Introduction and Yoga Origins

– Hello everybody welcome to this really important interview for the reverse heart disease naturally summit. We didn't just pick anybody. We picked probably the most prominent yoga educator instructor and practitioner on the U. S. Surface and maybe the planet all also a very dear friend and a fellow Detroiter. So I can actually vouch for what he's done for the local, the regional and the national international yoga community.

So without further ado Johnny Kest how are you? – Very good Joel thank you for having me. – Very grateful for your taking the time out of your very busy schedule.

You Have so much that you do all the time. We go back. I would estimate 25-30 years when you started opening advanced and beautiful yoga studios in Detroit. And uh began the tradition of big classes, packed classes, wonderful community uh and then also of course yoga teacher training and I was just one of those people in a downward dog on a sweaty mat and a wonderful room and you obviously had an amazing ability to bring a community together and teach and inspire. But tell us you know a little uh you're a very famous yoga instructor and yoga trainer. I believe you're the national director of yoga Training for the Lifetime Fitness. You know mega brand of super gyms and have done that for a long time. But tell us a little bit go back to I think it's Hawaii and give people a little sense why you know decades later yoga has been a part of your life almost your entire life. – Yes. Um I was introduced to yoga in Hawaii.

You got that at the age of 12, my father, you know, had us four kids, my parents were divorced and he was living in Hawaii and he had us four kids and he was going to yoga every morning Ashtanga Vinyasa with David Williams who was the very first American to bring this more vigorous style of yoga to America Ashtanga vinyasa.

And that's where I got my start. – So for for the chance that one of the many, many people listening to this interview already is scratching their head.

What what was in the United States before Ashtanga and vinyasa style, vigorous yoga. Was there anything specific or a variety of practices? – Up to up to that point, yoga was first of all, it wasn't really that well known, most people. The only time you heard of yoga was on tv shows like that's incredible. Where a yogi would be invited to hold his breath for five minutes or fit into a small box. It wasn't really popular at what's However, there was a few books that were coming out, like I think it was called 21 days of yoga or that came out that started to make yoga more more awareness.

But back then um when I started practicing, which was in 1980 in the early 80s. Um no one really was aware of it. You would have to search far and wide to find a yoga class in a community center somewhere.

– Now, I mean did David Williams, the famous teacher that inspired you and your father, did he go to India to learn these styles of yoga and brought him back?

– He did, he did, he was on a search for health and wellness and he had heard about yoga from a friend and and he went on a search in India to find this fountain of youth that he had heard about. – So somebody bumps into you in an elevator and you've got a yoga t shirt across your chest and they say, what's yoga? What's your response?

And you can go a while on this if it's not a quick answer. – I love that question. You know, yoga actually the word yoga, if you translate it, you can one of the more practical translations is relationship yoga really is about being in relationship and coming out successful and I know that you're focusing on heart disease really there's an epidemic in our country, uh not just heart disease, but this feeling of of of loneliness of separation.

And I think that heart disease more than cigarettes more than drinking alcohol more than high fat foods more than anything, loneliness is the greatest contributor to heart disease.

Yoga, Community, and Heart Health

That perceived feeling of of separation. This lack of intimacy and the whole purpose of yoga is about learning how to make connections energetic connections within yourself and with others. – So can you practice yoga alone or is you can and it's better to do it in the community for the human connections?

– Well a lot of people have this image of a yogi going up onto a mountaintop and separating and going on as a to become liberated. But really uh the yogis are the ones who after they found their liberation, they come back down and they create community and teach others. So yes yoga can be um of course you have to do the work yourself and it's It's really um something that you have to do yourself but of course you can do it share it with others. – Yeah. And what you know, so you're 12 years old, you're in Hawaii I think your father if I don't want to offend was either a dentist or an oral surgeon with low back pain.

Looking for a solution, right? – Yeah. He actually had uh about four or five back surgeries and I don't know what the statistics are now. But back then more than 50% of them failed and each one of his back surgeries failed.

