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LIFE

Jacoby Ballard Creates Safe Spaces for Trans Community

Learn how Jacoby Ballard, a transgender yoga teacher, creates safe spaces for his community.

ELIZABETH MARGLIN • JUL 27, 2016

A transgender yoga teacher creates safe spaces for his community.

[Jacoby Ballard](#), a yoga and Buddhism teacher, is the founder of Queer and Trans Yoga classes and workshops. He collaborates with yoga nonprofits like Off the Mat Into the World and the Yoga Service Council to address issues of diversity and inclusivity, including developing trainings for yoga teachers who want to be agents of social change. Ballard describes himself as a queer, transgender person, an identity that is, in great part, the catalyst for his work. He has unique insight into how inadvertently gender-biased and prejudiced yogis can be.

See also [Jacoby Ballard: Building a Welcoming Yoga Community](#)

“Most teachers whose classes I’ve attended as a student say something homophobic, sexist, racist, or transphobic,” says Ballard. He has been in classes where teachers greet students with “Hello, ladies!”—incorrectly assuming his gender. He has been escorted out of changing rooms and stared at by other students. “I have been in classes where teachers talk about ‘how women’s bodies are’ and ‘how men’s bodies are,’ where my own genderqueer body is caught somewhere in between, and simultaneously erased and dismissed,” says Ballard. “Over and over again in yoga, the gender binary—classifying a person as either masculine or feminine, male or female—is reinforced, and every time, it’s painful.”

Ballard began practicing yoga before he came out as queer and trans, and while he credits the practice with helping him realize both identities, it wasn’t always pleasant. For years, Ballard endured gender bias, both on and off the mat. Fortunately, he didn’t become disillusioned with yoga. Instead, he seized the opportunity to fight for inclusivity, mutual respect, and empathy. Since coming out as transgender in 2004 (when discussing the past, Ballard prefers to use the pronoun he currently identifies with), he has taught at the [Philadelphia Trans Health Conference](#), trained organizations and health practitioners in alliance with the queer and trans community, and reached hundreds of people with Queer and Trans Yoga, a style he developed that avoids gendered language, incorporates awareness of transition, and addresses current events and concerns in queer communities. He has also taught Queer and Trans Yoga workshops in 15 cities across America, and offers [retreats](#).

See also [Jacoby Ballard: Personal Transformation + Healing Yoga](#)

In 2008, he co-founded Third Root Community Health Center, in Brooklyn; the center, at a sliding scale, offers yoga, massage, acupuncture, and herbal medicine to all comers, including: “disabled” people, those with abundant bodies, people of color, queer and trans community members, and low-income populations. “This is the path of yoga, the path of love: to welcome everyone into your heart, into your studio, into your sangha [community],” says Ballard. He has also started a scholarship fundraiser for the Black Yoga Teachers Alliance, and has taught a Buddhism class at a correctional facility in New York.

How to Be Welcoming Of The Transgender Yoga Community

Here, Ballard’s suggestions for making your local yoga studio and community more welcoming:

If you own a studio, create a code of inclusivity. For example, have students sign an anti-discrimination pledge.

Make bathrooms more accessible by putting a sign on the door that reads: “Friendly for all genders.”

Ask the name, and the correct pronoun, for everyone you meet at your studio. The pronoun people prefer can be highly personal, explains Ballard. “Some trans people prefer to identify as the gender they have transitioned to, while others prefer more gender-neutral pronouns like ‘they’ or ‘xe,’ ‘xim,’ and ‘xir,’” he says. (You pronounce the “x” with a “z” sound.)

Take the gender out of cueing—don’t say things like “Men tend to find this pose easier.” Instead, use gender-neutral variations, homing in on polarities like vigorous and soft.

Reach out to local queer and trans-friendly organizations for guidance in encouraging diversity. “Yoga studios need to make the effort to reflect their community in its entirety. No one can feel comfortable in a place they don’t feel reflected in,” Ballard says.

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