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Scandal contorts future of John Friend, Anusara yoga

By Manuel Roig-Franzia, Published: March 28

At his best, when a crowd of hundreds of students extended their limbs before him or drew deep breaths with their eyes closed, John Friend could captivate minds and shape bodies. Students spoke of melting beneath his touch. In a gentle voice, he urged them to reach for something beyond the physical, something that extended past the poses they perfected on their yoga mats and embedded into their everyday lives.

“It’s all yoga,” he would say.

He became a superstar, a jet-setting international celebrity of boundless ambition who had invented [Anusara](#), a yoga style that combines rigorous physical poses with a philosophical framework, strict ethical standards and an emphasis on building a worldwide yoga community. He touched down in European and Asian capitals or headlined American yoga festivals trailed by an entourage and a traveling retail outlet. When class ended, the parties often began, “happenings” where his adoring fans drank beer and cocktails and listened to Friend read poetry as costumed performers roamed the room.

“Kind of a lovefest. Kind of a party,” April Ritchey, a California-based Anusara instructor, called it. “People really got addicted to being a part of this.”

Friend achieved “kind of a new thing: yoga rock-stardom,” said Joe Miller, the owner of Willow Street Yoga in Takoma Park and Silver Spring, until recently the world’s largest Anusara-affiliated studio.

Friend’s empire — an international network that claims more than 1,500 teachers, including 25 in the Washington metro area, and 600,000 students — is in crisis now, teetering under the strain of a sex scandal that has split its most loyal practitioners and prompted an astounding venting of emotions, from rage and recriminations to compassion and sadness. In conference calls, e-mails and hushed conversations, Friend has admitted to sexual relations with students and employees and married women. He has confessed to cheating on one girlfriend and smoking marijuana, according to senior Anusara instructors who have participated in conference calls with him. And he has acknowledged leading an otherwise all-female Wiccan coven whose members sometimes took off all their clothes for gatherings, according to senior Anusara instructors who detailed



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his admissions in a written summary provided to The Washington Post. The coven's name was the Blazing Solar Flames, and Friend had Anusara's graphics team design a logo for it, according to three former employees.

There had been rumors about a wild side to Friend's lifestyle for years, but few comprehended the magnitude until Feb. 3 when an anonymous Web site — *jfexposed.com* — appeared containing graphic, close-up sexual images and racy chat transcripts attributed to Friend and a student. The Web site, which was up for just a day and a half, gained a wide audience when it was featured on the popular site yogadork.com. It included allegations of financial misdeeds — the freezing of promised pension funds — that Friend later said were the result of a clerical error that was corrected after an employee complained to government regulators.

Friend's sexual transgressions clashed with his sermonizing on the value of relationships and the importance of trust, deepening the wound among some of his most ardent students and associates.

“Too much power,” concluded Naime Jezzeny, a prominent Anusara instructor in New Hope, Pa., who has ended his affiliation with Friend. “Too much success. Drunk on power. It's like a cliché.”

Friend never liked the word “guru,” with all its implications, but that's what some considered him: a wise, caring teacher who inspired an impassioned following. And even as dozens of high-profile Anusara teachers — yogis who have become stars in their own rights — have abandoned Friend and the business he created, there are hundreds who have remained staunchly loyal.

“This is a man who does way more good than any mistakes that he made,” Christy Nones, a former student and girlfriend of Friend's, said in an interview.

Once the most public of men, Friend, who is 52, has retreated, saying in a statement that he is seeking psychological help while taking a sabbatical “to allow for a period of deep self-reflection and healing” and taking “full responsibility for being out of integrity in intimate relationships.” Friend did not respond to multiple interview requests.

“John isn't a guru; he is a yoga teacher who founded a style of yoga and built a certification program and school,” said Katy Saeger, a public relations consultant who represents Anusara. “He will admit to that which is true, but the sensational stuff needs to end. It's borderline weird.”

The beginning

John Friend was introduced to yoga early, he has said, entranced by the stories his mother told him while he was growing up in Chicago and Youngstown, Ohio, about supernaturally gifted yogis from the Himalayan Mountains.

“They just sounded like superheroes,” Friend said in a videotaped interview with Elephant Magazine. “As an 8-year-old boy, it was like Batman and Flash and Superman all put together. . . . I wanted to be a guy who could dematerialize and go all over the place and really know the secrets of life.”

He worked as a financial analyst, he has said, but eventually became fully immersed in yoga, studying Iyengar, a popular yoga style, before inventing Anusara in 1997, a wholly owned business based in the Woodlands, a Houston suburb.

