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KARMA YOGA

Jacoby Ballard: Personal Transformation + Healing Yoga

A yoga and Buddhism teacher reveals ways to transform your personal struggles into an opportunity for healing others.

SEANE CORN • MAR 23, 2015

A yoga and Buddhism teacher reveals ways to transform personal struggles into an opportunity for healing others.

This is the third in a yearlong series of interviews conducted by guest editor [Seane Corn](#), founder of the yoga service organization [Off the Mat. Into the World](#), each featuring a different leader in yoga service and social-justice work. Everyone profiled here will join Corn in teaching a workshop on yoga for social change at [Yoga Journal LIVE! in Estes Park, Colorado](#), September 27-30. This month, Corn interviews Jacoby Ballard, a trans yoga and Buddhism teacher and co-founder of the [Third Root Community Health Center](#) in Brooklyn.

Seane Corn: Tell me about your personal journey and what brought you to yoga and Buddhism.

Jacoby Ballard: I came into yoga as a jock [in college]. Luckily, my first teacher slowed me down and taught me about the [philosophy of yoga](#), and that hooked me. I was asked to [teach yoga](#) at the college, and one of my classes was for the school's administrators. That's when I fell in love with teaching, because the administrators brought their real life into the yoga classroom. They came to me and to yoga to heal and for resilience to make it through divorce, hysterectomies, suicides of a couple of their kids—some deep, hard, traumatic things. I got certified at [Kashi Atlanta Ashram](#) in 2004, and there was a LGBTIQQ [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer and Questioning] presence there. I was already out as queer. After my teacher training, I came out as trans as a result of immersing myself in yoga and the ashram. I went into yoga spaces and tried to be my full self, but I also met resistance, ignorance, and, sometimes, hostility. When I look back, I see it as transphobia. The yoga world is a reflection of the rest of the world, and so whatever is prevalent in our society shows up not only on our mats personally but in the space collectively.

See also [Jacoby Ballard on Power, Privilege and Practice](#)

SC:At present, how do you support the trans community and others who are typically underrepresented in the yoga studio?

JB: In 2008, I co-founded Third Root Community Health Center, a worker-owned cooperative. The six owners vary across race, size, disability, age, gender, and gender identity. We have offered various classes for specific communities—yoga for abundant bodies, queer and trans yoga, yoga for people of color, and yoga for survivors of sexual violence. Sometimes we need to just be around our own in order to heal and not face the injustice in the world. It is not about exclusion, but creating intentional space to heal.

I also try to show up at trainings and retreats as myself and know that my presence there enables other trans people's presence, as well as influencing others. I'm interested not in inclusion but in transformation, changing the whole game: giving a voice in leadership to yogis who are not often given the mic; giving support, guidance, and mentorship to emerging leaders from different communities so that they don't fail; and being in solidarity with one another so that all of us ultimately have access to happiness and the goals of all the teachings of yoga.

SC:What is the vision of the diversity training you offer to yoga teachers?

JB: The bigger vision of diversity training is to have all yoga teachers be trained as agents of social change and as change-makers. An immediate goal is to reduce harm that yoga teachers perpetuate out of ignorance, out of a lack of training, out of not having relationships with various communities. They may not know what hurts people or the language that honors them or respects them and their histories. Another goal is to model what alliance, courage, and honesty can look like between the facilitators, who are from different backgrounds and life experiences. Every day, yoga teachers have a pedestal to speak from—and that is an opportunity to truly honor all of humanity.

See also [Video: Off the Mat and Into the World](#)

SC:What is your personal experience with harm created by yoga teachers?

JB: One experience that includes healing is having been in a yoga classroom where the teacher was talking about the benefits of a squat and the contraindications for the pose. At first, he said the squat is really great for [pregnant people](#). I was so relieved he was not gendering pregnancy because I know lots of transmen who are and have been and will be pregnant. Then, the teacher said he meant women who are pregnant, and the whole room—200 students—started laughing at the notion of a pregnant man. I felt like the whole room was laughing at me and my community.

I stayed in the practice, and afterward, I approached the teacher and told him that I felt hurt by the comment and like I didn't belong in the room, and that when everyone was laughing, they didn't want me in the room either. Because of our shared practice and because of my tone, he was able to receive me well and understand what I said, and he started crying. He had harmed me, and yet we hugged. There was beautiful forgiveness in that moment. Teachers are not always that open to feedback about their language or adjustments.

See also [Tessa Hicks Peterson: Social Justice, Yoga + Awareness of Inequalities](#)

SC: Can you give examples of supportive rather than oppressive techniques for teachers?

JB: I ask people's permission to [touch their bodies](#). In [Child's Pose](#), I ask them to wave a hand if they don't want to be touched. Also, someone who doesn't want to be touched won't necessarily raise a hand, so I have to be aware of their body language and their breath. When I'm first touching someone, I try to come into their sphere [of vision]. I'm not coming from the back and surprising them; I try to make my presence known in some kind of vocal way. Then I watch their breath because one of the signs of trauma is holding the breath or having a heavy breath.

SC:What have you learned in doing social-justice work at Third Root?

JB: I've learned to keep at it and to not give up just because things get hard. Out of commitment to the work and commitment to each other, we have to keep coming back to practices of solidarity and alliance, introspection and awareness.

SC: How has this helped your own yoga, your own healing, and your own experiences as a man in the world?

JB: I've learned to stay with my practice, and that my practice is the most grounding thing I have. It exists everywhere that I exist, and I take refuge there through all the sorrows and joys in my life.