

Reality Sandwich Blog
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Sleeper agents, holy viruses and you.
or,
How I came to found my own yoga academy.

As a person deeply identified with artists and their path, its become clear that the spark which led to founding Sarva Yoga Academy sprang from my frustration of watching too many friends jettison their artistic goals to become yoga teachers, only to later become despondent when their hand to mouth existence hustling as a teacher left them exhausted and wondering what their lives be might like if they hadn't switched hats. Granted, the pressure to jump ship and get a 'real job' seems to come from the outside as well. Ironically, its difficult to be an artist in a culture that's addicted to constant entertainment, worships entertainers, and remains sufficiently amnesic to their pedastalizing of actors and rockstars to ridicule those who've not commercially 'made it' yet.

My involvement with guitar wasn't a choice. One day I didn't care about it, the next, I picked one up and just *understood*. I glimpsed infinite possibilities and that was my first samadhi; like getting hit by lightning. In the euphoric aftermath of that sudden flash, I saw it would be a life long path.

Teaching yoga does scratch a performer's itch to be

onstage and the center of attention. To lead a group of trusting souls through a sequence of postures and meditative instructions is a massive creative outlet! The challenge of clearly communicating to the students what the immediate and ultimate goals of the practice are through poetic metaphors, humor and the charismatic fearlessness to 'go first' is a sweet space which we teachers abide in at the end of a session...and its just as satisfying as audience applause. I love it.

Another reason for founding Sarva Yoga Academy stems from having met people who appeared to become nervous when hearing the word 'yoga' yet were clearly masters of entering into states of transcendence. For example, at a Christmas party last year I met a champion skier who was nursing her right knee back to health {it was sixty percent there} and she was still out performing every one else on the mountain. Later I found out she's also a world renowned rock climber. We started talking about her adventures when my big mouthed friend Chris butted in and shared with her that I taught yoga classes and dharma in the city. I felt a wall go up and after a brief awkward moment, she said that she knew nothing about yoga. I quickly assessed my options for interpreting her response: at face value it sounded like she thought 'yoga' meant 'Indian calisthenics' and had no desire to set foot on a rectangular piece of plastic to try and put her foot behind her head; or, was she a master of yoga who was reminding me that knowledge was not the same as wisdom? Since there's really no way of knowing, I chose the second, more exciting interpretation.

We quickly came to the agreement that regardless of their expression, when a practitioner of a discipline spends years honing their skills to eventually become capable of pushing themselves to the edge, they all share a profound high of being out of their own way and the rush of a transcendent state pouring through them. This could be called a 'yogic state', and has many other names: Athletes enter 'the zone', musicians play 'in the pocket', poets and painters wait for the 'Muse', drug enthusiasts 'trip out', meditators call it 'samadhi', Christians enter into 'the grace of God', warriors call it 'being impeccable' and business people seek 'peak performance'. Same state, different names, one problem...they don't necessarily know why or how to stay there! Sudden discovery depends on gradual development and, as children when we lack confidence in new situations, adults spout to us their ham-fisted advice to 'be ourselves' which only increases paranoia by exposing the fact that we can't even do that! As well, yoga teachers breathily advise students to 'just be' in all moments, and I don't think they actually realize what a high stage that is and that aspiring yogini/yogis require a reliable method to reach it.

As a child my first introduction to dharma was through my dad sharing with me the ideas of 'Fourth Way' or, 'Gurdjieffian work'. I was around ten years old {the same time I fell in love with guitar} and was having so much anxiety and anger in school that it was clearly causing stress and tension that a healthy child should be free off. My dad noticed how I was blocking myself from this state

