

Shrink Rap Radio #206, May 3, 2009, The Yoga of Self-Acceptance with Tony Wolff

David Van Nuys, Ph.D., aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Tony Wolff
(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Hera Chan)

Excerpt: We have a thing in Big Sur called “Sudden Oak Death”. The oak trees all over the forest are dying. It’s just a horrible parasite that they can’t control completely. So you look from a great distance—I was looking across the canyon through my binoculars and you see these thousands of individual trees, just, just dead within the evergreens. And then I took my glasses away and looked across the canyon and there was this glorious patchwork of colour. What were individual dead trees were now part of this just amazing, beautiful nature as it is. At that point—it just depends on how you want to look at something. And it was at that moment I realized the purpose for the book. That attitude is everything.

Introduction:

That was the voice of my long-time friend and business mentor, Tony Wolff. Tony Wolff and I worked together in his consulting company for 18 years or so, when he decided to close up shop and go on a quest to build a more meaningful life. Tony has practiced yoga and Vipassana meditation for over 20 years. He began practicing transcendental meditation in 1967 and has taught yoga for over 10 years. As founder and president of an international strategy development and consulting firm, Tony Wolff developed some of the earliest tools for understanding audience behaviour. Transitioning from the world of consumer products to the emerging technologies of the early 1980s, Tony Wolff and company helped clients understand the impact of rapid technological change on consumer behaviour by focusing on the inner subjective experience of audience members. Scaling back his professional life of the early 90s, Tony traveled to Russia extensively, working on citizen diplomacy issues. He’s brought the works of noted Russian artists to American audiences. He founded a non-profit foundation dedicated to cross-cultural arts education and helped establish one of the first independent art schools in post-Soviet Russia. Tony has written short fiction and non-fiction essays and has published poetry and travel writing. Tony is also cofounder of Magic House Pictures, whose charter is to assist independent, low-budget filmmakers in developing direct to viewer distribution channels. Magic House Pictures’ first film, “Codes of Silence”, is currently in development. Tony serves as executive producer. Now, here’s the interview.

Dr. Dave: Tony Wolff, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio!

Tony Wolff: Thanks, David.

Dr. Dave: I’m so pleased to have you on the show. You and I have a history way back to around 1981, which is 28 years. And for about 18 of those, I worked with you part-time in your market research consulting company. You’re the one who

introduced me to the whole world of focus groups and market research. Some time back, you retired from that world and I'm still carrying on with it, although on a fairly part-time basis.

Tony Wolff: Mmhhh...19...oh god, that's scary, David.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, I know. I'm pretty sure. I'm not exactly sure of that date but I think I went back and looked at one of the earliest reports that I had written for you and I think that was the date on it.

Tony Wolff: I'm pretty sure that's true because I may have introduced you to market research, but you introduced me to technology.

Dr. Dave: (laughs) Right, right, yeah. I was eager to steer us in that direction. You know, another insight that I had just recently—I don't know if "insight" is the right word, but the experience that I had with you, the training and the feedback I got from you, in terms of doing focus group interviews, has probably translated into this podcast interviewing.

Tony Wolff: Oh, cool, that's great.

Dr. Dave: And I get wonderful compliments from people about my interviewing style, so I think that probably you deserve some credit for that as well.

Tony Wolff: (laughs) No comment.

Dr. Dave: Now, you were a very successful businessman and I've always admired you for that. And there's that Chinese proverb: "Give a man a loaf of bread and you fed him today; teach him to fish and you fed him for life". And I've always credited you with teaching me how to fish—at least in terms of market research work and making money there. So, as I say, you were a very successful businessman, but I think in your soul, you always struggled a bit with that. How would you characterize that struggle? Or to put it in other words, what was the part that worked for you and the part that didn't work for you in being a business consultant?

Tony Wolff: Right. Well, I think my whole life is about "is that glass half full or half empty". And all the spiritual exploration I've done makes it all simple but not easy. I always had a great facility, I guess you could say, for making money. I was always fascinated and it came natural to me. But I always had this other, sort of streak in me that I tended to not pay attention to. I kind of went the easy road it seemed, like, to me. Money always came fairly easily to me, and I guess that was the measure of, I guess you would say, success in the business arena. But, especially as my business grew and grew and I got more and more praise and material benefit from it, I always had this gnawing feeling of, um, I was helping people to sell stuff that really didn't make a whole lot of difference in the world.