“John made yoga more mainstream,” said Jordan Bloom, a respected Washington-based yoga instructor who has dropped his affiliation with Anusara. By offering a sense of community and a life-affirming philosophy, Friend

was able to appeal to a broader range of people.

“People were experiencing transformations physically, emotionally and spiritually,” said Jackie Prete, a New York-based Anusara instructor who remains affiliated with the organization.

Friend’s engaging, welcoming manner put students and teachers at ease. He had a mop of curly hair, wore frumpy clothes and laughed easily. He was not built like the conventional image some have of yoga masters; he was no willowy, impossibly sinewy creature but instead stood on thick, powerfully muscled legs. He even had a bit of a double chin. He was preternaturally talented, but he seemed human. His style was “very lighthearted and yet not flippant,” Bloom said.

With the help of a deeply committed core group of teachers, Friend developed “the Ivy League of certification processes,” said Jane Norton, a Martha’s Vineyard Anusara instructor who remains affiliated with the organization. Certification could take years and cost thousands of dollars in fees and travel costs. Anusara placed a greater emphasis on spirituality and philosophy than some yoga styles. Classes began with an invocation on the “grace-bestowing power of universal Spirit within and around us.” Friend’s most loyal teachers say his approach relied on “the tantric philosophy of intrinsic goodness,” rather than tantra’s more sexual connotations.

Top teachers volunteered countless hours writing the Anusara curriculum or serving on its ethics committee. Some grumbled about not being paid and wondered whether it was ethical or legal to ask them to work for free, but by and large they were honored to be included. “That’s the yoga attitude,” a former Anusara-focused studio business manager said with a sigh.

In the early days, the entire Anusara empire could fit into a single room at Willow Street, which hosted one of the first teacher gatherings.

“You’d call up the Anusara office [in Texas] and John would answer the phone,” said Bloom, who teaches once a week at Willow Street.

Willow Street, which remains open but is no longer an “Anusara-dedicated” studio, was founded by one of yoga’s grandes dames, a beloved instructor named Suzie Hurley who is now 67 and calls herself one of the “grandmothers of Anusara.” Hurley and her son, Joe Miller — who recently bought the studio from his mother — spent the early 1990s studying at the Kripalu Yoga Fellowship in Massachusetts. Kripalu was rattled by a sex scandal in 1994 when yoga master Amrit Desai confessed to having sex with three of his students. Desai made a clean break with Kripalu, and the method survived, Miller said.

In the aftermath of the Kripalu scandal, Miller felt himself drifting from yoga. Then he met John Friend.

“He was just goofy and real and brilliant,” Miller recalled. “He really totally re-inspired me.”

Now, it’s happening all over again.

“This is sort of the inherent flaw in the classic guru model,” Miller said. “In the yoga world, these cycles of destruction are what it’s all about.”

Expanding the empire

Friend envisioned creating a vast enterprise that could “bring more love, happiness and peace to millions of

lives,” according to a confidential October 2011 memorandum prepared to woo investors and obtained by The Post. The document, which lists Friend’s phone number and e-mail on its cover, outlines a plan to expand Anusara’s reach beyond the traditional yoga community and into the “\$300 billion health and wellness industry.”

At the core of Friend’s expansion plans was a proposed 8,000-square-foot center in Encinitas, Calif., where he planned to host talks by “preeminent world scholars” and film content for a pay-per-view digital channel. The company took in \$2.8 million in 2010, according to the investor memo. But expansion was taking a toll. In the past two years, the company was losing money because of the costs associated with expansion, confirmed Wendy Willtrout, who is running the company during Friend’s sabbatical. The company was seeking \$1.5 million in financing through the sale of preferred stock, according to the investor memo.

The other thing about the memorandum that concerned some teachers was that it revealed Friend’s plan to trademark himself as an entity separate from Anusara, prompting fears he was leaving behind those who had helped build the brand.

Friend had already alarmed some of his teachers by attempting to capture a part of their incomes. Friend wanted to take a 10 percent royalty on products sold by his licensed teachers, a move that irked some teachers who had become affiliated with the organization before such requirements were discussed and had wanted to market DVDs and other material that weren’t specifically tied to Anusara, according to interviews with Anusara teachers and company documents.

“I felt like, ‘Wow,’ ” Prete said. “It was surprising to me. On the other hand, I know it takes a lot of money to run Anusara.”

