LISTENING IN WITH ...

Seane Corn

YOGA’S Alchemical Power

Seane Corn is one of the most high-profile yoginis on the planet. Raised in New Jersey, she left home as a teenager to live on her own in New York City. In Gotham’s grittiest corners, she soon encountered several “everyday angels” who started her on a spiritual path, as she describes in her book Revolution of the Soul (Sounds True, 2019). Today, Corn is also known for her extensive humanitarian and social justice work. Here, she talks with Unity Magazine editor Katy Koontz about how yoga can help you shift your perspective, heal your trauma, and open your heart.

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**KATY KOONTZ:** One of the first “angels” you describe in your book is Billy, whom you met at 19 while tending bar at a gay club in New York City. He told you, “Ignore the story and see the soul.” What a deep truth to hear at 19.

**SEANE CORN:** Absolutely. It took me years to really come to terms with what he said and understand it. But I carried that teaching with me, and I wrote a whole book based on it. Billy wasn’t saying your story doesn’t matter. He meant don’t give it so much power. A person’s story is just an aspect of their journey—there’s something bigger going on that you need to open yourself to.

**KK:** Once you found yoga, you wrote that it brought all sorts of issues to the surface, and that your job was to allow it, but not to be consumed by it. That sounds like a fine line.

**SC:** Yeah, but it’s a process. If you do this work long enough, the stories that live within your tissues come to the surface, and they can bring up a lot of emotions. It can be overwhelming to begin peeling back the layers of your trauma, your ancestry, your culture, all your shadow selves, and it can make you feel that you’re somehow bad or wrong or inadequate.

It’s important to be present to the story and willing to investigate it, but not to be defined by it. Ultimately, everything happens the way it’s supposed to for the soul to transform. That doesn’t make it easy or good, or even fair. It just is what it is. But if we shift our perception, we can see that every single experience is fodder for growth. It can either bring us down so we’re consumed by fear or it can open our heart to love. But if we go into the fear and it ends up teaching us patience, acceptance, compassion, and empathy, then was the fear a bad thing, or was it an essential part of the growth process?

**KK:** Right. I vote for the latter.

**SC:** This excavation work holds up a mirror to the places within ourselves that are disconnected from God. It provides the tools for additional insight so we can flip the story and perceive it through a more illuminated lens that leads to alchemy. The use of prana, breath, and stimulation shifts energy and actually changes our cells. But it doesn’t just happen, you have to make it happen. Every single time you step on that yoga mat, it’s a rebirth. It’s transforming the lead of your fears into the gold of your compassion, understanding, and wisdom.

But something has to be broken down first, and that’s the messy part where you don’t know it’s going to be turned into gold. All you know is that the lead is somehow melting, and bubbling, and running all over the place, and it’s a matter of faith and trust that it will become something invaluable.

**KK:** That trust is important, because even if you think you know what is going to come up, it may be something very different.

**SC:** It might not be what you necessarily wanted, but it’s always what you actually needed. Yoga gives you tools so that when life happens, instead of anesthetizing yourself with TV, shopping, drugs and alcohol, food, or relationships, you’re able to sit with the discomfort and be in relationship to it. That’s what yoga teaches us—not to reject it but to be in relationship to it, learn from it, and then transcend it. And you do that again, and again, and again. And just when you think you’ve got it, you do it again.

**KK:** That’s one courageous pathway.

**SC:** It is, and it requires an enormous amount of humility, acceptance, resilience, and forgiveness for both self and for others. Spirituality, to me, is very, very messy. When I see spiritual images with white light, doves, rainbows, and angels, I always think, *That would be interesting*, because that’s not been my experience. My experiences seem bloodier and grittier, but they are no less holy.

Some people get seduced by those pretty images and if it doesn’t match what happens for them, they think they’ve done something wrong. But they’re spot on—wherever they are in the process, it’s perfect. If you’re in a fetal position, sobbing hysterically, snot running down your face and into your hair, and your heart is just breaking in surrender, God’s all over that. There’s the rainbow. It just doesn’t look the way we’re often told spirituality should look like. But as we continue to break through these moments, the amount of time we stay in that messiness—that phase between lead and gold—gets shorter and shorter.

**KK:** Another lesson in this is not to have expectations—because that’s not surrender.

**SC:** No, it isn’t. When COVID hit, our lives came to a halt. I watched people around me panic, all for very valid reasons. My rational brain was able to understand, to check all the boxes: *I’ve got money in the bank, I’ve...*
got community, and I’ve got family. Big picture, I’m fine—and everyone I love is okay. So why don’t I feel okay? Where is this sense of instability, this deep worry, coming from? Even after all my years of yoga, it was like, we begin again. Spirit was saying to me, “Can you use your yoga now? Can you sit with the grief, the loss, the disappointment and just be present to what is?”

At first I thought, Actually, no I can’t. People are dying, I’m afraid. But then I realized, this is yoga. This is the practice in action: Sitting with it until I get to that place where I know that even if everything was taken away, I would still be okay. I got there, but I definitely had that moment where I thought, I don’t know who I am without the external world supporting my identity. Meaning, if I’m not teaching, am I still a teacher? Am I still valuable? Am I still lovable? Does my life still have purpose and meaning? Since that had never been plucked away from me before, I had never really given it a lot of thought. So that was my work, to go inside, and I’m grateful I had tools so that I could be in the inquiry without getting too overwhelmed.

**KK:** And yet we still have to be careful we don’t use those tools for spiritual bypass—that we don’t get all zen without first feeling the feelings.

