



Power and abuse

Regarded author and teacher, Matthew Remski, renowned for his work on highlighting physical and emotional injury in yoga, talks to Gillian Osborne

I pre-ordered *Practice and All is Coming*. Not from some morbid fascination with the sordid details of other people's experiences, but from an almost fearful yet compelling desire to look into the heart of one of the significant practice traditions and to see what else lay there, alongside yoga, intertwined with it. The stories are shocking but entirely believable, presented rationally by the author whose meticulous research coupled with a piercing depth of perception shook me into the reluctant acceptance that it is only the experience of yoga that is pure. Everything else is human and subject to fallibility.

Fast forward some time down the line and I'm writing this article, so I contact Matthew Remski and ask to speak with him directly, because the impact of his book has been transformative in my understanding and acceptance of the yoga world; my yoga world. I'm not somebody who is used to interviewing anybody, so my conversation with him

had no firm agenda, other than to get a sense of how he sees the book positioned within the overarching issue of abuse; and more importantly, to try and get something of a handle on the intangible issue that has been lurking at the back of my mind. That issue is one of power; and of the various dynamics that are in play where issues of power are brought to the table. Or in this case, to the yoga mat.

I am no scholar, but I am also no stranger to an academic text book and I have spent enough time in study to recognise considered, informed opinion and original thought. Conversing with Matthew was both illuminating and inspiring. And comfortable! Much of his conversation flowed from an apparent and deep knowledge of these issues and any attempts to better his eloquent phraseology would most likely fail in spectacular fashion so I have quoted him directly where attempts to paraphrase seemed inadequate. I am grateful to him for sparing me the time, and I hope in this short piece I am able to convey some useful wisdom and thus do the conversation justice.

Abuses run throughout all sectors of society but this group of articles in *Spectrum* is focused on abuse within the yoga community and to examine that we often begin by considering "survivor" stories. Therein lies the first misconception; because most survivor stories are told by females yet abuse within the yoga world, as Matthew says "crosses the gender line all the time". He goes on to tell me

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of a man with whom he is in contact in the USA, who currently has an ongoing complaint against a male teacher for sexual abuse. This man declined to speak to me, even though it would have been entirely anonymous, and I do not blame him. The reporting threshold for abuse claims from men, against men or women is exceptionally high, and so most remain in the shadows. It is beyond the scope of this article and the function of the BWY to provide any form of therapeutic support or investigation into why this is the case. But perhaps by simply recognising that male victims of physical and sexual violence do exist in yoga communities we acknowledge and hold space for them, and therefore go some way towards giving some small measure of support.

At the same time lets also consider another largely overlooked group of victims: those who have suffered abuse at the hands of a female teacher. Matthew tells me he speaks with numerous people who have complaints of physical or emotional abuse in these circumstances, yet they have no clear context in which to frame their story or bring their complaint. Frequently their stories lack the shock element of sexual abuse and so fail to gain traction, but a huge obstacle is the “belief threshold” that must be overcome, since the idea of the female teacher as aggressor does not fit the archetype. The combination regularly serves, whether intentionally or not, to prevent these stories from coming into the light.

The more one begins to look beneath the surface the more complex the issue becomes. According to Matthew “one of the unexamined roots of modern postural Yoga is homosocial violence [which] has ... continued to the present day”. Too regularly he finds himself unable to document abuse because victims are not willing to go on record. Stories of male yoga teachers being abused by both male and female teachers simply cannot surmount the incredibly high barriers to reporting. It is undoubtedly a subject that warrants research and investigation but will inevitably require a good deal of sensitivity.

To begin to unpack these issues it is helpful to understand something of the nature of a socially organised structure in which abuse is enabled to exist. To do that it is instructive to consider the concept of “Charismatic Authority” developed by Max Weber (German sociologist 1864-1920). This model of authority is one that hinges upon the charisma of the leader and one of the drawbacks of this type of leadership is the lack of any natural successor, and a potential inability to transfer authority. The transfer of leadership therefore depends upon what Weber describes as a process of routinisation, in which behaviour and patterns of relating become normalised, internalised and stabilised into ongoing authority structures over time.