Unlike other yoga businesses — such as the popular Bikram hot-yoga brand — Anusara was not a franchise. Instructors paid only a small licensing fee — less than \$100. Even though Friend’s business was not a franchise, a few teachers and their attorneys were concerned that his company might be acting like one because it required certification of teachers and enforced ethical standards that could lead to decertification. It was no small matter, because state and federal laws might impose strict requirements and heavy penalties if a business doesn’t properly register as a franchise.

The small yoga classes that Friend once taught at Willow Street and other studios morphed in recent years into flashy extravaganzas, some with music and dance performances. His shows were branded with catchy names, like the tours of mega-rock bands: Ignite the Center. Melt Your Heart, Blow Your Mind. Light the Sky.

“It just got weird,” said Jezeny, the New Hope, Pa., Anusara instructor. “I’m like, ‘What happened to the yoga?’ ”

Others found it arresting. Onstage, Ritchey said, Friend “had that ‘it’ feel. It was just something hard to explain. It’s an intrinsic thing. It’s cerebral, and it’s not. There’s some sort of magic that he had.”

Friend was pursued everywhere he went. “People were almost like worshipping him,” said Jeff Barrett, Friend’s former personal assistant. “They look to him as some sort of deity.”

Several years ago, Friend released a video that included fire twirlers and hula-hoopers, unnerving traditionalists. A “mini mass hysteria [ensued] about where John was taking the organization, that he was going down the road of ‘Burning Man Anusara,’ ” a key adviser recalled, looking back in an e-mail sent to a committee appointed to

deal with the ballooning scandal. "People were freaking out."

Friend's lifestyle was also making his followers concerned. There was so much chatter that followers organized an "intervention" in 2010, according to e-mail exchanges between Friend and a group of Anusara teachers. Friend later stated in an e-mail that he admitted during the intervention to smoking marijuana and to romantic involvement with a student and employee. In the e-mail, Friend recounted that his associates said they were concerned that he was "'unstable in [his] behavior' and moving in a more libertine direction."

"I honestly thought the whole thing was not a big deal, since I certainly did not feel unstable or libertine," Friend wrote in the e-mail.

Friend frequently lectured on leadership skills and relationships. In one video, posted on YouTube as part of a marketing company's "John Friend Collection," Friend says, "over time, if . . . you're able to develop more of a long-term relationship with someone, what you gain is — you gain a bonded sense of trust with the other . . . and in that trust you're able to open more and more. You're able to reveal yourself more and more."

About a year after they broke up, Nones said she received a call from Friend.

"I've never told you this, but I cheated on you that one summer," Nones recalled Friend telling her. Nones had been a student of Friend's and had also worked for his company. Still, she remembers a "beautiful relationship" with Friend that lasted from 2007 to 2009, and she believes many Anusara teachers have been unduly harsh in their criticisms. "My boyfriend cheated on me, but that doesn't really bother me," said Nones, who took time out from her bachelorette weekend for an interview. (She's marrying one of her former yoga students.)

Barrett, the former personal assistant, said Friend was focused on juggling his sexual relationships and keeping them secret. Barrett said Friend asked him to send a different gift to one girlfriend on each of the 12 days leading up to Christmas, including earrings and a monogrammed robe. It was Barrett's job to arrange accommodations for Friend's girlfriends, sometimes stashing one girlfriend at a hotel while the other stayed at the modest home in the Woodlands that Friend inherited after the death of his mother.

"John was very sure of himself. He thought he could manage this," Barrett said. When one of Friend's girlfriends discovered that he was seeing another woman, she went to Barrett in tears, he said.

Once, Barrett says, he received a call from Friend saying he was expecting a "very, very important package" and wanted it brought to his house. When the parcel arrived at Anusara's office, Barrett — who said it was his job to open Friend's mail — discovered a large plastic container full of marijuana. He told another employee he was worried about getting caught driving such a large amount of marijuana. Barrett was fired. He said it was for disloyalty. An Anusara spokeswoman did not respond to Barrett's claim about the firing. In an e-mail response to questions from The Post, Willtrout — who declined to be interviewed — acknowledged that marijuana was sent to the Anusara office but described it as a "small amount" and an "anonymous gift." Friend, however, admitted to smoking marijuana and said he once had the drug sent to his office, according to a summary of a Feb. 9 conference call with a committee of advisers prepared by Hurley, the former Willow Street owner, and another longtime instructor and "grandmother of Anusara," Betsey Downing.

In the letter, a copy of which was provided to The Post, the women state that Friend also told the group that he had been helping "someone with a sexual trauma she had experienced earlier in life," which was a matter of concern because Friend is not a licensed therapist. "As a way of justifying that it was sex therapy and not an

actual affair, [Friend] said: ‘But I never kissed her,’ and that she thought it was very healing for her,” they wrote. One person on the call asked how the woman’s husband felt. He thought it was “completely out of bounds,” Friend told the group, according to Hurley and Downing.

