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TexasMonthly.com

May 2012

Downward Dog

John Friend is the charismatic founder of Anusara, a style of yoga started in The Woodlands fifteen years ago. Pose by pose, he built Anusara into a hugely popular global brand, with adherents everywhere from Japan to Israel. Then he found himself entangled in a string of bizarre accusations. Can Texas's most famous yogi get himself free?

by Mimi Swartz

Before John Friend's life and business became engulfed in a tsunami-size scandal earlier this year, the Woodlands-based yoga-teacher-turned-mogul was doing quite well, thank you. He was gearing up for his 2012 Ignite the Center World Tour, in which he planned to spread the word about Anusara, the brand of yoga he founded in 1997, at workshops held everywhere from Austin to Tel Aviv. The tour would culminate in December with a celebration at the Yucatecan pyramids, aligning “with the cosmic connection of the end of the Mayan calendar,” as the promotional literature promised, and connecting “the sacred geometry of the ancient pyramids to current-day transformation.” Friend had equally big plans out in Encinitas, California—ground zero for yoga in the U.S.—where he expected to stage a grand opening for his new headquarters, which he intended to relocate from Texas. The Center, as he had christened it, was to be a state-of-the-art-yet-still-spiritual capital for his increasingly global yoga enterprise. He planned to host classes over the Internet that would reach the farthest corners of the earth; in the future, other planets might not have been out of the question.

Friend had every reason to be confident. After eking out a living as an itinerant yoga teacher in Houston in the eighties, he had built his particular philosophy of “life-affirming” and “celebratory” yoga into a vibrant community—or *kula*, in Sanskrit—of more than 600,000 students and almost 1,500 licensed teachers in one-hundred-plus countries. He had over 15,000 Twitter followers, and attendance at his workshops, whether in Bryn Athn, Pennsylvania, or Gangnam-gu, South Korea, tended to be standing room only. In 2004 he had been featured on the cover of *Yoga Journal*, the mainstream bible of the U.S. yoga world, and he had appeared—masterfully straddling two cliffs under a drenching waterfall—in a 2007 yoga pictorial in *Vanity Fair*. He had his own Anusara products—mats, T-shirts, videos—and Manduka, one of the most well-regarded yoga gear companies

in the country, had rolled out the John Friend Collection in the fall of 2011. In other words, Friend was poised to become the world's first full-service cyber yogi and, most likely, a very rich man.

But then, last November, a handful of his instructors began a curious exodus. They resigned from the Anusara fold and gave up their hard-won teaching licenses, offering vague statements about no longer being “in alignment” with the organization. Over the next two months, some thirty or so teachers followed in their wake, raising more than a few eyebrows. Then, on February 3, the anonymously created JFexposed.com hit the web. “This site is not intended to hurt the Anusara community or its teachers,” the home page stated. Rather, it was meant to be “a wake up call to John Friend to be true to his own philosophies and expectations of integrity.”

Displaying private emails and compromising photos, the website leveled the kinds of accusations that would challenge the sensibilities of even the most assiduously nonjudgmental yogi. One tab charged that Friend was a member of a Wiccan coven—named Blazing Solar Flame—that used, in Friend's words, “sexual/sensual energy in a positive and sacred way to help build the efficacy of our practices.” Posing a challenge to Anusara's ethical guidelines for teacher-student relationships, which Friend himself had written, the coven included several of his students. A second tab revealed hot and heavy emails between Friend and a married woman whose name did not appear in the roster of coven members listed under the first tab. In one missive, Friend's lover worried that her husband might be on to them. Not to worry, Friend had responded, “We are aligned with the Shakti.” The file also contained some ostensibly erotic photographs that might have been more at home in a gynecology textbook.

As if that weren't enough, the next tab suggested that Friend was either very bad at managing money—even though he had an accounting degree and had worked as a financial analyst—or greedy or careless or some combination of all three. The CEO of Anusara, it turned out, had frozen his employees' pension plans for nearly a year without notifying them, an action that had drawn the attention of the Department of Labor. The author of JFexposed.com had thoughtfully attached supporting documents. The fourth tab alleged that Friend's assistants had received marijuana shipments for him at Anusara headquarters. For someone who promised that his style of yoga “was grounded in a Tantric philosophy of intrinsic goodness,” the information was, at best, alarming.