And that always bothered me. Somehow I wanted my work to be...to further what you would call this other energy in me. So I don't know if it was that I was just unwilling to look at what came easy to me or whether I had a calling that was deeper or a longing that was going on concurrently. It was probably a little of both. The net of it all was, you know, the minute I got into business, or, the minute I formed my company, I was trying to figure out a way to sell it. So, I was never in it with both feet.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, I remember you trying to sell the company and I think probably, you know, maybe there is a sense of calling that you were wrestling with there and maybe still continue to wrestle with.

Tony Wolff: Yeah. Well, let me just interrupt you 'cause a phrase comes to mind from my teacher. I think it comes from sort of a Buddhist point of view. He said, "Just the asking—just the longing—is the start of the spiritual path." That "we...wondering if there's something—some other meaning to life—even if though there's no answer, is the beginning of the spiritual path." Which I always thought was so wonderful 'cause it kind of takes the onus off of this sort of...angsty Jewish (chuckles)...you know, "what's over the other hill; what's better over the other hill?" I think there's really is something to that.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, yeah. I like that. Now, somehow you transitioned from a guy who was consulting to high-end clients like Apple Computer, Kodak, IBM, the New York Times and so on—to a yoga teacher. What kind of career path is that?! (laughs) Tell us about that transition.

Tony Wolff: Well, it's interesting. My goal was to sell my business by the time I was 40. And so I was, like, just this driven maniac, as you may remember. And I remember that—I forget who it was...oh, oh...one of the guys that worked with us, Tom, told me about guy down in Esalen and I've always known about Esalen. I've been to Esalen many, many years before and always sort of knew about it. When I first got out of college, I almost went to Esalen for training in psychology. Either you went to business school or you went to Esalen to learn about, as you know, sensitivity training. And that's probably more years ago than probably most of your listeners can remember, but I know you were in that world very early on. So I'd heard about Esalen, sort of this, you know, human potential place and I'd actually visited there a few times. Anyways, he said that this guy that he had worked with who had dropped out of the business world was running a workshop and it would be a good place to spend some time. So alright, spend a week down in Esalen. This was at the time around my 40th birthday. And I had been seeing a therapist at the same time and he was always positing to me, "Well, Tony, you know, you can quit your job. Nothing's keeping you from it. It's not the end of the world. You know, you leap and the net will appear". And, uh, he went off on vacation at about the same time I went down to Esalen and I remember coming back from Esalen and he was coming back from being gone for three months and I just made the decision to close the business. Because it was

just something that I knew I needed to do. I was, you know...God was hitting me on the head, or somebody was hitting me on the head and I had started yoga in a part of my life prior to that, but nothing very...you know, I did it at the health club.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Tony Wolff: And when I quit my job—or when I closed the business—I continued to do some consulting. But my ex-wife and I split up and I moved back down to Carmel, which was the place where I had grown up. And I actually just found myself at the local yoga center—most of everyday! It kind of saved my life. I had the heebie jeebies most everyday, you know, wondering, “oh god, what have I done? I quit my job, I got divorced, and here I am”. And there was just something very calming and orderly that I’d never had in my life before. I just, you know, I’d go to, like, four yoga classes a day sometimes.

Dr. Dave: You know, one thing I want to throw in here is that, actually, you did have a BA in Psychology, right?

Tony Wolff: Yes, yes.

Dr. Dave: I remembered that. And although you “only” had a BA, I was always impressed by how much you knew about psychology and how you were able to build on what you knew and capitalize on it in terms of the consulting work that we did.

Tony Wolff: Well, you know, David, it’s not just Jewish angst. I mean, you know, there was this pull from a very, very young age. I got very intrigued by the whole group process movement very early on and was planning to be a therapist. I went to Sonoma State, I think before you even got there. I was accepted into the Master’s program there to become a therapist and my father passed away. So I decided to go to work—take care of my family and my mother. So I got a job using, you know, my sort of...my psychology orientation in the market research business. So I left that world and went to work.

Dr. Dave: And you went to work...you got your training in New York City.

Tony Wolff: Yes. Correct. Uh-huh.

Dr. Dave: With a very high profile guy there, as I recall.

Tony Wolff: Yeah, it was a pretty high profile market research company. But then, more than that, I hooked up with a company that was exploring creativity and group process.

