

Episode #37 – 3 Ways Yoga Therapy Can Improve Your Life Now with Bob Butera

Donna Ferris: [00:00:00] Welcome to Bounce Back Stronger, the podcast that explores ways to find peace and purpose no matter what happens. Today's guest is Bob Butera, Founder and Program Director of the Comprehensive Yoga Therapy Training at Yoga Life Institute. A little bit about Bob. Bob has dedicated his life to empowering others through the ancient wisdom of yoga.

With a Ph. D. in yoga therapy and decades of experience, he has taught over a thousand yoga teachers and 300 yoga therapists. His deep understanding of yoga philosophy and psychology informs his approach, guiding individuals toward greater harmony, balance, and well-being in all aspects of their lives.

He is the author of five books, including *The Pure Heart of Yoga and Meditation for Your Life* and his latest work *The Yoga Life: Applying Comprehensive Yoga Therapy to All Areas of Your Life* is focused on applying the philosophy and guiding principles of yoga into your daily routine.

Bob, thank you so much for joining us on Bounce Back Stronger [00:01:00]. As a former student and reader of your work, I'm so happy to have you on the podcast.

Bob Butera: Glad to be here.

Donna Ferris: I understand you're in San Diego now.

Bob Butera: Yes.

Donna Ferris: How is that?

Bob Butera: Living out on the West Coast with a little bit of sunshine and a lot of yoga. This is all good. There's a lot of yoga people out here.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, it's nice to find your people.

Bob Butera: Yes, yes. We were in Pennsylvania for the 30 years that you were mentioning. Our studio was probably the fourth, depending on how you calculate what a studio was in the entire area.

So I opened a studio, thinking I should be a 45-minute drive from the others so as not to infringe on their territory.

Donna Ferris: But there are also two other States, right? You got New Jersey and Delaware in there too. So you were one of the biggest studios.

Bob Butera: Yeah in that area we ended up becoming that. And we published for roughly 20 years, we published a holistic magazine called Yoga Living that you know about, but it had a circulation of 65,000 and it went to everywhere that the Philadelphia region would cover.

So it went into New Jersey and Delaware, and in that magazine, we put in articles, and then there would be advertisements from holistic practitioners that you would never be able to find anywhere else. And it was especially large in the years before the internet started to become available, when you could Google things.

So magazines like that are not as necessary now. So, we ended up stopping at around 2018 or 19.

So we were able to unify a lot of people.

Donna Ferris: Yeah. And we miss that. I think there are some holistic fairs that I've heard about in different areas now. So that's what's coming up as opposed to having those kinds of journals, but it's something people miss.

They definitely do.

Bob Butera: In line with our topic today on yoga therapy, being involved in your community is a part of it. You know, making sure you're getting out there with COVID [00:03:00] now, there's a lot of isolation going on.

There's a lot of this (points to headphones). These are great for me speaking with you right now, but there's much of this in public. So, people don't actually speak to each other. So our sense of even basic acquaintances has decreased, and from acquaintances come friends. Friends are an essential part of your psyche.

If you don't have a feeder source for friendships, new ones won't be coming into your life. Your old friends will be there, which is wonderful, but you'll also benefit from meeting new folks. And that, I think, is something to consider.

Donna Ferris: Yeah, I saw a stat yesterday that I want to say is a larger percentage than this, but about 20 percent of people don't ever see anybody face to face in their day.

Bob Butera: And certainly, when you work from home, you may see screen time, but those, those social interactions are definitely more valuable than we recognize. [00:04:00]

Donna Ferris: I agree. The surgeon general said that there was an epidemic of loneliness before the pandemic. So it has only been exacerbated since.

So let's maybe hit the questions: Can you share why you pursued a career in yoga, what caused that, and the focus on holistic wellness?

Bob Butera: Sure. As a college student, I studied international relations. I love living in foreign cultures and studying foreign languages. So, I discovered that by going to Canada and living in Quebec, I became close to fluent in French because I had studied it in high school, finished all my college credits for language, and loved it so much.