The Anusara grandmothers and several other teachers interviewed for this article said Friend, whose ex-wife had been a student of his before their marriage, was responsible for tweaked ethical guidelines to make it easier for instructors to enter into sexual relations with students. The guidelines once instructed teachers “to avoid sexual relationships with students” and, in cases in which a sexual attraction occurs, to “wait some weeks before acting on it” and to help the student find another teacher. But in 2009 the guidelines became more permissive, stating that “a romantic relationship between teacher and student is permitted in Anusara yoga” but that “the respectful roles of teacher and student must be maintained within the classroom.”

Willtrout said the ethics code was changed “because many of the teachers and students who were dating in the community encouraged it to evolve.”

Jezeny, the New Hope, Pa., instructor, thought a line had been crossed. “There is a perceived power differential between the student and the teacher,” Jezeny said. “You can’t exploit that or manipulate that in any way.”

A spiraling crisis

The appearance of the jflexposed.com Web site — which Friend blamed on a disgruntled former employee — set off furious debate on yoga Web sites and in a members-only Facebook page for Anusara teachers. The furor was stoked by a series of vague statements issued by Friend and his company that confused some teachers and outraged others. On Feb. 7, Friend decried the publication of “many falsehoods and completely twisted exaggerations” but also admitted that “there is some accuracy within the allegations.” He only went into detail denying the allegations of pension fraud. He also referenced plans to give teachers a greater voice and said he’d be willing to commit to restructuring the company.

Two days later, he held his conference call with the Anusara grandmothers and other advisers. Many of the teachers urged him not to appear at an upcoming event in Miami in which he was scheduled to teach about “the dharma of relationships,” according to Hurley, Downing and another participant who spoke on the condition of anonymity. Friend was concerned about people who had already bought plane tickets to attend the event and the possible loss of revenue. He went forward with the appearance after altering the title, according to a spokeswoman, and — to the surprise of many — was introduced by the former girlfriend he had betrayed, Nones.

“Here’s the worst thing I did,” he told the audience, according to Downing’s notes. “I slept with a married woman. Here’s the second worse thing: I lied to Christy.” Downing also noted that he said, “Okay, I smoked pot.” Everyone laughed, she recalled.

During one of the Miami sessions, Downing says she confronted Friend about concerns she had about the statements he’d been making to the committee and in public. He told her, “I am not a sex therapist, and I have never said I was a sex therapist,” Downing recalled. She responded, “Then you are just being technical with your use of words . . . you are not revealing what you told us on the conference call, that you did sex therapy with a student.”

Later, in an [open letter to his followers](#), Friend admitted that he had “once described the nature of a private relationship as therapy in an effort to hide the relationship, and this was both wrong and the source of the false label.”

In the weeks after the Miami conference, Friend seemed to struggle to gain control of a spiraling crisis. First, he announced that Anusara would be transforming into a nonprofit and Michal Lichtman, a successful businesswoman and supporter, was the company’s [new chief executive](#). A few days later, Lichtman was saying she’d bought half [the company](#). The day after Lichtman’s announcement, she and Friend decided not to pursue a business partnership, Willtrout said in an e-mail response to questions from The Post. That decision was not announced until two weeks later, when Willtrout distributed a letter saying that, in fact, Lichtman was not a co-owner of the company and was not serving in any [executive capacity](#). Lichtman did not respond to interview requests.

But it didn’t stop there. Just last week, Friend distributed another missive, outlining yet another explanation about his company’s future. He said that he had resigned as an officer and director of the company and that he had “entered into an agreement to potentially transfer the ownership of the company to a third party who is not connected to [me personally](#).”

Others have been much more definitive about Anusara’s future. In February, Douglas Brooks, a Rochester University professor who helped Friend come up with the Anusara name and is a respected voice in the yoga community, called for the dissolution of Anusara to prevent further damage to the broader perception of yoga and warned that “for John to continue in any role of leadership, implied, concealed or actual is to consign Anusara to the status of another fallen [yoga cult](#).”

Modern yoga was having a reckoning.

“Yoga is still undergoing enormous growing pains as it’s coming to the West,” said Bloom, the Washington-based instructor. “Yoga is still figuring itself out — as a modality, as an industry, as a profession.”

But the real question that so many were asking, and that one no one could answer, was this: Would yoga be figuring itself out with or without John Friend?