Dr. Dave: Yeah—Synectics.

Tony Wolff: Synectics. Exactly. What makes groups of people...it was one of the earliest “what makes meetings work”. Many listeners may have heard of a book—I forget who the authors were—it was called “What Makes Meetings Work”, but a lot of that whole facilitation world came out of the Synectics process. So I just got very intrigued by, you know, what happens in organizations around decision-making. And I applied that to focus groups. Well, I always felt that the market research world was one small part of what had to happen if you were going to have any real kind of impact. I kept trying climbing higher and higher up the corporate ladder to actually have decision-makers involved.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Tony Wolff: So, anyway, a very long-winded answer to your question. Yes, psychology was always a...psychology with a non-business orientation was always a big part of my interest.

Dr. Dave: Right. That’s interesting background and we may kind of skip around here ‘cause I know I kind of pulled you off of your yoga path back into the business...

Tony Wolff: No, no, no, no...it’s my life.

Dr. Dave: And I’m intrigued by both parts and I know when, around the time that I first met you—and I think I met have even met you before we hooked up to work together and I didn’t know I was meeting you at the time—and you were sort of this quasi-hippy guy. You know?

Tony Wolff: Absolutely. (laughs)

Dr. Dave: You were this laid-back, hippy-looking guy. And so the paradox was: here was this hippy guy, who on occasion, could suddenly appear, you know, in the corporate world and converse with folks in New York City. Later, we were facilitating at Apple Computers. Steve Jobs walks into the room—a very young Steve Jobs at the time. And basically, you know, I think you politely asked him to pipe down or something. (laughs)

Tony Wolff: That’s true. (laughs)

Dr. Dave: So, you’ve had a very interesting path between...you know, you talk about the ambivalence that you struggled with inside yourself and outwardly it’s manifested between this, at times, very laid-back seeming guy to this very high-powered intense guy.

Tony Wolff: Yeah, you should try being married to me. (laughs)

Dr. Dave: (laughs) No, thank-you! I worked with you for 18 years and that was good enough.

Tony Wolff: Exactly! (laughs)

Dr. Dave: And I was the only one who hung in.

Tony Wolff: That's right, that's right.

Dr. Dave: A lot of people came and went.

Tony Wolff: Yeah, yes. That's absolutely true.

Dr. Dave: Okay, so coming back to the transition to yoga. Oh, and by the way, I was struck by the metaphor that your therapist said: "Take the leap and a net will appear". I've heard about "taking the leap" but I've never heard that particular use of it. That "and a net will appear". I like that.

Tony Wolff: Yeah.

Dr. Dave: So the marriage broke up, you were back at your beautiful house on the beach in Carmel and you were spending lots of time going to yoga classes. So at what point did you...did it strike you: "well, I'll become a yoga teacher".

Tony Wolff: Yeah, you know, I'm not exactly sure but it was an interesting decision. It just sort of, you know, uh, pardon me for hesitating here 'cause I don't know what actually led to that, but I know I was with a woman who was one of my first yoga teachers and the decision just sort of came to me and it was more that I was looking for some place to put my energy and I thought, "I spend so much time doing this, it would be..." Oh, no! Now I've got it. I know exactly what it was. One of the teachers at the centre that I studied at...he wasn't very flexible. And...

Dr. Dave: You mean, physically or emotionally?

Tony Wolff: Physically. Turns out he wasn't emotionally either, but he wasn't very flexible physically but he was a wonderful teacher because I had gotten into yoga and I was thinking, "well, I'm supposed to do all this stuff". And it was one more kind of striving that I was involved with. I kept hurting myself and American yoga really has been sort of infused with this sense of performance and competition and there are so many people who don't have bodies like that.

Dr. Dave: Oh, yeah. There are some approaches to yoga that are like boot camp now.

Tony Wolff: Yeah, yeah. And you know, it's sort of a self-selecting process and it's

a metaphor for the rest of life. The kind of people who become teachers are generally naturally flexible people and you go to these places and you say, “well, here’s the people who are really cool doing it, so shouldn’t I be able to do that too?” People struggle with this, trying to get to this next level, and end up being very disappointed and hurting themselves and I saw this guy teaching and it was just such a relief that I started enjoying my yoga much more and I thought, “wouldn’t it be something if I was up there—a guy who wasn’t flexible”. I thought that I could, you know...there was a whole set of people who I could also share this with because it had been such a revelation for me.