Though the site existed for just 36 hours before vanishing into the ether, its creator—discovered to be a former Anusara employee—had taken the time to alert the editor of YogaDork.com, one of the most popular yoga websites in the country. The editor promptly broke the news of the charges under the headline “John Friend, Head of Anusara: The Accusations.” Page views on YogaDork jumped from roughly 400,000 to around 1.4 million, and online commentary about the yoga leader's apparent folly went viral. Readers and bloggers argued over whether one should ever look for a guru outside oneself. Some attacked YogaDork for exposing Friend's behavior (“If Jesus, [Krishna], Mohammed, Arjuna or Buddha were around today they would be written about too—lucky for them 21st century media wasn't around to do a full on literary slaughter”), but most directed their fury at Friend himself. (One post described him, in not very yogic terms, as “some kind of f—ed up weird warlock perverted Dumbledore power whore.”) Perhaps sensing a shift, a PR rep for Anusara offered the editor of YogaDork an exclusive interview with Friend if she would take her story down. She refused.

Friend responded by directing email blasts at his followers. In an open letter to his kula, he asked for forgiveness for “poor personal decisions” and begged them to reserve judgment until the allegations were explained. He stated that in the coming days he would “openly and transparently address all the claims in detail.” On February 8 he gave an exclusive interview to the editor of ElephantJournal.com—an influential website for those interested in, among other things, Eastern religions, yoga, and sustainability—and admitted to having consensual

relationships with students and employees, including married ones. But he kept the specifics to himself. “It is not fair for me to explain the intimate details of each relationship in a public forum,” he confessed in something of a non-confession. “I see clearly where I can rise up as a man and walk differently in my relationships with women.” He was also, he said, practicing compassion for the leaker behind JFexposed.com—though privately he had already sicced an attorney on the author.

Given that the world of yoga is one in which men and women wear as little as possible while waving their rear ends in the air in the search for transcendence, it should have come as no surprise that Friend appeared to be joining the ranks of such disgraced sexual miscreants as Ted Haggard, Eliot Spitzer, and Anthony Weiner. Friend was not the first yogi, as he put it, to have fallen “out of integrity in some relationships.” As one *New York Times* article pointed out in the wake of the allegations, Friend had obvious predecessors in Swami Muktananda and Swami Rama, gurus who were accused of sexual escapades in 1981 and 1994, respectively. The much-venerated Gurumayi was also caught in cultlike misconduct of her own, chronicled in the *New Yorker* in 1994.

But a couple of factors set this scandal apart. First, there was the use of technology, which spread the news of Friend’s failings around the globe in nanoseconds and offered a window into a culture and vernacular that practically begged for a mockumentary by Christopher Guest. (As one Anusara instructor wrote, resigning from the organization, “I realized the dharmic choice for me was to continue to teach asana with the brilliant alignment principles I learned from John Friend while giving direct acknowledgement to the spiritual lineage which informs the darshan of my heart.”) Second, there was the money. With the U.S. yoga business valued at nearly \$6 billion annually, there was a lot more at stake than the behavior of one middle-aged crazy, a fact that Friend himself seemed acutely aware of when he told *ElephantJournal.com*, “We must all remember that any missteps by me do not invalidate any of the greatness of the Anusara yoga method.” Never before had someone been laid bare at the top of such an expansive yoga empire, and no one could predict what the effect on its adherents would be.

Nearly 14.5 million Americans now sling yoga mats over their shoulders, attending classes in studios, gyms, strip malls, and ashrams. The mass popularization of yoga began roughly fifteen years ago, and today its different styles are too numerous to count, from the sequence-following Vinyasa to the intense Ashtanga to the breath-focused Kundalini. And then there are the accessories—blocks, straps, videos, and all those seductive tank tops from the likes of Lululemon. William Broad’s recent book *The Science of Yoga: The Risks and the Rewards* is a best-seller, generating innumerable mini-controversies of its own. Yoga’s widespread appeal is not entirely shocking: while its practitioners are usually stereotyped as a blissed-out bunch, in the years since I began practicing the discipline, in 1997, I’ve discovered that it draws far more type A’s engaged in blistering struggles with their inner perfectionists. Instead of religion or alcohol or drugs or competitive Frisbee for anxiety management, we have found yoga, which, with its peculiar mixture of stretching and strength building—both emotional and physical—along with some pretty easygoing spirituality, somehow does the trick. That yoga is now ubiquitous—I had my choice of classes last year while visiting Kerrville—is a testament to both its effectiveness and the frenetic state of the populace.

