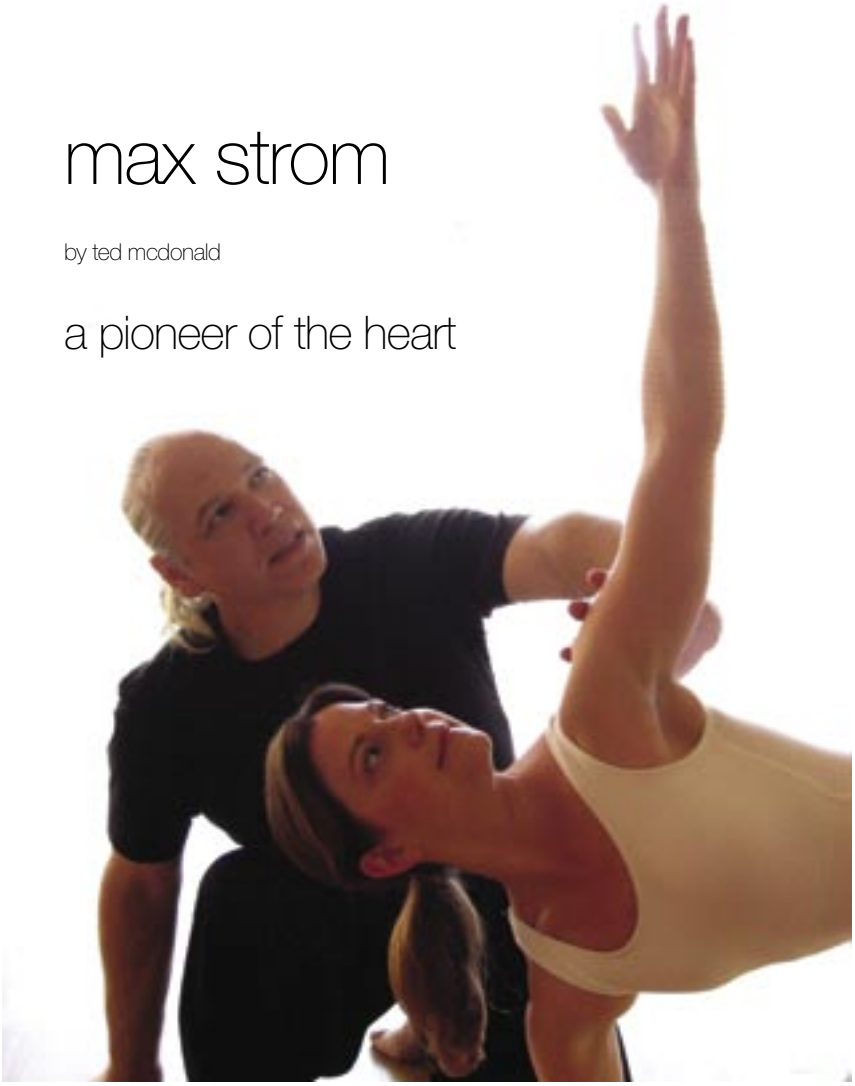
max strom

by ted mcdonald

a pioneer of the heart



Max Strom's yoga classes have always been dedicated to opening the heart and enriching the lives of his students so they can make better choices in their own lives, and affect positive change in the world. He recently moved to Ashland, Oregon after years of teaching in Los Angeles and built what is now the Exhale Center for Sacred Movement, a world-renowned yoga studio in Venice, California. He recently released his Yoga DVD entitled Max Strom: Strength, Grace and Healing.

YogiTimes: What was your first experience of yoga?

Max Strom: My real introduction to yoga was at the age of 15. I had a spiritual crisis where I wanted to understand how the world worked, what was spirit, what was god, is there god? I spent about five to seven years studying intensely. At that time, I took up meditation and Pa Kua, a non-violent marshal art, and also Chi Gong for a few years in my early twenties. So, I had already been studying many of the aspects of yoga before ever putting a mat down. I started hatha yoga when a friend dragged me to a yoga class on my 35th birthday, and this year I'll be turning fifty.