of being at ease and offered a flexible strategy to hit the moving target of continual transcendence. I remember I was standing at the top of the stairs in our house when he shared with me the truth of the lack of my 'I-ness' by pointing out that 'I' was an idea associated with my name, but in reality did not exist. 'I' was actually a legion of sub personas fighting for control of 'Michael' like a hundred actors on a stage fighting for a single microphone. Like a swarm of birds moving as one super-organism, under investigation, 'I' also dissolved into something quite alien to my first impression. Even though this was way over my head at the time, it was far more helpful than the standard shitty advice to 'just be yourself' and I accredit it to planting the seed for my attraction to the spiritual path. Shortly after our conversation, I began devouring books on Mr. Gurdjieff's methods, witchcraft and astral projection. I remember practicing dissolution as I fell asleep...by visualizing my insides emptying out into a hollow shell then passing an outer ring of sparks slowly up from my feet to the top of my head and back, a visceral state of full/solid/voidness came over me. Then the lucid dreaming started. My usual stress induced nightmare of plummeting into a cave-like abyss could shock me into awareness of a subtle dream body that if I became present with it, would allow me to float down to earth or even fly. However, at that time I had no words to frame repeated experiences of non-dual absorption and only received shrugs from my parents when I asked them what was going on.

In the past seven years have I met Teachers who could

not only confirm the validity of this experience within Tibetan buddhist and Indian yogic scriptures, but have also taught me how to stabilize it and use it as a path to liberation. Since all moments are potential windows for entering this pure being state of transcending I chose the sanskrit word 'Sarva' for the academy because its means 'all, entire, whole and complete'. 'Sarva' is a synonym for 'astanga yoga' which is Master Patanjali's eight step recipe for 'all-day' yoga. They prescribe avoiding harming others, making best use of your time and resources, physical disciplines, pranic regulation/redirection, sensory withdrawal, and increasingly effortless levels of mental focus/absorption. It demands you get your act together first before you try to teach others anything. As well, we integrate the Gurdjieffian work {the Fourth way} because it incorporates the three ancient methods of physical mastery, emotional devotion, and intellectual evolution into a practice within life where the personality is transcended and entire solutions are revealed in a single instant. Sarva Yoga Academy's curriculum braids together Tibetan, Indian and Fourth Way lineages into a cocktail for real time recovery of this yogic state {or whatever you'd like to call it} in all twenty four hours of a day, and to my knowledge this has never been done before.

On his last breath, Lord Buddha said 'Be a light unto yourself' as a warning against having blind faith in what he testified was true about the nature of reality and the cessation of suffering. He knew that parroting his instructions would not yield authentic realizations in his students and worse, impersonating him would destroy his good works in this world. Yet the irony is that we must bind ourselves to a teacher's lineage to become free, and we must carefully vet the one(s) with whom we intend to entrust our dharma mind. Agnostic, skeptical, open-minded, earnest and hard working are ideal qualities in a student looking to receive teachings from a pure lineage, and they must make it come alive and validated by testing it against their life experience. Just as they would kick the tires and scope the mileage before buying a used car!

A student empowers their teacher to teach them just as much as they have the power to deny them. We become like our teacher because the desire to 'grow up and evolve' is molded by their guidance and presence. The simple proof that your teacher is a reflection of the very best aspects of yourself is that *not everyone sees them as you do*, and with enough time spent with them, they will shift and become more and more mirror-like. This relationship is living, dynamic and depends upon the

student to keep it functioning! The danger lies in pedestalizing a teacher/path and then clinging to it as the only valid way.

Rather than celebrating the universality of this magnificently blissful and spacious experience tragically, humans have repeatedly persecuted and killed each to uphold that their label/path is 'the true one' and that they alone are 'chosen to ascend'. This is the sin of making a graven image. Sin means to 'miss the mark'; like an archer with glaucoma. 'A graven image' is a fixed mental image--a story, carved into the neural pathways. Its what Joseph Campbell referred to as 'eating the menu'. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche calls it 'presenting your credentials'. Our personality 'I' so badly wants to take credit for what happened in the brilliance of that mind blowing Experience that it makes up a story to tell itself so that it can be relived. But that story isn't what happened! Its a subjective blurring that cordons off the holiness of that precious moment into a memory which will most likely be cast like a pearl before the denizens of the next dinner party or worse, one sees themselves as superior to everyone else who 'just doesn't get it'. The unconscious bait and switch of communing with Reality beyond all words to describe, for a memory/narrative becomes a habit which is 'engraved' into the synaptic patterns of a soon to be disappointed, nostalgic and fundamentalist sucker. Its as ignorant as thinking your reflection is actually *in* the mirror.