Dr. Dave: That’s interesting cause I have never been flexible and my kids are not flexible and I was involved with yoga for a time and actually...

Tony Wolff: I know you were, yeah.

Dr. Dave: And I taught it too, although it was prior to people getting certified and kind of...all the hierarchies that exist today. But that was always something I kind of struggled with too. Was that sense of, “geez, do I even dare claim myself as having any legitimacy here given that there are all these poses that I can’t do”.

Tony Wolff: Right, right. Well, what I learned was—and this is really the essence of yoga and any spiritual path and any, *any* path that one takes in life, I think. There’s all this chatter going on in your head about what you’re supposed to do.

Dr. Dave: Right.

Tony Wolff: And it, like, separates you—it’s like a filter from what you’re experiencing. And if you can just notice that all that stuff is going on and that you’re just, usually just sort of a puppet on a string of all these words—that’s the beginning of being present. I mean, if a businessman is trying to make a decision, he’s got all these influences on him. All these shoulds, all these intentions, all these everything, but he’s separate from his experience. If you’re in yoga and you’re trying to achieve a posture and your brain is telling you—excuse me—your *mind* is telling you to do something, it takes you away from what you’re actually experiencing. So, I just got back to the psychology interest; I got very intrigued by this whole duality that exists between this mass of protoplasm between our ears. We tend to think the mind is up there somewhere and we’re so controlled by it. And just by noticing what it’s doing is a revelation. Just to see it. My wife gave me a great book. It’s called—that I recommend to anyone—it’s called “The Untethered Soul”. I forget the author, but he was talking about all this crap that goes on in our mental jabber that we take for reality. He said, “Imagine that those voices in your head were sitting next to you in the car. That somebody other than your mother-in-law was telling you all this stuff.” Would you really take it seriously? And would you give it the amount of credence we give those voices in our heads? You wouldn’t—you’d kick the person out.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, that's a great metaphor. At some point you'd tell them to "shut up—you're driving me nuts!" (chuckles)

Tony Wolff: Yeah! Or just, "there you go again". But it's that awareness. That awareness: "oh, there I go again". You know, that awareness is behind those voices.

Dr. Dave: So this practice really drew you into what's now being called "mindfulness", it sounds like.

Tony Wolff: Yes, and let me see if I can go with that for a bit because my influence is a very interesting western interpretation of an eastern concept. Yes, what I started noticing was by slowing my body down and giving it things to do in a physical sense so that I felt a muscle pulling one way or pulling another way and then also noticing what was going on in my mind at the same time, I found an amazing ability to be present with what was actually happening both in my mind and in my body. So the slowing down was a fabulous experience for me. Now, this notion of mindfulness, which has been such a wonderful gift for so many people, is a translation of a Pali and a Sanskrit term. In the East, the mind is—the idea of the mind—it's a heart mind. It's located in your sternum, in your heart. It's the same thing, but it's not just that stuff that goes on up in the brain. So even the term "mindfulness", I think... Another author that I've read and have talked about and just love...he's actually a market research guy who became a Kabbalah rabbi...a very, very fascinating guy...and 'cause I'm getting so old, I can't remember his name. He wrote a book called "God is a Verb" and one of the things he said is that the whole notion of mindfulness, again, tends to separate what goes on—'cause we tend to think the mind is between our ears. I like the term "intentional awareness". A bit differently that you want to be aware. There's an intention to be aware at all times, including what's going on in the mind. But that's a digression...For want of a better term, mindfulness does point directly to what I'm talking about in yoga. For me, yoga is an excuse for paying attention.

Dr. Dave: Mm-hm.

Tony Wolff: Nothing more, nothing less.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, yeah. Thank you for that. Well now, you've written a book, yourself, on yoga. So, what led to that?

