

# BODY ORIGAMI

## CALIFORNIA YOGA COMES TO TOKYO

by Leza Lowitz

**A**merican writer Leza Lowitz just opened a yoga studio in Tokyo called "Sun and Moon Yoga." Although she's been a freelance writer for the past 15 years, she confessed that she couldn't have stayed sane without yoga. Now she wants to share a bit of that sanity with others, especially in Tokyo, the city that never sleeps. We caught up with her to talk about her passion for twisting.

Unlike many yoga teachers, Lowitz insists that she wasn't born a pretzel. In fact, she first discovered yoga in Northern California after returning from an eight-month trip to Tokyo in 1990 that lasted 5 years. Life in Tokyo was extremely fast-paced, and she was your basic Type-A personality, working ten jobs, grabbing a bite to eat on the train, never slowing down. When she came back to California, she was in culture shock and decided to try a yoga class at a local dance center. Her teacher was a mime from France who had a very playful, very caring teaching style and yoga practice. Lowitz had always thought of yoga as "too slow" for her personality, but as it turns out, it was the perfect antidote to her energetic lifestyle.

As a writer, she says she spent a lot of her time "in her head." After the first few yoga classes, she discovered that she was an expatriate in her very own skin. So she began to practice yoga regularly, and found an entire city within her body. "Yoga led me back into my body, which was like an unexplored world. Since I love to travel, I thought: here's my next trip! I was ready to go. My bags were packed," she recalled.

That was ten years ago, and Lowitz is still on that journey, discovering unknown alleys within. Only now, she has become a certified yoga instructor and is sharing that journey with others.

### Bending Reality

So what is so wonderful about stretching and

twisting? "Remember that Yoga comes from the Sanskrit word *yuj*, which means "yoke" or "union," Lowitz says. "Yoga unifies the body and mind through the breath, opening channels of energy that send the life force—*prana* or *ki*—through the body. Yoga offers a way of Being rather than Doing. It's a very powerful gateway into the soul. It's sometimes called the science of conscious awareness. Practicing yoga allows us to slow down, quiet the mind, and gives us a tremendous opportunity to explore our potential for growth—both physical and spiritual—and unity within ourselves and with others. That's an amazing gift."

"Yoga teaches us how fragile and complex the human body is. It teaches us to accept where we are, to breathe into difficulty, and to let go of willfulness. It allows us to open places in the body where the energy is blocked, and teaches us that sometimes we limit ourselves in our own minds, with our habits and beliefs," she explains. How many of us have gone through life literally holding our breath?

Lowitz believes that practicing yoga is like holding up a mirror to yourself. "When you do a yoga pose, your mind begins to wander. At first, you judge and compare, and eventually, you just release the judgments and comparisons and go deep into the breath, into the here and now."

She describes yoga as a moving meditation, but it's also the practice of surrender, which is an incredibly vulnerable, powerful action. "If you can trust the unknown enough to fully surrender to what *is*, rather than looking toward a future of what *could be*, you begin to fully live in the moment. When you live in the moment, you realize how inter-connected everything in the universe is," she explains. "Through yoga, the heart opens, and everything in life begins to shift towards balance and acceptance. Yoga opens up enormous channels of creativity and teaches us how to embrace the 'process' rather than focusing on the 'goal.'"



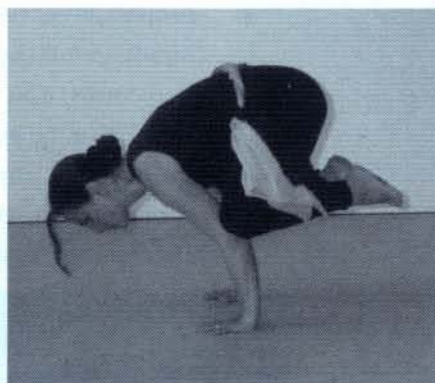
That's exactly what happened. The more Lowitz practiced yoga, the more the experience of quieting down and listening to the breath, to the body, and to the silences between breaths, began to resonate for her. She realized that being a Type-A person was not really serving her, but rather, was burning her out. Was there a way to "do less" and "live more?" If so, she would find it.

