Taking Hatha Yoga to School
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EDUCATION

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The Yoga Ed. curriculum, successfully adapted yoga into the US public school setting, could augment temple youth teaching programs as well

Yoga Ed.'s curriculum arrives as a three-inch-thick binder bulging with a ream of printed paper. It is a complete course description for 35 classes a year through eight grades in hatha yoga, with related techniques teaching mind and emotion control and positive interaction with fellow students. In our April, 2004, issue we profiled one of its authors, Tara Guber, long-time school teacher, hatha yoga enthusiast and wife of Hollywood producer Peter Guber of "Batman " fame. In that article we described her successful attempt, along with fellow author Leah Kalish, to develop and introduce a program of hatha yoga to The Accelerated School in South Central Los Angeles.

In the 1990s, this was a depressed, crime-ridden area, birthing ground of the infamous Crips and Bloods gangs and flash point for the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Blacks largely left the area following the riots, to be replaced with an influx of Latinos. It remains a tough neighborhood. The school's setting is important to an evaluation of the course, both to appreciate the bold task the authors took on and to understand why some parts of the course seem aimed at children "old for their age." Then again, perhaps children are all old for their age these days, and childhood should no longer be "presumed innocent."

A curriculum, for those not familiar with the world of education, is a manual for teachers which lays out everything they need to teach a particular course. The Yoga Ed. curriculum is divided into three sections: a teacher's guide, lesson plans and resources. The course's stated mission is "to inspire, educate, facilitate and support children in developing physical health, emotional stability and self-awareness through informed and experiential study, self-exploration and yoga." The philosophy, methods and goals of the program are explained. It lists in detail

how Yoga Ed. qualifies to be part of the state of California's physical education program--the niche it occupies in that state's public school system. A great deal of good advice and teaching methods for the professional teacher are conveyed. After discussing the contents of the curriculum further, we'll go into the teacher qualifications, then how to apply the program in a Hindu setting.

Class structure: A typical 45-minute class has an inquiry which provides a theme for the day, for example, "How do I breathe? Why does yoga focus on breathing?" The students begin with a "time in "-- "five minutes of silence which supports students in transitioning from outer attention to inner awareness." In other words, the teacher tries to get the students to calm down. Time in is followed by a discussion for five to ten minutes, for example, of the process of breathing and how it is used as the focus of yoga. Next is a warm up for five minutes, then 15 to 20 minutes of yoga postures. "This is the heart of the class, " the curriculum states, "The day's inquiry or theme should be the focus during the physical and mental experience and exploration demanded by the yoga." The postures are followed by five minutes of games or "partner work." Partner work consists of poses that require two people, such as "elevator " which starts with the students sitting back to back on the floor with their arms interlocked. They then try to stand up in unison. Next comes "rest and visualization " for five minutes. For young students, this might be "beanbag bodies, " in which the students lay on the floor and try to completely relax. The teacher moves among the group and tests the "beanbag bodies " by lifting a foot or hand, which should show no resistance, just like a beanbag. If the child is stiff, then he is coached to "breathe into that part and try to be completely relaxed." The session concludes with a class project, such as a collage of student drawings of poses. Simple homework may be assigned, for example, "Do slow breathing for five minutes before going to sleep. Record what you observed about yourself and how you slept."

The class outlines are just a page apiece, but they reference the advice given in the curriculum's first sections and the appendix on games at the end. There are 280 lesson plans in all, enough for a full year of study each through eight grades.

This is a course in hatha yoga primarily, and the curriculum describes dozens of poses and nine breathing methods. The pose names are in English, corresponding most of the time to the Sanskrit. There are three variations on Sun Salutation, triangle poses, warrior pose, downward dog, tree, etc. The instructor is expected to be a certified yoga teacher, able to teach the poses while working within the student's abilities.

Before and after the hatha yoga, classes make use of visualizations, games and metaphors. Several visualizations, a kind of fantasy roll playing, begin with the "Sunbeam Opening Story." It goes in part, "Close your eyes, adjust to the dark and then notice the sunny sky above you. It feels warm and inviting. One of the brilliant sunbeams is reaching down toward you. The light beam fills up your whole body, from the top of your head all the way down your spine and out through your fingers and toes. You know and feel that you are safe and that nothing will ever harm you here. In your imagination, you open your eyes and start down the beautiful path at your feet. As you reach your garden gate, reach into your pocket and put any trouble or worry you may have on your Trouble Tree. Now open the gate and step into your garden." From this, the visualization is developed, for example, into imagining a magic deer in your garden who takes you on a ride into the sky that cleans and energizes you.

The metaphors are quite creative teaching devices. One is called "Rocks and Feeling." "Bring in several palm-size rocks to represent negative feelings. Name the feelings and give examples of what might have caused the feelings as you place rocks one at a time in someone's hand or pocket. Discuss how it feels to carry those rocks around. Decide appropriate and loving ways to let go of those rocks that don't involve throwing or dumping them on others."

Another metaphor easily adapted to the different age levels teaches finesse. "Give the students a scarf or string with a knot in it and then coach them to use finesse to get it out, especially as they get frustrated! Walk them through slowing down, breathing easily, noticing everything they can about the knot and figuring how to work with it instead of against it." By varying the thickness of string and complexity of knot, students of any age can benefit from this.

The games are drawn from an appendix entitled "Games for Life, " written by Leah Kalish and Diane Spahn. Beanbag bodies is one of the games. Several are based on the hatha yoga poses, for example, "Dogs and Snakes." "This game is a fun way to combine two different yoga poses into a movement activity for a group. The group forms a line and stands side-to-side leaving about a foot of space between players. Everyone (with the exception of the end player) gets into the downward facing dog pose. Make sure players have formed a tunnel with their bodies. The player at the end of the line gets into the cobra pose and, using hands and forearms, pulls him/herself through the dog tunnel." This continues on until each student has had a chance to crawl through the tunnel.