I switched schools and went overseas to Japan and Taiwan and I did these study projects there. And then I was studying meditation there. One of my mentors sent me to learn yoga and he sent me to India and I was in between, [00:05:00] graduated college, but not really figured out what I wanted to do. So my first reason for all this was that meditation was getting me really in touch with who I was and spiritual practices, and I wanted to spend a year or two just focused on those kinds of discussions before making any life decisions.

So I went to this place in India, and it was a total click. I can see why my mentor figured I would enjoy that place because they covered every aspect of healthy living slash spiritual living in one place, from nutrition to meditation to yoga practices and physical stuff to psychological and so forth.

But the way that it ended up becoming my career is that when I returned home figuring, okay, I've kind of got myself somewhat figured out. It was clear that I was more of a natural teacher. And so I went to do a degree where I could [00:06:00] be a teacher in private schools for spiritual studies or a minister.

And cause I was very interested in all the spirituality. When I was there, I was teaching yoga to undergraduates, having been trained in India, and the classes kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger. And my professor said you should be teaching yoga, not anything else. And she was seeing the benefits from people.

And this was in the 1990s, 1990 to 93, and this was before there were many yoga teachers around. So this woman, Ann Miller, said you should get a PhD in this, not just this master's in education, but you should go on and do a PhD in this yoga field.

And she's the one who found my university in California - the California Institute of Integral Studies.

Donna Ferris: Yeah. And that's where you got your Ph. D. too?

Bob Butera: That's where I got the Ph. D. and then it was focused in yoga therapy.

Donna Ferris: And what is yoga therapy for [00:07:00] those who aren't familiar?

Bob Butera: Yoga therapy is a term that was coined.

We don't know exactly who coined it, but around the late 1980s, people started referring to yoga that was applied to health conditions. They started calling it yoga therapy. And the place where I was trained in India had been doing yoga for health conditions because their yoga school was one of the first yoga schools in a city in the world, literally 1917.

Usually if you studied yoga, you would have to go off to one of those retreat centers that you all may have heard of. And you take that drive and it's amazing up in the mountains somewhere, you know. It's remote and it's hard to find, you get lost, but then you have a great time when you're there.

So that's how yoga was originally taught. And then people started slowly in the early 1900s, taking it to the [00:08:00] cities. And then you have people with diseases who suddenly are improved, like their conditions improve. So the place where I was specialized in that, and so they called it yoga for total health.

And then in the late 1980s, everybody started to call it yoga therapy. And their approach is a total lifestyle approach where you basically lower stress and improve natural living in order to strengthen a person's system.

Donna Ferris: And this really leads right into your current book, right?

Bob Butera: Correct.

Donna Ferris: I didn't mean to do that so easily, but it just happened.

Bob Butera: No, I know. Even compared to my other titles. If we're going to discuss yoga therapy, this is literally, our handbook. And everybody, Donna wanted me to share, like, so why did you [00:09:00] write this book, basically?

And the reason was to summarize pretty much all the different areas of your life that you would consider and evaluate. We sometimes use the image of a bucket with a different holes in it. Where are the holes in your life? What is stressing you out?

Or like, what are you not maximizing? Like, are you not eating properly? So that becomes a leak in your bucket. And then we try to systematically do things and shift our approach to life so that we plug those holes, and we become strong in all those areas

Donna Ferris: In working with people what do you find is the top three things that they struggle with?

Bob Butera: So top three things they struggle with. Well, we'll end with deep breathing because almost nobody I've ever met breathes deeply. And I call it the [00:10:00] biggest vitamin pill that you could have is your breath. That's your first vitamin pill and your first meal because it's continuous.

But probably, I think it's when we have a materialistic view of life that is the main problem. So let me maybe unpack that, and that would be when we're disconnected from our deeper values. Sometimes people like to criticize the modern-day world, like, oh, the internet is disconnecting people or social media is the problem, but but it's not actually true.