Tony Wolff: Part of this struggle that I experienced in my body and all the stuff that was going on in my mind and noticing...I mean, yoga's morphed over the centuries to whatever culture it was in; that's what's so wonderful about it. In our particular iteration, it is experiencing class structures and we sort of married this Indian guru tradition of the master imparting the wisdom with the American drive for progress and competition and success and you know, when you go to a yoga class—I don't know how many of your listeners go to a yoga class—but, they

might go to any other kind of sports activity. There's a ladder of progress. And in yoga, it's measured by how flexible you are—physically. It's not measured by how your ability to pay attention increases. And if you read any—I mean, I'm a dilettante; I'm not any scholar of yoga—but if you read any of the books about what yoga is about, yoga is about the ability to pay attention, to observe what is going on in the body and in the mind, so that the artificial separation between them goes away. Well, even though teachers intone that as being important, the way you go from a beginner's class to an intermediate class is to be able to, you know, stretch your hamstrings more, to be able to do a posture the way the teacher says to. And I was just fascinated with that and I actually wrote an article. It was quite a funny article about this contradiction I see in the way people talk about yoga in America and the way it's actually experienced by so many people. And that just leads to a lot of unhappiness and suffering not only by inflexible people, but also super flexible people. At a certain stage after 40 years, somebody says, "okay, now I can do all these contortions—what else is there?"

Dr. Dave: Yeah, I've sometimes thought that if it were all about flexibility, then circus contortionists would all be enlightened beings, but clearly that's not the case.

Tony Wolff: Well, if I may say, David. This is a test. You read the part of the book I sent you. (laughs) Or else, you told me that many years ago because that's a quote from the book. I say that—that in fact, if it were just about flexibility, then any circus contortionist could be a yogi—would be yogi—and that's just not true.

Dr. Dave: I think great minds run along the same channels.

Tony Wolff: That's right, that's right. That's exactly right.

Dr. Dave: Let's put it that way.

Tony Wolff: So I wrote this article and I remember a teacher of mine sent it to a yoga journal and they said, "this guy can really write; this is really funny; it's really true, but it's an opinion piece and he's not famous. We only publish articles by people that are more well known". So it sort of just sat on my desktop for a while. And then I showed it to another teacher of mine. She asked me why did I want to do this. Oh, I remember, no. Then, I thought I was going to turn it into a book. She said, "why do you want to..."—I showed her this article; I thought it would become a book. "Why do you want to write the book?" And I couldn't give her an answer. I really didn't...I really couldn't...I didn't know whether it was because I wanted to be famous or I wanted to rant against the world or I wanted to save humanity or...There was all this stuff running through my head and I couldn't give her a good answer, so it just sat around for years. And then about three years ago, I had just a, sort of a pre-Madoff horrible financial situation. I've always been ahead of my time. (laughs) I did that one ahead of my time too. So long story short, our lives got turned completely upside-down.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, you got caught in a major financial rip-off, right?

Tony Wolff: Yeah. I was sitting out on my...after we licked our wounds...we lived in this wonderful house that we had to sell, but I had a cabin on the coast in Big Sur and I was out on the deck one morning. And every morning I would get up and it was like, you know, I could be really miserable every morning and somehow I managed not to be. And I was looking—I can remember like it was yesterday. In fact, it's the preface to my book. I don't know if this would be clear to other people, but I was looking across the canyon of a bunch of...We have a thing in Big Sur called "Sudden Oak Death". The oak trees all over the forest are dying. It's just a horrible parasite that they can't control completely. So you look from a great distance—I was looking across the canyon through my binoculars and you see these thousands of individual trees, just, just dead within the evergreens. And then I took my glasses away and looked across the canyon and there was this glorious patchwork of colour. What were individual dead trees were now part of this just amazing, beautiful nature as it is. At that point—it just depends on how you want to look at something. And it was at that moment I realized the purpose for the book. That attitude is everything. You can look at any situation from different perspectives. And I've always said, "that's denial" if you're trying to be positive, but you have a choice at every moment. I had this horrible experience in my life and I'm totally justified in being completely miserable at whatever I want—or I could say, "shit happens". For some reason, that connected. Because that's really what yoga is about for me. It's like, at any given day, I could be in this practice and I can choose to feel good or feel bad. Feel like I might need to do something better than I can do or accept where I am. And it was at that time that I said, "geez, I think I'll write a book". That's what this book is about.

Dr. Dave: Yes, well, what's the overall thrust of your book? Is there a central message, would you say?

Tony Wolff: Yeah, I think so. You know, the Buddhists are...I think the Buddha was either a teacher or a virgo or both or something. Because in Buddhism, there are lots of lists; there's the Eightfold Path, there's the Four Noble Truths—there's all these different lists. Well, what I said this book is about is the Five Not-So-Noble Truths. They are: slow down, pay attention, breathe, let it go and lighten up. Those terms have been with me since I...Actually, the last client I had—I was essentially a personal coach—he was a CEO of one of the first internet advertising agencies. He was having a hard time dealing with his success; they were growing so fast he didn't know what to do. He called me tacitly to help him with his retention issues—how to keep people in your company.

