

Yoga With Insight

A Profile of Sarah Powers

Andrea Miller talks with the well-known American yoga teacher about what has made her life meaningful.

Searching for meaning, Powers tells me, has been the driving force in her life; it has led her to where she is today.

Powers, now forty-six, is a yoga teacher who has developed her own approach to the practice. Her numerous articles and interviews have appeared in such publications as *Yoga Journal*, *Tricycle*, and *Yogi Times*. She has made two instructional dvds, *Yin and Vinyasa and insight Yoga*, and she has a new book, also called *insight Yoga*. In 2007 she co-founded *Metta Journeys*, an organization that offers yoga retreats to help women and children in developing countries, and in 2010 she plans to establish yoga institute, a teachers' training program.

Sarah Powers was born in 1962 in Arizona. When she was two years old, her upper-middle-class family moved to California, where she was raised with her two elder brothers and her younger sister. "We had freedom to explore," Powers says. "Our parents allowed us a lot of room to make our own choices."

But her parents were not very happy together and they separated when Powers was eleven. Her mother now felt free to explore who she was, which paralleled and complemented the future yogini's own adolescent experiences. "My mom was becoming inquisitive about the same time I was. We were just twenty-four years apart!" laughs Powers. "So my young years were full of being in Hollywood and Venice and exploring all kinds of people and attitudes—exploring what it means to live a life that feels connected and worthwhile. At that time—the early seventies—that was something everybody was exploring." The challenge for Powers was learning how to channel the question in wholesome, healthy ways.

"I wanted to push the boundaries of what was acceptable and expected," she says. "I was really interested in boys and psycho-tropic drugs, and I loved colorful scenarios. My more intellectual side started to be nourished in college."

Powers started out studying psychology, but she was unfulfilled by the approach taken by her professors; she wasn't interested, she says, in "trying to figure out how you can get a pigeon to peck at a light." Powers changed her major to English literature because writers, she felt, were constantly engaged in questioning what is meaningful. She fell in love with William Blake and, after that, she became obsessed with nineteenth-century writers who spoke about interconnectedness. But that's hardly a surprise.

Interconnection, integration, and synthesis, after all, are key concepts in her life and are today the hallmark of insight yoga, her yoga style, which weaves together taoism, yoga, and buddhism.

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“I now see how each lineage is a transparent map, which when placed on top of the others widens my ability to chart a course through my inner labyrinth,” writes Powers in *Insight Yoga*. “The various traditions act as guides rather than absolute authorities.” In our interview, she adds that her meditation practice doesn't simply enhance her yoga practice; to her, it is yoga practice. They are integral paths of self-discovery that are not separate.

As for the Taoist element in insight yoga, it is primarily Chinese medicine—the healing branch of the tradition.

“I've used western medicine for surgery and been very thankful that it was there,” Powers says. “but western medicine tends to work more with suppressing symptoms through the use of some kind of invasive agent, and Chinese medicine tends to have a more holistic view.”

According to traditional Chinese thought, everything in the universe, both organic and inorganic, is composed of a vital essence or energy called chi, and this chi flows through the human body along certain invisible pathways called meridians. For good health, chi, which moistens the joints and connects the interior and the exterior of the body, must have proper strength and flow. The concept of chi can be compared to the prana of buddhism and hinduism, and the concept of meridians to the nadis.

Powers has studied meridian theory with Dr. Hiroshi Motoyama and his student, yoga teacher Paul Grilley, and she has learned from them that there are three ways one can positively influence the flow of chi while practicing yoga: putting the body into particular shapes to pull and pressurize tissues; manipulating the breath through pranayama, yogic breathing; and focusing the mind on our movements.

She learned what is called yin yoga from Grilley. Yin and yang are the two ways that chi manifests. when we refer to something as yin, we mean it's cooler, less mobile, more hidden, and feminine. When we refer to something as yang, we mean it's warmer, more pliant, superficial, and masculine. yin and yang are relational terms. That is, neither exists in a vacuum, but one or the other is dominant at any given time. Yin yoga is a quiet practice that emphasizes holding poses for long periods in order to work with one's deep tissues—the bones and ligaments. Yang yoga is more active. It involves rhythmic movement and engaging the muscles.

Powers incorporates both yin yoga and yang yoga in her practice. Both are important, she believes; yin yoga helps us relax when we're under stress, and yang yoga invigorates us if we lead sedentary lives. Powers works with meridians when doing both yin and yang styles. When she was first studying Chinese medicine, she would look at diagrams showing where in the body the meridians begin and end, and how they flow. Then she'd practice a pose to try to feel which meridian was influenced—which aspect of her physical or emotional health. “It became a piecing together puzzle,” she says. In the foreword of *Insight Yoga*, Grilley writes, “Sarah employs taoist terms, buddhist terms, and Sanskrit terms, depending on which most clearly and succinctly describe the underlying ideas. It is a historical accident that Chinese Taoists elaborated certain energetic ideas better than others, that the Tibetan Buddhists elaborated subtler mental processes, and that the Sanskrit peoples elaborated deeper inner and outer cosmologies. All these systems describe aspects of reality that were most pertinent to them at the time of their creation.

