

[Pondicherry's Ananda Ashram](#)

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## Pondicherry's Ananda Ashram

Powerhouse of the Yoga Marga

Param, Yogi Deva Centuries ago Pondicherry was called Vedapuri (City of the Sacred Teachings), as its citizenry included several thousand erudite pandits. Then, its fame stemmed from the town's spiritual and intellectual calibre. In the 18th century its spiritual renown was displaced with cosmopolitan notoriety as the colonizing French made it their India home base, naming it Pondicherry.

Today of course the French are gone, leaving behind only a legacy and a curiously un-Indian architecture. Due to a burgeoning growth of religious centers, Pondicherry is regaining its former esteem - it has already unofficially been given a new Tamil name. At the vanguard of this spiritual renovation is Dr. Swami Gitananda's Ananda Ashram, a modern multi-functional facility dedicated to perpetuating Hindu knowledge, practice and culture.

Focusing his energies for 15 years on building Ananda Ashram both structurally (a feat he has accomplished several times as the Ashram changed its locale) and spiritually, Dr. Swami Gitananda has built a virtual power grid of yoga/Siddhanta voltage. Powering several international yoga-teaching bodies founded and presided over by Swami Gitananda, Ananda Ashram revolves at the hub of a worldwide body of students, Ashram-alumni teachers and a small network of periodical publications. Branching out beyond its own internal activities, Ananda Ashram is interactive with many other religious organizations. Erected on Dr. Swami Gitananda's maxim of 'yoga in action,' the Ashram produces and coordinates more yoga-cultural programs and events per year than New York City's Broadway produces new shows.

For all of the Ashram's administrative responsibilities, the underlying ideal is one

of simplicity - "I wanted to establish a model of the ancient yogarishi gurukula, where India's greatest heritage would be taught," wrote Dr. Swami Gitananda four years ago in an article commemorating the Ashram's 10th anniversary. Although Ananda Ashram has appeared to some as lying in the umbrage of the very well known Auroville ashram/village project, this is not a widely shared observation. Auroville's humanistic and neo-yoga emphasis leaves much of the traditional ashram structure behind. In Pondicherry a gap was made between tradition and transition. As nature abhors a vacuum, Dr. Swami Gitananda filled the gap: "I sincerely feel that we have filled that vacuum in our local area, in yoga, Vedanta and Saiva Siddhanta."

The single most developed facet of the Ashram's service are the youth programs - the amalgam of yoga courses, temple worship, cultural arts training, and ashram life for kids of all ages and backgrounds. Cultivated since the inception of Ananda Ashram, these youth camps and seminars have grown over the past five years into almost seasonal events that have matriculated hundreds. A typical program runs for two weeks of 5 A.M. to 10 P.M. hatha yoga sessions, classes in classical Patanjali yoga, training in Carnatic music and Bharata Natyam, participation in pujas and bhajan, and even environmental clean-ups at the Pondicherry beach. The results speak for themselves. Children and teenagers who have participated in these programs often excell in their school work, and through their demonstrations and knowledge of yoga and Bharata Natyam are stimulating a resurgence of interest in Hinduism among their friends and families. This peripheral effect has been noted as a key windfall of the programs.

Over the past few months, the Ashram has stepped up its youth activities to an even higher gear, in response to the Kanchipuram Shankaracharya's recent admonition for Hindu religious institutions to form parochial programs for Hinduism's next generation. Ranging from The Children's Yoga and Cultural Program to The Yoga and Youth Leadership Program, Ananda Ashram has gone beyond the prototype stage in children's religious education and is now considered a leader in the field.

Rigorously disciplined, drawing on six years of military service, educated to the nth degree, an inveterate traveler and a deeply spiritual man, Dr. Swami Gitananda vigorously promotes the ancient, yet scientific system of yoga, pure yoga. But he is also very aware of the importance of teaching yoga as an integral part of Hinduism, a fluid part of a fluid whole. His ashram and teachings are a potent melding of sadhana, study and culture, particularly South Indian culture. Lining the Ashram walls is such a rich mixture of sculptured murthis (deity icons), painting and prints

that it has earned the accolade, "Museum of Hinduism."

This past August 1st through 4th, the Ashram held its second annual Pondicherry Summer Music and Dance Festival - four evening of a Dravidian culture connoisseur's dream come to life on the coast of the Coromandel Sea. The fourth night also coincided with the annual jayanthi celebration of Dr. Swami Gitananda.

Dr. Swami Gitananda's wife, Srimati Meenakshi Devi, has made it her paramount service to arrange and coordinate the youth programs and to serve as Ashram mother to the number of children who permanently reside there, including their own young son, Balyogi, who is being trained to assume the spiritual and institutional leadership of the Ashram in later life. American born, now an Indian citizen, Meenakshi Devi is an accomplished Bharata Natyam dancer and hatha yoga exponent, and serves in several administrative capacities at the Ashram, including editing and doing much of the writing for Yoga Life, the Ashram's 12-year-old, international monthly magazine.

Planted firmly on terra firma, Ananda Ashram stands at the pinnacle of a guru paramparai lineage - a pyramid of gurus and ashram/madams that dates back over a century to the renowned Sri Kambliswami, one of whose devotees gifted some land to Kambliswami's initiated successor. A samadhi for Sri Kambliswami was built there, and the spiritual successorship and management of the madam was passed on from swami to swami until it was given to Shankaragiri Swamigal, a highly spiritual, yet aging monk. In 1975 he initiated Dr. Swami Gitananda as the Shankaragiri Acharya and deeded over to him the management of the Sri Kambliswami Madam, which is now the present site of Ananda Ashram. Dr. Swami Gitananda states that it is the power of this guru lineage that has made his Ashram so successful.