In the 1950s, people had other issues. In the 1920s, they had other issues. Whenever we're slightly out of balance, whatever the thing may be - that is the stress. So we can name the modern ones, which I just referred to, we were talking about community and the lack thereof, or, you know, social media really wreaking [00:11:00] havoc on not just the nervous system by watching screens so much, but on the heart of people because as soon as something bad happens to us and everybody else shows their beautiful pictures, we start to feel a

decrease in self-esteem, and we feel like we're the only one suffering or something.

So, social media is a major problem. The top three would be defining yourself from spiritual principles, not from external forces. That means that you could work where Donna works, You could work where I work, and it really doesn't matter. It only matters if you're in touch with your deeper values while you're there.

Donna Ferris: And when you have to cross those values, right? That's one of the problems. When you're out of alignment with those values and know something's wrong, you can't define it. So, we don't really want materialism. It's just something that we think we want, [00:12:00] and it's out of alignment with what our true values are, but we don't know better,

Bob Butera: The media and various things are always, you know, making shiny objects look like they're the source of happiness, and our source of happiness comes from our inner fulfillment.

Donna Ferris: Comes from inside. Yep.

Bob Butera: You need to have your basic needs met.

So, you need to get a job and have a roof. But as I like to say, a hut has a roof on it. You know what I mean?

Donna Ferris: A hut has a roof.

Bob Butera: And many people who live in huts are happier than people in the United States, unfortunately. Because then we have to work so much to keep these roofs over our head, these very fancy roofs, fancy roads, cars, and everything.

I think when I talk about the values because this is such a huge thing. It's not just that I need to work in a carbon-neutral facility because I believe in carbon neutrality. Because it's impossible, actually, if you drove your car, you're not carbon neutral anymore.

And, we [00:13:00] can't escape the society as it's set up. I like to think of it more as not having perfect external circumstances because I think that's where people who want to live this better life will often find a lot of frustration

because they have to drive a car and they have to go to a grocery store and their, their food is in a package, and they can't grow all their own food.

There are all these things that limit us. But it's more about understanding your inner values and then resolving and accepting that they're not going to be perfect.

Donna Ferris: I think you also hit something really important too, is that the happiness comes from inside, not externally, and in that pursuit of trying to find it everywhere else is, is going to leave you unhappy, probably.

Bob Butera: Yeah, right. Each person has to define that. And one of the things we'll do, and obviously I'm setting our yoga therapy conversation up, [00:14:00] but we like to be non-dogmatic in this. So, there is a spirituality to it.

That's in our question chart; that would be the essential starting place. Then, as you build your lifestyle around this core center that you define, you can figure out how to express it in all the different areas of your life. So in the center of your pie is your core value that love is gonna define you, or you want to cultivate compassion in your life or whatever it is that brings you that sense of total peace and joy and success would be that type of quality. Then, you would figure out how can I cultivate that in my personal life.

How can I do that in my fitness? Then, we help a person first define this, and only then do all the other areas start to line up.

Donna Ferris: Right. And you wouldn't do them all at once, right? You kind of address the one on fire first. Is that how you think [00:15:00] about it?

Bob Butera: Absolutely.

Donna Ferris: Cause there's usually one that is on fire. So beyond meditation, which we're going to talk about, what are two other things somebody could do to kind of quickly right themselves?

Bob Butera: I like to say, find a mentor. And yes, a yoga therapist is a mentor, but I don't have to be biased to think that only yoga therapists can help somebody. A good friend. Somebody that's gonna guide you without shaming you in any way, like by helping you determine what you want to do, they are gonna be there to hold you accountable to say, hey, how is that diet change going?

Or are you getting to bed on time? Because your sleep is crucial, did you go to that yoga class or that fitness club, or did you take your hike? And are you actually doing it? Yeah. And, you can have a good friend without even having it be formalized.

[00:16:00] So I would say some sort of mentor presence in that area.

Donna Ferris: No, I love that. That handles the connection piece, too. We get so much in our heads that it's really helpful to have somebody you admire who is on the path you want to be on.

Bob Butera: Yeah, absolutely.

