

MOVING INWARD

An Interview with Bo Forbes, Psy.D.

Bo Forbes is a clinical psychologist, Yoga teacher and Yoga therapist in the Boston area. She developed Integrative Yoga Therapeutics™, a system that specializes in the therapeutic application of Yoga for anxiety, insomnia, depression, immune disorders, chronic pain, injury rehabilitation and athletic performance. In this interview, she talks about the role of sadhana in her personal life and as the impetus for many of her current projects.

Integral Yoga Magazine (IYM): Can you define what *sadhana* means for you personally and how it impacts your role as a Yoga teacher and Yoga therapist?

Bo Forbes (BF): *Sadhana* is a daily spiritual practice, usually with a specific goal or intention. For me, *sadhana* works best when it's integrative and multi-faceted—when it addresses my body, mind *and* spirit. So some elements of my *sadhana* involve asana, but these movements are also contemplative in nature. And, I have a meditation practice which also reaches my body. My *sadhana* supports the inner inquiry that's necessary for me to feel nourished and creative. While my *sadhana* may have a “goal,” it shapes itself and takes on a life force all its own, if I'm open and willing to let it. When I'm rooted in *sadhana*, my path feels organic, like something is growing. For many years, I followed the thread of my *sadhana*, of the work and what felt most alive about it. And then about five years ago, I emerged to find that the fields of Yoga and psychotherapy were ripe for being shaken and stirred a little bit. From the outside, my choices may look planned, but the outer form of my work reflects my inner experience.

IYM: In what ways can *sadhana* be therapeutic?

BF: *Sadhana* is incredibly therapeutic for us in the West. We have many cultural maladies: anxiety, depression, chronic stress, spiritual alienation and disconnection with our deepest self. The common denominator in all of these is a difficulty being present, knowing who we really are and accessing the deep well of potential that lies within. When we focus outward too much or grasp for power, we become confused. We can start to identify with what's outside of us, what's *not* us: our bodies, our emotional states, our possessions, what others think of us. This is human nature. It also makes *sadhana* a potent antidote for what ails us. *Sadhana* allows us to slow down and go within. It brings us back to our deepest self.

IYM: Do you see teaching as part of your own *sadhana*?

BF: Definitely. Although it might seem that teaching is outer-directed and *sadhana* is inner-directed, for me this isn't the case. Like *sadhana*, teaching is never a static practice. It changes based on where the practitioners are physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Part of my teaching practice is to teach therapeutically: to focus deeply on the class. What does the class need in the moment? What wants

to awaken? There is a partnership between us: I'm doing my *sadhana*, which informs theirs, and vice-versa. We're all focused in the moment on cultivating inner awareness. Teaching always brings me into the present moment. Often, I also supervise teaching assistants simultaneously. This requires a deep attention that is itself *sadhana*.

IYM: You recently published your first book, *Yoga for Emotional Balance: Simple Practices to Heal Anxiety and Depression*. Can you talk about this book, and how it relates to your own spiritual practice?

BF: The book explores emotional balance, or *sattva*. Melding Eastern and Western knowledge systems, it looks at some key questions: What keeps emotional balance at bay? What creates the gap between our mental understanding and the real-life experience of change? The book explores the nature of *sadhana*, the spiritual meaning behind anxiety and depression and how we use *sadhana* either to reinforce anxiety and depression, or to transform them. What can we derive from these states of consciousness if we are open to engaging in a relationship with them? The book offers therapeutic and contemplative practices that help instill emotional wellbeing and bring us closer to our deepest selves.

Writing *Yoga for Emotional Balance* was humbling. First, it took me a while to recognize writing as an integral part of my spiritual practice! I needed to see the Yoga in the writing. Both Yoga and writing are about inner connection. Both are about being deeply present with the recipients: readers or Yoga practitioners. In the beginning, I had to face some fears about what my colleagues in the Yoga and psychotherapy communities might think or say about my ideas. Those fears kept me from really going inward and working with a more mindful approach to writing. Kripalu has a plaque with a passage from the *Bhagavad Gita* translated by Dinabandhu Sarley that reads: “Yoga is the practice of accepting the consequences of being yourself.” I love that. Writing and Yoga are about being willing to risk sharing our authentic selves. For me, that willingness and courage arise directly from *sadhana*. In the process of writing this book, I needed to rediscover the importance of being true to myself.