Friend was always something of an unlikely yogi. He is now 53, with white hair, lines around his chipper blue eyes, and a softness around his middle. Whether you think of him as self-effacing in a supremely self-confident way or supremely self-confident in a self-effacing way, Friend comes off as warm and approachable, qualities that set him apart from a pack of solemn, lean—and younger—competitors. He came to Houston from Ohio as a child; studied finance and accounting in college; found actual financial work deadly; and decided, with some

monetary help from his parents, to devote his life to yoga. (His flamboyant, eccentric mother had introduced him to yoga as a boy.) He studied with masters like B.K.S. Iyengar and Patabhi Jois, who brought Iyengar and Ashtanga yoga to the Western world, respectively, and he got to be on a first-name basis with American yogis like Judith Lasater, one of the founders of *Yoga Journal*. But Friend has the most in common with his semi-nemesis, the relentlessly ambitious Bikram Choudhury, whose eponymous hot yoga method now spans the globe. Like Bikram, Anusara—which means “flowing with grace” in Sanskrit—was supposed to be a new, improved Hatha yoga practice, one that combined all the things that Friend liked and discarded those he did not.

I had my first encounter with Friend more than a decade ago, when he gave a workshop in honor of his late mother in a cinder-block gym at a Woodlands community college. At the time, I was practicing various styles, but my favorite teachers were among his earliest students: middle-aged women of incomparable beauty and good humor, the latter quality being one that is not always found in abundance at yoga studios. In their classes, I found an enthusiasm and acceptance I had never experienced elsewhere. I was a fortysomething woman who had wrestled with klutziness my entire life; that I could learn to master a headstand inspired me to tackle new things off my yoga mat as well.

So when my teachers encouraged me to take the workshop with Friend, I signed up right away. He was then in his forties and just one of many yoga road warriors—instructors who traveled from city to city hosting classes in hopes of building a following, kind of like rock musicians. He could stand on his hands while simultaneously doing a split in the air with breathtaking ease, but he also loved a good joke or ten. Attending that workshop was like taking a class from a former Deadhead who'd also been a stand-up comic before picking up some great moves while hanging out in, say, Pune, India. Friend ricocheted around the room, one minute talking about “opening to grace”—Anusara’s buzz phrase—and the next minute helping a woman in her mid-fifties into a handstand while playing to the crowd with one long “*Cooooool!*” All of us did things we’d never believed we could do.

The women who assisted in teaching that day were all, like Friend, warm and encouraging and thick in the waist, in most cases from having a child or two. Everyone laughed a lot and came away from the workshop feeling buoyant. Anusara yoga was a flawless blend of East and West: Friend was serious about proper positioning of the body—“alignment” in yoga-speak—an idea he borrowed and built on from his work with Iyengar. But Iyengar-style classes could be strict and somewhat joyless, while Friend, in typical American fashion, urged students to make yoga more like an individual dance than a series of rigid poses. And unlike Bikram classes, where students did the same sequence of poses every time, each Anusara class was different—there was always something new to try. Friend knew instinctively just how much Sanskrit, Eastern philosophy, and meditation his followers would tolerate: enough to make his yoga feel authentic and exotic but not too much to weigh anybody down.

Anusara also succeeded because Friend had that business background. Like Iyengar, he instituted a process of certification that doubled as a branding tool. This system was a threefer: students got better-than-average teachers (certification required intense study and written and video exams), teachers could charge more because of their formal training and enjoy the prestige associated with Anusara, and Anusara won another income stream for itself from the thousands it could cost to become a certified teacher. As of 2010, Anusara Inc. was bringing in \$2 million a year in revenue. Friend made money not just by teaching—though leading a workshop with eight hundred or so students at \$195 a pop wasn’t bad, especially when you did it almost every day of the year—but also by training others and charging them for instruction manuals, videos, and fees (it cost \$375 just to apply to be a teacher). Lifted by yoga’s rising tide, Friend became a bona fide celebrity, enlightening hundreds of

thousands with worldwide tours that featured themes like “Light the Sky,” “Dancing With the Divine,” and “Melt Your Heart, Blow Your Mind.” If you missed him, you could buy John Friend practice videos with titles that paid homage to Hindu goddesses, such as “Lakshmi Rocks Me.”