YT: Happy Birthday.

MS: Thank You. Yoga was familiar to me because it was similar in many ways to Chi Gong, yet it was very different as well. I have a lot of physical challenges. Some I was born with, and some came along the way. I had clubfeet at birth and many surgeries to correct them. I had knee-high plaster casts, braces and so on. I've also broken some bones [like] my left elbow. It doesn't straighten now, so when I do a handstand, I need to bend both elbows in order to do it.

When I first went to hatha yoga it was a great relief. It felt like I was starting to deal with some of these issues, helping my body to heal. I started practicing six days a week after about two months. Then I started to realize the emotional benefits I was getting, and eventually, within about 6 months to a year I started understanding the spiritual aspects, and started integrating my previous studies and experiences.

YT: It sounds like it was almost an immediate transition for you, bringing the spiritual and emotional into the physical practice.

MS: Yes. I started to feel like plates of armor were being pulled off of me. This gave me a sense of physical freedom, of course. My joints were opening and my muscles were elongating. But it was also opening the stagnant energy channels, so it was also opening my heart center on a daily basis, especially through the breathing practice, but also through the asana practice. I attribute much of my rapid transformation to learning how to breathe well early on. That is when things really started to move.

Through the breathing practice I really felt the way I thought. The way my mind worked and the choices I started to make were different. As soon as one's system for making choices changes, it changes the course of our life. From little decisions to big decisions – you begin to make them differently. Instead of going here, I go there. Instead of eating this, I'm going to eat that. Instead of befriending this person, I'm going to befriend that person, etc. All those little decisions change the course of your life.

After a while, I discovered that I didn't want as many things. I didn't desire as many things. It wasn't that I was trying to curb my appetite; it was just that I didn't need as much stimulus to be content and happy. When we think of ascetics who renounce certain pleasures, it can seem really difficult, but I realized that with enough practice these things start to drop away. "I don't refrain from eating doughnuts because I'm using my will. I don't eat them because I don't desire to eat them." It's a completely different experience.

YT: Were you surprised that these desires would fall away so easily?

MS: Very surprised. I found that yoga helped to take away many of these desires. Not all of them. I still have some struggles, but not the ones that were plaguing me before. The people I knew that practiced yoga didn't really talk about this much. And I think some of them hadn't had the experience because they didn't establish a breathing practice. Once it started happening to me, I started meeting other yogis more earnest on their path, and I was able to learn more about this.

YT: Did you have a natural transition into teaching?

MS: I'm always surprised by my answer to that question. I never saw myself as becoming a teacher of any kind. After a few years of practicing, I lost the desire to be in the work that I was in, which was writing movies in Hollywood. And although I really loved the writing part, I really disdained the business part, which is quite ruthless to writers. Finally, I wrote one more script just to have enough money to live off of for the rest of the year, minimally. I was trying to figure out what to do to create an income, and a close friend suggested that I teach.

I thought he was very sweet for suggesting that, but it was just not a possibility for me. I talked to another friend about it and he not only agreed, but he set up a class in his living room. Then two other friends started setting up classes pretty much against my objections. So, I started teaching in living rooms for the first six months by donation. These classes grew organically, and I had to move the classes into a space that I rented. It was a gym-type setting. Eventually, Yogaworks invited me to sub at their school, and after a few weeks I started teaching on their schedule.

I was stunned that it happened as rapidly with virtually no effort. The next thing I knew, I was actually able to make ends meet teaching yoga, which I thought was the greatest thing I've ever done. When I say greatest, I mean most meaningful and most satisfying and fulfilling.

YT: What would you like to say about teaching yoga?

MS: I think yoga teachers can get so bogged down in teaching how to practice yoga that often why we practice is forgotten. Not just as an esoteric or intellectual exercise, but really: why are we doing this? And if we're doing it for these reasons, why don't we do it this way?

