

Geoffrey Roniger
Biography
March, 2006

I was born in 1975 to a psychiatrist father and a mother who would eventually become a psychiatric social worker. I grew up in New Orleans, LA, and for as long as I can possibly remember I have thought that existence is weird—not just mine in particular, but existence in general. I suppose it was this intrinsic tendency to question the nature of the universe, coupled with my unique parental heritage, which created my fascination with human behavior and metaphysical speculation.

In addition to being a psychiatrist, my father was an outstanding baseball player through his college days and became a very skilled tennis player in his adult days. I was therefore raised playing a variety of sports: baseball, tennis, football, soccer, and basketball. It seems that while I was absorbing my father's appreciation for the patterns of the human psyche, I was also absorbing his passion for physical movement, as expressed in competitive games. The co-development of these two (often juxtaposed) interests had the curious effect of making me over-analytical and hyper-self-critical in all activities of my life, but most prominently in the realm of sports. While the gift of the analytical mind was helping me to read people and therefore navigate social situations, it was also inhibiting my ability to spontaneously respond during sporting activities. This internal rift between mind and body would later become the unconscious motivating factor in my exploration of Hatha yoga.

I left New Orleans in 1994 to attend Vanderbilt University, where I majored in European Studies. By immersing myself in courses on European history, philosophy, music, art, and literature, I understand now that I was unconsciously tracing the roots of our contemporary American worldview. I spent half of my junior year living in southern France, and this experience further clarified, by way of cultural contrast, some of the ingrained values and ideologies of the American psyche. Basic to all of my studies and my explorations living abroad has been my personal belief that something is drastically wrong with the current state of world affairs. Thus my senior thesis, entitled *Visions of Dystopia: The Powerlessness and Passivity of Modern Man in "Brave New World," "1984," and "Brazil,"* was the culminating investigation of this point of view.

I was introduced to yoga midway through my college career and became immediately impressed by its effectiveness as a physical discipline. At that time I was studying a highly dynamic form, the Ashtanga Yoga of Pattabhi Jois, and this greatly appealed to the athlete in me. I would continue to study this form throughout 1999 when I moved to Edinburgh, Scotland. There, as fate would have it, I found a job helping to renovate a 19th century church into Europe's largest Ashtanga Yoga studio. In addition to deepening my physical practice, I also started penetrating the philosophical background of yoga and Buddhism through the reading of great texts. T.K.V. Desikachar's *The Heart of Yoga*, Robert Thurman's *Inner Revolution*, J. Krishnamurti's *Think on These Things*, and Alan Watts's *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, all became landmark works for me that exposed new possibilities for both seeing and being in the world.

When my European work visa expired, I decided to move to San Francisco because my intuition told me that I would find my next yoga teacher there. I was also beginning to embrace the self-study component of yoga practice, and this intense need to understand my own patterns prompted me to start Hakomi therapy. Hakomi, a body-centered form of psychotherapy, seemed like a refreshing departure from the more scientific/intellectual model of classical psychiatry practiced by my father. The emphasis on uncovering core beliefs through listening to the body rather than through analytic introspection was appealing because of its directness. The body-centered approach was also highlighting what was already beginning to reveal itself through my practice of the yoga poses. I was beginning to observe how the same self-critical voice that had hampered me as a high school athlete tended to make me feel more inadequate as a yoga practitioner and therefore more alienated from myself.

Co-emerging with the initial stages of my therapeutic process was a shift in the style of yoga that I was practicing. This shift began in 2001 when I took my first class with Rodney Yee. Rodney's deep

understanding of the human body, which comes partly from his background in the precision-oriented Iyengar yoga tradition, combined with his creative use of imagery and his unique ability to bring yogic philosophy to life, changed my perception of what the practice could be about. Instead of feeling like I needed to move through a certain number of poses to have a sufficient practice, I became more interested in holding poses for a longer period of time to gain a clearer understanding of the nature of the resistance in my body. This new emphasis on self-observation, which paralleled the work I was doing with Hakomi therapy, did not instantly change my self-critical patterns, but it did give me more objective distance from them and therefore seemed to diffuse their potency.

My commitment to studying with Rodney heightened when I decided to enroll in Piedmont Yoga Studio's 18-month Advanced Studies Program in 2002. There I had the privilege of studying with other exceptional senior teachers: Richard Rosen, Patricia Sullivan, and Clare Finn. During the period that I attended the Advanced Studies Program, I had another significant experience that would radically deepen my understanding of my internal world: two 10-day Vipassana meditation courses. By sitting and observing my breath and bodily sensations for nearly 12 hours a day, without the distractions of talking, writing, reading, or watching TV, I was able to penetrate to an experiential realization of impermanence. Whereas before the Vipassana courses I had only been reading about the concept of impermanence, I now had a visceral appreciation for it as an experience and for its implications in altering my worldview.

Through the coalescing forces of the Hakomi work, the Advanced Studies Program, and the Vipassana meditation courses, something in my attitude toward life had shifted. It took me a while to sort this out on a conscious level, but I realized that it is ultimately how one perceives the world that determines one's experience. While no drastic changes had taken place in the external realm of my life, I somehow felt that my relationship to outside events was different. This shift in attitude also manifested itself in my thought processes, so that the same self-critical voice that had always caused feelings of censorship and hesitation now became more muted. The yoga practice had now become more about inward listening for me—more about undoing and unraveling rather than doing and accumulating. I felt less judgmental toward myself and more curious about how I had come to embody certain mental attitudes that had been running me for nearly thirty years.

Before graduating from Piedmont's Advanced Studies Program, I was given the opportunity to begin teaching at The Yoga Loft in San Francisco. While a more humble side of me felt unready to teach such a sophisticated and profound art form, a more confident side felt completely in line with this vocation. By 2005 my public classes had grown considerably, and I had started working with a number of private clients. All signs seemed to be pointing me in the direction of teaching full time, which I have done now for the last year. My approach to teaching yoga is an amalgamation of all of the elements from the different styles that I have found effective in my own practice. This blend includes the fluidity and movement from the Ashtanga tradition, the alignment and energetic principles from the Iyengar tradition, and the orientation toward undoing as opposed to doing. Underlying all of these ingredients is the emphasis on natural, fluid breathing, as I feel that the breath is the most reliable indication of the state of the body and mind.

Since my teaching debut in the spring of 2002, I have been featured in the Awakened Athlete column of *Yoga Journal*, and I have appeared in 2 yoga videos: Advanced Living International's *Yoga Sessions III* and Gaiam's *Yoga Now* with my teacher, Rodney Yee. I am very dedicated to this practice and continue my study of it diligently. I feel very strongly about bringing it out into the world and sharing its benefits with others.