Friend’s entrepreneurship and showmanship, so intrinsic to Texas culture, were, not surprisingly, problematic in the yoga world, where any attempt to turn the practice into a capitalistic enterprise is met with ambivalence and suspicion. Houston, ironically or not for such a work-driven city, has a relatively old and successful yoga community that dates back to the sixties, starting with Billie Gollnick, who was followed by teachers like Lex Gillan, John Coon, George Purvis, Robert Boustany, and brothers Doug and David Swenson, all of whom enjoyed statewide, if not national, reputations. Starting out, Friend did not endear himself to everyone. Yes, he had a good reputation as a teacher (“He was the real deal,” an early student assured me), but he also became known as a climber and a user. His falling out around the end of 2003 with yogi Douglas Keller, who had helped him develop Anusara, was noted in particular. The tenor of the separation was akin to a bitter divorce: Keller says that positive comments are no longer made about his contributions and that Anusara students are sometimes forbidden to take his workshops. (“Anyone who is perceived as crossing Friend is ousted from that community,” a former assistant, Jeff Barrett, told me.) Considering that Keller was a yoga teacher, as opposed to a competing drug kingpin, Friend’s behavior seemed a little over the top, even back then.

I didn’t see Friend again until I signed up for a workshop in Estes Park, Colorado, in 2008. This event was the first-ever Anusara Grand Gathering—a call to Anusarans everywhere to commune in one place—and it was clear that we had come a long way from that gym in The Woodlands. Hundreds of people, mostly women, had paid several hundred dollars for three days of yoga with Friend as the lead-in to the annual Yoga Journal Conference, the yogic equivalent of the Cannes Film Festival. Friend had sold out a space that was the size of, if not larger than, an airplane hangar. There was chanting to music performed by Benjy and Heather (think a New Age version of Sonny and Cher or She and Him) and some kind of talent show that, due to painful elementary-school experiences, I eschewed. There were talks on meditation and spirituality from Friend’s perennial sidekicks: Douglas Brooks, a Hindu scholar who received his master’s of divinity at Harvard, and Sally Kempton, a former Manhattan writer (and the daughter of columnist Murray Kempton) who sometimes goes by the name of Swami Durgananda. All in all, it was an interesting experience, less because of the vegan food and Friend’s rambling dharma talks—kind of like pep rallies for yogis—than because of the change I observed in Friend and his organization.

The middle-aged women who had been his earliest students and served as Anusara’s first teachers were still there, but most weren’t assisting as they had back in The Woodlands. They tried but generally failed to maintain their happy faces as they were crowded into the same hall as us tyros, where they were “corrected” by younger, sylphlike creatures who seemed to take their task as seriously as nuclear arms inspectors. (Friend’s attempts to further codify Anusara through increasingly complex certification methods had already been causing some grumbling, as teachers who had reached what they believed to be the top of the heap discovered that he had created a new level requiring still more exams, to be graded by newcomers. Some “special” students were upgraded and could skip much of the process entirely.) At meals, a phalanx of yoga bunnies formed a force field around Friend, and it was not hard to sense the social stratification, despite Friend’s insistence that we were all part of his “merry band.”

Back at The Woodlands headquarters, there were other hints of friction. Despite its explosive growth, Anusara was still being run like a mom-and-pop business. Some members of the office staff of ten were overwhelmed with work, while others, with higher salaries, showed up only intermittently (they preferred to practice yoga).

And there were strange, unwritten rules of the type familiar to Hollywood personal assistants. One employee had to return his new office chair because he had bought the wrong color. (“John hates red,” one of Friend’s minions explained to him.) A \$1 million investment from a foundation in Oregon went to, among other things, a leased BMW for Friend’s—yes—personal assistant.