Like when I told you about my my time in India. Right? I said it was an institute. I lived there with a bunch of other people. So, if you ever look at any of these places, a community was always involved. Suppose you go to your religious place, whether you like a temple, a synagogue, or a church. In that case, wherever you go, there's always a study group for this, then there's a social group for kids, and then there's activities for this, and then they usually have their service once a week.

They have a singing group. So the second thing I would say is even if you make out a list and you want to kind of address different things in your life and you get totally inspired by Donna here, [00:17:00] and like, you're on it, you're ready to go, then I would like to refer back to what you said a few minutes ago.

Just do one thing. Make that list, know it's there, but then work on one thing at a time, or else you'll feel overwhelmed. That would be my second thing: the mentor, and then one thing.

Donna Ferris: One thing. And then meditation. So that you can have the space.

It would be interesting to hear your view on meditation after writing a book on it and having been a teacher and a practitioner for some time. Many people who will listen to this do not think they cannot do meditation.

Many people still resist, and I would love to hear what you would tell them.

Bob Butera: So I've given many talks on meditation, obviously, like when you have a book, you go out, and you give these seminars, and you do these tours, which is really fun. You meet people, and then you [00:18:00] learn a lot in the process.

One of the things I realized is that many people may be intimidated by meditation. Or they've tried it, even if they didn't tell anybody, and when they closed their eyes, they realized there was like a freight train, a circus, you know, like a concert, musical, like a whole bunch of worries.

There's just so much going on in there that they were like, "Oh my God, I'm getting out of here. Like, there's no way that I'm ever going to meditate." Instead of feeling bad about it, they just kind of got interested in the next thing, and they went to play some music or they went out with their friends or something.

So, the first thing I like to say is to think of the goal of meditation, not meditating. And a lot of times, people become obsessed with this. I need to sit here and look like Buddha. And then, like a Bill Murray skit, I must [00:19:00] become enlightened eventually. If you think about the real goal of meditation, in these talks, I might make a few jokes about how you don't really have to meditate if you get to the goal. Who cares? So, if the goal is feeling peaceful, it is to have clarity from all that chaos that can be in our minds. Even though everybody looks very calm, if you ask them what's really going on, we all have different things that we're concerned about.

So, what I like to do then is say, what is it that gives you peace of mind? That's actually one of the first things in the book, even as a child, what were the things that you did that maybe your brother didn't do, or your sister didn't do, but you loved, so like there's a kid who loves to fish or the kid who loves to play the music.

Well, then, as an adult, go fishing and play music. Or, I like to walk my dog. It was just the funnest [00:20:00] thing, and my brother hated it, or my sister didn't like it, you know, or whatever, but I did. Well then, you probably have a dog now, I bet, if you liked it as a child. So, just take a longer walk, but don't listen to anything this time.

Just be silent. Then, allow the peace to come in incrementally. And I always like to say that if my mind is here, what is it that's going to click for me? And be a little creative. Like some people, relaxation is listening to music. If you go towards drugs, which alcohol is a drug, then if that's your source of relaxation, or any external substance like that, it's not actually relaxation.

So you want to do something where it's just you and nature or some music, something that will uplift your system. You can [00:21:00] use substances in a certain manner, and some people can be constructive with them. But if it's on a

regular basis, you're not going to be able to actually master your own mind. So that's why again, when you're with that mentor, you can talk about things. And it'll come up, well, what makes you feel good, what centers you, do more of that.

Donna Ferris: I like the idea of what you did as a child; I think it is really helpful because it was before society and work and all these things got in the way. What did you really like to do?

There's this really touching Dove commercial in which they say that what stops girls from doing sports is their concern about their bodies and how they look.

I think it's a real thing. We do feel that way. And it's not just women; it's men, too. And if we go back and [00:22:00] look at those things. What did we do before we got busy or too embarrassed or whatever it is, and there's probably a source of joy there and peace,

Bob Butera: I would say, do those things. And then as you feel ready, sit quietly for five minutes, like then you can step yourself into it. And see how that goes. Or, like, play your music, do it in a manner that's quieter or aimed at peace. Even jogging, I think when I was younger before I was introduced to something like meditation, I would go for a jog, which I would kind of say, well, it's going to help me with my team sport. Still, I would often go out there late at night, almost like, after dark, and I would run, and it would cause me to sweat it out a [00:23:00] little bit.

