

# Inspirational Yogini: Maya Breuer



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Maya Breuer is all about inspiration. Not only is she the founder and director of the Santosha School of Yoga, which is located in Warwick, Rhode Island, but she is also the founder of the National Yoga Retreat for Women of Color. Maya has been a practitioner of yoga for over 20 years now and has trained and studied the ancient traditions of yoga in both India and the United States. She uses the style of Kripalu as she intertwines the classical and ancient traditions of yoga with her own life experiences as a woman of color. She not only creates a feminine-sacred approach to this ancient practice, but she offers inspiration to women of color around the nation to tap into their inner selves, to create unity between their physical and emotional well-being. Maya talks with us about the benefits of yoga, her experiences in India, and gives us some insight into the National Yoga Retreat For Women Of Color:

**Maya:** I lived in an ashram in the ancient village of Khayavroahan in Gujarat India. Each day I lived the simplest natural life. I heard and saw cows revered in India free to roam and mingle, I watched the amazing beauty and colors of the rising and setting sun, and befriended villagers who could not speak English but still wanted to know me. Witnessing and being a part of a way of life so simple

and close to nature was my most memorable experience while studying in India. This way of life revealed that nature and spirit are intertwined

**Maya:** Yoga can help women deal with the daily stress that occur and impact overall health and well being. Yoga is also very effective in helping women cope with health and emotional problems and natural life cycle events such as menstruation (endometriosis, and PMS), pregnancy and child bearing, and menopause.

Numerous physicians have incorporated yoga into their studies for women's health, i.e., Dr. Dean Ornish, Jon Kabat Zin, and Dr. Mehmet Oz. Their findings demonstrate that Yoga is beneficial for women's health and wellness especially when yoga is combined with the practices of relaxation and meditation. There have also been studies that indicate that yoga when combined with certain medical protocols may support living and healing from serious health conditions such as: hypertension, diabetes, insomnia, anxiety, and more. Yoga is also a great tool to teach women, so often busy taking care of others, techniques to slow down and take time for them. Yoga also stretches and tones the muscles, increases circulation, respiration and elimination and promotes deep relaxation.

**Maya:** Yes, women who attend my retreats and yoga classes are often living with some of the following health problems: hypertension, diabetes, anxiety and depression, morbid obesity, Chronic fatigue, lupus, breast cancer and stress related insomnia.

**Maya:** I taught yoga for many years and one day I was struck by the absence of women of color in my yoga classes and at the workshops, conferences and retreats that I attended through out the country. I thought about it for a while then decided that I would reach out and introduce women of color to yoga and I would create a Yoga Retreat *just for Women of Color*. I had never heard of such a retreat. I knew that there were many African American and Latina women's Tours and Empowerment programs, but I wanted to create something different. A weekend for women of color to come together and focus on our vulnerabilities not on being strong, nor on getting ahead in our careers, but a retreat offering women of color a break -- time to explore yoga, rest, renew, laugh, dance, play and breathe. My favorite time at each retreat is the opening and the closing. When women first arrive at the retreat their faces are always so telling. They appear to be unsure about what this retreat is. I love seeing their innocent anxious looks turn to beaming smiles as they sigh and begin to move to contemporary familiar music from Mary J. Blige, India Arie, Jill Scott or some other sister who is finding her self and connecting to who she really is. I love their looks of incredulity and joy as my posse (women who support my work) and I welcome them with these familiar sounds and moves. At the close of our weekend their faces again are telling. What I see is a glow and an

awareness that did not appear there before. I see smiles and eyes that are hopeful. I see faces that look relaxed and renewed. To be honest, there have been so many memorable and amazing moments at the retreat that this was a difficult question to answer.

**Maya:** Physically when we breathe correctly we expand our belly with the inhalation of breath and we contract as we release the breath. This motion of correct breathing causes the diaphragm to massage the abdominal organs -- the stomach, small intestine, liver, pancreas and the heart. Correct breathing also stimulates the blood circulation to these organs. Many of us do not breathe correctly, either we breathe too fast or too shallowly and because of this we do not take in enough oxygen to feed our vital organs. For many this occurs because we are living and moving too fast and functioning under stress. We start our lives breathing correctly but as we grow from child to teen to adult our breathing patterns start to reflect our lives. If we live fast and furious our breathing is reflective of this; if we are sedentary our breathing also reflects this. Some of the negative results of improper and incorrect breathing are: premature aging, depression, fatigue, sluggishness and in some instances diseases can also indirectly be a result of incorrect and improper breathing.

