



## Toronto Body Mind

Toronto's yoga, meditation and wellness community

### Inspiring Instructors Part II: Queer and Trans Yoga

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As a teacher who offers classes specifically to the Queer and Trans communities, I have had some disheartening experiences and witnessed some students struggle to find a place for themselves in the yoga world. While some studio owners have turned classes away because they want classes they can offer "to everyone", others have "scooped" requests for me to teach to a LGBTQ group because they felt "anyone can teach Queer and Trans Yoga". And, sadly, I've taught students who have experienced homophobic and/or transphobic experiences at other classes. I know we can do better as a yoga community—to open our hearts and create more spaces that provide safety, understanding, and community building. Meet Jacoby Ballard, a yoga instructor and co-owner of a wellness centre in Brooklyn, New York, who is doing just that.

#### ***What led you to decide to offer yoga classes to the queer and trans communities?***

I came out as trans while training to be a teacher, and so yoga has always been a part of my gender. It's been a very spiritual process, to transition socially and medically, that it has really demanded that I know who I am. Though I found support through yoga in yamas and niyamas and through the warmth of my teachers, I also found a complete lack of understanding of the trans experience.

I wanted to offer a supportive environment that created safety for queer and trans students. Many trans guys have attended my classes simply because I see them for who they are without any veils of transphobia. Because I went through a medical transition, I know which modifications to make and how surgery affects the body.

The queer and trans communities are not very present in typical yoga studios for several reasons: because of the looks we get from other students; because of the lack of understanding around pronouns; because of the complicated experience within the body; and because our identities aren't often reflected in the yoga studio. I wanted a space for my community to explore the deep down stuff—the internalized oppression, the samskaras we hold—as well as a space to have fun and create community around self-care and self-growth.

#### ***Do you directly address your students' identities or experiences in your classes?***

It depends upon whether it's a LGBTQ class or one for the general community. In a Queer and Trans class, I absolutely address identities. In one case, a trans guy arrived at class after having been harassed on the subway. He was really shaken and I could see how it was becoming stored in his body. In the opening meditation, I talked about how important it is to have a space to let down our guards, to cry about the traumas, to let the body be complicated. We did a lot of gentle, restorative poses that class. We also did some partner work that involved looking at each others' eyes with compassion and tenderness. The students also adjusted each other in child's pose: a gentle pose that feels safe, as it resembles the fetal position.

The students share solidarity, much more in than my general classes. The classes are also frequently celebratory—whether because of the outrageous outfits that students wear, or because of the laughter during poses like Crane Pose that look pretty gay and fabulous.

***Which tools offered by yoga can help support our folks?***

The yamas are excellent. I talk about Satya: knowing who you are, and that your truth must come from your heart with courage. I talk about Ahimsa, and environments that provide safety, familiarity, and comfort in a world that often traumatizes us. And how we must practice Ahimsa ourselves, toward ourselves and our community, resisting urges to compare or divide; and toward a world that often doesn't provide space for us. We must offer our compassion for that narrow view.

I talk about Svadyaya—self study and self reflection—as a daily practice for queer folks who don't see ourselves reflected in the media, even yoga media. Svadyaya is an opportunity to know truths that our world often doesn't permit us the opportunity to explore. Asana is really useful in getting queer and trans folks into their bodies, safely and with understanding, to explore our conditioned tendencies and the way that trauma is stored in the body. Pranayama is a great tool to also understand bodily patterns and to learn how to be present in the moment. I encourage students, for instance, to deepen their breath when coming out to their families.

***Do you feel the broader yoga community supports your work in this area?***

I have found support at Third Root Community Health Center in Brooklyn, a worker-owned cooperative health center that I helped to found. The teachers at Third Root are invested in offering yoga to their own communities: survivors of domestic violence, people coming out of prison, people of color, veterans, etc. We strive at Third Root to have our teachers reflect those to whom we want to bring yoga. Likewise, at Kripalu, where I hold an Advanced Teacher certification, fellow students are eager to apply what I know about mastectomies from a trans perspective to their work with cancer survivors. They also understand that not everyone has the same access to yoga, and so Kripalu has given me Teach for Diversity grants for my work. I have begun offering teacher trainings to those who would like to be more inclusive, yet there are still barriers as it is mainly only studios that are explicitly radical who welcome this. I don't think the yoga community understands queer and trans identities in general, or the need to have specific classes. Many teachers don't understand what would be different about a Queer and Trans yoga class, or how to alter what they teach for this population. There is a lack of understanding about language, and about specific bodily needs due to medical or social transitions.

*For more information about Queer and Trans Yoga, please contact Jacoby at [jacoby.ballard@gmail.com](mailto:jacoby.ballard@gmail.com) (<mailto:jacoby.ballard%40gmail.com>).*

**References**

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