Dr. Dave: Sure. I remember that.

Tony Wolff: What it really was, was “what am I doing with my life?” And as I started working with him, I started knowing that this studying I had been doing in my own life was exactly what this guy needed. Not necessarily that he needed to meditate or to go to yoga, but he needed to slow down, he needed to get back into his body and breathe, he really needed to pay attention once he was calmed down and he had some patterns in his life that would sort of set him off automatic pilot when he was stressed that he needed to let go of to see—not to do the opposite, but to see how he had been operating on automatic pilot when he got stressed. I remember saying to him was, “if we can’t laugh at ourselves, we’ve got nothing”. Those themes have been with me in one form of another and they became the essential theme for if you’re...it doesn’t matter what kind of yoga you’re doing, it seems to me that if people can remember these themes, whatever yoga you do is going to be more pleasant.

Dr. Dave: You did share with me some early chapters in your book and I was quite moved by what felt to me like a very authentic voice. Perhaps you’d be willing to read a passage for us.

Tony Wolff: I am not an adept. I am closer to being a dilettante than a yogi. I’ve practiced for years but only in the most western of ways. I came to yoga first from Vipassana meditation, with its practice of attempting to pay attention to the present moment. I can still remember Jack Kornfield reminding us that meditation is not how long one can pay attention, how many breaths one could count, or how quiet one’s mind becomes. It is simply about returning—waking up, remembering to come back to the breath and the body. It is a continual return to what is happening right now. Over and over again. In my best moments, this is what yoga has been for me. The postures are almost excuses for paying attention, for being curious and for noticing what is happening at each moment in my body. The breath is the highway, bringing mind and body back together. When that connection exists, my mind is a great friend. It is an accomplice drawing attention down into the physical structures of the body so I can see the energy when it is blocked and when it begins to flow. At those moments, all dramas and stories disappear. It’s just a question of where I choose to put my attention. Many mornings when I have been in my practice for thirty minutes or so, quail come skittering out of the bushes, bustling there way through their morning meal. A young rabbit often joins them. One morning, one of the quail and the bunny played together. The rabbit would jump up and the quail would jump higher. The quail would return to tease the rabbit, as the rabbit would jump again in a kind of jig. They were playing. Several weeks ago, a doe and her fawn came right up to the window, seeing my wife and me on our mats. They welcomed us with their presence and lack of fear. Yesterday they return. The fawns would walk more surefooted; its thoughts were fading. Before sitting to write this preface this afternoon, I took a nap. I dreamed of the doe in our living room—her head caught between the stiles of our spiral staircase. I came up to her and freed her head. She licked my hand. Her black nose shining. The dead tan bark still sit across the canyon. The dog barks. Yellow-jackets buzz. A spiderweb glistens

before me. The sun, past its afternoon zenith, arcs to the sea. There is so much here, right now. It's not rocket science, nor does it require donning white robes and chanting into the night. It's simple, but it ain't easy. Just remember the Five Not-So-Noble Truths: slow down, breath, pay attention, let it go, and lighten up. Actually there are six, since lighten up should be in there twice.

Dr. Dave: Alright. Thanks for sharing that passage for us—that's very nice. Very nice indeed. So who's the intended audience for your book?

Tony Wolff: Um...the marketing folks ask me that a lot. (laughs) It's really been such a fascinating experience of taking that hat off and just writing and now needing to put it back on.

Dr. Dave: See how well you've trained me to ask that question?