## Finding an Om Within

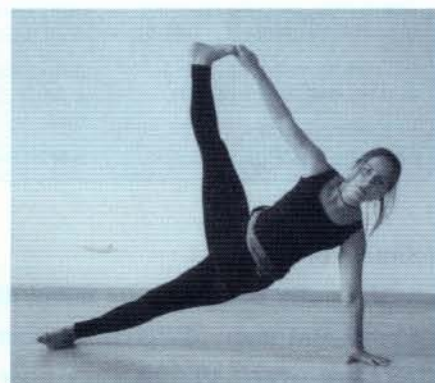
As Lowitz discovered in a decade of practicing yoga, it can also be a very cathartic tool for self-transformation. While she was stretching and twisting, breathing and calming her mind and body, she discovered places in her body that were very stiff—and she also discovered incredible reserves of strength, stamina and newfound flexibility. As a child, she says she experienced physical and emotional traumas, which were stored in her body's



Boat Pose



Crow Pose



Side Plank Pose

cellular memory. As a result, she had a lot of subconscious blocks, which Yoga helped her to release. It taught her to trust, to step into the unknown. "By discovering where emotions are stored in the body, we can work to accept them and not push them away. If we walk into the difficulty, we can breathe through it and release these emotions and traumas," she asserts. That is one of the cornerstones of her teachings. To explore whatever emotions and memories surface, and to embrace them, honor them, process them, and let them go.

An interesting side-effect of releasing blocks was a newfound capacity for creativity. "Nature abhors a vacuum," she says. "When I released those pent-up feelings, yoga helped open up deeper channels of creativity." She'd been writing and publishing for years, and had a fulfilling career as a freelance journalist and translator. But when she first started yoga, she was struggling with her writing and feeling frustrated. So between writing periods, she'd go to yoga class to unwind. And one day, a funny thing happened. As she was dangling in Downward-Facing Dog, the line of a

poem came to her. "Within my body, there's a city." During her practice, the muse would speak to her and other lines would come.

## A Twist of Fate

The process was mysterious, but Lowitz explains it this way. "As a moving meditation, yoga lends itself to poetry, to creative exploration, to self-expression. The poses have provocative names, often based on animal movements, and lend themselves to metaphor: Eagle, Cobra, Bridge, Tree, Monkey. When I "got out of my own way" and stopped trying so hard, my writing began to flow."

One night, she performed the yoga poses and read the poems at a small reading on the coast of Northern California. As luck would have it, Anne Cushman, an editor at *Yoga Journal*, was in the audience. Cushman encouraged Lowitz to write more yoga poems.

Eventually, she collected those poems into an award-winning book, "Yoga Poems: Lines to Unfold By" (Stone Bridge Press, 2000) that married her love of yoga with her love of metaphor and imagery.

"I realized that yoga helps us recover our emotional core and connection to the world through breath, movement and awareness. Poetry does the same through words, images, and sound. Each of the poems in my book is inspired by a yoga pose or breath exercise. Some are highly personal, others are more like meditations." Like this poem from the book:

## The Benefits of Bending It (Unlike Beckham)

While being inspired creatively was a wonderful result of taking yoga class, as Lowitz points out, there are many other concrete benefits of yoga—physical, spiritual and contemplative—and each yoga student is different. Yoga reduces stress, releases toxins, calms the nervous system, tones and strengthens the systems of the body, and creates flexibility in the spine, which is like the



### ***Adho Mukha Svanāsana ( Downward Dog)***

Within my body there's a city	mind-body-belly oxygen tank both empty and full.
nameless streets dead-end alleys	<i>Listen to the place you feel it the most</i>
of pains and promises, a mapless Atlantis	says the teacher, head dangling from
cordoned off by years and bones.	<i>adho mukha svanāsana</i>
The muscles pull the tendons throb	a single bulb on a simple cord.
my joints crack out their resistance—	So once again I go down deeper
places I've ached undetected	to where the muscles pull
for a quarter of a century send out their muted frequencies	the tendons throb the pain travels
from an unfamiliar pose.	its clandestine escape and then retreats
Descending too quickly, I implode.	in the halfway reach where each breath
Down here, or even up there breath is the most	razes another skyscraper I've aspired to,
difficult of absences and so, two finger-widths	brings the earth up a little lighter between my toes.
beneath the <i>hara</i> I find my bearings	© 2000 Leza Lowitz

fountain of youth.

She notes that there are many different kinds of yoga and many different teachers, and since there are over 840,000 yoga poses, there are thousands of opportunities for breakthroughs. She also emphasizes that there are plenty of poses that are challenging, if not impossible, to do. "This is a really good thing to know, because when beginners come to yoga class, they get discouraged or intimidated. But there's no way someone can do all of those body-bending poses. And the truth is, that's not the point of yoga. "The poses are just envelopes. You pour your body, energy and intention into them. Everyone's journey is different, but each one is powerful," she says. Through teaching yoga, Lowitz sees the ways in which yoga can change people's lives. One of her students quit smoking, another found the courage to quit her stagnant job and pursue her childhood dream of being an artist, and an older man rediscovered his youthfulness and vigor, having fun "playing" in headstand and handstand, poses he never imagined he could do over 50.

