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Sun and Moon Yoga: 'Within my body, a city'

By ANGELA JEFFS

Trying to find the way in and out of the Sun and Moon Yoga studio in Meguro, Tokyo, is a bit like trying to negotiate an Escher drawing. Do you take the clean way, the dirty way, the back way or the other way? No worry, says owner-director Leza Lowitz, there is no right or wrong way, only the space that awaits.

This is the second time that Leza has lived in Japan. When she returned to her native California in 1994, she was burned out. As a freelance writer, editor and art critic, she had found many opportunities here. But after four years, she was exhausted and "drinking too much."

The crunch point, she says, came at an art exhibition opening, when a woman said they had met before, "but that time you were drinking, so you don't remember." Shocked that I had made such an impression, I knew it was time to change course."

Back in California, Leza began a period of deep self-reflection. Together with her husband and soul mate, Shogo Oketani, she bought and renovated a 1930s bungalow as a coastal retreat, adopted an abandoned dog and began to study with French mime artist Veera Wibaux — a woman with an energetic personality who also taught yoga. "That was my new beginning."

Many years later, in 2001, Leza found herself at a yoga retreat in Hawaii, and during

a meditation asked for guidance. Back in California, she was active — writing, doing her practice and writing poetry, but "I didn't like the direction the country was going." Much to her surprise, the answer came: Go back to Tokyo to open a yoga studio. "'OK,' I thought, 'but not yet.'"

It was Shogo who changed her mind. Returning from a trip to Tokyo to see his father, he had decided it was time to move back. "To be honest, I was very unsure. What would I do with myself? It was a very different time economically, and I was that much older. Again I heard a voice: yoga."

But how to start a business? Though she had no road map, Leza recognized that this had never stopped her before. So she began by looking for a studio, a place that people would regard as sacred space in Tokyo: "an uplifting, healing space, where people could unfold through the study and practice of yoga."

What she found instead was a mess. It had been a pharmacy, located right at the back of an ugly concrete building. But the address was just minutes from the station, and "when I walked in, I fell in love with the fact that I could see open uninterrupted sky through the window — the sun by day, the moon at night."

With land in Magome given to them by her father-in-law, Leza and Shogo had built a small house. "We decided to



LEZA LOWITZ, who with her husband won an award for poetry translation and criticism, has created "an uplifting, healing space" in Tokyo with Sun and Moon Yoga, where people can "unfold" — and even watch the moon. ANGELA JEFFS PHOTO.

use the same architect for Sun and Moon Yoga. Even though I had no budget, Yuji (Hashimoto) said he would do it, and knowing I loved tea houses, set about designing the space and the moon-viewing window frame you see

now."

The construction crew was an energetic bunch of old men who used to build "sento" bath houses, and they set to work lovingly with handsaws, using bamboo from Leza's garden. "I think you can feel their

calm energy when you walk in. . . ." When she opened a month later, she had only a handful of students. But she kept faith with her vision, and eventually more drifted in: members of Foreign Executive Women. Quickly the word began to spread.

"The students who like our down-to-earth attitude are a wonderful mix. Fifty percent are Japanese, and they come, they say, because they feel they can be themselves."

To Leza's surprise, many of the students want to be taught in English. This was not planned, she says, happy enough to allow Sun and Moon Yoga to evolve naturally. "Right now we have eight teachers and some 1,000 students, and things are pretty healthy. People really need a place to relax and unwind, and find community and peace."

She thinks it unlikely that Sun and Moon will expand. "Is bigger really better? I would hate the intimacy to be lost — and anyway, where would I find another space like this? We are about yoga in community. I love seeing people walk away with smiles on their faces. I believe in service on a spirit level, not an ego level."

There is also the call of the written word on her precious time. Most recently her book "Yoga Poems: Lines to Unfold By" (first published in hardback in 2000 by Stone Bridge Press) came out in paperback. "The first line came

to me one evening in 1995 as I was struggling in The Downward Dog: 'Within my body, there's a city.' After that, as I practiced poses, the poetry just began to flow."

Coauthored with Reema Datta, "Sacred Sanskrit Words: For Yoga, Chant and Meditation" was published in 2005, also by Stone Bridge Press. "In putting together a primer for yoga students, we experienced a deep learning of our own."

As a writer she also collaborates with Shogo. In 2003 the couple was awarded the Columbia University Japan-U.S. Friendship Community Award from the Donald Keene Center of Japanese Culture, for translation and criticism of modernist poet Nobuo Ayukawa's collection "America and Other Poems." Most recently, Leza and Shogo coauthored a book on "kanji" for Stone Bridge Press and completed an epic novel about a female ninja.

A bottomless well of energy in her own right, Leza epitomizes Simhasana (Lion Pose) in her book of unfolding poems: "Queen of the jungle, / she knows no fear. / In goes the holdingholdingholding / out goes the tongue / fingers, eyes, head, breath / everything reaching / for more space / in which to roam."

Phone (03) 3280-6383. Web site: www.sunandmoon.jp. Leza will be reading and performing her yoga poems on Sunday, Sept. 24, from 6:30 at Good Day Books, Asahi Building 3F, 1-11-2 Ebisu, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo; tel. (03) 5421-095, fax (03) 5421-0958.