Thus in the context of some yoga traditions an original patriarchal violent pedagogy can eventually cross generational, cultural and gender boundaries, becoming “routinised” so that we see complaints of verbal, emotional, physical and sexual abuse through generations and across genders. Complicated by the fact that stories of women giving intrusive adjustments, applying body weight,

shouting, slapping or intimidating are less likely to be reported or believed, we can begin to see how such dysfunction is able to perpetuate unchecked.

To return to my introduction and that lurking idea about power; it begins to become clear that the charismatic leader has a substantial amount of power, and the organisation which he/she is leading may have a number of cult characteristics. According to Matthew “when one looks at abuse in the yoga world through the lens of cultic dynamics it’s really about power”. ... and silencing, and who’s able to speak and who’s not able to speak, and who is ideologically pure and who is not ideologically pure, and so on.” I am inclined to agree with him; abuse primarily appears to be concerned with power and not with the form the abuse takes.

It is worth mentioning at this point that the BWY teacher training courses do address issues of power and integrity and shine a light on the teacher student dynamic. There are critically important issues of ethics to consider when one is in a position of authority. Any instructive relationship, teaching or supportive organisation must ensure that it does not itself become a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

Which brings me back to Practice and All is Coming. Matthew tells me he wanted to do two things with the book; first “to describe how ... violence ...was.. prepped or groomed by some basic assumptions within the yoga rooms of the mid to late 20th century” and second to explore how the qualities present in those rooms “make yoga populations more vulnerable to high demand groups”. To explain the dynamics of the latter he coined the phrase “Somatic Dominance” which puts the power relationship between charismatic teachers and their students into a framework that is non gender specific and addresses the expression of power between bodies generally. For example: “Within a Somatic Dominance space the teacher assumes definitive and intrusive knowledge over the student’s body [as] a fundamental premise. [On walking] into the room ... that’s the assumption that is made. All sorts of power exchanges that are felt before they’re said, flow from that assumption.”

According to his theory, in any situation where Somatic Dominance is in play the range of outcomes may vary, but a loss of autonomy will be experienced to one degree or another. This might be anything from a vague sense of interference with personal agency or compromised inner guidance, through an increasing spectrum of harm including physical or sexual assault. It logically follows that maintaining somatic autonomy in yoga is therefore the essential key to a healthy student teacher relationship. Along with other materials we are making information on Somatic Dominance available in our resources and of course it can be found in detail in Matthew’s book Practice and All is Coming.

Paradoxically, it is often when we are at our most vulnerable that we find yoga. Within the overarching endeavour of maintaining personal safety, integrity and wholeness in the

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yoga world then; to whom do we turn? I think we probably need to look within, follow sensible guidance and seek the wisdom of a trusted teacher. But therein lies the rub... There was much for me to consider and reflect upon following our conversation, but by far the most sobering and poignant question that remained in my mind was from Matthew himself "Who are Yoga's real gatekeepers or wisdom holders?" Where do we turn to preserve our autonomy and authenticity of experience? I am unsure of the answer. Increasing numbers of academics are custodians of the original texts and philosophy, but what of the experience of the everyday practitioner? Who is custodian of that? Perhaps the answer will become clearer in the next untold story that Matthew believes is to come. The story that looks more deeply into the routinisation of a patriarchal pedagogy and the dynamics of power in yoga.

Gillian Osborne, BWY Vice Chair

- Turn to page 34 for a review of Matthew Remski's book

A VERY bumpy yoga journey Sarah's story

In my early twenties, I was keen to learn yoga and meditation and met an English man called David who was teaching evening classes in Durham. He was dressed as a Hindu monk and he spoke eloquently on Vedanta and all things Hindu.

I was doing a PhD at the time on consciousness and spirituality and, to cut a long story short, within a year I left for India to train with his guru, at David's insistence. I was told his guru, Swami Prabhuddhananda, was an enlightened being.

At that time I didn't know if one could verify that, or what sort of credentials to ask for, except to trust David, the monk who had been teaching me intensively. If he said Swami Prabhuddhananda was the real thing, then it must be true. Or so I thought.

