

Sarah Powers interviewed by Susan Moul from Kripalu

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Recently Sarah Powers and I spoke about many things Yin.

Sarah Powers has been teaching yoga since 1987. She makes her home in Marin, California, but travels internationally offering retreats and workshops in her intelligent and compassionate blend of yin and a flow style of yoga, transpersonal psychology, and Buddhist Mindfulness. Her training and influences include Dzogchen Buddhism, Vipassana, Ashtanga, Viniyoga, and Iyengar teachings.

Susan: Since I began doing yin I've been doing it four or five days a week, and I always "yin" before I teach or practice. I had been experiencing constant injury at the origin of the hamstrings and also origin of adductor muscles, and that's just a thing of the past. It's easy for me to be passionately committed to teaching and encouraging others in yin because, even at a purely bio-mechanical level, the practice has been so effective for me.

Sarah: That's great to hear. Every time I come out of a day's practice I feel so much renewed enthusiasm to share it, even years later. It's made a big difference for me also.

Susan: Students always ask me, "How am I going to find time to do this?"

Sarah: I think we can look at our lives and see what we really care about by how we spend our time. If someone is beginning to value the quality of how they are living their moments, then giving themselves ten or fifteen minutes to drop the outward going activity of their mind and do some yin yoga, (feeling into the body without an agenda), then they will start to find that there is so much more emotional space in their life. It won't feel so cramped inside. So I think it actually gives people more time, rather than taking away.

Susan: You know, one thing I enjoy in the process of teaching yin is its almost instant efficacy. You don't have to tell people what it's going to do!

Sarah: True. They get to directly experience it. It's also the perfect opportunity to allow them to experience how softening their mental state allows the energy body to redistribute in a much more natural and harmonious way. And this will affect how they experience their active yoga postures as well.

Susan: Would you like to say more about that, the effect on the energy body?

Sarah: Well, the connective tissues that we are taxing when doing long held poses (or you could say while we are loading the ligaments with some pressure and pulling) houses the unseen pathways that our vital energy flows through. Indian yogis call these energy highways Nadis, Chinese yogis call them Meridians. Our energy body (the sum total of all these energy pathways) tends to densify, calcify, or stagnate when we don't move our bodies outside of our more habitual ranges of motion. Obviously this is why we do yoga postures. But coming into a pose in a consciously slow yin way and staying for many minutes at a time helps us go into deeper corridors within our natural ranges of motion in the joints of the hips and lower back, where the meridian chi can become most deficient.

Susan: Yes. There's a loss of our natural self-knowing motion that results not only in health deforming compression but a loss of self-awareness. In yin we don't demand extremes, we basically gradually remember ourselves.

Sarah: Lovely way to say it. And for this reason it is safe. We're not going outside our natural ranges of motion, we're just using the full extent of our ranges of motion. It is a way of stimulating the vitality and motility of the energy body coursing through those tissues.

An effective way to stimulate the meridian system is to push on or pull the connective tissue, which is what shiatsu and acupressure are based on.

Susan: Right. Plus, as I'm often telling students, this is a really great way to stimulate the retention of calcium. Kripalu guests who are my age often have osteoporosis or osteopenia on their minds and I try to foster an understanding of the natural balance of the moving body, that health isn't necessarily a pharmaceutical or medical approach, it's just about the way you live in your body.

Sarah: That's a good point. When we have a deeper understanding of what we're doing beyond just feeling discomfort or trying to be patient, there's more motivation to sink into it. That's why there are different styles of classes. Some just help us stay committed to practicing, while others are geared toward helping people have more intelligence about what is going on inside themselves while they are in the poses. Understanding how the meridian system flows within us gives us a deeper understanding than simply knowing the Western anatomical functions of the organ system. Having some understanding of Chinese Medicine connects us with how the organs are related to this unseen energy field, and how our yoga poses affect these pathways.

For example you have two kidneys but you also have kidney meridians; there's kidney chi and then there's meridian chi. And they influence each other. It's along the meridian channels where the energy gets more disrupted, especially where bone comes together with bone, in joint sites, so that's what is being stimulated by certain Yin postures.

On an energetic level, in the ancient Chinese medical system, the kidneys are in charge of the health of our bones. It's the kidney "juice" that stimulates the cellular production in the bone marrow, the white and red blood cells. White blood cells are essential for immunity, and red blood cells carry oxygen. So it is the dynamic vitality of the kidney chi that's in charge of not only our spinal health, but our immunity and overall cellular vitality as well.