IYM: How does your role as a clinical psychologist inform your role as a Yoga educator?

BF: My passion is the Yoga of transformation. Being a psychologist has given me a fascination with the nuances

of change. Most forms of Yoga seem to help us feel better physically, emotionally and spiritually. Yet what are the specific elements, the interventions that take our practice to the next level and make it deeply therapeutic? I've spent years watching closely to see how people respond to a variety of therapeutic tools, from alignment cues and postural changes to breath work and restorative practice. It used to be that we'd teach a Yoga class and there would be one or two people with physical or emotional issues, so teachers could easily offer modifications. Now, many doctors and therapists recommend Yoga to their clients, and many people with emotional issues seek out Yoga. This has caused an increase in the numbers of people with injuries and emotional issues in regular group Yoga classes. So, teachers need to have some aptitude with Yoga therapeutics in these group class settings.

Psychologists are dedicated to self-study: it's part of our professional training, and invaluable to teaching. Because Yoga is inherently spiritual, people often attribute a spiritual authority to their teachers. My background as a psychologist helps me be less attached to the idealization or devaluation that can come up for people. For example, they may think that I've caused their healing or transformation. I recognize that this is not about me; it's a projection of their own wonderful qualities. Likewise, people can think I'm withholding or rejecting. That's usually not about me, either, but rather about something internal, or familial, that they've tapped into from the depths of their own suffering. The goal is to teach from our center and create a sacred space where people can experience Yoga not as a product of the teacher, but through the medium of their own being. People can love or hate or be indifferent toward their teacher, and we as teachers can metabolize and contain that. We can decide not to take it personally or absorb it into us. This empowers people; it returns their personal power to them.

Clinical psychology has incredible models for learning that center around experience, like live practice and group supervision. I've brought these models into our teacher training and Yoga therapy training. In our school, the New England School of Yoga Therapeutics, we bring clients into as many aspects of the training as possible so students can learn in a live practicum setting. And, with our Yoga therapists-in-training, we create a clinical supervision group that meets for 2.5 hours monthly for 18 months. We do interviews with everyone at the beginning and the end to explore how their core understanding and skills evolve over time. This clinical supervision model echoes the one-on-one training model favored by traditional Yoga therapy training. At our school, we bring this live, experiential, *sadhana*-based dynamic back into Yoga education.

IYM: How do you balance inner inquiry and external work?

BF: There's a paradoxical interplay for me between teaching and doing *sadhana*. My *sadhana* entails a lot of



Dr. Bo Forbes

private work, but when I travel and teach my expression of self becomes more public. I have to be able to reach people and give them what they need—and there's an outer-directedness to that. The more travel and teaching I take on, the more my *sadhana* needs to expand. So my personal definition of *sadhana* includes self-care, which can mean things like spending more time with family or taking a deeper look at nutrition and physical health.

For a lot of people, the idea of having a personal practice of any kind—Hatha Yoga, meditation or other formal practice—is intimidating. They feel it should be evolved right from the beginning; however, an important element of *sadhana* is the *process* of evolution itself. We develop an intimate relationship with *sadhana* in much the same way that we do with a partner. This intimacy isn't instant; it deepens over time. It endures its ups and downs. Often, it's awkward or we resent it. It may become incredibly precious to us. Or we learn to just be present with it. Whatever it is, though, we sit with it. We immerse ourselves in it every day. And, when we stick with our *sadhana*, it builds *prana*, or life force. We add to that reservoir of life force every time we practice. Then our spiritual practice becomes a living, breathing thing. In those times when we are torn apart by loss, or overwhelmed by life's challenges, or have a resistance to practicing, that life force is there to sustain us.

Bo Forbes conducts teacher trainings, teaches workshops and presents at conferences internationally in the fields of Yoga, psychotherapy and Yoga therapy. She is a frequent contributor to leading Yoga magazines and is the author of Yoga for Emotional Balance: Simple Practices to Heal Anxiety and Depression. For more information: www.boforbesyoga.com.