He he was still in severe pain and someone said well you know why don't you try yoga? And surprisingly um he was open to it and he started going to this yoga class in Hawaii which eventually he brought me to and my three brothers and he started feeling this amazing health benefits.

His back started to get stronger and he became free of pain and he became an advocate. He was convinced that um yoga healed his back. – At what age did you have the idea that you're not going to dental school and you're not going to accounting school, you're going to pursue a yoga career of teaching education and training at what age, you know, it's not every parent wants their child and in our background to be a doctor and you took. – This is true. I went to, I graduated from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and it was just more organically.

I my father took me after he learned yoga and he felt the benefits. He was very very driven type a person. And so yoga started to change his nervous system and he actually took me to India with him at the age of 15.

And when I came back from India, my gym teacher at at our high school asked me if I would share what I learned. So my first opportunity to teach yoga to share yoga was in my high school and even at the University of Michigan wherever I went I always found someone to share yoga with. So it was more organic.

I really didn't want to lose this incredible practice that brought so many healing benefits to my father and myself and those I saw around me I didn't want to lose it when I came back from Hawaii. So I just started sharing it and that was the real motivation for opening up the very first center for Yoga was just creating a community that would help keep this practice alive in my own life.

– Yeah. And these these are now all merged into the lifetime fitness chain. But I'll speak to, you know, your incredible success of for many of us, you know, the highlight of the week was the one or two or three times that we made, you know, large group classes and heated rooms, You had music and you had wisdom and I'll share. I always was impressed because you know, you knew me, I knew you you know, I was a medical doctor, your you know, your citation of medical literature studies at Harvard on yoga and the brain yoga and the gut yoga and blood flow.

And uh you know, you obviously have had a lifelong passion for this. When did you start introducing teacher training programs? – Well, you know, it's it's funny that you mentioned my my interest in the medical world, you know, when like I said when yoga first came out, it was more of like that's incredible, you know, it wasn't being involved. Then slowly I started watching yoga.

They start We're talking about yoga as alternative medicine in the medical world. And then a few years later they started talking about it as complementary, they complemented it with other therapies. Then a few years more, they started calling integrative medicine. They brought yoga right into the hospitals and so that really impressed me and IIi saw in the 19 18 90 there was a man of course, you know him named Dr. Dean Ornish who wrote the book How to reverse heart disease, how to reverse heart disease without drugs or surgery.

And that really inspired me that hey, this is something that the world needs. And so I I started teaching yoga and then and then started running teacher training programs so that that yoga had, you know, an opportunity to be shared even on a greater level. – And I think, you know, it's it's kind of you to bring up the name of Dr. Dean Ornish.

He is being interviewed during this summit and I know one of his greatest passions is talking about community and yoga and breathwork and imagery and it's quite radical that he introduced that in a heart disease reversal program, one of the first ever done in the world, not just food, not just fitness but mind body spirit and yoga practice.

So somebody would come up to you and say Johnny, you know, they've told me, I'm starting to develop some blockages. I got blood pressure, I'm struggling with my weight where you know, and I've never done yoga, let's let's say somebody in decent shape, they can touch their toes, they haven't had five back surgeries like doctor Cast your father, I mean where are you going to start them?

And what would you tell them are the potential benefits for their heart for their long term health? – Well you've kind of touched upon it when you started when you mentioned breath work. But I have a great story to tell you.

When I started teaching yoga. Um one of the doctors, one of the local cardiologist in in our area called me up and said I I heard your your yoga teacher and we're looking for a yoga teacher. We're trying to duplicate Dr. Dean Ornish's program here in Michigan. We have a dietician to help manage the low fat diet. We have a therapist to for group therapy and stress management. We have a physical assistant for to manage the aerobic part of it. So they but we we need a yoga teacher.

And so they interviewed me and they said come to our cardiologist office and and I want you to teach class to our staff to see if you're the right teacher.

So I taught a short class to them and his name was Dr. Jody Rogers.

