

THE YOGA TEACHER MENTOR

Notes from *The Yoga Teacher Mentor: a Reflective Guide to Holding Spaces, Maintaining Boundaries and Creating Inclusive Classes* by Jess Glenny (Singing Dragon, 2020).

I highly recommend this book. In my opinion *The Yoga Teacher Mentor* is of great benefit to yoga teachers of 20 years experience and of two weeks experience, to trainee teachers and to people thinking of doing a yoga TT. Plus there are many insights for yoga practitioners.

Full disclosure: I have known Jess since 2002 and I wrote the foreword for her book. This is an inspiring, thought-provoking and challenging read.

As a taster, here are some highlights from *The Yoga Teacher Mentor*:

“Even the at-home teacher sometimes feels unsure, incompetent and out of their depth. For this teacher, though, such feelings are old and familiar friends...as yoga teacher Lizzie Lasater says: ‘Completing a 200-hour teacher training does not make you a yoga teacher. It is little more than an invitation to begin to learn how to teach yoga. It is an early step in a lifelong journey’...

“It may come as a shock to realise that yoga teachers aren’t all beautiful rainbow beings full of love and light. Some freshly minted teacher training graduates are quite naïve about what they can expect to find in their new field of work. Be aware that the full range of human behaviours can be found among yoga teachers...Employers of yoga teachers are not inherently nicer or more ethical than the rest of humanity...

“I don’t have much disposable income but my lifestyle is amazing, and that for me is far more important than money’ (Margot)... ‘I’ve taken on a lot of gym and cover work, and by the time I get onto my own mat, I’m feeling tired, uninspired and reluctant to do yoga. I really miss the old joy and enthusiasm’ (Stephanie)...

“Foundational to yoga, and a capacity that we all want our students to have, is subtle internal attention. This ‘feeling into’ allows us to sense and respond to the needs of our own physiology...

“I’m a big fan of teaching from a chair. I like the way it up-ends people’s expectations of what happens in a yoga class – and in the space where the expected isn’t happening, there’s room for something new to arise... I started to include a chair in the Mysore room because I needed to sit down. I wanted to own my physical limits in a very visible way, and in so doing offer permission to my students to own theirs too...

“Like a skyscraper, a balanced class has a strong frame but is made of flexible material. It is constructed to sway with the wind without falling apart. If students push they can feel that they are securely held within the class boundaries...

“More important to me than individual one-off permissions is that I am always seeking to create a culture of choice and exploration in which teacher and student are in partnership. For me, the chief intention of a yoga teacher is the cultivation of relationship. The postures are a structure for enabling this relationship in an embodied way. They are important, but they are not the yoga, and teaching them is not what I am ultimately there for...

“Our students...often believe that yoga teacher training is far more lengthy, thorough, extensive and rigorous than it actually is. If you haven't yet met a student who thinks you know more about medicine than their doctor, or more about biomechanics than a physiotherapist, don't worry, they're coming soon...

“Our habitual stance may be exhausting and dysfunctional, but it's also familiar and unthreatening. In life, as on the mat, there is often discomfort, confusion and a sense of disorientation in the process of realignment...

“Create a classroom culture in which students' experiences are valued more highly than your own beliefs about what is 'correct' or what 'should' be happening in a particular posture. Create a classroom culture in which students feel able to report discomfort or difficulty and ask for modifications, and in which awareness of embodied experience is valued more highly than achieving a particular physical form...

“Teaching is a practice in and of itself, which means that at some point every piece of the psycho-emotional junk in our closet is bound to come tumbling out...Our students want secure but elastic holding, in which there is permission, but there is also containment. When we are able to be this kind of container, we are serving their needs...

“We live in a culture obsessed with looking, staying and feeling young, and in denial about the realities of ageing and death. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the media profile of yoga: all those buff, youthful bodies becoming ever buffer and apparently more youthful. There is an implicit belief that if we can just stay fit enough, we can outrun physical decline...

“I think we have to understand that our current view of yoga is thoroughly lopsided. Yoga is not about constant increase in wellness, fitness, flexibility and general physical capacity; it's about a whole-life journey. This encompasses gaining physical prowess and it also encompasses losing it. The losing phase is just as much yoga as the gaining one...As artist Robert Rauschenberg says: 'When you work with what's available, the restrictions aren't limitations, they're just what you happen to be working with'...

“It's a nought to 100 culture, which bypasses the body of experience lying in the middle ground, and misses important relationships with regular, long-term teachers...Nowadays, the rampant self-promotion is obligatory, and the pressure to position oneself as a product and maintain online presence has become the blacking factory of yoga teaching in the gig economy...

“I think that community is an important antidote to the rampant colonisation of yoga by big corporations and to the orgiastic self-promotion of hashtag yoga. I'm not talking about community as represented in yoga advertorial here, with its spew of airbrushed images of cute disabled children and coffee-coloured black people. No, I'm talking about the community that happens when we do our damndest to actually include people who, for whatever reason, are hard to reach out to and challenging to integrate. This means we have to keep opening our ears to listen when most of our fibres are straining not to hear. It means we have to let go of some of our cherished assumptions about how things are supposed to be in a yoga class...

“If you don't have time to eat properly and look after your basic needs, you're working too much. This is foundational and more important than anything else. If you don't create more space in your day, you will get ill...

“Bedizened in narcissistic social media ra-ra and groaning under the weight of commercialism, yoga might seem wrecked, pillaged and desecrated, but it’s hard to completely despoil a practice whose deep roots are ancient and shamanic. The green shoots of yoga are protean. Some of the promising new growth is in intelligent engagement with cutting-edge movement research and neuroscience, in trauma work, in community building, in embodied rehabilitation work in prisons, and so on. Eventually the cash cow’s gotta give out, clearing the field for those engaged with somatic exploration of real value. You’d think. You’d hope. Gimme a million ‘likes’ on that one...

“Teaching yoga is a life-long journey involving commitment to practice, awareness and investigation into our own unfolding experience... Many elder teachers feel a responsibility to the transmission of yoga of real worth, and are very willing to help junior teachers who show themselves to be genuine, keen to learn and willing to commit. Good luck with the journey. Remember that there is a true compass in your body. Consult it regularly, and while you may have many unexpected adventures, you will never lose your way.”