

## Student Spotlight

### Many paths toward learning

This month I contacted yoga student, yoga teacher, and public defender Karen Anita Smith, who lives in Tucson, Arizona.

### When and where did you start your yoga practice?

My studies began in 1988 at the Yoga Room with Katherine Maltz. I was a new lawyer, working for Legal Aid in another town, and suffered from angina. I had been a competitive runner in college but I was so overwhelmed by stress that my hands clenched when I slept. My chiropractor suggested that yoga might help me learn to relax.



The yellow pages directed me to a class ten minutes from my home and sixty-nine miles from my work. I would change clothes while driving back to Tucson on I-10 to make a 6:30 p.m. class. Those classes with Katherine introduced me to Iyengar Yoga. Later, I met Manouso Manos in San Diego, and then I met my mentor and primary teacher, Ben Thomas, at a Manouso Intensive in Tucson.

### How does yoga help you in your work as a lawyer?

Yoga has helped me tremendously in my 25 years of work as an assistant public defender—the last eleven years working with children. Yoga grounds me and keeps me from bleeding out emotionally. People in trouble with the law suffer. Oftentimes, they were suffering long before they came to have legal issues. Things can be very toxic. Yoga also helps me when there are issues within the office. I think differently than many of my colleagues. They sometimes find me to be not adequately upset about perceived injustices. Every day presents new challenges on how *not* to react and how *best* to react.

### You are also certified. Do you teach?

I teach two classes a week at a fitness club near my house. Teaching completes me. It is nice to totally engage sans stress, and my students are wonderful. Most of them are long timers. There are four married couples, a father who comes with his two adult daughters, and my oldest student, who's 85. My youngest student is in his mid-twenties. They work together as family—a very culturally diverse one. They are Hispanic, Norwegian, Jewish, Chinese, Russian, Bangladeshi, and Anglo. The classes reflect that Tucson is a university town, and they also reflect that blacks are a minority in Tucson—and that blacks are not always receptive to yoga.

### Can I ask you about race? When I ran into you in Boca Raton, I was reminded that there are not that many people of color in our Iyengar Yoga community.

I was very happy to see young black people, and other people of color, at the convention in Boca Raton. I was happy to learn that some have become teachers in this method.

I am not a spokesperson for my various heritages—African American, Choctaw, Cherokee, or English. Nor am I a spokesperson for my past or possible current religions—Baptist, Church of Christ, Tree Hugger, Stone Sitter, or Buddhist. My African American religious bearings teach that you should not have idols or say prayers in a language you do not understand. I believe that these beliefs keep many people away from yoga.

This yoga has affirmed my belief in God. The philosophy resonates more clearly within me as a structure for a good life. I am a person who questions authority. I understand ideas of right and wrong and fairness and how to be in the world and not be of the world.

### Anything else you'd like to add?

There are various pathways, *margas*, for learning. You can do your yoga through your work or other activities. People will find their teachers and their path. It is important to be authentic and to treat people well. Sometimes it is important to just let things be. Each adult is ultimately responsible for his or her own personal development.

Manouso spoke at Boca Raton of the need to find a way to, for lack of a better word, to “re-present” Iyengar Yoga. Our community has maintained a degree of separation from other yoga communities, in part, to insure the integrity of the method. I think that the method is sound and that exploration of ways to get the word out is necessary. That said, we are here to share and not to compete.

Mr. Iyengar was all about liberation. He was an absolutely amazing person, who happened to be of color, and he was not afraid to accept himself and the fact that he was different. He did not have to conform to make others happy. There was calmness about him and he did not impose himself on others. He gave of himself freely. The world is a better place because he did not create divisions. He tended to his business. He wanted people to love one another. He accepted all of us as family.

This is what attracts me to this method of teaching and learning—the fact that it allows for creative, independent, purposeful thought and action while nurturing our potential for continual growth. It makes us more mindful of our surroundings. It makes us better able to decide what is important.

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