I find that the mind is tremendously powerful. If you invite people to focus on their highest intention while they are in their asanas, they'll focus on that. And, they will have a result from that that doesn't have anything to do with me. So I try to constantly remind people, without hitting them over the head with it, why are you here, not just in this class, but in life? What is your purpose? Then channel that purpose through your practice.

TM: And meditation?

MS: For the average Westerner, asana and pranayama are really necessary before meditation. It's like we are living in a car that's covered in mud. We don't know we're in the car because we can't see out. Everything we know is in this car. We live in here. Then we start practicing asana and pranayama, and that would be like cleaning the windshield. All of sudden we start cleaning the windshield and we realize there is a whole world out there we weren't aware of. Of course, instead of looking out, we're actually looking into our own hearts – into our own being.

Then you realize that you are in the car and there is some place to go and now you understand what all these instruments are for. They are to take you on a journey forward. That's the practice of meditation. Cleaning the windshield is the practice of asana and pranayama. Then driving the car, going through on your journey through your spiritual practice is meditation.

One of the ways I teach meditation is by asking people to visualize not just an object, but a person or a thing in their life that they have immense gratitude for. I don't say who and I don't say what. I say a person or a thing. That means they can be focusing on Jesus, they can be focusing on their grandmother or their two-month-old baby. They can be focusing on a religious symbol. What ever it is, they choose, so I'm not imposing it on them. They choose something that is immeasurably valuable to them on an emotional and spiritual level and they focus on that.

If I think about my grandmother and she is the person I am most grateful for, my heart swells, tears come to my eyes, I feel filled with the highest emotions of a human being. So, now this meditator is sitting there with their heart open, filled with love and their mind quiets. Rather than waiting for something to happen, I try to let people understand that they are what's going to happen. They are the guest that's coming in to the house. Don't wait for the guest. You are the guest. It is your heart that is going to heal, not someone else's heart that's going to heal yours. You're the healer. You are the person that's going to lead by example.

YT: What would you like your students to leave with?

For me, yoga is not based on intellectual ideas, it's based on direct personal experience. The deepest level of that is called mysticism, where we actually have a spiritual connection. I love to see people when they discover their breath for the first time. You can see sometimes people in *savasana* involuntarily breathing very deeply and slowly with the look of ecstasy on their face because their breath has awakened, the prana has awakened in their body and they have a new heightened sense of being.

I love it when people find they are able to open their hearts a little more; they are able to leave the class kinder than they were when they walked in, or more forgiving. That's what is really going to change their life. If they can put their foot behind their head and do some complicated postures, they are going to impress their friends for five minutes. But if they can go home and if their wife of their husband or boyfriend or girlfriend notice that they are becoming happier and kinder in the past six or nine months since they've been doing yoga, then I feel they are getting something out of their yoga practice that is meaningful and lasting.

TM: How can someone use yoga to change or enhance their connection with god or a higher source? Have you found any success fostering a connection with the divine through yoga for others?

MS: I believe so. There are different ways of going at this challenge. Some people chose to do it by being very focused in on their own ideology. But as a teacher, I find that there is another way that seems to be working really well, which is to use universal principles that can apply to almost any religion or spiritual path. Principles that I try to abide by in my own life. I leave out names and things that can trigger people to turn you off.

So, for instance, if I say: let's all pray to God, that's going to turn off fifty percent of the class. Well, first of all, which god? To a Jew it's one thing; to a Catholic it's another; to a Protestant it's another; to a Muslim it's another. And an atheist is not going to listen to you anymore because now he thinks you're a kook because you believe in God.

But rather than just not talking about it, you can bring up words like love, truth, honor, respect, gratitude, forgiveness. Those words can be listened to and heard by all these different groups. Their hearts can be touched. They are universal and in the essence of all the teachings anyway. So, I prefer to talk in a language that almost anyone can hear. It's like being an usher with a penlight. The usher leads you to your seat, you sit down and the movie comes on. The usher didn't make the movie. The usher just led you to your seat. I think if we can be successful doing that, by leading people into their own hearts, then we are truly in service.

Max will be teaching a workshop at Exhale Center For Sacred Movement. May 26-28, 2006.

maxstrom.com