

Statement about Ben Wolff

I apologise for supporting and promoting the work of Ben Wolff.

From the outset, I wish to make clear that these are my honestly held opinions, based on my own knowledge and what I have experienced.

Ben has taught at a number of contexts that I am aware of, including the Shala from 2016 (not 2014 as he stated on his bio), the Yoga Nidra Network and organisations that he set up himself (for example, the Breathing School and the Long Covid First Aid website).

My own involvement with Ben began when he came to my Saturday morning class at Globe House in about 2011. Subsequently, Ben attended a mentoring group that I facilitated in 2012–13 and he was a student on two courses that I taught: a five-day Yin yoga intensive (2014) and a Yin yoga eight-day course for teachers (2015). In 2017, Ben started teaching a three-hour session on some of the courses that I was running. The last time that Ben taught on one of my courses was March 2021.

I have to be honest: I was blinded by Ben's brilliance. This clouded my judgement and meant that I overlooked doubts and concerns. This is my mistake. I introduced Ben to more than 200 yoga practitioners and I publicised his work through my newsletter. I did learn from Ben and he helped to clarify my teaching — but I was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the how and the what of his teaching.

Ben is undoubtedly a phenomenal salesman. He is charismatic and highly intelligent. But in my own experience, I have seen Ben's 1:1 work to be at times more harming than healing. I believe his teaching methods to be unethical and potentially damaging. His sweeping statements (such as "If Migraine is the problem, Breath is The Answer"), his one-size-fits-all-circumstances approach (such as his non-negotiable use of a 'clicker ticker'), his rejection of feedback that is not adoring praise (as I experienced when passing on comments from his sessions on my courses) reveal a teacher whom I consider to be ungrounded. A priority in all teaching has to be student safety, accurate information and listening to students and other practitioners through openness, dialogue and feedback.

To be clear: myself and others have attempted to discuss these issues with Ben on many occasions. Ben was remarkably resistant to feedback and comments and, at times, aggressive in his response.

In the last two months, numerous people have been in touch with their experiences of studying with Ben. Some approached me and some I approached myself in a bid to understand the extent to which my concerns were shared by others. A few have been positive and continue to follow Ben's teachings. Some have expressed gratitude for what they learnt from Ben. Many have stated their difficulties with the style and the substance of Ben's teaching (see personal statements from 15 different people below; these are just some of what have been received).

On the basis of my own experience and the experience of many of those who have practiced with Ben and shared their reservations and concerns with me, I do not recommend studying or practising with Ben Wolff.

Many lessons can be learnt. The need for regulation, the need for supervision, the need for channels of feedback. This is life: many mistakes, many lessons, continual learning.

Norman Blair, 29 July 2021
www.yogawithnorman.co.uk

Here are some of these accounts [these accounts are used with permission from those who wrote them].

“Ben does not create a safe space for learning and sharing and completely disregards any other work experience and qualifications. He shoots people down if they challenge his approach or you appear to get things ‘wrong’ in his mind...When I talked to Ben about leaving the Breathing School, his dismissive reaction confirmed that he wasn’t interested in me as a practitioner at all...A blanket, one-size-fits-all approach with exclusive application of Breathing School protocol is extremely limiting and negates all other learning and experience that any of us has had.”

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“I have known Ben for about 3 years and have studied with him in the past...I distanced myself from him last November due to feeling manipulated in our interactions. I was completely unaware that this was not just my perception and experience until today.”

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“It was during this course that I came to the same conclusion...the start of a pyramid scheme, emotional blackmail, constant pressure to spend extra to join an ‘exclusive group’ and sacrificing our own clients to the ‘Breathing Institute’ for the greater good. I have felt absolutely gutted that I spent so much time and money and feel a bit of a fool to be honest.”

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“The dream yoga training only confirmed some of my concerns and I was disappointed...I feel a little stupid now for not moving away from Ben a few months ago when my suspicions arose... It shows me I need to walk away from Ben’s teachings and see the lesson for myself to be more assertive with my instincts and concerns when they arise. I should have spoken up earlier with The Shala. Somehow I just didn’t have the words and still feel somewhat bamboozled, but also now relief. I endeavour to learn from this.”