Yeah. And there's a repetitive motion. So it's similar to hiking. Yeah. You start to get into this repetitive motion, and your nervous system calms down, so when you think of things like that, even going to the fitness club, some people find that to be really good. Swimming - some people get into a kind of trance when they go swimming.

But again, it's similar to running because you're not distracted by other things. You have to pay attention to your movements. So, it's like a form of beginner's meditation. If it gives you beautiful results, it often brings you back in touch with yourself, which is what we were talking about earlier.

For those of you who want to go further, the meditation will often start to happen naturally then.

Donna Ferris: Then, you can work on developing a meditation practice that will allow you to access it at any time, like standing in the grocery store or other times. We'll get into this maybe with the breathing.

That's something that you can access anywhere, which is helpful. But before I do that, is there anything I missed? Cause we kind of went around a bit.

Bob Butera: I would say, when I look at the book, when I look at the chapters, and when you talked about what's burning in your life. Thinking about just doing meditation - it's not going to address the burning issue. Suppose you think about yourself as this beautiful organism. In that case, if you're thirsty, you want to drink water, if your mind's racing, maybe do some relaxation and take that quiet walk or think about the psychological issue, or, if something's up in your health, well, then start exercising and get yourself in better shape.

Whatever it may be, you certainly want to start with that. And I would say that over time, what I see repeatedly is once you start to hit on three or four of these [00:25:00] areas, say three or four months after some kind of constructive activity, you will have this quantum feeling of better health. Or even if somebody is in a really tough situation with a really bad diagnosis, their internal peace will just move up.

Because presently, if we think about our modern society, the table is kind of set up for us to be very stressed out. Everybody seems to be stressed, or now they say anxious a little bit. Every career, you just look at the people. So you really have to figure out a way, to get around that and come up with a creative solution.

So that would be kind of my main thing. Yeah. Like to be creative, to figure out how you can stay afloat in your life. And [00:26:00] again, I really think that if you lived in the 1970s, with me, and you were in high school, you would have had just as many challenges as you have today if you're in high school.

Just different challenges.

Donna Ferris: I was listening to somewhere on a podcast, they're like, in many centuries, you weren't sure you were going to live through the day.

Bob Butera: Exactly! Exactly! And meanwhile, like, there's a lion over there, you know, or a bobcat.

Donna Ferris: I think we really have to recognize that we're less accepting of the idea that this is life, that life is going to have issues and it's all in how we react and happiness is inside.

Which you already said, this really is an inside job.

Bob Butera: That's right.

Donna Ferris: And with that,

Bob Butera: So you want to do a little breathing, because the two of us knew this was going to be at the end.

Donna Ferris: You're gonna do the three part breath, right? I think this was [00:27:00] one of the most transformative things in yoga training. I remember many times when people would do surveys, they'd say the breathing that we learned was the most important thing.

And what I got known as when I was teaching was as the breathing lady, which is a testament to you. And I thought that was funny cause I didn't do it that much. I only did it at the beginning of class, and it was really a way _for any of my students that are listening - it was a way for me to calm down because I have anxiety, and I needed that time to settle myself.

It was really for me to start, but it was also for the students. So anyway, we're learning it from the person who taught me.

Bob Butera: Yeah. And I'm learning it from the people that taught me. When you have these wisdom traditions, they're beautiful things to study.

So I always like to say, yes, we're talking about yoga since that's the one that that has touched us. But we have many traditions that are passed down, and the reason they're passed down is because they work really well. [00:28:00] So, I've talked a lot in our conversation about getting in touch with yourself and so forth, and finding the inside, and having like a kind of psychological understanding of how you work, and then getting in touch with your deepest values or your spirituality.