Breathwork and Nervous System Regulation

And he said he said to me you know we we loved your class, we want to hire you. But what we're really looking for is a specifically yoga postures that help to lower blood pressure specific yoga postures that help to reduce hypertension. Can you give us just like 10 or 12 yoga postures a formula that would help to you know lower blood pressure and reduce hypertension and dilate the veins and arteries? And I said to him, Well really yoga? The purpose of yoga's is really about changing the habit pattern of your mind becoming less reactive and when you become less reactive your blood, your blood pressure lowers, everything starts feeling better.

And he goes, well, I really want 10 or 12 yoga and said, well I don't I don't really have that kind of knowledge where I could give you exactly which poses will will dilate your veins and arteries and reduce hypertension.

But it's just a byproduct. And he kind of he said, okay, just give me five yoga. He started to negotiate with like, well that's not really how it works. But he he hired me anyway.

And so after about six months into the program where I was teaching his heart patients yoga, one of the heart patients had a ha heart attack during the or during the year long program that we were working with. And he went to the hospital and he nearly died.

But he was able they were able to keep him alive. And he called me from the hospital, he said Johnny yoga saved my life, wow, how did yoga save your life? He goes, when the heart attack came and all, I felt like everything was closing in on me and I started to get very frightened and the more frightened I got, the more everything constricted.

I felt like I was I was almost like suffocating myself, the more I got scared, the more the symptoms became even stronger. And he goes, I came to my breath and I just started to observe my breath and my bodily sensations like you taught us in class and then I started to relax and the symptoms started to subside and my chest started to it felt like it started to open to expand.

And he said if I didn't have my breath to come to, he goes, I'm quite certain I would have just died. And so I don't think Dr. Jody Rogers still really understood that that there's not an exact formula.

It's really learning how to come to your breath and become less reactive. That is the real power. Power of yoga is changing the fight or flight mechanism that we all have when we get scared to this more healing mechanism, this relaxation response. – It's interesting you just bring up that last little bit. It's a beautiful story I've never heard.

I know Dr. Jody Rogers and we're talking really a pioneer in Detroit, and we're probably talking 2.5 3 decades ago and he was very successful with that program.

And give him a lot of credit. But I was gonna ask you if you think, you know, the regular practice of breath work of mindfulness of a flow. Is it ultimately a different balance between the autonomic nervous system, the parasympathetic and sympathetic and a lot of this at a physiologic level is less fighter flight and more we often say rest and digest parasympathetic function, there's many tools that get you there. But do you think ultimately a regular breath practice? Regular yoga practice is a perhaps the most powerful and ancient tool to rebalance that great question doc.

– Yes. The breath is really one of the only functions in the body that is actually regulated by both the sympathetic nervous system and the Paris sympathetic nervous system. It's both voluntary when you want to make it and in volunteer. So the yogis found that breath is the key.

It's the bridge that takes you from the conscious to the unconscious that takes you deep into the nervous system where you can begin to change that fight or flight mechanism that often is directly related to allowed of sickness and disease.

– So again, somebody walks up to your lifetime fitness. I know you travel the country to the variety of gyms and teacher trainings and says, you know, I've never been in a yoga class. I'm not really sure what these words ashtanga and vinyasa mean what do you suggest that you know, somebody is listening to this summit and has never been in a yoga room or a yoga video or yoga take. So where does the person starts says I want to learn what that patient of Dr. Jody Rogers, I want that tool and where do I start?

Do I find a Johnny Kest? There's not that many. – Yeah you can really go into any yoga class because if a yoga classes being taught properly, it's a breathing class first. Everything else is optional.

So you can really come to a yoga class, sit on your yoga mat and just breathe consciously, breathe for an hour and you will feel chain afterwards. You come out feeling more, your heart feels bigger, your body feels more relaxed.

Like you got a deep tissue massage just from yoga breathing. So I always encourage students, you know, you probably heard of the, I don't know much about saints, but there's a St. Francis you, have you heard of him? He's that yes, he was the protector of the environment, a relationship with the um animal kingdom.

But he said he had a famous saying he said start where you are then move into what's possible. Suddenly you're doing the impossible. And so when you come to yoga you start with what's what's necessary and that is to breed, then you move into what's possible as your body feels comfortable and suddenly you're doing postures and flows that you thought were impossible.