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“I did a couple of workshops with Ben Wolff...I felt I was the only one who didn’t love it so sort of went along with the adoration there seemed to be for him, thinking it was just me and appreciated that he did seem very well researched...He did a lot of visualisations and breathing exercises with us, after which he asked us for feedback. I happened to be one of the first and said honestly that I appreciated his work but it hadn’t really helped for me. He really got quite abusive with me in front of the class...I said I’ll try at which point he called me a loser as only losers say they will “try”. He just wouldn’t leave it and it was humiliating to be spoken to like that in front of everyone. All the other students said to him how they thought it was incredible and valuable for them. I ended up feeling there must be something wrong with me as there seemed to be such idolatry for him...”

At the end of the class he said to me (when no one else was around) are you ok? I think I might have been a bit heavy on you. I said I was but felt really attacked and cried my eyes out when I got home...It’s curious that due to the almost guru status around him, virtually everyone assumed there was something wrong with them not him, how they must be wrong not him (including myself)...People want to be in the right gang! It’s a real eye opener to me.”

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“I’d felt on the training that some of the helpers (so called Daks and Dakinis, which in and of itself I don’t like), who headed the breakout rooms, weren’t hearing the questions being asked and there was a disconnect and a set agenda. It’s almost like they’ve been hypnotised! There are a few things Ben said and the way of his delivery that made me uncomfortable.”

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“In January I signed up to breathing school and the long Covid training which was to run in March [2021] ... The morning of the fourth live breath school Ben sent an email to everyone ranting about how furious he was at people at breath school taking the piss, talking about him on SM and criticizing his methods. It made me uncomfortable and I thought it distastefully put, overly abrupt and strange to address a vast group in this way based on the behaviour of a few...

I felt in order to be worthy I needed to meet not just a very high bar but to be prepared to be pushed, grilled and hauled over hot coals and then if he was having a good day I might be in... I just wasn’t prepared to be talked at inhumanely and squeezed like a commodity... It feels to me like he runs multiple personalities and in doing so he draws people in with a genuine desire to help and heal but something egocentric and narcissistic takes over to meet his desired outcome.”

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“I enjoyed the original Breathing School, but as time went on, the dynamics of the group of students around Ben, very much orchestrated by him, and some of the things he was saying caused me many concerns – so much so that I stepped right away from that group a few months ago... Inside the Zoom session (the second weekend), Ben was effectively ‘ranting’ at the students, insulting them and telling them that most of them wouldn’t make it as practitioners beyond the course. The atmosphere was hostile, and the other assistants were very quick to close down ‘unwelcome’ questions, giving standard answers that Ben had prepped them with. I felt so uncomfortable about the atmosphere in the session that I did not assist on any more trainings, and stepped away from classes with him around Feb/March [2021] time....

This group calls itself The Breathing Institute but what they are in fact doing is hypnosis (often by people who only have Ben’s informal training with yoga teacher’s insurance) in time with the 6/6 breathing... The dynamics of the group around Ben felt very toxic at times, almost cult-like – no one could express an opinion that wasn’t on Ben’s approved ‘script’ of views, some of which are medically unfounded and controversial. Ben’s style of managing the group was very dogmatic and closed. The group has its own ‘lingo’ of Ben’s favoured acronyms, which makes it difficult for newcomers to join, and clearly identifies members of the group to each other (again, this can be regarded as cult-like).”

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“He claimed to have made this huge discovery working with people (whom he name-checked but never said who they were) that would change everything for the next 10 years – and said people should go on his “very modestly priced” training course so they would be fit to deliver what was needed for the next 10 years. I thought I was listening to a classic ‘guru speech’ and I felt very uncomfortable. He came across as very arrogant and self-absorbed.”

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“I attended an online training Ben did in February 2021 where he had joined up with a hypnotherapist [Anthony Jacquin] to run a ‘Breath for Therapists’ workshop. It suggested it would cover a range of tools and techniques to help people in therapeutic professions to help their clients with breathwork techniques. In advance of the training, I sought some clarity from Ben about whether the content would differ from the content he had previously taught at his Breathing School through the Shala (which I had attended in September 2018). He responded with details about how he would seek to demonstrate how to change feeling and thinking instantly and that he would be teaching something new (but did not say exactly what). The lack of clarity at this point should have set off alarm bells but didn’t as I had previously found Ben’s teachings to be helpful.

In reality, on the evening of the workshop I felt like it was very disorganised, Ben was teaching many of the same things he had taught previously, there was little structure to the workshop or clear objectives or outcomes. Increasingly I have felt that Ben’s teachings were missing genuine research and substance. I was disappointed with it and haven’t taken any trainings with him since. I’ve actually struggled at times to really understand what it is that Ben teaches and have never felt certain that I could teach it to my own yoga students as it has often been lacking in genuine evidence-based research and has an air of the mystical about it.”