1. Increase vitality and rejuvenate the whole being -- body mind and spirit.
2. Increase the flow of blood circulation and oxygen to all organs of the body and the brain.
3. Release toxins and body waste
4. Increase our energy
5. Reduce the work load of the heart
6. Promote clarity in thinking and decision making
7. Promote relaxation.

**Maya:** The talking stick was originally used by Native American tribes to help to control the energy and sharing within a group-sharing or meeting. Talking sticks are always created in spirit and are blessed. They are made from natural tree branches and decorated with ornate symbolic items from nature such as feathers, hides, fur and symbolic carvings, Decorative items such as beads, paint and strings may also be used to adorn the talking stick. We use the Native talking stick in a ritual at the Yoga Retreat for Women of Color to honor our sacred space. Any woman who holds the stick will be listened to, will not be interrupted or judged as she speaks. It also symbolizes our commitment to keeping the words spoken within our sacred circle confidential.

**ymib.com: Favorite Affirmation or inspirational quote?**

**ymib.com: What sort of projects are you working on now?** I am completing the editing of my first book Soul Yoga for Women of Color; I will be offering the Yoga Retreat for Women of Color at the Crossings in Austin, Texas March 17-19 2006 and at the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in

Lenox, Ma. May 5-7 2006; and I am co hosting and coordinating a conference-Yoga-The Sacred Rhythm for the International Association of Black Yoga Teachers in RI August 2-6 2006.

**Funny:** I enjoy having and giving a good laugh and I can laugh at myself

**Compassionate:** Because I love deeply and have empathy, understanding and feeling for the lives and plights of my family, friends and fellow man.

**Conscientious:** I get the job done

**ymib.com: 3 things that you would tell a woman to never take for granted?**

- 1) Her health
- 2) Time for self
- 3) Keeping one or more true sister friend connections close at hand.

**Maya:** Visit my website [www.mayabreuer.com](http://www.mayabreuer.com) for information about yoga and retreats and events for women of color. Visit the International Association of Black Yoga Teachers at [www.blackyogateachers.com](http://www.blackyogateachers.com) to find a yoga teacher of color in your area.

I recommend Yoga Journal: [yogajournal.com](http://yogajournal.com), and Yoga Basics: [yogabasics.com](http://yogabasics.com). Both of these are great sites to find answers the most basic to the more advanced questions about yoga philosophy and yoga postures. These sites also provide interesting articles about contemporary issues and yoga today. Visit Kripalu.org for information about retreats and programs for health and wellness in New England. Visit the National Yoga Alliance <http://www.yogaalliance.org/> for a certified yoga teacher in your area.

Yoga Books: *Heart of Yoga* by TKV Desikchar; ***Kripalu Yoga on and off the Mat***, Richard Faulds and Sr. Teacher's at Kripalu.

**When beginning yoga for the first time always remember:**

- 1) Listen to your body
- 2) Move slowly and carefully
- 3) Study with a certified Yoga Teacher
- 4) Stop attending a yoga class that leaves you feeling stressed or anxious afterward or pushes you to compete with your self or others.

#### ABOUT MAYA

Maya is a member of the International Association of Black Yoga Teachers, the Kripalu Yoga Teacher's Association, the International Women of Vision and Action Group (a.k.a. Gather the Women), and the National Yoga Alliance. She is also an affiliate instructor for the American Yoga College. She also serves on the Rhode Island Department of Health Legislative Committee for

Minority Women's Health and the Kripalu Center Board of Trustees. Maya is a contributing author to Stephen Cope's *Will Yoga and Meditation Really Change My Life?*, Storey Books, 2003; and Kripalu *Yoga on and off the Mat*, Richard Faulds, Bantam Books, 2005. In 2004 she was the recipient of the Yoga Trailblazer Award from the International Association of Black Yoga Teachers. She is now completing her first book, *Soul Yoga*.