I arrived at an ashram in Moradabad, Uttar Pradesh, in September 1987. Within three days I had blacked out, and I came to on my bed, to find the guru on top of me. He was so big and heavy that I couldn't fight him off and over the next three months I was held there and repeatedly assaulted. He also emotionally and physically abused me and most of the time he would just laugh.

It took me a while to plan an escape that could work. I convinced this guru that everything was fine and I was glad he was happy. I proposed we needed all the disciples from all over the world to come and celebrate, including the monk from England and NV RaghuRam from Bangalore, who had been the most senior disciple of Swami Prabhuddhananda. I had written to Raghu Ram whilst I lived in India and so I was fairly confident that he would help me. My plan worked. On the first evening when they arrived I told the English monk, David. He told me that

BWY and you

Please remember that if you feel threatened or are in any doubt over your personal safety, or the safety of anyone in your BWY yoga class, please contact the BWY safeguarding officer Rebecca Morris E: safeguarding@bwy.org.uk. All matters discussed with her are confidential. In a situation of immediate danger you should always call the police.

BWY teachers are all trained to the same high standard and are aware of safeguarding and ethics. They are all registered, insured and accountable to the BWY training committee and ultimately the BWY trustees, who endeavour to ensure an ongoing transparent, accountable, safe and inclusive organisation.

We will be continuing to feature experiences, reviews and articles as a means of bringing into the light ongoing issues and themes around social justice. If you find these issues troubling please seek help and support.



I must do everything the guru said 'as guruji is always right'. I despaired.

The next night I managed to tell RaghuRam and he told me that the guru had done this before, with disastrous consequences. He said the girl had had a breakdown and her brother had hanged himself. He said he would get me out of there, which he did, the next day.

I went south to stay with RaghuRam and his wife, Dr Nagaratna, and their son. I also got to know Dr Nagendra and they helped me to learn yoga and pranayama and were very kind to me.

RaghuRam asked me to keep silent about what had happened to me with his guru as he felt it would be shameful for him too. I was pretty confused and upset myself and so found myself in the horrible position of feeling like I was falling apart and yet having to hide it all.

A few months later I came home to England. It was in 1988 that I tried to go to Rape Crisis but I remember finding it really hard to say 'I have been raped'. I think it took me two years to be able to say out loud: 'I have been sexually assaulted'. My local Rape Crisis centre told me to go away as they only treated women who can say they have been raped.

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I remember walking away feeling utter despair and shame that I had wasted their time. Eventually I found a private therapist, working with a charity, who saw me for a small donation. She helped me begin to talk about what had happened to me.

Any priest I went to during that time always told me to put it behind me and that the past is the past. My trouble was that I hadn't begun to address the trauma of it all, the deep damage it had done. The emotions and trauma were very much in the present.

I eventually encountered more guru figures and each one betrayed me. One was a therapist who sexually abused me. I felt he used everything he knew about me. He later admitted he had a sex addiction and he had planned to have an affair with me, six months before he started abusing me.

All this time, in my personal life, no one knew. I tried very hard 'to put it all behind me'. I was married and now had children.

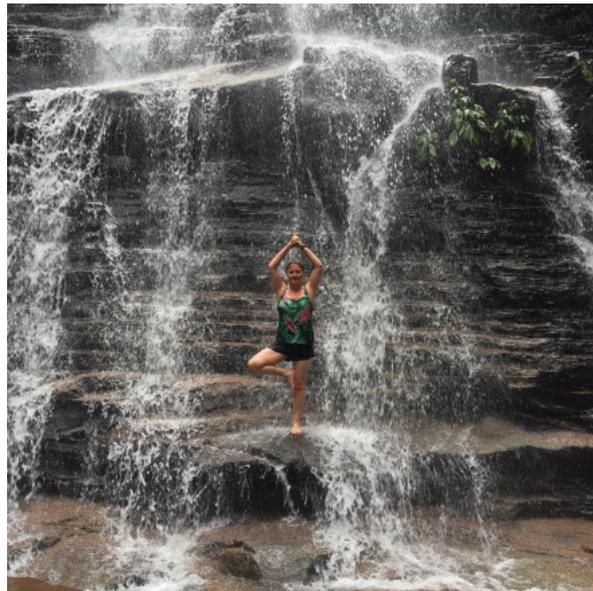
I met Tibetan buddhist teachers and I found myself hoping to find a father figure who had my best interests at heart and could see I was struggling and in great pain, whilst at the same time I was a yoga teacher and retreat leader and helping others.