It's quite remarkable. – So you were you were written up I think in the last year or two in one of the Detroit magazines that Johnny Kest yoga and meditation space in your home. And it was very beautiful and uh I remember being just a nice piece but the overlap between a meditative practice, A breath practice, A yoga, physical flow practice.

I mean what's the difference for those listening, you know, books written called meditation is medication by medical doctors and others. So I mean how do I do? We have different buckets and tools or is meditation an integral part of a complete yoga practice?

– It really is a meditation is is considered the highest form of yoga. It's something that your asana or yoga postures and your breath work. Your prana yama actually prepare you to move in to a calm and balanced state of mind which is meditation. So all the breathing that we do, all the movements in yoga actually prepares you to to be in stillness and sometimes the greatest effort you can make Joel is the actual, the greatest effort you can ever do is just to to be still to do nothing.

We're always reacting to come to your breath and get out of your own way. Takes tremendous practice. You want to try taking a few deep breaths right now with your – Would love you to demonstrate and I'll go along with you and anything you want to do our practical too. It would be amazing.

– Okay, well sometimes people have trouble with breathing exercise. So sometimes the best way to find your breath is to lose it. So we're going to practice what's called bio. Come baka, exhale retention. Just gonna do it for less than a minute.

Just try it with me, take a deep breath in, exhale all the way out. You can exhale through your nose mouth, hold your breath out the, hold it out, no breathing.

You can hold it out to a three knee pancetta shot to So that's already a good inhale filling one more time. Exhale emptying all the way out by a crew baka, exhale attention. Now hold your breath out this time.

As long as you can, Wow, that's already over 30, seconds. There you go. Now notice how you just, you just started breathing a little bit more consciously and effortless, effortlessly.

Sometimes the best way to really find your breath is to lose it. So you do that two or three times, maybe four or five times. Then you start taking deep full breaths and you may already feel do you feel a little difference in your body temperature? – Yeah, I actually do kind of warmed up.

It's interesting. Well, you know, I've told you this in the past, but one of my daily practices is the five Tibetan rites. And there actually is 1/6 1 in that little book that, you know, and I know of a guy in the bathing suit on the beach teaching it.

Meditation, Practice, and Daily Routine

And the sixth one is that practice that's for all your listening supposedly is a sexual enhancement breathing practice to do exactly what you said. So I guess I'm a little train because I do that every morning.

33 deep exhalation. And this idea of like collapsing your abdomen towards your spine at the same time. It's it's actually a wonderful therapeutic feeling. What about alternate nostril breathing?

I know your people listening may have no idea what I just said. So why don't you take it and run with it? – Yeah. So alternate nostril breathing is another wonderful proscenium, a technique where we're not really aware of it but at any one point throughout the day depending on the time of day. Even your mood your breathing through one nostril or the other. And so this is uh this is a good way to balance the right and left hemisphere of your brain. You just take your thumb And then your 2 1st fingers curl in and then your pinky finger and ring finger go on the other nostril.

So your thumb is on your right nostril. If you're using your right hand and your two fingers on your left nostril and then you inhale through one and then you close the other one and you exhale in. Feel inhale again through the right.

Now thumb closes the right, exhale through the left. Inhale through the lap, close the left exhale through the right like that. Alternate nostril breathing.

And again surprisingly if you do this just for a minute or two you start feeling just more relaxed. There's something that happens when you consciously intentionally breathe through your right nostril and then your left nostril Nadi

alternate nostril breathing.

– I think I can credit you. I certainly remember being told that mouth breathing is dirty and nasal breathing is the way we're built and actually now we know and I can share I'm sure you know that that is scientifically seemingly correct but talk about that a little bit about you know learning training.

Just some of the things we did to emphasize nasal breathing during the day and at night. – I'm really glad you're you're asking that question. There's a great book out there by James Nestor called breathe and really recommend that to all your listeners and all your viewers um to go out and get that book.

