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Yoga instructor finds balance, more space

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By Mary Garrigan, Journal Staff Writer

For Cora Wen, yoga is less about the pretzel-like poses she performs with ease on her mat and more about the spaces that yoga creates - in her body, her mind and her life - off the mat.

Wen is an internationally known yoga teacher who will lead "Heart & Harmony in the Black Hills: Yoga and Meditation with Cora Wen" Sept. 24-27 at Sylvan Lake Resort in Custer State Park.

"If you get space in your body and you get space in your mind, you might get it in your life, too," Wen said. "Often, things like compassion for others and forgiveness arise in that space."

Wen, 44, spoke by telephone from Nashville, Tenn., where she recently underwent an emergency appendectomy. She expects to be fully recovered from that abdominal surgery in time to lead the Black Hills yoga retreat.

Organizer Kris Van Deusen, a local yoga teacher and owner of Sun and Moon Yoga Studio, has studied yoga with Wen before and is thrilled to have her come to the Black Hills.

"Cora has much to teach about the practice of yoga," Van Deusen said. "It is so much more than what happens on the mat."

Yoga has been an important teacher in Wen's life ever since she took her first yoga class more than 10 years ago. At the time, she was a corporate banker and self-professed couch potato in her mid-30s who never, ever exercised.

"I was not an athletic person. I never exercised. I didn't run, bike, hike. I did nothing," Wen said.

She did have a high-stress job with US Bank that required a lot of travel. "I went to my first yoga class because I wanted some form of exercise I could do on the road, in my hotel room," she said.

It was love at first lotus for Wen and yoga.



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"I came out of that first class feeling fantastic. Not just physically fantastic, but every part of my being felt good. Of course, I wanted that sensation again."

So much so that she went to 37 weekend yoga workshops in one year and was soon spending six hours a day on her yoga practice, despite holding down a full-time banking job.

Wen brought her compulsive personality to yoga, which soon taught her a lesson on the importance of balance in life.

"I got so bad that I was annoyed when Thanksgiving with my family interrupted my yoga practice," she said. "And I was also very annoying to everyone around me. I had no social life, no relationships, because I didn't have time to go out to dinner or to a movie with friends. I had to do yoga."

Eventually, Wen realized how imbalanced her life had become, but even when the "honeymoon" period with her yoga practice ended, the joy remained.

"Cora's yoga practice is all about joy - of body, mind, heart and spirit," Van Deusen said.

In 2001, Wen quit her banking job and now earns her living as a yoga teacher. It was a career move that many questioned.

"My supervisors at the bank thought I was nuts. How could I leave a good job with a nice salary and a 401K retirement plan and medical benefits to become a full-time yoga teacher?"

Shortly before she left banking, she got a big salary increase. That was nice, she said, but it was nothing compared to the feeling she got teaching yoga. "When I saw my name on a yoga teaching schedule for the first time, I was filled with joy."

She helps spread that joy to some of the 15 million Americans taking yoga classes today, a huge increase from when yoga was first introduced to mainstream America in the 1960s by famous practitioners such as George Harrison of the Beatles.

"It's interesting that Americans have fallen in love with the ancient practice of yoga," Wen said. Today, yoga studios are popping up all over small-town America, and classes are routinely offered at YMCAs, churches and senior citizen centers. There are niche yoga classes tailored to every need, including office workers, toddlers, morbidly obese people and pregnant women.

Wen has studied with well-known yoga teachers Erich Schiffmann, Judith Hanson Lasater, Patricia Walden and Ramanand Patel. She has assisted Lasater, Schiffman and Rodney Yee in workshops throughout the U.S., Canada, and Mexico.

"Yoga as taught in America is very different from yoga taught in India, but that's true of a lot of things," said Wen, who is also a practicing Buddhist.

"America is more focused on the physical. We tend to want the quick fix," she said. "I read in magazines all the time now that 'so-and-so has a yoga-sculpted body.' Frankly, I'm not sure what that means."

As an avid practitioner of yoga, Wen said that yoga has not given her a perfect body, but it has given her a relatively pain-free one.

Born in Hong Kong of Chinese heritage, Wen does not have the typically tiny bone structure of many Asian women, she said. Large-boned and broad-shouldered, she always struggled with her weight and body image.

"I'm much more accepting of my body now," she said. "The kind of yoga I teach is not so much about the asanas, or the poses, but about being happy in your body, and in your family, your work and your life, too."

She emphasizes the calming, quieting, relaxing benefits of yoga. "Hopefully, at the end of a class, you walk out feeling better about not just your hamstrings, but about your world. You may smile at a stranger, or speak more lovingly to a spouse or a child," she said. "Yoga doesn't mean I no longer get angry at my husband or fight with my brother, but what yoga has taught me is that I can step back ... and deal with the conflict. Because yoga is not just on the mat. The real practice is amid householders."

Wen also speaks of showing loving kindness to people who are hard to love.

"She speaks of giving support and giving space to others. She speaks of having an attitude of gratitude, for whatever you have, even if it's not much and being grateful for the smallest and simplest things," Van Deusen said. "She speaks of taking your yoga practice off the mat and into the world."

Contact Mary Garrigan at 394-8410 or mary.garrigan@rapidcityjournal.com

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Web Site Contact: Debbie Renner debbie.renner@rapidcityjournal.com