. My practice changed when I got interested in vipassana (a Buddhist meditation technique). My asanas became a means to facilitate meditation. I started practicing with a little less intensity and developed a not-too-much, not-too-little practice that didn't push me to the edge but didn't neglect my physical body either. A middle path -cultivating the values of compassion, faith, and wisdom- has become the primary

intention of my investigation.

Nowadays, my inspiration derives from how I experience the moment. I ask myself: Am I grasping to get somewhere in this practice? There's a subtle difference between setting your sights on where you think your body should be versus observing where it actually is. When you practice with an eye toward a goal, you lose sensitivity.

"TO BE WITH THE PRACTICE IS TO RIDE THE WAVES
RATHER THAN RESIST THEM."

TM: Perhaps the question is incorrect. It strikes me that there's a reversal here -it's the yoga practice that keeps us fresh! Sure, some days the practice feels effortless while other days the practice seems quite hard. I've realized that change is the essential nature of our phenomenal world-we live in a state of flux. If you use yoga to remain mindful, life itself keeps practice fresh because you become deeply aware of how much everything keeps changing. SP: I made a similar shift from thinking that I had to "do" yoga to simply surrendering. I stopped fighting my body on the mat and started paying attention, as Tim described -learning to ride the waves rather than resist them. This attitude allows a whole new experience of reality, living the moment, again and again. It's the opposite of acting on reality; it's coming from within reality.