Yoga classes are normally voluntary. Everyone who comes wants to be there. But when Yoga Ed. is a required part of a school's physical education program, the yoga teacher may encounter something new: unwilling students. The curriculum offers advice on how to engage such students and get them to recognize the value of the yoga.

When interviewing Tara Guber for this article, she emphasized the need to present yoga as fun and playful and to create a special vibration around the yoga class. Ideally, the class should have its own permanent space, and a peaceful atmosphere can be established in this space. Creating the right atmosphere, she explained, was critical for dealing with student's behavioral issues.

Teaching qualifications: Yoga Ed. is part of the regular State of California curriculum at The Accelerated School. As such, it would be taught by professional teachers. Yoga Ed. requires teachers to be a certified yoga teacher ("or equivalent, " which is not defined). We searched the Internet for certification courses and found they are governed in the US by the Yoga Alliance (www.yogaalliance.org/), an organization of yoga teachers. One of the minimal programs meeting their requirements is the Basic Hatha Yoga program of the Integral Yoga Institute founded by Swami Satchidananda. The month-long resident program requires a minimum of six months prior practice of hatha yoga. It costs us$2,600 for the classes, housing and meals. Courses offered by others were comparable in price (except the one done completely by e-mail, a questionable bargain). These minimum programs are called the "200-hour certification, " referring to the class hours, and are what is required for Yoga Ed.

Qualified teachers can then take the three-day Yoga Ed. teaching training course, which costs $1,200 and includes a copy of the curriculum. In fact, taking the course is the only way to get a copy--it is not sold separately. To put the cost in perspective, a common social studies or history curriculum book alone costs $300 to $400, even as high as $700. The schedule for these teacher training programs, which are conducted in several US locations, is available at www.yogaed.com. The training covers how to set up a program at a school, create lesson plans, adapt yoga to the children's developmental levels and to improve their focus, concentration and relaxation. It also includes an ambitious goal to "integrate yoga into the school culture."

Evaluation: Yoga Ed. works wonders in The Accelerated School, making a difference

in the lives of children, improving their physical and emotional health, and making them better adjusted students. It is, however, a professional program. It requires an experienced teacher who is sufficiently trained in hatha yoga to safely conduct a class of rank beginners. Someone knowledgeable in hatha yoga might make a go of it without any prior experience teaching young children. But even Tara said, "At the beginning, nothing worked. We had to create the room, get mats, convince everyone to take off the shoes, etc. When something's not working, you have to ask yourself if it is because of you or because of the kids and then make the necessary changes."

In a Hindu Setting: How could the program be used as part of a Hindu religious education program? It hasn't been so used, so we make a few conjectures. If a temple or ashram already conducts classes in Hindu religion, Yoga Ed. could be an excellent addition. Its physical activity provides a welcome break from just sitting in a classroom, and its introspective and relaxation exercises will increase the students' attentiveness during other classes. Temple devotees who are already trained yoga teachers could become qualified for Yoga Ed., or a local yoga teacher could be solicited for the job.

Philosophically, with the course taught in a Hindu context, the Hindu origins of yoga could be brought forward. The course, for example, talks about karma, but doesn't use the word. It talks about chakras, but doesn't really discuss the soul body. Likewise, key Hindu concepts important for understanding the mind, such as reincarnation and the existence of higher worlds beyond this physical world, are absent and would have to be added. The course is used in the California public school system. It has to limit itself to the physical hatha yoga exercises and class projects and techniques that can be used to improve social skills, develop insight and be a better person. It can't go into overtly religious concepts. But this limitation disappears when taught in a Hindu context, and in many ways puts the course's teachings and methods into their natural environment.

It's not necessary to uncritically accept all the methods given. For example, there are a number of exercises based on guiding the children through mental visualizations of a fantasy world inhabited by wonderful talking animals. The intent is to get the children to be in a secure and happy place inside themselves. We don't have any experience with this method, and the teacher would have to judge for himself or herself how useful it is. Other meditation methods, however, are quite creative, such as teaching concentration to very young children by having them just follow the second hand on the clock for two minutes. A few methods which may be new to the teacher, such as the use of affirmations, are also quite acceptable.

Hinduism Today founder, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, highly recommended affirmations as a means of reprogramming one's subconscious mind. Western classical or New Age music recommended for some exercises can be replaced with creative selections from traditional Hindu music to the same effect.

A certain amount of cultural adjustment would be required. Anyone instituting the program would have to go through it and identify activities which are not considered culturally appropriate in their community. Some might not be comfortable, for example, with partner yoga pairing older children of the opposite sex. A few of the exercises may be a bit lost on those unfamiliar with the "New Age "--preparation of an "aromatherapy sachet, " for example. There's also an identifiable, though not objectionable, current of developing acting ability--perhaps a result of the course's development in close proximity to Hollywood.

What we found most inspiring about the course was its very existence in such a comprehensive form. A lot of work went into developing this course for eight grades. Even more work was required to actually institute the program at The Accelerated School, train teachers, organize classrooms, gain acceptance from the parents and community and so on--all requiring highly motivated leadership. Leah Kalish and Tara Guber have shown it is possible to create and institute a course containing real spiritual training for young children. Yoga Ed. can serve as a model to both incorporate and work from in developing comprehensive curriculums for teaching Hinduism to Hindu children.