

KUNDALINI RISING

BY SHAZIA OMAR

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Tete-a-tete with James 'Fish' Gill

I recently had the pleasure of meeting Fish in Sri Lanka. His approach to yoga as a form of healing and therapy was gentle and inspiring. The following is a takeaway from that meeting.

How did you get interested in yoga?

I first started learning in a small country town in the south coast of Western Australia. It was in the forest. And then, I fell out of the habit of yoga for 13 years.

I came back to it again later when I fell deeply in love with a wonderful yoga teacher. After a painful separation and a suffocating feeling of loss, yoga was part of my healing.

I now use yoga to help others cope with their suffering, sorrow, and aspects of their lives that do not seem to fit.

Although I have taught yoga for less than three years, I have worked as a facilitator of transformative programmes for many years. I create space for groups of people to relate more honestly, openly, and compassionately to themselves and to each other through their stories.

I share stories about my own vulnerabilities, my own life, things I could not see; where shame, sorrow, frustration, and loss hide in my life. I like to look there, because although sorrow, shame, disappointment, and discomfort are painful, they are amazing opportunities to be, as Pema Chödrön (noted American Tibetan Buddhist) would say, 'broken open.'

Where did you learn yoga? What kind of yoga do you teach and where?

I did my 350-hour teacher training in Perth. It was vinyasa, restorative yoga and yin yoga. I also teach meditation.

I myself do not really understand the distinctions people make between the various styles of yoga. Some have very clear concepts, while others have rigid ideas of what is what.

For me, it all blends together. I guess if I

had to try to define these styles, I would say that restorative yoga creates an experience of being held and breathed, so the parasympathetic nervous system (our rest and digest response) can switch on and the body and mind can rest and renew.

Yin is about finding a minimum edge, staying with that edge, and finding stillness. Vinyasa is an intentional creative flow, tied to the breath and focusing on specific areas of the body.

I teach yoga at two studios in Perth, Western Australia, in Gili Air (one of the Gili Islands of Indonesia), and in Sri Lanka.

In what ways has yoga benefited you?

I think that understanding the yogic teaching of 'santosha' has created peace in my life. Once upon a time, I would have interpreted santosha to mean happiness, but when I started to study it, happiness was elusive to me. I felt broken and lost, to be honest. I had such a depth of sorrow in my life that I felt I was drowning, so aspiring towards happiness felt far away.

Then, I got to know the term santosha as contentment; less about being happy and more about making space for the whole contents (contentment).

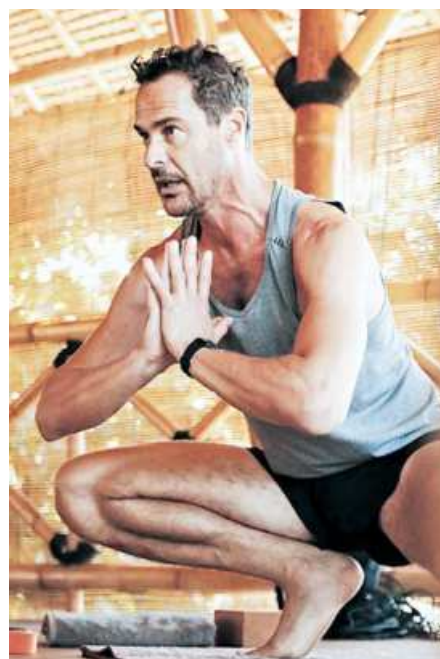
Yoga for me has become a practice of growing big enough so that all the joy and sorrow in my life can rest within me and there is no argument. I am now spacious enough to let it all belong, to let it all rest. That to me brings contentment and peace. My shame, my joy, my anger, my disappointment; they are all guests around my dinner table. There's enough space for them all.

Yoga leads me and the people around me towards liberation. It allows me and the people that I love be more intimately connected to the complexities of ourselves; not the suffering of clinging to joys and pushing away sorrows but the contentment of being a whole container. Even in sorrow

and shame, when you look deeper, past the discomfort, there is richness, even beauty.

Yoga expands my ability to stay with discomfort. Otherwise, I would just want to run away. It gives me ground in the groundlessness of life.

And everything in life is shifting. When we look closely, stability is just an illusion, everything is on the move. I mean everything. All joy is coming and leaving, all sorrow is coming and leaving, all the time. To many of us, this can be terrifying. That's why people try to build solid lives, buy land,



insure everything and make promises in relationships; to feel like everything will be ok. But while we do this, we resist the transient nature of everything.

Describe a typical day in your life?

A few weeks ago, I woke up in the morning, packed a car with camping gear,

lay my swag down in the bush, built a fire, climbed a mountain, watched a sunset, ate two avocados with a spoon and watched the stars.

As I was falling asleep, I realised, this is my practice. Whether it's the bush or the ocean, nature reminds me, everything is OK. So, my mornings often find me sitting, looking at the ocean, and from there I feel like meditating, inspired by nature.

I love my coffee. Sometimes, I will listen to music, or a podcast. Then I will go for a walk on a beach and collect pieces of glass. I feel like I'm collecting stories from travellers because each bottle has a story behind it — How did the bottle break? Was it a celebration, was it a tragedy? Then I will get on a mat and do some yoga. Then I will do some work in the middle of the day, writing or developing ideas around the retreats I run.

I will have some time with my guitar. I will work on some songs. I will try to eat well, although I do get drawn towards certain junk food. There will be multiple dogs throughout the day. I have a dog obsession. Some dogs I know. Some dogs I don't know. I have to spend some time with dogs. I have a series of dogs I consider to be mine.

What advice do you have for someone who has never tried yoga?

I teach a lot of beginners. Some of the classes are specifically aimed at men who have never done yoga before because I am very aware of the feminisation of yoga back in Australia. Why — maybe because yoga is seen as introspective — a work in rather than work out. In the modern world, this draws women rather than men because men have had generations of not looking inward in order to be productive in

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