It talks about all the medical benefits and it gives you a number of exercises that you can start doing at home for your own benefit. But one of the things experiments he did is he actually um Tate or his nose are closed off his nostrils for a whole month and just breathe through his mouth. And he kept a journal and he was under medical guidance of all the different things that happened to him.

But when we breathe through our mouth it's a sign of stress. There's very few animals even on the planet that breathe through their mouth, breathing through your nose is a sign of relaxation.

It's almost impossible to hyperventilate through your nose easily through your mouth. So one of the things if you ever want to know how someone's doing, you don't even have to ask them. Just notice their breathing when you go visit a sick person in a hospital, notice the breath of a sick person is very often distinct.

They're often breathing through their mouth. Their breath is often very short, shallow, chaotic. So breathing through your nose naturally is a sign of health of relaxation.

– Probably more important than ever. We learned in this pandemic is simple tools to augment your health and augment your immune system, which yoga has also been shown to improve. Although the focus here is on cardiovascular.

But you know, I actually pulled up for a moment in case anybody's wondering, you know, this is a new age interview and yoga. I mean there are many, many medical research studies and references on yoga just in the last year in a journal of complimentary and therapeutic medicine. The title of the article, like all of them is Yoga for the secondary prevention of coronary heart disease.

A systematic review. And they actually were able to find studies that included 5000 patients, some that were in a just a exercise practice, some that were specifically a yoga and breathing practice. They talk about, you know, observe changes. People listen to what I want to know.

You can lower your cholesterol, you can lower your triglycerides, you can raise your HDL cholesterol. We mentioned, you can lower your blood pressure, you can lower your weight with the regular yoga practice and really interesting in people who are having heart rhythm problems like atrial fibrillation. There have been randomized studies that you can actually have less racing skipping palpitations by adopting a regular yoga practice.

I mean the usual approaches or medicine or surgical procedures, pacemakers, but just some of the simple breathing techniques and you mentioned the words ashtanga and vinyasa. These are scientifically backed.

Of course. They're not incorporated in all cardiology programs or cardiac rehab programs. But I think you already set the standard by doing that decades ago for dr Rogers. And we can look forward to more and maybe share with the audience the term of hymns and how that fits into your life and a yoga practice.

– Yeah, that's really my motivating force is practice heart centered diet. If you will kind of think of a diet, there's an ego centered diet. I would say where you just eat whatever, whatever pleases you.

And then you have maybe a health center diet which you're, you're told what to eat that's healthy. And then I feel like there's a heart centered diet. You're really choosing when you eat three times a day. Kind of like you're

choosing either kindness or cruelty. You're really making a choice on how you're affecting not just animals, but the entire planet.

– It's the kindest diet. Without a doubt. I have two t shirts that both say locus given to. And I think I first heard that from you and said I have to memorize that.

So just share with us. I'm not trying to impress anybody. It's on my T shirt but tell us what that means. And uh how you've used that in class. – Yeah. So Loca may all beings be happy, May all beings be free? And when when you're when you're really when you're practicing yoga, you really feel that universal connection.

Like we talked about in the very beginning of this interview, the purpose of yoga is to dissolve the way the walls and barriers that that we perceive to separate us. Loneliness is the great illusion.

We think we're separate. But when you start practicing yoga, especially even in a yoga class, when you first come into a yoga class, you notice everything that separates you other people's bodies of this person bigger than me.

This person smaller. You notice what everybody's wearing, what everybody smells like. You feel everything that separates you by the end of the yoga class? It's not uncommon that you feel like the person next to you there there's nothing that separates you.

You just feel like the sense of no separation between self and other. Before the pandemic. We used to hold hands while we hold hands after classes. There come a point where you're not even sure which hand is yours. It's just uh there's just a feeling of union.

Teacher Training, Legacy, and Closing

– What about one step further? Your own typical practice? Do you do you have a daily flow and breathwork practice that you've done for years. – I do. I do I mostly I my my practice has moved to a much very strong meditation practice.

