



anarchy of yoga

With a background in psychology & a dedication to yoga tradition, Michael Stone is poised to become an important voice in yoga.

An interview by Christopher McCann



kristin sjaarda

Michael Stone and I walk through his backyard toward the garage he has converted into a small yoga studio, Centre of Gravity, in the Toronto neighborhood of Parkdale. We are carrying cups of peppermint tea he prepared just before my arrival, and the yard is filled with fresh sunlight, the autumn morning air cool and crisp. Around us there is no sound of traffic on a busy street, no bustle of people coming in and out of a daily round of classes. There is just the sound of the birds, the wind in the leafy trees, neighborhood kids riding their bikes to school.

Opening the door to the garage, I see two meditation cushions facing each other for us to sit on. At Centre of Gravity, yoga practice is

community-based and intimate. Everyone is welcome to participate and no one is turned away for lack of funds. People come to practice together without institutional structures. Here, Michael told me, we have stepped outside of the world of lineages. “I feel a personal responsibility to make sure to have a relationship with the student that is deep enough so I can understand if that student’s practice is working or not. The product of this is intimacy.”

Michael is a yoga and meditation teacher, psychotherapist and author of the new book, *The Inner Tradition of Yoga* (Shambhala, 2008). He has studied psychology, psychoanalysis, comparative religion, Sanskrit and Indian philosophy. Teaching yoga in the tradition of Krishnamacharya, he has also practiced with Richard Freeman and Sri K. Pattabhi Jois. Lately, he has turned his attention toward lecturing and writing, with two more books, *Yoga for a World out of Balance: Teachings on Ethics and Social Action* and *Yoga and Buddhism: An Ongoing Dialogue*, to be published next year.

By remembering the ancient tradition of yoga and Buddhism and relating them to Western psychology, Michael voices this wisdom in an accessible way, leaving the original integrity of the traditions intact.

Chris McCann When did you begin to see the relationship between your work in psychology and yoga?

Michael Stone I first encountered yoga through an uncle of mine who was schizophrenic and lived in a mental institution. He was really interested in Indian philosophy. He loved the Beatles and because they were studying with Maharishi Mahesh, he was exposed to the teachings of non-duality. When I was a kid, I would go hang out with him. He was like my confidante. They were all schizophrenics there, who supposedly had no social skills, and yet they would get together, share cigarettes, and sit in a room listening to the Beatles’ White Album. Those were semi-mystical experiences for a third-grader, and they also erased the boundary for me between psychology and spirituality.

CM So how do these two systems intersect, and how do they diverge?

MS The essence of psychological change is waking up to a world that doesn’t pivot around self-image. By definition, spirituality is waking up to

something greater than the stories we tell about ourselves and others and the world.

But my real interest in exploring Indian philosophy, Buddhism, yoga and Western psychology is not so much how they fit together, but how they don't fit together. Stephen Batchelor calls this "the anarchy of the gaps." Between the gaps of systems there is something fertile. Whenever you create a system, something gets left out. And so when two systems come together all those left-out pieces come out of the shadows because one system points out the shadow of another system. That's why it is really good to study with different systems and different teachers, because it will always point out your shadows.

I think yoga and Buddhism are doing this for Western psychology right now. But the danger is that Western psychologists are primarily interested in the parts of the Buddha's teaching and the parts of yoga that reinforce their worldview. The gap makes us uncomfortable. But I think yoga has always existed in these gaps.

CM What is the anarchy of the gaps in this relationship?

MS I think it has to do with the goals of each system. I think Western psychology has been unclear of its goal. If you ask a group of two hundred therapists, which I have done, what the goal of therapy is, they give you many, many different responses.

But Patanjali, for example, is very clear about the goal of yoga, which is to see through the illusion of self. To see through the inherent emptiness of self-image. And that it's not enough for us just to rework our understanding of our problems.

Most of our approaches to our psychological symptoms are based on the assumption that if you go back into the past, somewhere in your personal memory, you will be able to find the root of your present problem. Of course, when you go back into the past, you're going to find a good story. There is an assumption that the story will have such explanatory power that it will make the symptom go away in the present.

Western psychotherapy is caught in the delusion that our problems are primarily derived from memories in our personal past. So we go looking

to the storehouse of memory in our personal past to heal our wounds in the present. Yoga disagrees.

I've seen a lot of people who have done so much therapy they can talk about their problems from a Freudian perspective, a Jungian perspective, a feminist perspective, and so on. But yet, even though they know about their problems, they still don't know how to let them go.

They don't know how to work with them because what they are missing is the present experience. When a symptom arises in present experience, it's in present experience; it's not in the past.

CM What perspective does yoga offer?