Yet again I was betrayed. The main teacher bullied and belittled me, despite knowing my history. I broke down under the sheer weight of years of it. My other teacher was the abbot and he refused to do anything about the bullying. Other students rallied around the teacher and ostracised me. When another woman was nearly raped by a monk at the monastery, she came to me to beg me to report the monk to the abbot. I did and the abbot refused to do anything, sending the monk to the London centre where there were more young women. I warned a woman friend there and she immediately refused to speak to me anymore for 'speaking ill of a monk'. The monk went on to murder the founder.

During this time I found that I couldn't teach for crying and although I struggled on for another two years, I found myself crying in a class and couldn't stop and had to walk out. I thought it meant I missed that one class, but it turned out I couldn't teach at all for four years!

I tentatively started teaching again in 2016 and thank goodness I am now teaching better than I ever did. What doesn't kill you may make you suffer beyond what you imagine you can withstand, but it also brings great sensitivity and empathy to others' suffering. I still wouldn't wish this level of suffering on my worst enemy.

Whilst extricating myself from this toxic environment, I met a psychologist who told me he really truly did have my best interests at heart and he pledged to listen and hear and help me and not suddenly give up on me; a deep fear of mine. He was sweet to me and bought me gifts, sent me cards, and brought me snacks and visited me at home, and



I felt that at least I could dare to trust again. Then suddenly, after several years work with him, his line manager rang me up and said he would not be working with me anymore. Full stop. Nothing else. He was continuing working so there was no explanation for what he had done. My heart felt like it had been ripped out for the umpteenth time. I went into a kind of free fall. I felt more damaged than when I had started therapy with him.

Where did this all get me? Well, I don't trust people who enjoy positions of power and pretend to have my best interests at heart whilst they use my skills, or try to take my money, or use me to build their student base. I don't feel bitter. If anything, I just feel wiser.

I have become very wary of the position of 'spiritual teacher', as it seems to cause more harm than good. I think a good mentor can be helpful, but the person has to have your own very best interests at heart and less of their own. I have been helping people to exit various Buddhist sects and the many and varied religious groups out there who can seem authentic, but can actually be money-making machines with very specific agendas to grow their power, their buildings, their centres, their status.

People are often incredibly naive around monks, gurus and lamas and 'sri this that or the other'. It is horribly easy to sound learned and enlightened, especially to western students who haven't heard most of the slokas or prayers or philosophies before. The teachers themselves can be seduced by the adoration and respect of their students whilst some abuse, are dependent on alcohol or other drugs and can be corrupt to such an extent that they take pleasure in causing hurt or harm. You would be surprised how many are doing this.

The silver lining is I have been helped hugely by the eight-week Mindfulness course (MBSR) that I have been teaching for many years. I felt I had woven my parachute before things really fell apart for me, and then I had some bits of parachute left for the free fall.

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I am so grateful for that training, training created by someone who has been a bit of mentor for me, Mark Williams who is Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Oxford. No matter how bad things got, Mark remained kind and helpful and interested and supportive. This is a man who isn't in it for the adulation. He created the eight-week Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction course because as a psychiatrist, he really wanted to help people who have depression and anxiety to find ways to help themselves.

I also trained in Mindful Self Compassion which has been a lifesaver. With my parachute and a lifesaver – I survived. The Mindful Self Compassion eight-session course (plus one session which is a retreat session) proved to be the added bonus necessary to the mindfulness. I had been talking to Mark Williams for some years about how the usual mindfulness programmes lacked the compassion training and how I had begun to include it. A few years ago I went to America and trained with the psychologists Kristen Neff and Christopher Germer. I became a trained Mindful Self Compassion teacher and have been teaching their amazingly healing and resilience

building eight-week course since 2017. The combination of the two provided me with enough to come back to loving living again, feeling happy and recognising that there are many toxic people in this world, but fortunately the majority of people don't intentionally mean to harm me.

