

YOGATHREADS

Deepen your practice + Inspire your life



CYNDI LEE lounging in her Manhattan home.

THE BUDDHIST YOGI

There was a time when Cyndi Lee's brand of yoga, a marriage of flowing postures and Buddhist principles, raised eyebrows. *You can't be a Buddhist if you're a yogi.* People said things like that. The yoga magazines didn't know what to make of her, and neither did the Buddhist ones. It didn't stop students from streaming into her Manhattan studio, OM yoga.

Things have changed. Today the yogasphere is saturated with combo deals: yoga and wine tasting, yoga and surfing, yoga on a tightrope, Yoyalates, AcroYoga, Aerial Yoga, Hot Nude Yoga, and so on. "I was kind of a pioneer in that way," muses Lee, who has trained more than 1,000 yoga teachers in the OM yoga way. "I wasn't looking for a niche. I was just really compelled to share the practice that was so vibrant within me and still is."

The practice had a gestation of roughly two decades. Lee took her first yoga class in 1972. She was a dance major at a small liberal arts college in Southern California; yoga was an easy PE credit. After completing a graduate degree in dance, she packed her Birkenstocks and long flowing dresses and moved to New York City, where she began teaching yoga to make ends meet. ("I was a terrible waitress.") Her dance career took off after she choreographed the quirky video for Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Want to Have Fun," which snagged the 1984 MTV Video Music Award for best female video. Videos for Rick James, Simple

Minds, the *Dirty Dancing* soundtrack, and others followed.

It wasn't until the early 1990s, after meeting Tibetan lama Gelek Rimpoche, that Lee embraced Buddhism. His teachings resonated with her in a way that no yoga class had. "Yoga teachers would say things like: 'Just surrender to God in this pose.' And I didn't know what that meant. I just didn't get it," she says. "But I could understand how to work for mindfulness and compassion and curiosity." Soon the yoga classes she was teaching were infused with lessons learned from her Buddhist guru.

One of the overarching themes of OM yoga is "making friends with yourself," as Lee calls it. "It comes from a traditional Buddhist practice called *gom*, which means "familiarization." We invite people to really open up to their experience and make friends with whatever comes up, warts and all. If you feel crabby, bring that with you. If you feel sexy, bring that with you. If you feel hungry and bored, bring that with you. Watch how that changes with an attitude of 'Isn't that interesting?' Can you be curious about your experience, whatever it is? You neither have to push it away nor hold on to it." Lee and her husband, David Nichtern, a professional musician and a senior teacher in the Shambhala Buddhist tradition, lead "Yoga Body, Buddha Mind" workshops around the world.

At OM yoga center, which she opened in 1998, students arrange their mats so they're facing the center of the room and, more importantly, each other. Teachers pause about 10 minutes into class to let in latecomers, and students move their mats to make space, passing props across the room. "You'll never see somebody that needs to move their blanket to another place toss it or kick it," Lee says. "They fold it nicely and put it down where it's not going to be in anybody's way." The mindfulness and compassion practiced in the studio eventually inform their daily lives. "That's why it's called practice," Lee says. "We're practicing for other stuff."

—Anna Dubrovsky

One of the many Buddha statues adorning Lee's office at OM yoga.



AN OM YOGA PRACTICE

Buddhism underscores the importance of "being present" —

focusing not on the past or the future but fully participating in the present moment. "To help people really embody being present, I sometimes teach yoga as a walking meditation with fancy shapes," Lee says. Try this short practice next time you're on your mat.

Sit comfortably with your legs crossed and bring your palms toward each other until they almost touch. Feel the heat between your hands and then press your pinkies together. One by one, press the tips of your ring fingers, middle fingers, index fingers, and thumbs together. Slowly touch your palms together and simultaneously lift the elbows. You can chant Om three times.

Slowly separate your palms, feeling that space expand as you bring your hands just over your knees. Feel the heat between your palms and legs. Lower your palms and feel the very moment they touch your legs. Put one hand on the floor and then the other hand on the floor. Inch one hand forward, inch the other hand forward, and find your way onto your hands and knees. Move into downward-facing dog and *stay there without fidgeting*. Don't pedal your feet or adjust your stance just yet. "Pause," Lee advises. "Take a naked look at what's going on without changing it or fixing it. That's step one. Then work with what you see. You may or may not do anything. And that's very simple, but it's huge. It can change how you relate to your husband—or yourself." —A.D. >>