### **Losing the Guru?**

As yoga becomes increasingly popular, many people fear it is losing part of its spiritual roots and turning into

another competitive sport. Lowitz agrees and disagrees. "I think some people initially come to yoga for its physical properties, such as relaxation or balance or strengthening, but they inevitably discover its spiritual resonance, especially if the teacher guides them down that path philosophically." She enjoys a vigorous yoga practice and teaches sweat-inducing "Power Yoga," but it always has a spiritual underpinning. She also likes to teach deeply relaxing "Restorative Yoga," which helps strengthen the feminine *apana* energy, a receptive, passive, open energy that restores the body's natural equilibrium. "We sometimes forget that the fallow periods are just as important as the growth periods. Those are the times we till the soil. And they're every bit as important as the harvest. So we have to nurture ourselves by letting ourselves retreat and regain balance in the fallow times."

Why does yoga have such a remarkable effect on people's lives? "As soon as you begin to connect with the breath, to fully breathe in and out, something automatically transforms. You understand intuitively that the body is sacred, that the breath and life-force energy are sacred. When the energy channels of the body begin to open, there's a subtle shift in consciousness as well, a deeper sense of awareness. Yoga becomes much more than a form of



Sun & Moon

physical exercise. A good teacher can guide you on a spiritual quest, but as your yoga practice deepens, you begin to listen to your body, which is the best and only real teacher."

### **The Power of Now**

As with any boom, yoga is a rapidly changing field, with many different schools and styles. Lowitz says it should be noted that yoga in India is very different than yoga in America, just as American Zen is entirely different from what is practiced in Japan. But, according to Lowitz, that doesn't mean it's better, or worse. "Each



culture adapts an import to suit itself. We've been lucky that yoga is so flexible, and it's my hope that teachers continue to impart the spiritual teachings of yoga as well as share the physical benefits."

Although yoga caught on quickly in California and in the rest of the States, it has been slow to catch on in Japan and is just now gaining popularity. Lowitz explained why. "California is part of the Pacific Rim, and I think we've always been influenced by eastern cultures, mostly due to the proximity across the Pacific and the large Asian population. In the 1950s and 60s, as part of the Beat counter-culture, Californians "imported" Zen meditation from Japan and yoga from India. Now, decades later, I think yoga is popular in the States because people recognize the need for sanctuary and conscious awareness. We've all been so outwardly focused—on careers, material goods, and on "getting ahead" that those surface gains are becoming increasingly empty. People understand that those achievements, while often wonderful, do not necessarily lead to happiness or lasting satisfaction. Look what's happening in the world. The only movement is one toward unity."

"In the past five years, " she continued, "There's been a tremendous shift in focus towards simplicity, environmental awareness and global consciousness. The practice of yoga embodies these values of respect for the earth and its inhabitants, starting with the individual. People in Japan are becoming more conscious as well. Since nature-worship is such a big part of the Japanese cultural tradition, it would be good to see a return of those values in the next generations. In fact, there are three budding booms right now in Japan among the younger generations: Zen meditation, Sutra copying, which used to be done by old ladies, and Yoga. I think these disciplines are pointing young people in the right direction. Back to inner peace and consideration for others. Away from their video games and cell phones."

## Here Comes the Sun—and the Moon

Lucky for us, Lowitz has brought the California sensibility back to Tokyo, and her beautiful new studio is conveniently located in Meguro, only one minute from the JR and Subway stations. The studio, named Sun and

Moon Yoga, is a warm blend of East and West, designed by Tokyo architect Hashimoto Yuji to be a sanctuary in the heart of the city. The walls are painted wasabi green, and it's got a moon-viewing window design that looks out on a bit of green in the heart of the city. It's like a cozy little Japanese teahouse. People who come to the

studio say they come to nurture themselves and relax.

The name "Sun and Moon" comes from a literal translation of Hatha Yoga, a style which balances the opposing energies of the body (sun and moon, male and female, yin and yang, left and right, light and dark, etc) to attain equanimity and balance. Ha means "sun" and Tha means "moon." The studio offers a wide range of classes for every level, from beginning yoga to power yoga to restorative yoga—a wonderful, relaxing yoga that uses pillows, blankets and props for support. Her teaching style is a

creative, invigorating and inspiring blend of Ashtanga, Iyengar, Kripalu and Kundalini styles. There are also special workshops, including an "Introduction to Yoga" series for beginners. Lowitz wants to make yoga accessible to everyone, regardless of age, shape, or level of fitness. "Anyone can do the practice," she claims. "As long as you can breathe, you can do yoga."

And what does Lowitz think of the future of yoga? "Yoga will continue to be popular and practitioners will continue to experience the life-changing effects of the practice. To me, a true yogi is someone who is moved by yoga, someone dedicated enough to sit on the mat and be fully present with whatever arises during practice. That is the heart of yoga."

For more information about "Sun and Moon Yoga," Tokyo, please visit

[www.lezalowitz.com](http://www.lezalowitz.com)