I teach CPD on Mindfulness and Compassion for the BWY, plus in Autumn 2020 and January 2021 all courses below start as new classes: all on Zoom.

- online interactive Zoom Mindful Self Compassion eight-week course.
- online interactive short six-week Mindful Self Compassion course
- online interactive Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction eight-week course.

Easter 2021 start four weekend course including both eight-week programmes

Regular Yoga 90 minute classes on Zoom: Friday 10am; Monday 7pm

Please email me if you want details of my teaching or to join these small group teachings.

E: sarah.lionheart@gmail.com

Campaign to end abuse of women in yoga

London yoga teacher Julia Davis explores the Yoni Shakti Movement's call to action

Eradicating the abuse of women in yoga needs to be placed at the centre of our teaching and practice. For too long it has been a footnote in our story, as it was in the 2014 edition of Yoni Shakti. This is where I first read about the abuse of women within the Bihar School of Yoga in the (Satyananda Yoga) in 2014 I thought: 'That is terrible but it isn't about me. I am lucky I haven't experienced abuse in yoga.'

Others may not even have chosen to read the 'Afterward' in Yoni Shakti, the book is more than 600 pages long and all the juicy stories about empowering women through yoga practice are threaded within the earlier passages. We are encouraged to jump around the book to the sections that most appeal.

We haven't been gifted the vocabulary before to address the sexual exploitation of women by teachers, trainers and other leaders in the wilder field of yoga. I remember clearly the deafening silence coming from the hot yoga world as studios quietly removed the name "Bikram" due to the severity of abuse allegations against the creator of the hot yoga movement. As I have never stepped into a hot yoga studio I did not recognise at the time that it is our collective responsibility to address this terrible wrong. And now we have the tools to do so. It is very much my wish that women who have felt unable to speak up against abuse they have experienced or witnessed will have the strength to come forward and that all of us take responsibility for ensuring the abuse stops and that wounds are healed.

When I approached Spectrum's Editor about writing an article about the campaign to eradicate the abuse of women in yoga, it felt as though the stars were aligning. The Editor was planning a full feature. The wider organisation was involved and I found myself in a meeting with those responsible for BWY training all ears open, willing to find ways to make a meaningful difference.

Uma Dinsmore Tuli has said yoga teachers acting out of a collective responsibility is well overdue and has created Yoni Shakti: The Movement campaign. This is about all of us and through the tools she has carefully created, with the support and guidance of survivors and experts in sexual trauma, we all have the means to detect patterns of abuse and act to prevent its continuation. I believe we have a duty to do this for ourselves and our sisters and daughters.

We are well placed as yoga teachers and trainers to disseminate this information through our social media channels, studios and communities. The guidance Uma has created is clear and easy to follow. She has created two sets of guidelines:

Patterns of Abuse: Thirteen Warning Signals Nine Calls To Action

You may have already seen these as free downloadable resources on the BWY website, or as a DCT you may have received them as an additional training resource. If this is the case the wheels are already in motion within the Wheel. When we ask the question 'What can we do?' the answer is simple:

- 1) Include this information and discuss it as part of all BWY teacher training manuals – and if you teach teachers with any other organisation include it there
- 2) Display on the walls of your yoga studios
- 3) Share in your virtual yoga teaching spaces and groups
- 4) Distribute in your newsletters

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- 5) Post on Instagram and in FB and twitter
- 6) Place them in all regional newsletters
- 7) Bring it to the attention of governing bodies for yoga and therapy (that is what this article is doing within the Wheel – many of you have associations with other groups, please share this information there)
- 8) Send it to your professional organisations and alliances of yoga teachers and trainers
- 9) Present it to the leaders of your yoga lineages and schools.

I would encourage you to look at each of the points and discuss them with yoga colleagues and friends and share them on discussion forums. It is our responsibility as yoga teachers and trainers to disseminate this information. Many of us started our teaching journey within the British Wheel and have continued it with other organisations – I look forward to the day when that journey is safe for us wherever and however we choose to train.

