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A Teacher's Teacher

The setting is Rancho La Puerta, nestled at the foot of the sacred Mt. Kuchumaa in Baja California. Being there is, in and of itself, a transformative experience. But this feeling is magnified many times over by the yoga retreat that we are attending.

This week-long retreat led by Michele Hebert is comprehensive. It includes philosophy, postures, breathing and sound taught in a traditional manner that is surprisingly rare to find and deeply affecting. Patanjali's ancient teachings of the Yoga Sutras are the backbone of Hebert's classes, with the days structured around the eight-fold path of Raja yoga. "Yoga means to yoke or unite; she begins on the first day. "But Patanjali teaches that `yoga is the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind: So yoga is a state of being," she continues. "The yogic state is a state of grace:"



This introduction is followed by movement, which is approached slowly and consciously. We focus on learning postures with greater awareness, attention and understanding. Next, Michele's husband, Dr. Mehrad Nazari, teaches a more invigorating class that strikes the perfect balance between movement and stillness.

By the third class of the day we are melting into a new depth of beauty, tranquility and grace. It's a blessing that Hebert remains closely connected to the wisdom of her teacher. With a sparkle in her eye she says, "I always like to acknowledge my teacher Walter Baptiste, who taught yoga for 65 years. His wife, Magana Baptiste, is 84 and still teaches yoga and dance. Pretty amazing to see what can happen when someone practices yoga over a lifetime!"

Vibrant and glowing, Hebert herself has been teaching yoga for over 30 years. Her training began when she unexpectedly cancelled her enrollment to graduate school and hopped on a plane to San Francisco. A few weeks later, hardly even knowing what yoga was, she walked into the Baptistes' natural food restaurant and asked if she could work there in exchange for yoga classes. After her first class with Baptiste, he looked her in the eyes and said, "welcome home."

Hebert immediately began taking every class she could and developed a very close gurustudent relationship with Baptiste. "We had to hold the poses for a long time," she recalls, "and then begin to explore the psychological components of the pose and the related yogic philosophy." Also a renowned bodybuilder, Baptiste worked with Hebert in the gym, incorporating yogic principles into weight training. Her training with Baptiste eventually led to her managing his San Francisco Center and running his retreat center in El Salvador.

But then, after 14 years of working closely with this master teacher, he kicked her out of the nest. "You came here to teach, now you need to go out in the world and teach," she recalls him saying. So Hebert went to Rancho La Puerta, where she found a position teaching yoga, meditation and fitness. "Teaching there was so valuable in learning to translate what I had been given spiritually to a mainstream audience," she remarks.



Since then, Hebert has become world-renowned for her teachings. Now based in San Diego, she continues to teach classes, retreats, private sessions and teacher training apprentice programs in various locations, including Ginseng Yoga in San Diego.

People are devoted to these teachings because they find a fullness of truth that is like a precious jewel. On our second day of the retreat, we get a greater glimpse of this wealth when discussing pranayama - one of Hebert's favorite subjects. "Prana is the life force, it is vitality" she explains. "Through the breath we connect with this vital energy. The mind and the breath are like this;" she says as she wraps two fingers around each other.

Day three addressed pratyahara, withdrawal of the senses. We gave attention to the quality of our thoughts during the various postures. Day four was devoted to dharana, concentration, wherein we focused on sound. The fifth day was about meditation, dhyana. We fittingly ended with the subject of samadhi.

More than yogic postures, more than hand gestures, more than sound, breathing and meditation, the retreat classes imparted an ageless truth. Hebert's gift in sharing this knowledge is brilliant.

Leaving the Ranch after this life-changing week, tears of joy and gratitude welled up in many of the participants' eyes. In parting, Hebert enthusiastically shared this sentiment:, "The people that walk this path have a lot of joy. The closer we get to our spiritual essence, the more joy we experience:"

Hebert clearly exemplifies living in joy.

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