**SC:** I’m so glad you brought that up—I want every yoga teacher training to have an entire session on spiritual bypass because it’s chronic in our communities. Yoga gives us so much permission to detach, but detachment without awareness is dissociation. It’s avoidance. If we suppress the emotions that are often in alignment with our trauma—like the fear, the rage, the shame, the guilt, and the grief—they’ll find other ways to express themselves, like depression or disease. Or we’ll use substances to numb them out.

We have to get very, very skilled to identify the shadow, recognize what it’s trying to teach us, and then express the shadow, even if it means crying, screaming, or even going into a rage. Don’t immediately get all spiritual. Go to the ugly first, get that animal energy out of the body. It could require beating a pillow with a tennis racket, breaking plates, creating art, dancing, or chanting. We have all these different methodologies that let us discharge energy so we can release suppressed emotion. That’s processing, that’s not bypassing.

Then I actually am okay because I was able to move through the shadow. But if I don’t connect to and understand my animal nature, then when I meet yours, you will terrify me, and I will judge you, abandon you, or reject you. I won’t want to see what’s in you because that would make me have to deal with the same qualities that are in me. So if I truly want to learn empathy, I have to be willing to go into my own humanity and love the animal me.

**KK:** You also write about karma, which many see as a punishment or at least a consequence. But you describe it as an opportunity, a chance to make a better choice the next time.

**SC:** I believe we’re here to learn what love is and that it takes lifetimes. The yogis say we come back again and again, learning different lessons designed to mature our souls each time. So karma is like a checklist. If I need to learn patience, for example, I’ll be given life experiences that keep chipping away at my resilience until I can begin to embody patience and practice it authentically. That can’t happen unless I go through these experiences, otherwise it’s theoretical rather than experiential.

On a human level, karma is a total bitch, but seen through a spiritual lens, it’s an essential part of the pathway that leads to liberation. That doesn’t mean I don’t grieve, or that it doesn’t terrify me, or that at times I don’t wish it could’ve been different. You can’t change what is—that’s just life—but you can change your perception. That’s what I worked toward so I don’t get caught up again in that narrative of good, bad, right, or wrong.

Let’s say you’re experiencing abandonment, but perhaps you can’t have self-love until you realize the only person who can abandon you is you. Maybe that external abandonment is what’s going to bring you to reclaiming your whole self. So was that abandonment bad, or was it karmically essential to lead you to integration? You can choose to be empowered—not in spite of these experiences but because of them.
Similarly, you teach that opening yourself to healing involves inviting in what scares you the most because that’s what is keeping you from your highest self.

When you get really invested in growth, you might as well write a list of your worst nightmares and just sit with it because odds are some of those are going to show up. When they do, instead of feeling victimized, you can think, Okay, there it is. Now, what do I do with this?

The attachment we have to those deep fears is what holds us back from love. Not that I welcome those experiences. Trust me, I kick and scream just like everybody else. But at some point, I get that something bigger is being asked of me, and I pray for the strength to go toward it.

You write that you initially had an aversion to the concept of God and prayer, but that you came to understand prayer’s energy, which you describe as a way to connect to the highest vibration within us. Can you elaborate?

I grew up agnostic and then felt very committed to my atheism. Billy helped me to understand that God was in all moments, all experiences, all beings. He helped me to see that there was a difference between religion and spirituality, and that while I saw religion as limited, dogmatic, patriarchal, and narrow-minded, spirituality was inclusive.

Spirituality holds both the light and the shadow as sacred.

God, Goddess, Higher Power, Creative Consciousness—call it whatever floats your boat, but it’s truth and love, and it exists within all. Prayer, to me, is when you tap into the highest aspect of yourself and you offer intentions, or declarations, or affirmations to Spirit, to God, to this planet, and you send out high-vibration energy.

When my dad was dying, for example, I didn’t pray to God to take his cancer away. It is what it is. I prayed though for strength, compassion, and more awareness so that I could walk through the process—whether he lived or died—with more centeredness, with more grace. That’s what prayer does. It moves you into a different state of awareness so you can stay present with gratitude and send positive energy to others.

You teach that light cannot exist within us without darkness. Is this also true on a global level? Do we have to make peace with the darkness out there too?

Yes, and we have to actively transform it. In yoga, one of the sutras is ahimsa, which means “do no harm,” but it also teaches that we have to disrupt harm when we see it. We can’t be passive. What’s being excavated from the bowels of our society right now is deep unhealed trauma—racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, transphobia, bias, prejudice, and white supremacy. All of this has been deeply suppressed, but recent events have dredged up all of the shadow that’s within all of our consciousness. It’s scary, but you can’t change it until you see it—including seeing it within yourself.

So maybe we as a society can now do the work to actually create true peace. Not just peace as a theory but peace as an action. It can’t happen until we dismantle the systems that perpetuate this separation, this oppression—and more to the point, until we dismantle it within ourselves so that we can create true sustainable change from the inside out.

If I really want there to be peace, I can’t be pointing the finger. I’ve got to look at how I participate in this situation, how I benefit from it, and then I have to ask what I need to do differently to transform it.

Seane Corn is a yoga powerhouse, known internationally for her impassioned style, her raw, honest self-expression, and her work on humanitarian issues. In 2007, she and two other industry leaders cofounded Off the Mat, Into the World, a global community-focused leadership training organization for activists. She is also the author of Revolution of the Soul (Sounds True, 2019). Visit seanecorn.com.