Two years later, I attended yet another Anusara workshop, in Los Angeles, this time as a reporter for a *New York Times Magazine* profile of Friend. It was held in the ballroom of a converted Armenian community center just a few miles from the Kodak Theatre, where the Oscars were being held at the same time—a strange bit of synchronicity that seemed to confirm Anusara’s growing fabulousness. There was no band this time, only Friend, sitting on a dais in front of a rendering of Lakshmi, talking and talking and talking, mostly about Shri, “the radiant quality of divine beauty.” The average age seemed to have plummeted to about 26, and even for Hollywood, the crowd seemed exceptionally robust and gorgeous. Students, many of whom were also Anusara instructors, had adorned the edges of their mats with statues of Buddha and various Hindu gods, along with assorted prayer beads and journals, in which they assiduously recorded the Word of John. At the end of the workshop, Friend presented a sixties-style light show that was supposed to reflect the energy of the chakras. There was a lot of talk about taking our practices to the next level at the new center in Encinitas, and later that night, there was an after-party for A-listers at a warehouse in L.A. that featured fire-eaters and tightrope walkers. At one point during the festivities, a young woman reputed to be Friend’s lover crawled toward him wearing catlike makeup while he recited a poem about “riding the tiger.” Though he later insisted to me that the poem’s subject was creativity, suffice it to say the message wasn’t clear.

That whole weekend reminded me of Houston during the oil boom of the early eighties, when a great many success-crazed oilmen could not be convinced that what went up would, eventually and inevitably, also come down. The strangeness of Anusara’s new culture was underscored a few weeks later, when an employee of the organization contacted me to denigrate a former assistant who had been fired—shortly after being praised publicly at the Hollywood workshop for being indispensable. Then, after my story was published, an Anusara posse of mean girls attacked the mostly positive article online and in angry emails. At the same time, I began receiving anguished emails and phone calls from a parent and an abandoned spouse of two Anusara students, who suggested that something a lot more malignant than white-magic Wiccan rituals was growing inside the organization. No wonder, I thought in retrospect, Friend had objected so vigorously to my casual use of the word “cult” regarding Anusarans.

In fact, Friend never spoke to me again. He did not respond to my emails for this story, and one of his loyalists suggested it was because I had called him a “guru” in the *New York Times* piece—I hadn’t—and “sensationalized” the fact that he drove a BMW, which I’d duly noted he’d inherited from his mother. The official explanation for the implosion has the whiff of Houston circa 1986: Friend’s business got too big too fast, and he lost control. To his credit, he mentored a stable of yoga stars, such as *Yoga Journal* cover girls Amy Ippoliti and Elena Brower. But, says a publicist, they eventually chafed at being part of the fold: like Iyengar and Bikram, Friend did not allow teachers to introduce other forms of yoga in his studios, and he also asked for a 10 percent royalty on products they developed. A deepening cash crunch in 2011 most likely led to the dismemberment of the pension plan. Friend had also come up with a new definition of the organization’s principles that some followers found difficult to, well, follow: he officially named Anusara’s “philosophical vision” Shiva-Shakti Tantra in January 2010, causing conflict among those who could actually figure out what he was talking about.

And, finally, there was just a lot of chaos. The author of JFexposed.com told me that he posted the information because he was angered by what he perceived to be Friend’s hypocrisy, his seeming penchant for retaining bad

employees while losing good ones, and the dissolution of the pension plan. Perhaps the most thoughtful explanation for what happened to Friend's venture came from a therapist, yogi, and ayurvedic practitioner named Matthew Remski, who wrote on his blog that Anusara "seemed sustained by a distinctly late capitalist vibe: ungrounded, easy-credit fueled, dispersed across the internet, cohered by branding, conference calls and corporate-speak, and spattered across the vacay-destinations of our warming globe."

