

## Sharon Watts Writes

when pictures fail me...

# YogaCityNYC ~ interview with Bryant Mascarenhas / Yoga for Mental Health and Addiction

Mental health and addiction stories are in the headlines, on the streets, and, sadly, in our homes. Stigmas may slowly be eroding, but the hurt involved, wrapping humanity like a shroud, is as painful as ever.

Kripa Foundation Iyengar-certified yoga master Bryant Mascarenhas has been teaching specialized yoga for addiction and mental health since 1986. This month he is leading a workshop at Omega Institute to address and explore the very real possibilities of healing these serious issues, and it basically starts with this concept: *All you need is love*.

YogaCityNYC's Sharon Watts, who has lost a friend to death by alcohol, was eager to learn more.

Sharon Watts: The line that really caught my eye in your write-up is "Love, the greatest healing force in the universe, can bring the body back to life." Is it really as basic as this?

Bryant Mascarenhas: Here in the United States, we are using chemicals to try and solve a chemical problem. That is not really working out, is it? In the spirit of the Universe, we all are born in love. It all starts with self-love.

In order to feel self-love, a relationship with a Higher Spirit, or Higher Power, must be in place—however you choose to believe in this. Most people who are having addiction or mental health problems cannot resolve them on their own. Self-love and one's relationship with a Higher Spirit may need to be rekindled.

SW: How does that begin to happen?

BM: When the relationship with the Higher Power has been broken, through physical and/or sexual abuse, or family alcoholism, a child feels rejected and does not know how to receive love. This can result in a cycle of more alcoholism, addiction, and depression, and a bi-polar issue can take hold. A crisis situation may evolve, and the body needs to slowly be brought back to life: physically, mentally, and spiritually.

Those in need of help have to be willing and open to receiving it. That is critical. Support from the outside, while working on the inside, is also essential. This can be through family and friends, a 12-step program, therapy, or any combination of support systems that work toward self-forgiveness and contribute to the feeling of getting better.

SW: And how does yoga produce a positive motivational change towards rehabilitation?

BW: A yoga program, systematically taught, can be tailored to each person's healing journey, no matter their belief system. But first you need to align yourself to a Higher Power. It is this process, in the practice of Kripa Foundation Iyengar Yoga, that leads one from what philosopher Martin Buber identified as the "I/it" relationship (one of experience and sensation), to the "I/Thou" relationship, (one of relationships). All of our relationships bring us ultimately into the most important one, with our Higher Power.

Next, the key is to introduce the person to a yoga pose or meditative seated position where they start to feel a little relaxed, a little quieter. That way the heart chakra starts a slow awakening. The concept of self-forgiveness ignites when we get some good feeling back in our bodies. The challenge is to awaken the body first, through the central nervous system.

SW: How do you do this?

BM: As an overview, one needs to work on the three stages of sadhana: bahiranga (control of body), antaranga (control over the mental body), and antaratma (control over the causal body, containing our true soul). So one has to begin with the peripheral nervous system, with restorative work in asana, and then work the brain and spinal cord—the central nervous system—with active asana that includes downward dog, handstand, bridge pose with chair, inverted staff pose with chair, etc. This will finally lead us into the autonomic nervous system, becoming second nature to those afflicted. Here is where the nervous system begins its transformation.

SW: What else is part of your healing package?

BM: Breathing practices, specifically Viloma Pranayama II, and dhyana (meditation), have enormous effects on the three sadhanas, as well as our tri-gunas, or innate natures. In addition, their internal effect on the pancha mahabhutas (five elements) will facilitate longterm healing.

This has to be experienced. The yoga I teach is highly experiential; one comes to an inner "knowing through feeling" what is the NEW feeling within. And that feeling includes self-forgiveness.

SW: How else do you encourage your students?

BW: We encourage them to say (instead of "I am an addict") "I am addiction-free." That places the present in a positive light, and helps to break their attachment with the past.

SW: Most of us have experienced the pain and challenge of loving a person who is addicted or has mental challenges. One difficulty is knowing the difference between help and enabling—as well as not forcing a loved one to do what we feel is the best thing. While there is no guarantee of a happy ending, what positive thoughts can you leave us with?

BW: The entire journey of yoga is a healing journey. When one feels the zenith of the silence and tranquility within, the need for the drug or alcohol of choice dissipates. One gets hooked onto an unlimited supply of "spiritual high"—where the right amount of endorphins and serotonin are released.

The possibility to get well is always present—one should never give up hope.

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