

Erich Schiffmann on yoga, love, and freedom

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Erich Schiffmann speaks annually at Lulu Bandha's Yoga Crib, a four-day weekend immersion in Ojai, California.

Erich Schiffmann Blows Your Mind

It's summer, and I'm standing outside a peach-tinted stucco building in Venice, California, about to take a Freedom Style yoga class from founder Erich Schiffmann—a larger-than-life master in the American yoga community.

I take a big breath, follow a few dozen willowy students into the studio, and encounter a meditating long-haired 60-year-old who has been teaching yoga for 45 years, and whose karmic journey has allowed him to study with almost every yoga legend of the 20th century.

Schiffmann emerges from his meditation to offer a 20-minute esoteric philosophy lesson, guide a 20-minute meditation, teach some Freedom Style asanas, and then guide another lengthy meditation session. Not your basic yoga class, but what did I expect from someone whose classes explore, shall we say, esoteric themes all their own: *I See You, I Love You*; *Be Relaxed and Practice Love*; *What Happens after the Year of the Miracle?* Reading Schiffmann's first book, *Moving into Stillness*, and practicing alongside Ali MacGraw—on Schiffmann's DVD, that is—barely prepared me for this.

Yoga may never have experienced this phenomenon had Schiffmann not received an auspicious 12th birthday present—*The Spirit of Practicing Yoga*—from his older brother, Karl, who wasn't even into yoga. Neither was Schiffmann. "The book was just some sort of destiny thing," he says. He tossed it into a drawer and didn't look at it again for two years. Then it was love at first read. >>



He next fell hard for Yogananda and Krishnamurti, especially the latter's epic book, *Think on These Things*. "I remember thinking it was the best book I'd ever read. I didn't read anything except Krishnamurti after that for the next few years!"

He was so besotted with spiritual texts that he got into meditation, ditched his Venice surfer friends, and joined the Self-Realization Fellowship. After graduating from high school, he enrolled in Krishnamurti's private school near London—Brockwood Park—just to learn philosophy from his idol in person and to try Viniyoga, which he loved.

After a year, Krishnamurti advised Schiffmann to study with his yogic mentor, T.K. Desikachar, in India, which he did. He was granted a yoga teaching job at Brockwood Park upon his return, and fate struck again when he was introduced to Iyengar yoga by Jean Bernard Rishi, a renowned teacher and the father of a Brockwood student.

"I fell in love with it right off the bat because I loved the precision of what they were doing," says Schiffmann. "It got my mind involved in a way it hadn't been up to that point." After training

with Iyengar himself, as well as Mary Stewart and Dona Holleman on a second trip to India, his yoga course seemed set.

Then he read a magazine article by Joel Kramer.

Kramer, a self-taught yogi in the 1960s, practiced a

highly intuitive style of yoga that pictured energy lines rippling out from his sacral core through the muscles of his limbs to help his body stretch open. No precision needed. "I thought,

BIG TEACHINGS

1 Listening is the big learning. Learn to listen to the wisdom of the universe. But listen for it from within you. Listen to your heart and conscience, and then dare to do as your deepest feelings are guiding you to do.

2 Learn to honor your natural rhythms. Sometimes you need to do more yoga; sometimes less. You have to give yourself permission to do less when that is the right thing to do. Not just always push, push, push. The idea is to listen and remember—be guided from within.

3 Don't have it all mapped out in advance, thinking you know what you are supposed to do. You don't know!

4 When you think less, knowing flows in.

5 When you experience the peace within you, you will spontaneously undergo a fundamental transformation in the way you think about yourself and how you see the world.

Wow, it's a perfect mixture of yoga and Krishnamurti," Schiffmann recalls. He wrote to Kramer asking for lessons, and Kramer had just one request: A personal introduction to Krishnamurti.

Schiffmann agreed, Kramer flew overseas, and, Schiffmann recalls, "In about 10 minutes he turned my mind inside out."

Schiffmann says Kramer changed his yoga practice from being a mechanical copy of Iyengar's to doing pretty much the same thing—looking for the feeling and precision of perfect flow—but with more feeling and intuition. "My yoga started feeling like *my* yoga," he says. "I had finally learned to go within and learn from my own experience."

Five years later, Schiffmann moved to Northern California to study with Kramer, and the seeds of Freedom Style yoga were sown.

"Yoga is not a PE class. You're teaching students how to start feeling free, spontaneous, and intuitive," says Schiffmann, who draws from the teachings of his past mentors, while putting energy and self-guidance above all. "It's not about doing an asana the way a teacher wants you to—it's about trusting yourself enough to do that which feels most right to you."

It may not be a conventional way to teach yoga, but, as Schiffmann points out, the path to yoga doesn't conform to convention. He wants students to realize it entails truth, joy, consciousness, union, and awareness. And his lectures steer the way.

"I talk about yoga as getting 'online,'" says Schiffmann, "using your *mind* to get wirelessly connected. When you do this, you will experience the fact that Big Mind *is* your mind, the Supreme Consciousness *is* your consciousness."

—Lisa Miriam Cherry >>