

Yoga and Meditation Questions

*Sarah Powers Interviewed by Michelle Finn
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1. How and when did you first become interested in yoga?

I was a graduate student in Transpersonal Psychology in the mid-eighties and we were required to become involved in a physical discipline with a spiritual foundation. My older brother had been doing yoga for some years when he gave me a Sivananda yoga book which I had practiced from a few years earlier. This assignment gave me the opportunity to revisit the yogic path, but this time with live teachers.

Living in Los Angeles, CA at the time, I had access to many styles and began taking many in depth courses and trainings. Soon after, I realized the world of yoga was vast, both philosophically and experientially. I became drawn to a path that allowed my interests in psychological transformation and liberation to be accessed through the physical and subtle body.

I studied in depth with teachers in the Iyengar, Ashtanga and Viniyoga traditions. I began to see how aligning my energy harmoniously had a cathartic effect on my emotional and mental states, and therefore my state of being and relating. These changes encouraged me to want to assist others in finding this doorway into themselves and rather than continue to pursue a path as a therapist, my life evolved into days spent between hours dedicated to personal practice and sharing the tools and insights of that practice with others, both privately, and in classes.

2. Tell us about your yoga practice – do you practice every day and for how long?

My daily practice has changed over the years as I've deepened my inner exploration, both physically and psychologically. Like everyone, the process of maturity includes adapting to changes regarding aging, having a child, and digesting life's challenges. The common denominator all these years has been a daily commitment to come home to the inner life and through respectfully inhabiting this body and mind, discharging the excesses, while allowing access to a simpler, more refreshed and insightful aliveness. I have noticed that this clearing occurs much more rapidly than in years past, but I still allow

for a 3-4 practice on most days. There are of course interruptions to this schedule when raising a child and traveling a lot, but I do not see these shifts in the general routine as a problem. Any skillful practice has a cumulative effect and can be drawn from in leaner practice periods provided they are not extensive.

I like to begin my day with meditation for about 45 minutes, followed by a slow floor practice of Yin poses to nourish and rebalance the meridian system, while inducing greater agility in the joints. Then I stand and move through an hour and half or so of a strong, active flow practice. Pranayama and energetic meditations follow, ending again in open awareness. If I need to, I can shrink this practice down to an hour or less.

Along with daily practices, I delve into deepening my practice in retreat settings about 3-4 times a year. It is in these intensive periods that I find a noticeable acceleration of energetic and psychological evolutions within. I feel these are very potent environments for identifying and dispelling obstacles. Although I am a mother, I began going away from my daughter when she was 5 and could understand being without me for longer periods. I feel this has been important to model to her, allowing her to see that adults naturally take personal time for inner investigation, both daily and for longer periods, just as we need periods of time to bathe and sleep. As she grows into a young adult, I know I will have more availability for intensive retreating. For now, 1-2 week periods a few times a year are as long as I feel comfortable being away from her.

3. Do you think meditation is just as important as practising the asanas?

Overall, yes, if not more so.

I also think they are like equal branches on a healthy tree. Certainly, training and freeing the mind is the deepest frontier, but the mind is dependant on the Prana, and Prana is influenced by the body. When our body and energy are in equilibrium, we have more potential for an equanimity of mind with which to develop true knowledge of our Authentic Nature. I do feel that an integrated practice involves this 3 pronged understanding of the interdependence between the body, energy, and the heart/mind. The Tantric Indians and Tibetans have emphasized this in their practices for centuries and for me, this is vitally important as I am interested in inhabiting a fully embodied path to freedom.

However, a yogic path is not dependant on a fully functioning body, as inner yoga is possible whatever the state of the body. At whatever level of ability we have to move, we can utilize poses for added enhancement, but even more important to me is the possibility of having a free and beautiful mind.

4. You practice your own style of yoga by incorporating yoga with Buddhism. Can you tell us a little about this? Do you think practising Buddhism helps your yoga practice?

After many years of study about the nature of reality and my own inner doorways of freedom and suffering, I found the yogic path, one of personal experimentation and discovery.

Like many yoga enthusiasts, I am very interested in how life unfolds out of our perceptions and the way we circumvent access to clarity and compassion, compelled by ignorance.

I was elated to find these perennial themes being studied and practiced by modern day yogis, and finally felt I had come home to a spiritual community that was not based on theory or belief, but a verifiable personal and transformative experience.

Of course, the 'way in' has many roads, and finding the one or few that most closely match our constitution is very important. I am certainly interested in yogic vitality, but mostly in freeing my mind, regardless of where the teachings stem from.

After many years of practicing hatha yoga, pranayama, and shorter meditations, I felt ready to challenge myself with longer stillness practices.

The main ingredient I was looking for when learning to meditate was not only a path of concentration and absorption, but one which also directs awareness through insight practices into how we constellate a self and then suffer the defense and isolation of that self.

In tandem with my yogic practices, I have studied within the Vedantist schools of Jnana Yoga and Advaita Vedanta. Ramana Maharshi and Nisargadatta continue to be very influential in broadening my understanding. When I was truly interested in deepening my meditation discipline, I heard it was the Buddhist schools that gave this practice a high priority. The teachings of the Buddha Dharma are very explicit on the subject of the psychology of awakening and were closely aligned with my earlier psychological training,

while allowing the added (and very necessary) component of practice. I also observed a level of egoless presence in my teachers that made them feel both inspiring and available to me.