And the reason I do that is because normally when you hear yoga, all you get is yoga poses. And there's two popular definitions of yoga, the spiritual path, which I've been talking about with Donna here, and the go to a yoga class where I do poses and so forth.

So, I like to emphasize the inner one because we don't hear about it as much. However, the practices are equally powerful and helpful. You just want to learn certain basic ones that, again, tap you in quickly. So with breath work, it's become very popular these days. They give sophisticated exercises, which are very good if you know what I will show you now.

You want to learn just how to open your lungs [00:29:00] and also close them so that the air goes out. So we'll take about four or five minutes here.

And there's going to be three muscle groups as you do this. As you just pay attention to your exhale, you can squeeze the upper chest down and you'll feel that.

Then, the most elusive area is the rib cage area. If you put your hands on your side, you can exhale and try to feel. The ribs collapse in, and this is the area used the least and taught the least, but it's the entire muscle group for breathing. After that, we would think of this whole diaphragm as it collapses in; you think of your navel; it's an easy image, and it goes back towards your spine.

And see, if you can empty the lungs, the rest is easy. If you [00:30:00] don't empty your lungs fully, you obviously are going to have a lot of air trapped in there, which is usually called dead air, or just, air that's not full of oxygen, and you can't bend to your inhale. So, we're going to do another exhale as you've been breathing here, squeezing in all these three muscle groups.

And then we're just going to open, maybe keep the one hand down low, one hand higher, and you'll breathe into the lower hand.

We're just going to do one or two, exhaling from the navel now. We're going to breathe in and out of the nose mostly, because we're going to try for the calming breath. And then I'm going to have you put your hands on the sides and see as you exhale down. Now as you breathe in, try to fill in the back where the thumb is.[00:31:00]

You have to be patient with this, and you'll start to feel like a balloon-like feeling from the sides here. And then, obviously, the next breath will fill the very top. So we're just doing what kind of gravity does. It exhales from the top, pulls the sides, pulls the bottom, filling the bottom, the sides, and up.

I'm just going to have you practice this a little bit, making that nice exhalation. Just pay attention to any really neat thing that you're discovering about your breathing [00:32:00] process.

So we'll continue with a few breaths. I'd like you to make a smile on your face and just let that smile fill your whole body. You're telling your body that I love you, I care for you, and I'm going to learn something really cool and take a deep breath. I'm going to do the [00:33:00] exhalation.

Notice anything interesting that you discovered about yourself? Even in a short practice, sometimes you'll feel like, I need to do more of that, so that's good, or, or I really noticed something, as you said, and it feels a good way, so, my final point for us is if you start to do any meditation or deep breathing like that, you can do it driving to work, you can do in the grocery store line like you were saying, you can do the deep breathing anywhere. And you may notice if you pay attention to your breath or if you've already been practicing some yoga; usually, people start to notice certain situations where they're breathing in a very shallow way.

And they immediately self-correct. And I'm going to guess, just like most people, your yoga students had that experience. And because you probably [00:34:00] brought them back to their breath in class, maybe they were doing a harder pose. You show them how to breathe deeply while they're doing some core work or something.

But as you get more experienced with this, the curiosity and the excitement will start to drop because it'll feel normal now to do a deep breath. And that's where then the motivation to connect to that inner point becomes your intention. And you want always to keep that intention in mind while doing any of these practices.

So, there you have a snapshot of the yoga therapy process.

Donna Ferris: That's amazing. Well, thank you so very much, Bob. I was going to jump in there when you asked, what are you thinking? I'm like, I'm thinking I need to do this more often. I appreciate it so much. Thank you.

Bob Butera: Thank you for having me, Donna,

Donna Ferris: Thank you.

That's all for today. If you want to learn more about Bob and his work, those links will be in the show notes. Thank you so much for listening. I hope this episode [00:35:00] was helpful. And if it was, please subscribe, drop a review, or share it with your friends and family. That's the best way to get it in the hands of those who may benefit.

And if my daughters, Sienna and Sylvie, are listening, I just want you to know how proud I am of you. And I love you so much. Bye now.