The yoga I'm interested in teaching students is to perceive

this mirror-like or, stainless nature to all objects. Yoga/union means profound equilibrium has set in. Equilibrium that makes struggle untenable. Call it interdependence. Like a dreamer who has awakened inside a dream still sees people and places but knows beyond all doubt that its all made of their mind. With dedicated training in unerring wisdom, one may begin to stop being fooled by their instincts telling them to struggle/dominate their environment and finally perceive the appearances of the sensual world as a mirror/echo. First through logic, then non-conceptual glimpses, leading to the uncontrived sustained direct perception. Its the vision that reveals *why* compassion, reverence and love are the only sane attitudes towards others!

I also like to remind students that there is a *reason* their window of relief from stress and tension will close in the most stealthy and insidious way shortly after the ordeal of asana practice is over. Even the smallest movement of mind will block this holy communion with ultimate reality, and when this view is lost, our physical bodies become stressed out and age because our minds are constantly making a profound albeit subtle mistake about its relationship to the world.

Is it a teacher's kindness to *not* ask if its worth going through the ordeal of asana classes again and again and again if the students never see the mistake their mind is constantly making? Is it sane to be an hour and a half older and out twenty two dollars [\$2 for your mat, thank you] only to become addicted to a practice that was never

intended to be 'an end'?

I've seen it countless times in students in yoga classes and succumbed to it many times myself. Ignorance. Desire. Aversion. You swear that the regularity of the practice and the right teacher playing an ideal soundtrack is the reason for your breakthrough, and instead you tear a hamstring. What happened? It was going so well...I was breathing my exhales all the way out and everything! We think the quality of efficacy lies within those ideal conditions and then...let down. We are no different than a drug addict who rushes back to the pipe for another epic escape and slips into an overdose. A wise person starts asking penetrating questions at this point. In Buddhist terms, this is renunciation moment. A window of shock has momentarily opened to let go of exaggerated, self-existent views which cause us to feel as Alan Watts says, 'alone and afraid in a world we never made.'

So how do we avoid palliatively switching professions, alienating ourselves from others, and become firmly established in a life of awestruck transcendence? If you've read this far, you obviously feel this is not too much to ask! This brings me to the principal reason for opening Sarva Yoga Academy: the authentic lineage instructions I've received from my teachers are so clear, effective and applicable to daily life, I could no longer stand by and not share it with the students who'd been coming to study with me in yoga classes for the past fifteen years. I felt like I was teasing people trying to squeeze a complete picture in fifteen minute dharma

talks. Frankly, I see a greater speed in 'saving the world' from the ignorance of humans by educating those students who have no interest in becoming yoga instructors yet long to integrate the deeper teachings of yoga to their personal and professional lives. They are like sleeper cells...carriers of a holy virus who, heart by heart causally spread seeds of sanity, abundance and love in this world. I also want to educate and support yoga teachers who can and will actually teach yoga, which is far beyond teaching postures.

Sarva Yoga Academy completed its first seven month term this past May {on the Buddha's birthday}and graduated fourteen 'Sarvies', as they like to call themselves. We will begin a second term on October 7th and are now accepting applications for 2011-2012 term which will be held in Manhattan.

Q: What is the Fourth Way?

A: 'The Fourth Way, or 'the Work' is a spiritual tradition. Its a way of life. Its a spiritual practice that seems to be the foundation of all the major religions. In other words you can find parallel teachings in each of the major religions that are already formulated in the Fourth Way as a ground work. However the Fourth Way as we know it today, was not formulated until G.I. Gurdjieff brought the Work to the west in 1914. Prior to that, the Work/Fourth Way was kept very secret and taught only in esoteric schools and monasteries. So basically it is practice that enables certain people who are in the possession of what is called the magnetic center or, ability to attract teachings to practice a

spiritual life while staying in their regular, ordinary circumstances of life. There is no need for them to go into seclusion there is no need for them to renounce the world as they know it, to renounce their families, their jobs...they can practice while staying in life. That's why its called the Fourth Way. The first traditional three ways of practice are the way of the fakir: the way of the physical body, overcoming physical body and its desires. The second way is the way of the monk, or overcoming the way of the emotions, mastering one's emotions. The third way is the way of the yogi, the way of mastering the mind. And the fourth way is the way in which all these three components are taken together and practiced in unison at the same time. Hence the Fourth Way yields fast results and it can be compared to the Buddhist tantric practice in that way.'