

ORIGINAL PLUMBING

CREATING A YOGA SPACE FOR ALL: Q&A WITH JACOBY BALLARD

by NICK on NOVEMBER 9, 2011

As some of you may know, I've been blogging a yoga column ([here](#) and [here](#)) for OP. For this series, I reached out to Jacoby Ballard, a yoga teacher whom I admire and respect for his dedication to bringing yoga into queer and trans community. He is the co-founder of [Third Root Community Health Center](#) in Brooklyn, where he is an herbalist, yoga teacher, organizer, and fundraiser. Check out this interview with him.

How did you first get into yoga? What keeps you going?

I started meditating my senior year of high school as a way to keep my head in the game—maintain presence—in basketball and soccer. I got into yoga because I needed to fulfill a 'wellness credit' in college. I took an amazing class with a 70-year-old woman named Lillian, who I will honor forever. Yoga changed her life, and she changed mine.

Continuing to practice, as well as to teach, is wanting to grow into a better person and love deeper. I can understand the trauma that's triggered in my body in many different situations, or I can remain present even when put in a precarious position (literally and figuratively), which yoga reveals again and again. Or if I can return to a posture or meditation that angers me, with more and more love, attention, and presence each time, then I am necessarily growing off the mat as well.

My students also certainly keep me returning, to teach and to practice. To be able to watch my students, of many different backgrounds, work through their own trauma on their path to joy and happiness, is a gift that I receive daily. It's not always easy to hold space for that, and that challenges me as a person and as a teacher. I have been teaching yoga for 11 years, and I never stop growing and gaining more skills.

I never really wanted to teach in a studio, where I didn't feel comfortable, welcome, and where no one else was visibly queer or political, where the community is mostly white, straight, and upper to



middle class. There are so many assumptions in the typical yoga studio that come out through the teachers' words that have triggered me as a trans, queer, working class survivor. Most teachers whose classes that I attend as a student say something homophobic, sexist, racist, or transphobic. I wanted to create a class where those experiences were understood and welcomed. Where liberation internally and externally were equally valued. Where community was built, and where there is sincere care for fellow students, regardless of their body, their gender, their race, their class privilege.

Queer and Trans Yoga at [Third Root Community Health Center](#), a worker-owned cooperative that I helped to found, is mostly a typical open-level yoga class. I would say that the differences is that gendered language is not used (men's bodies are like *this*, women's bodies are like *this*), there is more laughter and play and community feel, the students' clothing is more outrageous and fabulous, the students introduce themselves to each other and bow to each other at the end of class, and we do partner and group poses that build community. In terms of teaching the class, I really don't teach that differently than I do any other class, but most classes I try to make accessible to everyone who comes through the door. Not every teacher knows how to do that, especially for queer or trans people, or has that intention.

How do you focus classes around queer and trans people without fostering a sense of separation from other people?

I think queer people generally love to be around other queer people. So the sense of separation is not coming from my queer and trans students, but rather from straight people who see the class on the schedule and ask why there is a class specifically for that population.

I teach classes that are not Queer and Trans-specific, and my Queer and Trans students often show up for those classes as well.

What would you say the main benefits of yoga are for trans guys?

So many! The possibility of embodying your body fully, with its complexity and depth of many experiences. The possibility of noticing how and where anger arises in your body, and how to work with that energy without harming others. Bringing breath into the chest, which is often a site of trauma—physical, mental, and emotional. Finding a balance of strength and flexibility, and a balance between effort and surrender—all of which are rare for cisgendered men, and when trans guys are trying hard to pass and avoid harassment, surrender, adaptation, and flexibility can be forgotten. I think yoga builds those qualities of surrender, relaxation, compassion, and grounded joy that are not necessarily revered in our society's concepts of masculinity.

I've never practiced with a teacher who has awareness about a medical transition. What are some of the things you would address or pay attention to when working with someone after top surgery or starting hormones?

After having top surgery, I have my students wait a month before returning to their practice. I also have them be careful with any backbend or even raising their arms overhead, which would stretch the surgery site. I really encourage my students to be gentle and not to rush back into their practice as it was before surgery. It can

also help prepare for top surgery, or any kind of surgery, by bringing strength, balance, and awareness to the surgery site, where there will be some atrophy and numbness after surgery.

In terms of hormones, its more about engaging the other limbs of yoga (than the asana): breathing practices, the daily observances, ethical practices, meditation. The body is going through big changes and will have more physical strength, and I really guide my students to be aware of and compassionate with what is coming up emotionally and mentally as a result of their transition as a whole, as well as from the hormones that they are on.

Favorite pose: It changes daily! Handstand, and a restorative Supta Baddha Konasana with bolsters, blankets, blocks.



Favorite piece of yoga wisdom: There are so so many favorite pieces of wisdom from this ancient tradition, they fill my days! One that was offered by Sharon Salzberg is, consider everyone to be the Buddha. The guy on the subway picking his nose, your best friend who is going through a breakup, the woman hauling her groceries up flights of stairs. Considering everyone to be the Buddha really gives perspective. Another piece offered by my teacher, Jaya Devi Bhagavati, is 'so what?!' When you're frustrated about something, when you're holding on to an old hurt, when a friend is late to meet you for dinner—so what. What is holding onto that going to do for you? Will it make you happier?

Best place (literal or figurative) to practice: In a place that evokes joy. For me, I love practicing on top of mountains!

I also really love practicing when I am really sad, really angry, really upset. Because those emotions consume me, I really focus on my practice. I'm not looking at the guy next to me or my mind is not wandering away. I'm moving into those emotions, feeling them in my body. I've cried on the mat so many times, and am so grateful to the practice when I am so overwhelmed by emotions, because it lets me explore them in a heart-felt, embodied way.

Third Root prioritizes in serving those who may not feel comfortable in a 'typical' yoga class setting—people of color, survivors of abuse, abundant body people, veterans. The Queer and Trans Yoga class is a component of this larger ethos. Third Root also offers acupuncture, herbal medicine, an Herbal Education Program, and massage.

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