Tony Wolff: (laughs) It's actually...and this is where you as the market research helper says, "that's not good enough, Tony, but I'm going to do it anyway". The audience is everyone who's interested in doing yoga. Let me be a bit more specific. It's for someone who hasn't practiced yoga because they're afraid that they're not flexible or they could never do this stuff, whatever people do, or their bodies don't look...people who bring themselves doubt as a reason to not do yoga. It's for those people. It's for people who started to do yoga and they're wanting to move on but they've hurt themselves a couple of times, they're pushing but they're not getting what they wanted out of it. And it's also for very experienced yogis who probably have found something missing. It's for people who start asking that question, "Wait a minute. I can do all this, but why aren't I happy?" It's also and maybe most importantly for teachers. Because, as I said, the selection process is so many people come into this teaching who are very flexible people. They used to be dancers or they just have this natural flexibility in their body, so they started yoga and it was just this godsend to them. It's almost like when you're inflexible, there's a little more...you've got to pay attention a little bit more. But unless a teacher recognizes what I'm talking about here, so much what I'm talking about is going on internally, so they've got to honour what's happening in the student. They've got to honour this mental crap that's going on while everyone's sitting in these poses, you know, sitting in lotus or in some cross-legged position with their hands on their...looking like they're mellower than crazy and all this crap's going on in their heads. So, sorry, but it's for the whole gamut.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, yeah. So, do you have any sense of where you'd like to see your book and your work go in the future?

Tony Wolff: Um, yes actually. I want to do workshops in this. Back to why I want to do this, I find when I share this with people, there's such a sense of relief amongst the people who are taking the workshops. It's just, "oh, I'm not the only one feeling this way." One of the teachers I interviewed for the book... "Nobody ever

achieved enlightenment through Asana—through the postures”. And the second thing he said was, “the essence of enlightenment is lightening up”. Yoga is pretty serious stuff. It’s tended to get a lot of the trappings of spiritual seriousness along with it. So while it is very serious work, it requires a very healthy dose of lightness, of humour, of playfulness—or else it’s just work.

Dr. Dave: Okay, well. I think we probably should begin to wind down here. I had intended to have us talk a bit about the pitfalls of spiritual materialism that you and I have had a couple conversations about, but I think I’ll save that for a future interview. Maybe when your book is actually available because it’s not actually available for folks yet and so, that’ll give me a good excuse to have you back.

Tony Wolff: A good close, David, is you’re right—it’s not out yet and I’m dealing with those issues of spiritual materialism right now as I’m trying to say, “okay, now how do I sell this thing”.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, exactly. Well, Tony Wolff, it’s great to reconnect with you and I want to thank you so much for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

Tony Wolff: Great fun and thank you, David.

Conclusion:

I hope you enjoyed this conversation with my friend, Tony Wolff, as much as I did. Tony and I recently reestablished contact after a hiatus of several years and it’s great to be back in touch with him. As you heard, his book is not quite out yet and he’s been picking my brain about some of the technical issues in getting up his own website, making the book available there, and distributing his own podcast interviews. As you heard in our interview, he’s discovering the chicken and egg problem that confronts so many authors and workshop leaders these days. You’ve got to be famous before mainstream publishers will pay attention to you. So it’s looking like he will initially self-publish his book and hopefully grow a sufficiently large audience that a major publisher will take the book on and in turn, doors will open on the workshop circuit. Knowing Tony as I do, I’m pretty sure all these pieces will fall into place. As you can probably tell from our conversation, I’m already a big fan and hold Tony in very high esteem. As you heard, I worked at his consulting company for quite a few years and we had a fairly complex relationship that involved juggling roles of boss, employee, colleague, peer, and friend. As my quotes boss, Tony embodied the best qualities of that role. I could count on him to give me very straight feedback. Some of it was painful and difficult to hear at times, especially when I was first learning the trade. I had to resist the temptation to rest of my laurels and say, “Hey, I have a PhD and I’m a professor and I’m older than you and I don’t need to put up with this”. But I knew I needed to hang in there and that I could learn from Tony if I could quiet my own ego. And it was clear that his feedback, when it was critical, was not coming from an attacking place but from a place that, in fact, respected me as a colleague who could take it and grow from it, which is what I did. As a

consequence, Tony really nurtured and brought out the best in me, challenging me to rise to excellence. I was the second person in his company and as he brought others in over the years, one of the things that I appreciated about him was his ability to really listen to each person and to somehow incorporate their input, their perspective into whatever project we were working on as it moved ahead. And of course it was wonderful to work with a boss who was willing to share his own questions and struggles in both the material and the spiritual quest, just as you heard in this interview. You heard Tony refer to both his divorce and his unfortunate financial loss. What didn't come up in the conversation is that he went on to build a new relationship and has been remarried for the past seven years. These are transitions that Tony met with great courage and honesty. I hope I've not embarrassed him with these personal observations. I look forward to his unfolding story and am pleased to have been able to share a portion of it with you here.