After his ElephantJournal.com interview, Friend followed his vague denials with incremental admissions of truth. He emailed a guarded apology to the Anusara community, and the next day he held a three-hour conference call with his interim committee—a select group of teachers he appointed in the wake of the scandal—during which he confessed that the allegations were "mostly true." Yes, he had had affairs with students and married women; yes, he had smoked pot and once received some in the mail. (A former assistant told me he was afraid of taking possession of drugs sent to Friend. "I needed to work for someone normal, and he wasn't normal," he said. "When I started hearing about the Wicca, I thought, 'This is unreal.'") As for the freezing of the pensions, Friend claimed it was "an administrative error" that had been rectified. And there was, well, a little more: Friend also revealed in the conference call that he had helped a woman who had suffered sexual trauma early in her life—meaning, as his listeners correctly interpreted, that he'd engaged in sex with her. "But I never kissed her," he explained in Clintonian fashion. (When pressed, Friend admitted that the woman's husband deemed his behavior "completely out of bounds.") Then, on February 12, he showed up for a three-day intensive Dharma of Relationship workshop, in Miami, clearly hoping his relationship with his kula would continue as it had before.

It did not. At a glassed-in conference center overlooking the water, Friend once again took questions, this time from about 120 students and instructors. The grief from many in the room was palpable: they had placed both their spiritual and financial trust in him, and now they felt deeply betrayed. It wasn't the sexual dalliances that disturbed them so much as Friend's refusal to take responsibility for his actions. According to one of Friend's longtime teachers, Betsey Downing, he once again made a hash of things when he tried to explain himself. (Maybe Friend was flummoxed by his own course description: "By understanding these different levels of interaction, we can more skillfully align with the highest intention to see Spirit in each other, in all of life.") He cracked jokes and mostly repeated the defense he had used during the conference call. The Wiccan rituals weren't sexual, for example; the coven members just took off all their clothes "to build the energy." Then, on Valentine's Day, Friend read a letter of apology to the assembled, claiming that if they did not stand with him, Anusara might be over and done with that very day. In other words, Anusara's teachers could all be out of work if they didn't see things his way.

But they didn't, largely because—as often happens in these situations—Friend just couldn't seem, in yogic terms, to find his own truths. Later that day, for instance, Downing, a forceful instructor who calls herself an "Anusara grandmother," says she confronted Friend, reminding him that he had admitted to a sexual encounter with a former student in the phone call with the interim committee but then claimed in a letter to teachers that he had never done so. Downing says she asked him to correct himself publicly, and he refused. "The media would go wild with that information," Friend reportedly said. "There might be lawsuits." "Then don't tell us that you are telling the whole truth and being transparent," Downing replied.

More teacher resignations followed, as did calls from longtime associates like Douglas Brooks for Friend to step down. ("The Anusara community and the yoga community at large suffers . . . degradation by association, implication, and public perception," he wrote.) *Yoga Journal* withdrew its invitation for his appearance at their annual conference. So too did Wanderlust, a yoga and music festival. Trying to distance themselves from their former teacher as swiftly as possible—a race against time that had as much to do with preserving their future

careers as expressing their disgust with Friend's indiscretions—a group of ex-Anusarans banded together to form a new organization called the Yoga Coalition. Whatever they teach in the future will have to be named something other than Anusara; Friend still owns the trademark, devalued though it may be by his behavior.

For his part, Friend tried, and failed, to install a wealthy former student as the head of Anusara—a move many saw as an attempt to maintain control. Currently his vice president of operations is in charge, but few believe she has the business acumen, yogic skills, or star quality to run the organization. A skeleton crew remains employed in the Woodlands office.

On March 20, Friend sent one more email to the Anusara community. He wrote that he would no longer be teaching, “to allow for a needed period of self reflection,” and was stepping down as a director and officer of the company as well. Anusara's organization would be restructured, and a new leader would be found. “Now that there is the beginning of a genuine plan in place for moving Anusara yoga forward independent of my management,” he said, “I am taking a sabbatical to embrace a process of self-awareness, transformation, and healing. I will be on teaching hiatus and have sought out professional therapists who are helping me on my path.”

I, for one, preferred an earlier explanation. In one of the emails quoted on JFexposed.com, Friend apologized profusely to the Wiccan coven members for fooling around with so many women. “My poor judgment and misaligned energy put the whole coven, each of you and your families at risk,” Friend wrote. “I have always considered myself intelligent and clever, and so I easily could create my own world even if I had to shrewdly cut corners since I would not get caught.”

Eliot Spitzer couldn't have said it better.

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