“Sarah’s book,” Grilley writes, “is a yoga book. It is not merely taoist or buddhist or Sanskrit. It embodies what the term yoga has historically stood for—a system of practices that cultivates all levels of a human being.”

Sarah and Ty Powers met when she was working at a restaurant and he came in for breakfast. That led to a few dates, but, she says, “we were in different psychological spheres. I was eighteen and he was twenty-seven. I was about to move to boulder to go to college, whereas he was an executive at CBS television and a classical guitarist who collected wine.”

Powers went to boulder as planned. After that, she would occasionally clean out her wallet and find the crumpled paper she had with his number on it. But instead of throwing it away, she’d just shove it deeper down into the folds of her wallet. He was interesting, she thought. Maybe someday she’d want to phone him again. And that is exactly what she did a year and a half later when she moved back to Los Angeles so she could transfer to UCLA.

Little did Powers know that at the exact moment she called, he was on the couch breaking up with the woman he’d been seeing since Powers had left for college. When he picked up the phone and said, “yes, Sarah, I remember you,” his girlfriend jumped up and ran out of the house. Later that day, the girlfriend told him she’d had a dream he would end up with a Sarah.

“He was rude to me on the phone in deference to her,” Powers says. “He said, ‘OK, what’s your number?’ And, as I rattled it off, I thought, he doesn’t have a pen. He’ll never call back. I was embarrassed for calling.” Yet, three weeks later, he did phone. He had memorized the number. They met for lunch, and they’ve been together ever since. “I had a number of years to go in college,” Powers said, “and he was patient with me while I had to say no to social events because I was studying. Ty is enthusiastic without needing a reason, just the poignancy of being alive. He’s someone who is very inquisitive.

“Ty introduced me to opening the curtain and looking past what seems obvious. He had read a lot of metaphysical material. I’d say, how do you know that stuff is true? And he’d say, I don’t but I’m willing to question and discover for myself what’s true. Then he’d say, you might want to read this or that, and I’d start to explore. We had such juicy dialogues about the meaning of life.”

The couple wed when Powers was twenty-three and her mother was expecting the child of a younger man. “My mom,” quips Powers, “was the forty-seven-year-old, pregnant, unmarried mother-of-the-bride.” Although her father, didn’t attend the wedding, about five years after the wedding, father and daughter reconciled their differences, and now have a loving respect for each other. Powers’ mother was a Buddhist then, and now she has found a spiritual teacher from the Hindu tradition and has been studying with him for the past twelve years. “She spends most of her time with that practice,” Powers says. “She’s an ascetic older woman now.”

After the wedding, Powers began her masters in Transpersonal psychology. “The program was the synthesis of spiritual development with psychological healing and growth,” she says. “We were exposed to writers from all different traditions, including many who had integrated psychology with eastern practices. I read Jack Kornfield’s and Frances Vaughn’s work, and I felt they were so articulate about their own psychology—both the beautiful, insightful sides and the broken aspects. The psychological training they’d had in university gave them language and helped them help other people, but the practices forged the pathways.” On an intellectual level, this is when Powers became curious about Buddhist meditation and how it might help her to heal her own psychological wounds.

The masters program also exposed Powers to the mind-body connection. She was required to learn a physical discipline with spiritual roots, she chose yoga because she’d practiced it a few times, using a book her brother had given her. She assumed that, being young and athletic, yoga would come easily. Wrong—it was rigorous,

both mentally and physically. “I was brought down to my blood, sweat, and tears nature,” Powers says, “and halfway through I decided yoga wasn’t for me.” But savasana, the motionless “corpse pose” that concludes most yoga sessions, changed her mind. She says that during this “nap time” she experienced an unusual peace, which she pinpointed as an absence of longing.

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Was clarity with joy underneath, and she decided she had to come back to yoga—that it would be hard but hard didn’t mean bad. As she got deeper into the practice, Powers considered doing her thesis on how yoga might have different psychological effects on different people, and she was in the process of interviewing teachers when one asked why she had chosen this topic. She responded that it was to fulfill her program requirements, but she knew this was only the surface answer. Afterwards, she took the question deeper: Why do I really want to do this kind of study? How will it affect my practice and life?