As with any spiritual tradition, the levels of development are vast and require years of in-depth study and practice, but personally I find no conflict between the paths of yoga and buddhism. The tools from both paths, explored sincerely, allow a deeper access into living from increasingly freer dimensions. Similarly I have been studying Taoism and Chinese medicine to enhance my understanding of how the meridians and emotions are affected by yoga postures. This has greatly enhanced my practice and understanding.

5. Have you ever found any postures hard or impossible to achieve, and was it just a case of practice makes perfect when you did master them?

Of course there are many poses I can not do!

I feel it is a damaging but widespread myth that ANYONE, given enough practice, will eventually accomplish all the poses. In studying anatomy over the years, particularly with Paul Grilley, who I learned about Yin Yoga from, I have come to understand how much we are all limited by the shape of the bones we are born with. Certainly there are a small percentage born with the capacity to accomplish amazing physical possibilities, which a yoga practice, gymnastics, or Cirque de Soleil brings out, and this is beautiful to witness.

But yoga as a path of awareness is much more about freeing our attachments to our limited self concepts and assumptions.

Asana practice can teach us how to fully inhabit this body while working skillfully within our limitations, enhancing our vitality and health. Obviously, through use, we render our bodies more useable, but I know how easily in this culture we can cling to physical ideals, succumbing to increased attachment to performance, breeding either self inflation or deflation respectively. This is a huge and rampant hindrance in the popular yoga culture and one each of us who are committed to a physical practice need to be alert to.

Personally, I have a pretty average range of motion both externally and internally, with slightly more agility in the latter. This allows me to enjoy the medium range of poses whether back bends or hip openers, with more natural ease in such poses as Supta Virasana, Upavista Konasana, and poses

where the femur turns more in than out. Conversely, extreme external rotation or extreme back bends, have always been more challenging.

Before I understood this, I would feel frustrated by my difficulty with foot behind the head poses or my inability to grab my ankles in wheel pose in 2nd series Ashtanga practice, regardless of continued diligent effort. Although I have certainly increased my natural range of motion through practicing these poses, I know I will never become extremely externally rotated, and no longer expect otherwise. I have learned that as soon as we fight against our tissues, creating emotional agitation and mental dissonance, we disrupt the very reharmonizing of our energy that an asana practice has the potential to do. I have found it is as important how we practice (our internal attitude) as it is which poses we are able to practice.

6. You are a mother as well as a yoga teacher. Do you think that studying yoga has influenced the way you are raising your daughter? And if so, how?

I had my daughter after about 8 years of a committed yoga practice. I am so thankful that I had these tools firmly established in me, not only to prepare me for the intense experience of a home birth, but in parenting as well. My commitment to a yogic life no doubt influenced my choices in having a drug free home birth, raising my daughter on organic vegetarian food and in choosing to homeschool her.

My yoga practice also helped me learn to metabolize strong sensations by focusing my concentration, breathing fully and consciously, while directing prana to difficult areas within. This training was particularly invaluable during the first 3 months of pregnancy when I had extreme morning sickness, and of course while giving birth, and during some of the difficult days of life with a newborn.

Meditating and living mindfully, with receptivity verses reactivity during challenging experiences, is a training. Intimate relationships with our mate and children can become a committed spiritual path where living yogically can include the complexities of our personal and worldly life.

I have found countless opportunities to witness how easy it is to fall into conditioned patterns and resort to parenting from an authoritarian or overly permissive place of disconnection, both damaging extremes for any child. The potential to recognize this, and quickly make amends when I react rather than respond, is now much greater and has allowed a continual intimacy to

flourish with my daughter. We do not need to be perfect for them, but being honest, communicative and loving, has immeasurable value.

A growing tolerance for uncomfortable inner states, and therefore a choice in responding skillfully, can be learned both in our yoga practice and as a parent. I am a better yoga teacher because I have parented for the last 12 years, and I am a better parent because of my continuous yoga practice. I wish all young women (and of course men) had the opportunity to learn about these dignifying practices that enhance well being and direct insight into our deeper natures before they take on the overwhelming responsibility of raising a conscious, loving human being.

7. What do you think are the most important qualities a teacher can have?

With regards to a yoga teacher, I would say compassion (towards oneself and others), solid, skillful training with a thorough digestion of the teachings and a talent for sharing these tools and insights with others. A sincere interest in learning from every circumstance in our life, dedication to a path of awareness that includes freeing the heart and mind (not just an asana practice), diligent self reflection with a strong radar for self deception, and a devotion to deepening one's personal practice not only daily, but through intensive periods of retreating, with continual influence from insightful teachers, mentors, and spiritual friends.

8. Out of everything you've achieved in your career, what stands out the most for you? What would you like to be remembered for?

I think what stands out for me is how grateful I feel to the many compassionate teachers and practitioners who have kept these teachings alive, while continuing to help the teachings evolve and stay pertinent in our personal experiences.

I have learned through yoga that life is a path within which greater depth and understanding can become living truths for us rather than abstract ideals. I am learning that freedom is a state of mind and although we can familiarize ourselves with these values during our "practice periods", the true test and training ground is within the way we live our moment to moment existence.

9. Is there anything else you'd like to say?

I hope we can continue to grow together within the yoga community, to constantly be aware of the crippling effects of yoga fundamentalism, while diminishing unnecessary intolerance between styles. I think we will then continue to expand into our larger communities (outside the yoga circles), thereby growing the potential to truly create enlightened societies.