An essential question to ask when we share yoga practice is: are we caring for the physical needs of those who attend our classes? We know as teachers that the vast majority of those who attend yoga classes are women with wombs. Part of removing the abuse of women in yoga is to understand the need to not support any teacher or organisation that exploits or manipulates women. There are key yoga techniques to avoid at certain times so a woman can fully respect and honour the health of her womb.

‘Respect for womb cycles is the foundation of a refined and sensitive yoga practice for women,’ you’ll find in Uma Dinsmore Tuli’s book, *Yoni Shakti*, referenced on Page 2.

All women deserve to know when it is safe to practice inversions, bandhas, kapalabhati, bhastrika, breath of fire and hot or fast yoga. There are times in a woman’s life cycle when these practices are not appropriate. For example some practices are not appropriate during menstruation, with erratic menstrual cycle, when using an IUD, when seeking to conceive and during early pregnancy, during established pregnancy, during postnatal period, during lactation and during perimenopause and postmenopause.

Becoming confident in the language of caring for women in our classes is a practice in itself. The Womb Friendly Manifesto is a resource all studios and teacher trainings can use to ensure this safety going forward. A step further would be to establish practices within teaching that are nurturing to women throughout their menstrual and life cycles. To me this feels both natural and necessary and these practices that are nurturing to women are also beautiful and safe for every other person.

The vision is to create a yoga world where practices honour all bodies and the abuse of women is eradicated.

Are you aware of the sexual abuse that has been reported in the following organisations? Agma Yoga, Amrit Yoga, Anusara Yoga, Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga, Bikram Yoga, Himalayan Institute, Iyengar Yoga, Krishnamacharya Healing and Yoga Foundation, Kundalini Yoga, Atman Federation of Yoga, Samye Ling Buddhist Retreat Centre, Satyananda

Yoga, Sing Mohan, Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres...

If so there are now guidelines you can follow. If not, I would encourage you to be curious... The BWY has made the movement’s resources available to its members. You can find the documents containing the 13 warning signs and 9 actions on the website at W: bwy.org.uk/abuse-in-yoga and it appears on the BWY Facebook page. You may have read the August edition of BWY’s *Yoga Now*.

The Yoni Shakti movement believes that across the yoga world women are misinformed about what practices are ok for their bodies at key times in their menstrual cycle and while they are trying to conceive and it would be easy to give them a tick box guide to practices that could be harmful. This is not common knowledge and women often override their bodies intuitive wisdom when faced with an authority figure at the front of the class.

Abusers intend to attack those who are most at risk and least likely to be clear headed. It is our responsibility to ensure our organisations are inhospitable environments for those who wish to prey on women. It is much easier to do this with clear guidelines that all teachers have a responsibility to follow.

Now is the time for us to act. Many of us not only trained with the Wheel but we have connections with other organisations. Join us and be part of the movement to eradicate the abuse of women from yoga and establish yoga as a safe practice for all women. It takes courage to make a stand. I am passionate about the benefits yoga can bring into all of our lives. Let’s make it safe for our sisters and daughters. You can join Yoni Shakti: The Movement Facebook Group here: W: facebook.com/groups/yonishaktithemovement – in the files section you can find a list of recommended organisations providing information and support for survivors.

Julia shares yoga at finchleyyoga.com and runs events, teacher support and trainings for yoga teachers at W: yogateachersforum.org E: info@yogateachersforum.org

Recommended organisations providing information and support for survivors:

W: rapecrisis.org.uk 0808 802 9999

Solace Women’s Aid W: solacewomensaid.org

Women’s Aid W: womensaid.org.uk/information-support

Women Against Rape (UK) W: womenagainstrape.net

The Survivors Trust: W: the-survivors-trust.org

Helpline: 0808 801 0818

Imkaan (UK) W: imkaan.org.uk/get-help

Imkaan is a survivor support organisation rooted in black feminist thinking, advocating the power of collective action.

It provides support for survivors of sexual and domestic violence and referral to BAME specific support.

Cult Information Centre (UK and International)

W: cultinformation.org.uk

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