Powers realized that she was trying to articulate the merits of spirituality so she’d be armed to discuss the matter with someone like her father—someone, she says, who was good at arguing. Powers called the school and said she wasn’t going to complete the program. “I really didn’t want to intellectualize my practice,” she says. “I wanted it to be more self-investigatory.”

So she dedicated herself to self-study, to exploring a wide range of traditions.

Now her crisis of meaning changed its flavor. No longer simply trying to define “meaningful,” she was asking what it felt like to embody it.

The first person Powers taught yoga to was her husband, and it is yoga that has enabled the couple to become body-centered, meaning they’ve made the body into an ally. “When we’re not body-centered, we act out from reactivity and we’re at the mercy of whatever habits we have for coping with discomfort,” Powers explains. “But when we have a body-centered practice, the body is our most intimate guide. Prior trauma that’s being reactivated doesn’t become another layer of submerged material we can’t deal with; rather it becomes an added doorway into the body. We ask, where am I feeling tension or stuckness and instead of assuming we shouldn’t be feeling what we’re feeling, we hold the dissonance.”

That said, a practice that’s only, or even mostly, body-based does have potential pitfalls. “There is a tendency,” Powers warns, “to do body practices to stay thin, have tight buns, or to get attention for doing certain postures—egocentric motivations stemming from not knowing oneself truly.” Yet yoga focused only on shape serves a purpose for a certain level of development, as it tends to eventually change the person doing it, even though they may or may not know they’re being changed.

“Coming through the doorway of the body,” she says, “people eventually realize they have a mind that needs attention and, coming through the doorway of the mind, they eventually realize they have a body that is going to be either an obstacle or a support. Both directions point to their opposite.”

As for her personal path of discovery, bringing together her metaphysical readings and yoga as a physical discipline seemed like an easier combination than sitting down and facing her own mind. “While doing asana,” she

says, “I was readying myself for meditation.” When she felt the time was right, Powers did a retreat with students of the Vipassana meditation teacher Goenka.

In the same way she’d been surprised by how difficult yoga was, Powers now had to come to grips with how difficult long meditation sessions were. Indeed, she found this first Goenka-style retreat one of the most challenging things she’d ever done, not because her mind was distracted—she’d expected that—but because the practice was so physically arduous. She realized that her yoga practice had been oriented around feeling comfortable. She’d find a pose and, as soon as it became uncomfortable, she’d move to the next. To sit for hours, without trying to improve the posture through movement or visualization was a whole different matter. And it was life-changing.

Powers did three more Goenka-style retreats; she did Vipassana retreats with Spirit rock teachers, and she went to Burma to do a retreat there. Eventually, she delved into Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. “My meditation practice continually helps me discover greater potential for seeing and listening in a way that’s more aligned with deeper truths, rather than my conditioning,” Powers says. “That seeing and listening informs every moment, so my yoga practice is much richer.”

While Powers was developing her practice, she and her husband were also raising their daughter, Imani Jade, who is now sixteen. “I wasn’t willing to spend too much time away from her,” Powers says. “Ty and I were home-schooling her, so we would relieve each other for short periods to go off on retreat.” One of the reasons the couple decided on home schooling was because, when Imani Jade was five, they started traveling in order to give yoga workshops—something they continue doing today throughout the United States, Asia, and Europe.

Until Imani Jade was fifteen, the family went everywhere together. In hotel rooms, trains, planes, and waiting rooms, they’d read and discuss. Then Imani Jade would write a paper. To allow her to develop her social skills, the family tried to spend one season a year at home in California. Imani Jade would take classes at junior college (starting at age twelve) or she’d be in a play, or take dance classes. With her education tailored to her pace and interests, Imani Jade whizzed through her elementary and secondary education, and is currently studying history and dance at a college in the New York area.

“Ty and I are all alone again, like we were before we had her,” Powers says, her voice carrying a hint of empty-nest syndrome. The couple has been together for twenty-seven years. They frequently co-teach yoga retreats, and Ty Powers is their manager.

“I’m curious,” I say, “about those juicy conversations you two have about meaning. What’s Ty’s take?”

“It’s constantly evolving,” Powers tells me. “Yet I’d say what’s meaningful to him is constantly broadening his capacity for inclusiveness. It’s having an uncompromising love and compassion for family—no matter how they are—and extending that love to the human family.”

“And what about you?” I ask. “What do you think makes life meaningful?”

“One of the reasons we’ve been together so long is that we’re aligned. For me, what’s meaningful is interconnectedness. Where do I feel split, whether it’s within me, in my psyche, or between me and an event or a person? What’s meaningful is the pain and the suffering of that, and seeing the healing.

“What’s meaningful,” Powers says, “is discovering a capacity for renewed freshness and continual insight.”

◆ For resources and further reading on Yoga and Buddhism, go to www.shambhalasun.com.