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“The process of me breaking away physically and mentally from Ben was hard. The growing discomfort and concerns with his teachings, the way his demeanour seemed to have changed (yet not being able to put a finger on quite when or how), his response to challenges within the group, his ‘teasing’ of group members (including me), the ‘cure anything in three minutes’ mantra, the bloody acronyms for everything (pardon my French), and his denouncing of everyone else’s view but his own...all that fought for a long time with the sense of inspiration and loyalty I’d felt in those early months, Ben’s welcome support and encouragement when I was having a tough time with the YTT and his generosity with his time.

Later still, I took to attending workshops with my camera off. All this now seems ridiculous with hindsight – why didn’t I just not go, not book onto them in the first place? – but I was still fearful of missing out, feeling almost guilty and disloyal at doubting...and I also began to sense in myself a worrying almost-jealousy of those who WERE in his inner circle – a clear warning sign that something was not right. But the thing about all of this was I thought I was the only one who felt that way. Everyone else appeared to be happy with it all.”

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- “1. Having attended training courses and workshops with Ben, the teachers were told by Ben that he prohibited them from teaching any of the material he shared with them on the courses which they had paid for and completed.
2. Ben seriously undermined their confidence in their own capacity to teach and share material that they were already competent to deliver before they began the training course with Ben.
3. Ben frightened the teachers by telling them that all yoga nidra was unsafe and harmful.
4. Ben confused the teachers by telling them that even though they had previously encountered his breathing teachings in the context of yoga nidra that he prohibited them from including any of his breathing practices in the context of yoga nidra.”

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“I encountered Ben at a workshop where his practice ‘disappeared’ some long-term addictive behaviour. I wanted to understand how he did this and was taken in by his intellect and charisma. Over seven months I attended workshops and 1-2-1 sessions primarily to support a big work project, along with weekly mentoring where I shared daily drawings of my internal process. In March 2021 he texted out of the blue to say that as I was ‘affiliated with abusers’ I was no longer welcome. It was a shocking betrayal of trust.

At the workshops I had observed, but over-ridden, the warning signs of overt flattery with some students and shaming of others, unsafe disclosure boundaries, bad-mouthing other modalities and publicly pathologising students who were not ‘fixed’ by his practices.

I have learned a lot about bullying, safety and the power that teachers hold from this process and am grateful for the opportunity to speak openly, at last. This is possible because of the support of my peers and the courage of other people speaking up. It troubles me deeply that my brief involvement with and promotion of the menopause course exposed more people to unsafe behaviour. If I introduced you to Ben Wolff, I can only apologise, I am truly sorry.”

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“Falsehoods are presented as scientific fact in Ben’s work. The aim appears to be to lead people to believe his opinions as fact, to create a dependency on his teachings, he has the knowledge which is too difficult for his followers to understand! I remember hearing him teach and thinking – ‘Why is he saying this?’ – it was neither necessary or helpful; the purpose appeared to be to present himself as a ‘scientific’ expert, to be above questioning and therefore taken at his word. Literally baffling with science. He doesn’t have the background in science nor the understanding to qualify him to teach this way...He seems to have little regard for truth or integrity; I’ve witnessed him lie his way out of a situation rather than accept feedback, his lying depended on someone else being made out to be the liar. He cannot admit to being wrong....He doesn’t teach to empower but the very opposite, to instil fear, create dependency and followers. There are all the worrying signs of cult culture here.”

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“I have felt fearful of raising these issues until now as I felt I was alone. I no longer feel alone, and I know there are many others out there who have also not spoken up for fear of repercussions, or for being the ‘lone voice’ in what appears to be an all-positive feedback group.

After working with Ben and being a part of the inner circle, it is clear that addressing any issues about Ben’s behaviour or practices is strongly discouraged, and negative feedback of any kind is met with aggression and public reprisals. I believe this has instilled a culture of fear within his ‘inner circle of helpers’ (the ‘Dakinis’). I also feel very strongly that people working with Ben are encouraged to do ‘magic tricks’ and use practices that are unethical unless you have specialist training. Working with vulnerable people with PTSD and chronic health conditions and editing traumatic memories is not something to be learnt from watching a video in my opinion.

I feel as if I have witnessed the growth of a cult with a guru-type leader who privately belittles those who pay to attend his trainings, discards anyone who challenges him, and encourages competitiveness within his group to become his ‘favourite’.”

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