Glenn Black
Mr. Anonymous Sees It All

The skinny man wraps both legs around the back of his head with such ease, he could be a contortionist. He names the poses as he does them—eka pada sirsasana, skandasana, kurmasana. His voice is soft yet authoritative, like Fred Rogers—a description that somewhat contradicts the nickname given to him by his students: “Sargent Swami.” He looks into the camera: “In the 20 years that I have been asana, I have never been injured,” he assures us.

Today, twenty-five years later, Glenn Black has a considerably different story. While he pretzeled himself up with impeccable ease in that 1987 video, Black says he stopped practicing asana more than ten years ago. At 64, his hair is gray, his moustache is gone, and there is a ten-inch scar running down his back—the remnants of a spinal fusion surgery on his lumbar vertebrae three years ago—an injury caused by yoga, he admits. “I was a pretty ego-filled young yogi,” Black says in the small private studio adjacent to his home in Rhinebeck.

I first met Black the day before, the way most of his students initially encounter him—pacing the classroom silently with his hands clasped behind his back. Black walked the empty room at Shakti Yoga, a small studio in Woodstock. His forehead creased, his chin bowed, he seemed absorbed in thought. Black’s regular students know this signature walk, just as they know his staple wardrobe—a t-shirt tucked into a pair of sweatpants hiked nearly up to his armpits, a pair of black therapeutic shoes, and occasionally, as he wore the day we met—a pale green sweatshirt with the words “I’m just here for the savasana” printed across it.

While most of his students are yoga die-hards – some well-known ones - they know not to expect a single asana from his classes.

“In nine years with Glenn, I haven’t done more than one down dog ,” says Linda Lalita Winnick, owner of Shakti. Even that day, the pose was done to point out just how
unprepared his students’ bodies were for it.

In many ways, the movements Black wants his students to focus on predate any American school of yoga. “I get people to move every joint in their body every way it can move,” he says. The tagline he has for this approach couldn’t be more straightforward: “Human Movement.” When trying to describe what’s involved, rattling off a list of Sanskrit names won’t suffice. “The sequence of the movements change every time because the students are always different,” he says.

When Black is teaching, precisely who is there matters very much. For this reason, he usually caps his classes at 25, no matter what the demand. And his regulars know that while he might seem blasé as he paces the floor before class, that’s not the case at all. “He will walk around and watch people with his hands behind his back,” says Paula Lynch Liberis, a YogaWorks teacher who has been a student of Black’s since 2006. “I often think he doesn’t know what he is going to teach until he sees us move.”

Black has been watching bodies for 42 years. He’s been sought out for his bodywork by professional athletes, dancers, yogis—you name it. He’s gone on tour with Lou Reed. Yet he doesn’t have the aura of a celebrity yogi at all. Black has no website or Wikipedia page. The two DVDs he’s come out with in his career have his AOL address but not his photo printed on their casing. That’s the way Black likes it. “I call myself the Anonymous Yogi,” he tells me.

But in the past ten months, Black has been anything but anonymous. Since William Broad’s New York Times Magazine article “How Yoga Can Wreck Your Body”—a chapter excerpted from his book The Science of Yoga—came out, Black has become notorious for his hardline opinion on asana. Most people should not be doing it, he told Broad and would readily say it again.

As for the response he got from the yoga world when the book came out: “All hell broke loose,” Black says. He doesn’t have much to say himself about Broad’s book. He’s never read it.

It’s not because he’s a lazy reader either. As a teenager, Black poured over anatomy texts—studying the muscles, bones, and viscera—practicing massage on the guys on his high school wrestling team. After serving in the Air Force, he returned to his hometown of Lansing, Mich. where a friend gave him a copy of Swami Satchidananda’s book. Soon Black began reading voraciously on the topic, but he was an unlikely yogi.

In 1971, when he took his first yoga class at a community college in Lansing, Black was working as a truck driver. In 1978, he began teaching yoga at the community college and shortly after, quit his trucking job when he realized he was making more money doing massage and teaching on the side. In 1982, Black came to the Omega Institute, initially to take massage classes, but ended up working there. While he’s taught yoga and done bodywork around the world, Omega is just about the only place where Black has taught regularly for the past thirty years. The Institute draws teachers from around the globe, but Blacks lives just down the street.
Yogis recognize Black for his discipline, his months spent practicing in isolation, and his apprenticeship with renowned physical therapist Shmuel Tatz. Yet Black admits he damaged his own body during those years while doing yoga. In the ‘90s, Black performed at Maho Bay, in St. John, where he would show off his extreme flexibility. “I would get so out of my body during these performances,” he says. “I was doing things that were not appropriate and not good for my spine.” He attributes the stenosis that inflamed his lumbar vertebrae to the deep back-bending and performing he did over those years.

Back then, Black began introducing movements beyond asana to his classes after observing his students’ limitations and experimenting on his own body. “He’s made his body his laboratory,” says Liberis. It wasn’t until the early 2000s that Black stopped teaching asana altogether and not until after his surgery in 2009 that he renamed his approach, “Human Movement,” which he teaches in addition to yoga nidra and Tatz’s hands-on technique, Body Tuning.

It’s not that Black doesn’t believe in the power of asana (for those few whose bodies have been properly prepared). Rather, he’s revolted by the way asana has been adulterated and overtaken the meaning of yoga today. “If you want to really develop in yoga, you’ve got to get past the insignificance of asana and really develop the mind,” he says. “When you see titles of courses and retreats you can go to—Yoga and Dolphins, Yoga and Zen Golf—it’s endless what has been combined with yoga and it’s appalling.” But the bastardization of an ancient practice aside—and for Black, that’s a major aside—on a very basic level, he believes people are completely unaware and misguided about how they ought to be moving their own bodies. “You look around and there are a lot of people stumbling or hunched over or their head is too far forward,” he says. “Most people don’t have a clue about themselves, and most teachers don’t have a clue about their students’ bodies.”

Before meeting Black, I would not have counted myself among such clueless masses. I’d studied anatomy intensively, practiced yoga rigorously for years. In the time I spent with him, Black managed to shame the pants off any mastery I thought I’d developed. In our small class, he stood in front of me, observing with his deep-set eyes as I flailed my arms around in a failed attempt to circle them in opposite directions.

The following day, as we stood preparing to leave, I asked Black if he might have any advice on how to relieve the chronic pain in my left piriformis, caused by overstrain during vinyasa. “Never stand like you’re standing right now again,” he said without a moment’s hesitation. Schooled by others on Black’s sharp eye, I’d tried to hold my shoulders back throughout our conversation. “I always stand like this,” I began to say, but Black knew already. “Who notices the way they’re standing all the time?” I almost asked. But of course, I knew the answer: Glenn Black does.

--Jane Porter