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Job loss, foreclosures, threats of terrorism and life's countless challenges can disrupt anyone's inner peace. For most men, the stress can be too hard to handle. Former Zen Buddhist monk, yoga teacher and founder of Men's Yoga Tribe, Jonathan Bowra, sees a way out. We spoke with him in a recent interview.



An
Interview
with
Jonathan
Bowra

By
Kwami E. Nyamidie

Mindful Men's Yoga Practice

Kwami: You were teaching yoga before coming to Seattle.

Jonathan: Yes, I've taught yoga in Germany, Hong Kong, Korea and Turkey. I've run yoga workshops in Boston, San Francisco, Santa Monica, and New York.

Kwami: How did you get into yoga?

Jonathan: In the early 1980s I was a member of Walkabout Dance Studio, a contact improvisation dance collective in San Francisco, where I became interested in yoga and started practicing.

Kwami: And Zen Buddhism?

Jonathan: When I was 19, I saw an ad at the studio where I was living about a retreat that the Korean Zen Master Seung Sahn was organizing. I went. The rest is history.

Kwami: How so?

Jonathan: The master talked about the four noble truths. First, life is suffering. Second, the cause of suffering is within us. Third, suffering can cease. And fourth, a path leads us out of suffering. I was going through much suffering then, so his words touched me.

Kwami: You were going through a great deal of pain?

Jonathan: Yes. The youngest of 12 children, I suffered as a child. My mother, MaryAnn Bowra, an Irish American, was married to Lowell Cantrell, a Pentecostal minister with whom she had seven children before he died of polio. She then married my father, David Bowra, an African-American Pentecostal minister. His wife, with whom he had had three children,

had died. They had two more kids, my sister and me.

We were very poor and lived on a farm in New Hampshire in a very strict Christian household. For some unknown reason, my parents converted to Judaism when I turned six. When I was 10, my mother divorced my father. We moved from the farm in Northwood, N. H., to Redlands, California. My mother had home-schooled us. Now I found myself in public school with many unfamiliar kids. Instead of the big family where my siblings raised me, now it was only my sister – who now had new friends – and my mother, who had to work. Lonely and feeling abandoned, I got into drugs and alcohol by age 11, until I was 19.

Kwami: How did Zen help you?

Jonathan: Zen Master Seung Sahn said that suffering comes from karma. "Look within yourself for the cause of your misery," he said. I moved from the dance studio and lived at the Zen center for more than eight years. I went to Korea and took novice monk vows but left four years later although I continued my Zen and yoga practices.

Kwami: What does your Zen practice consist of?

Jonathan: I do a daily practice of bowing meditation, sitting meditation and sometimes chanting meditation. I also do meditation retreats that last three, 30 or 90 days.

Kwami: The purpose of such long meditations?

Jonathan: These retreats present

few distractions. I become aware of my thinking keeping me from being present. I sit for 10 hours a day in 30-minute segments with 10-minute silent walking meditations in between, time for meals and short breaks, simple food and sparse accommodation.

The 90-day meditations, called Kyol Che, "tight dharma" in Korean, are like entering a karmic pressure cooker. It starts to boil, bubble and foam. You experience what the teacher meant when he said "trouble comes from you." When you see that most of your

thinking is unreal, it is possible to let go of the causes of hatred and suffering.

Sitting with yourself without distractions can be frightening, like going into a lion's den. You realize that not only you, but everyone is going through the same thing.

These meditations help me understand who I truly am, not who I think I am, and I see the true nature of my suffering as I cultivate compassion for myself and others.

Kwami: What was the most important thing Zen Master Seung Sahn taught you?

Jonathan: He said, "Only go straight. Don't know." I should pay attention to whatever I am doing and "Do it 100%." He said a part of our mind functions before thinking. That "before thinking mind" is our "true self."

Kwami: How did you get into teaching yoga for men?

Jonathan: As I developed my own yoga practice, I noticed how much this ancient practice had to offer. Yoga can make you strong and flexible, bring your body out of disease into balance and relieve your aches and pains.

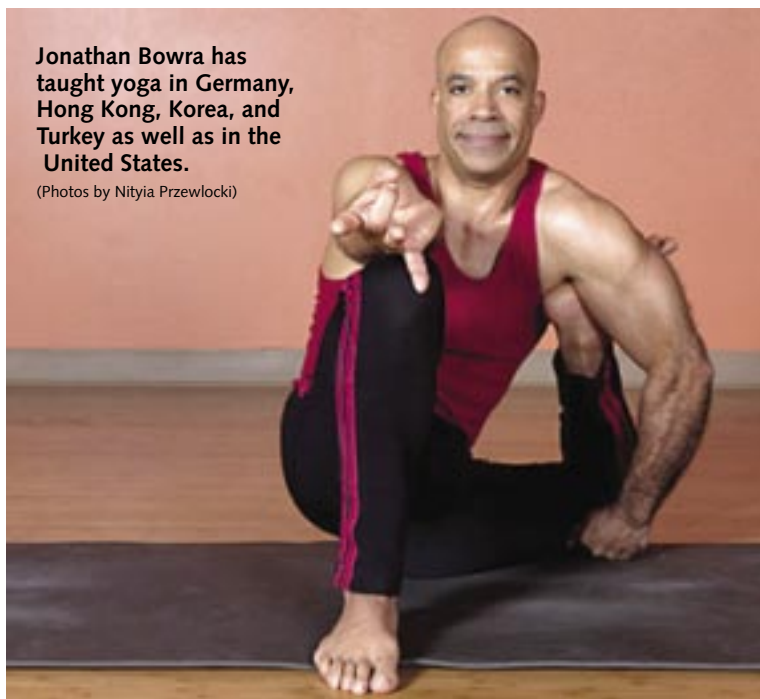
"Where were all the men?" I discovered that fewer men attended yoga classes than women and that men do better in yoga when they practice without women. The participants are more relaxed, less distracted, less worried about performance and appearance. This opens them to deeper levels of awareness.

Kwami: How do you add Zen wisdom to your yoga practice?

Jonathan: Zen, as the bare basics, forces you to answer the question: "What are you doing right in this moment?" I teach my students to pay attention and know that yoga is not just an exercise but who they are. Everything that you've done, all your ideas, hopes, dreams, fears and prejudices confront you on the yoga mat. People sometimes think in yoga, "I can't do that" or "If I try hard enough I can do that."

Jonathan Bowra has taught yoga in Germany, Hong Kong, Korea, and Turkey as well as in the United States.

(Photos by Nityia Przewlocki)



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