MS Yoga is suggesting several things. It is suggesting that the past is fictional. When you talk about your past, you are generating fiction that gives you a sense of self. But we don't see that as just a narrative, as just a story, a chapter in the great anthology that we call me and mine. We identify with our problems that serve to create a sense of self.

What yoga is getting at is that what causes our suffering is not the symptom, but the fact that we create and reinforce a sense of self that relates to that symptom. Health, or liberation, or freedom from the yoga perspective, is seeing through the mechanism in the mind that always superimposes a self on everything.

In Western psychology we call this the ego, which for Freud and Jung is that which mediates between conscious and unconscious, personal and social. It is considered the healthy centre of the personality. But in yoga, it is considered *aklesha*, or an affliction, and in Sanskrit it is called the *ahamkara*, the I-maker. It's this part of the mind that wants to put everything we experience into a story that we call I, me, and mine.

CM What does this mean for the asana practitioner?

MS All yoga postures are designed to create new patterns of sensation in the body that affect the nervous system and the mind, in such a way that we're invited to enter into these patterns of sensation as a meditative exercise. But what happens is, the foot behind the head pattern, or the backbend pattern, or the forward bend pattern gives rise

to feelings that are uncomfortable, so we do everything we can to stay out of the internal form of the yoga posture, because it challenges the mind.

Our mind is filled with preferences of what feelings you like and what feelings you don't like. The yoga postures, when done well, are designed to push and pull on you like this. But what they are pushing and pulling on are your stories about yourself, and your stories about the body, and your memories, and very deep and old emotions.

What happens when you enter into the yoga pose with steadiness and ease is that your effort relaxes, and the mind softens. Instead of saying, There is me and my leg, there is just leg, different rotations in the bones, feelings in the muscles, and that just becomes energy. The energy does not belong to me or mine—suddenly the energy is just the natural world expressing itself as your leg. And then, as Patanjali says, the body and universe are indivisible.

CM Let's introduce memory into this. What role does it play?

MS Everything we experience is filtered through the sense organs and the mind, which are always biased because they are patterned. The word for this in Sanskrit is *samskara*. The technical definition of *samskara* is the psychological, physiological and cultural grooves in the mind, the body and the culture.

Whenever you experience something, it gets filtered through the *samskaras*, and so the heart of yoga is the dropping of these deep patterns.

It is not enough just to work with your personal, or ancestral memory. You have to recognize that because of the momentum of memory you have a moral obligation to practice so that you don't put the negative effects of those memories into the culture through your actions. Yoga is action, but you can only take action based on non-attachment, otherwise it's reactivity.

What's interesting about how Patanjali uses the term memory, or *samskara*, is that it's always both psychological and physiological. So that whenever you start working on deep physical patterns, you are

working on the mind, because the mind does not want to be present for the feelings associated with those patterns. And whenever you work on deep psychological patterns, physiological responses occur.

CM How does spiritual realization further cognitive insight?

MS Western psychology is fabulous at helping us recognize the pattern, but now we are turning to yoga to ask what to do about it once it is recognized. Because it is not enough just to re-cognize the pattern. We have to see through the process of cognition so that we can see how whatever we are noticing is impermanent and without an inherent eternal substantiality in time and space. It has no inherent essence. It's based on conditions we can't comprehend.

And when we let go of all this contextualizing and storytelling, the feeling that is left is intimacy with all things. This is how the Buddha defines enlightenment — what is left when wanting is relinquished. And he calls this nirvana, which means to blow out, or to extinguish. Well, what is extinguished? Life is not extinguished, the rivers are not extinguished; what's extinguished is attachment to your viewpoint. And that's the heart of intimacy.

That life is always organizing itself, this is the anarchy of yoga. Anarchy in the best sense. A trust that there is a deep intimacy of all things, to the point where there are no things, just process. So the ground is groundless. And even if the ground were shifting, if it were made of water, it could still sustain you.

CM What role does teaching play in your practice of yoga?

MS Here we are, sitting in a garage in Parkdale because I think that these teachings belong in alleys, in the gaps. People just come here by word of mouth. We develop a relationship with people over time. And they develop relationships with each other, so that we can drop into deep practice without the constructs of institutions, even the institutions of the commercial yoga studio.

What motivates me now to share yoga with other people is to explore how complex the yoga systems are, and apply practices individually, for different people, who are in different conditions. I want to see how the

practice can come alive in their life as they live it—not to just do their practice and then go back to their lives.

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Kristin Sjaarda studied photography in Denver, Colorado and then moved to Vancouver, where she took her first yoga class. She moved to Toronto to pursue her photography career and took a job managing a yoga studio in downtown Toronto, where she first met Michael Stone. Lately, both photography and yoga have been set on the back burner while she cares for her two sons. www.kristinsjaarda.com

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