So I'll sit in silence for two hours a day, an hour in the morning, hour in the evening. That's pretty pretty regularly. Um two hours of meditation a day. And then my my awesome practices mostly uh ashtanga based. So if you're familiar with ashtanga, there's a sun salutation, A. Sun salutation, B.

Sun salutation A. Is 10 breasts, 10 movement. Sun salutation, letter B. Is 18 breast, 18 movements. Then there's about 26 standing postures and then there's another 26 seated postures.

– Lot of emphasis on balance, right? – Yes, a lot of balancing postures. And if you you you were kind of talking about this before when you were talking about the human body and a lot of the things.

But our our bodies are designed to be perfect healing machine, they seem and often the body seems actually really ultimately very fair. You get in what you put, you get out of your body what you put in.

So I'm really glad that you brought up a daily practice because you really have to do the work. – Side note, one of the most interesting medical research studies in 2022 kind of offbeat was a big database of whether you could stand on one ft for 10 seconds or more or it didn't have the ability to balance and stand on one ft for 10 seconds and more.

And they did this and thousands of people 15 years ago and follow them for actual illness and death and the inability to have that that balance, that strength and actually was very strong predictor of a poor outcome.

So I'm sure you would maintain, you know that one of the benefits among so many others is indeed emphasizing practicing and improving your balance. – I'm going to share that in class tomorrow, I think it's a great study, – I'll follow up and send it to you, but it isn't quite a well done research study.

– Yeah. And I think that's why kids love yoga Joel because there's so many balancing postures and they love that challenge of actually falling out of it because they feel like they're growing, they feel like they're being challenged. And so whenever kids come to class, I always will do a lot of often even teach kids yoga, but we always do a lot of balancing postures, they love that. – People can find you on a website.

– Yeah, so you can go to Instagram, Johnny Kest yoga, that's probably the best way to find me on Instagram, but there's JohnnyKest.com as well. – And of course if they're a member of Lifetime Fitness, there's teacher training humbly.

How many students do you think you've certify in 200 hour plus R Y. T. Programs. – Well well, you know, lifetime is an amazing, like you said, super gym, it's almost like a country club and they have almost 200 locations and our teacher training program that was developed and designed by me is taught at most of their locations. So we're talking thousands and thousands of students that have become yoga teachers. – Just little sparks of light all over the United States all over the world because I know people traveled to Detroit from all over the United States for your teacher training programs and now they can have them in all these different gyms all over the United States. Powerful stuff.

Sir. You got lots of energy left in you but you have got quite a legacy there. – Well now with the zoom, it's incredible. We've been doing teacher trainings online with people from Africa and Australia Europe. So it's been really quite amazing how this technology has brought even more of.

– And then you've got a son, Jonah, your oldest who's wandering the world teaching yoga. Although maybe he's back in the United States for a little while.

– He's in Berlin right now teaching yoga. – Isn't that amazing Jonah Jonah Kest. So if you have people will be listening to this in the world. So – He's more, he's more interesting to follow if you want to check out Jonah's Instagram.

It's Kest yoga. He's got some amazing amazing stories and photographs on his Instagram. – Photography is incredible all over the world. So thank you for taking the time from your family.

You still have a absolutely gorgeous, delightful daughter at home who could use some daddy time. But I appreciate your sharing people listening all over the world. This is going to reach many many people and somebody is going to benefit from this may be a whole lot of somebody.

So thank you again, of course we have to close a little here. – Thank you so much for sharing this with the world that heart disease cannot, you know, cannot be just taking care of with drugs and medicine.

You need to approach multifaceted lee. So, so glad you're bringing this other, this other angle to it. – And I will just say that's such a great way to close so much of the summit interviews are about root cause in this case of heart illness.

And if you don't, you know, approach anger and stress and trauma and uh, you know, it's kind of the tight inner distrust that people develop over time and yoga can open that heart and be the be the path to curing that.

You know, I agree with you appeal and a surgical blade are very much a band aid at best. – All right, well, let's take a deep breath together again. Everything Everybody big inhale exhale. Let it go and watch everything change. – Excellent. God bless.

We'll catch up soon.