I often say that a kidney or liver sequence of Yin poses is like a needle – less acupuncture session.

As you learn more about the kidney, the liver, or the spleen chi, and how the integrity of the body and mind is dependant on their equilibrium, the more effortless it becomes to get up and practice.

There's also a whole psychosomatic level to balancing the energy body that I find really fascinating. Strong and flowing Prana is vitally important because this directly affects the way we feel and the way we think. It has a direct influence on our perception of what is important in our world.

Susan: For me yin is also a beautiful practice that returns us to knowing ourselves as the bodies we are, a way of curing the endless polarization of mind and body metaphors. It helps ground students in an awareness that feeling of any sort – whether it's physical sensation or something we deem emotional – is feeling that is done by structure. Without being a body, we couldn't feel anything. So often I hear people speak about

themselves as though they were a cloud floating around near their muscles and bones. I feel all practices are a way of getting through this disembodiment, of exploring and ultimately disabusing ourselves of the notion of there's me, and then there's some "part of me," and then oh yeah, here's my body, too. You know, we can get free of dissociation.

Sarah: That's a very good point. Sometimes we don't know why we feel better, we just feel better. We have little awareness of the subtlety of feeling, we just want to feel good, and like it when we do, hate it when we don't. During a Yin sequence we can strengthen our ability to impartially attend to a wider array of sensations and feelings, developing this psychologically based skill of widening our sphere of acceptable feelings.

When difficult feelings arise during the practice, we have the time to work with them more precisely. We can bring that which we have split off from into the light of attention. We can even personify a tight knot of tension so that we can relate to it more directly. In this way, tension is temporarily segregated from the rest of our experience and offered our full acceptance and investigation. Often buried unmet needs are then allowed to surface and be honored. The Yin poses offer an atmosphere of calm abidance that can support this kind of psychodynamic work.

Susan: That's lovely.

Sarah: If we are aware, we can become conscious of what's going on within us during the process of living. Usually we just say, "well this feels awful or that felt great so I'll do this again tomorrow, and not that." We are often blindly ruled by hope and fear. We don't really know what's going on in our inner life. I really enjoy sharing tools that help people become more awake to themselves, body and mind.

I'll give you an example. Let's say someone is in a passive back bend like Seal. Seal stimulates the connective tissues called the longitudinal ligaments along the spine. The kidney meridian flows through the bones and ligaments in the lower back. Kidney imbalances are related to fear.

During the pose I might suggest you attend to any fear that arises while you are here. While feeling into the compression in the lumbar, a feeling of being stuck, not only in your back, but in some other region of your life, your relationship with your partner for example. Staying in the pose while being with this feeling non-judgmentally, you may discover a fear you have been avoiding such as a feeling that your partner can not really meet you

emotionally in the way you need. This insight might arise out of inquiring into what this back pain would say if it could speak. You might even let the pain be seen in front of you so you can relate to it more clearly by personifying it. As you continue to breath into your spine, allowing sensations and feelings room to breath as well, you literally inhabit yourself more fully. Without rushing to create 'solutions' we have time in a yin pose to explore various levels of our experience. This in itself is extremely liberating.

Susan: Amazing. Again, it helps us all understand we're not operating somewhere out in space, we're embodied, and there is natural health, natural sanity, and really, natural joy in that.

Sarah: Yes. The layers. Blending the physical with the emotional, and transpersonal levels really expands what the possibilities are within a yoga practice.

Susan: I've been thinking and reading a lot lately about cellular processes. I believe that is where we can help people release the tension that causes illness.

Sarah: Ah. When you think of cells as continually being regenerated in the bone marrow, and if it's the kidney chi that is in charge of the health and production of the bone marrow, this kind of cellular makeover that's going on constantly can be enhanced by the way you practice yoga on a regular basis. I have found with Yin Yoga that there is both a preventative aspect to it, by nourishing our individual constitutional needs, and there's a regenerative quality it engenders, when we've already gone down the road of deficiency and depletion .

Susan: And I think this is the critical health level, fundamentally.

Sarah: Yes. It's a way of stimulating the restorative process within us. Nourishing the Meridian system before our bodies rigidify or become a mass of cells congealed in some distortion is the responsibility of each of us. We have to practice in a consistent and balanced way if we want to affect a more quantum level of health. And even as the body grows old or gets sick we need to remember that true well being is a state of mind.

Susan: Yeah. That's it.