

Yoga and Meditation Interview

by Eleanor Cheung

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“Yoga and meditation are far closer than many people believe, and come together through the Buddhist teaching of “non-attachment,” says yoga teacher Sarah Powers.

I wasn’t aware of the close relationship between yoga and meditation until I met Sarah Powers, one of America’s leading yoga teachers, when she was invited to teach here by the Yoga Society of Hong Kong.

Sarah, her husband Ty and their nine-year old daughter Imani (who is home-schooled) spend approximately six months each year travelling together away from their California home giving yoga workshops and holding international retreats. “We are gypsies at heart,” says Sarah. “We enjoy being with new people and visiting new places. We create our home life everywhere we go.”

According to Sarah, yoga is not just asanas (physical posture), which is why she incorporates other key aspects of yoga practice, such as pranayama (breathing/energy work) and mediation (in the Vipassana tradition of Buddhism), into her teaching. She confesses that it is hard to place a single, all-encompassing label on the yoga she teaches, and that it is “an integration of styles.” “I teach a passive style called Yin Yoga,” she says, “it comes from the roots of a blend of Hatha yoga postures with Taoist philosophy.”

Despite the popularity of yoga over the last few years in the West, few people are aware of the esoteric roots and philosophical structure. Sarah says that many people overlook the fact that mindfulness in meditation is the essence of yoga. “There is a saying that if you start with yoga you’ll discover you have a mind to watch, and if you start with meditation you’ll discover you have a body that’s uncomfortable. So either place you start will lead to each other.”

Sarah started yoga 16 years ago when she was studying transpersonal psychology as a way to help meditation. “I was only 20 and it was hard,” she says. “Physical yoga was the doorway in, and as my body and energy got more settled and calmer then I could learn to meditate.”

The teaching of “non-attachment” in Buddhist meditation is particularly important in yoga. Sarah explains that yoga practitioners can become subtly addicted to trying to perfect their poses, which she says is the pitfall in the culture of Hatha yoga. “The body is forever changing and you can get caught thinking someday I’ll have the perfect back-bend, and then I’ll be happy, but it is an elusive rainbow.”

What Sarah loves about the Buddhist teaching is that it helps yoga practitioners become more aware of their mental state. “When you start wishing you were more flexible in your tight hip, you notice it, and you let it go...It’s a key to living free of suffering.” Sarah says.

“I have learned that it’s a limiting truth to believe that happiness is always somewhere else,” she says. “Just to come home to the moment, to the body, to the people you are with -just being was a potential for me. It doesn’t matter where you are or who you are, but if you have diligence, commitment and compassion for your state of being, then anything is possible, because we all have Buddha nature.”