Taking Yoga Seriously
Category : June 1989
Published by Anonymous on Jun. 01, 1989

Taking Yoga Seriously

Overhauling Body and Mind at Bombay's Elite "Yoga Institute"

Bhatt, S.J. Yoga and Bombay don't normally appear in the same sentence. Finance, movies, horse racing, publishing and gangsters, yes. Yoga, no. Unless you count the frozen-in-granite serenity of the Siva/Brahma/Vishnu bust that towers in yogic peace over tourists at the Elephanta Caves in Bombay Harbor. But even the Siva statuary is under stress, or was, as nearby dynamiting has caused cracks and water seepage.

There is also health awareness that has surged into India's brain and blood, inspiring salad bars, fitness centers and thousands of young ladies in thousands of high-rise apartments stretching into yoga poses while watching a meditative exercise video by - who else? - a nubile Bombay actress. Of course any vestiges of the cosmic Hindu background of yoga have been carefully left out.

Bombay looks at itself as the Manhattan of India, sort of the Big Mango to New York's Big Apple. Just as Manhattan has its share of redeeming virtues in its many meditation/cultural schools, so does Bombay. After all, this is a city that has the Mahalakshmi Racetrack nearby the Mahalakshmi Temple. But when Bombayites or for that matter citizens from Hong Kong to Hamburg, Germany, want to get serious about yoking themselves to yoga, they pilgrimage to the doorway of Bombay's Yoga Institute.

It is called just that: the Yoga Institute - an unglamorous name reflecting its founding in the simpler times of 1919. If founded today, it would probably be called The Body/Mind Institute of Theta-Wave Meditation, reflecting the school's infatuation with EEG brainwave readings and other science-cast shadows of yoga. The school's newly opened Yoga Museum ranges from Patanjali to parapsychology. But 70 years after its birth it is still Bombay's yoga school of choice. Legend has it that any film star, professor, broker or industrialist who studied yoga in Bombay did so at the Institute. A diploma in yoga from here carries the status of a law degree

from Harvard Law School.

The Yoga Institute is one of a handful of schools considered India's creme de la creme: the Bihar School of Yoga, B.K. Iyengar's Yoga School in Poona, Ananda Ashram in Pondicherry, Sivananda Ashram in Rishikesh, etc. They each consider themselves the best. This is understandable and appropriate from the student's point of view. The Yoga Institute says it teaches the science and philosophy of yoga. So it does, but so does everybody else. And the Institute's emphasis on using yoga as a shock-absorber for the karmic jolts and stresses of human life is nothing new. Business companies all over the world have stress-reducing classes that incorporate yoga techniques. In fact, the staff and programs at the Yoga Institute don't discuss the ultimate samadhi stages of yoga. God-realization is not on the curriculum. Awakening your own capacities of consciousness via yoga is the core teaching. This is, to be sure, a school run not by monks but by a family spanning three generations.

So, where is the Institute's allure and magic? Most students would say in the founder, Shri Yogendraji, who has the comfortable air of a yogic country doctor, and in the fraternity. It's also tough to get into. If you walk off the street and march into the office expecting to plunk down the fee and start yoga, you'll end up on the street again within five minutes. The staff is taught to take the science of yoga so seriously that casual inquiries or stray visitors are given a cool reception and rebuffed quickly. If the would-be yogi recovers from this and persists, then he or she may sign up for a 7-day health camp or a 21-day Better-Living Course. Then you're part of the family. The Institute at its first level of service is a human garage. You check in your body and mind for overhauling and tuning up through simple asanas, breathing, diet adjustments and a little yoga psychology. It offers courses targeted at a number of specific diseases, including diabetes.

In the ongoing Real Estate Wars of Bombay, the three buildings on three blocks of prime land are probably worth millions of rupees. Driving up by taxi, one sees only a modest sign to identify the buildings as the Yoga Institute. Seventy years ago when Shri Yogendraji started his school mainly on idealism and zeal he managed to get property in the Santa Cruz suburb north of Bombay city. The Juhu beach was only a few miles away and there were wooded lands and a sense of remoteness from the city's worldly concerns. It was a retreat. Now that retreat has been overrun with apartment buildings and businesses and houses as Bombay flowed northward like an uncontrollable amoeba. The school still holds its dignity, squatting on its three blocks, a multi-storied fortress where men and women study the paths of hatha, raja, mantra and kriya yoga. The grounds surrounding the

habitats are tended as a tropical tree-and-grass garden by the yoga students who live here. A statue of Sage Patanjali, author of the Yoga Sutras, is the garden's cold, mute witness. The garden is a favorite rendezvous for classes, practicing outdoor yoga, strolling during non-class hours and hosting guests. Despite all the traffic and noise of the surrounding neighborhood, the school feels quiet, as though a glass dome settles over it. Only the winding scream of airliner jets landing and taking off at the nearby Santa Cruz International Airport is truly disruptive.

We meet with Shri Yogendra in the Institute's garden. He is twenty-two years older than the school he started. That makes him 92, a witness to two World Wars, the independence of India and every invention from the car to the computers that control the Voyager space probe now voyaging outside our solar system. Shri Yogendra is a small, gnome-like man with a striking profile of a prominent, craggy nose and a white beard that catches the sun. Weathered, but not old and leathery, he walks loosely with a straight spine. In short, he's a human billboard for his own yoga training. Like many yoga teachers, he can quickly turn stem, demanding, critical. But for those who know him, he's a genuinely warm man. It turns out he put in this garden himself. As we walk, he points out a tree and muses, "Look. This nagachampa tree has blossomed for the fast time, 32 years after planting, my boy. So wait and watch patiently for achieving great results in yoga." Not earthshaking advice, but as a life-long teacher he is fond of sprinkling such bromides into his conversation, and he definitely has the years logged to know that patience is a key virtue of yoga.

Some of his in-residence students are drifting through the garden - they come from abroad and various areas of India for a nine-month teacher-training course. It is by special invitation and only after careful screening. One of the institute's three buildings is a residence hostel that holds fifty students. They wear handsome white pajamas and short-robe tops for classes. This creates an image of a karate dojo (school) only here they train to penetrate the mind's personality defenses, control the senses and still the high seas of emotion/thought into a glassy ocean of consciousness. At least that is the ideal. As the students can tell you this is tougher than breaking a concrete block with a single hand-edge blow.

Helen, a resident trainee from England, tells us, "The last few weeks have been very important ones in learning to remove some of the blocks and resistances present in my personality. It feels as though I am learning to be more free, removing some of the tamas [lethargic, limiting quality], which I see has been very strong, or rather learning how to deal with it in a constructive way." Organizing her thoughts, she continues, "One pan of this is feeling able to direct more energy into

the present, being willing to take up whatever is in front of the instead of feeling apathetic towards some things."

Shri Yogendra and his wife, Sitadevi, live in the middle building called Yoga Bhavan where the main office is housed and an auditorium opens out into the garden. There's a large library dedicated to the arcana of yoga, and here Yogendra plans and writes his many books, the latest being the first volume of a Yoga Encyclopedia. Some of his books were selected as part of a time capsule project called Crypt of Civilization to protect valuable human wisdom and thought from nuclear or natural destruction. Seven hundred books were entombed in a cell in the US under the supervision of the Archives of the Ogalthorpe University. Yogendra and his wife, who has been a helpmate in both yoga and home, don't actively teach anymore, though Yogendra still gives seminars and lectures on occasion. The head of the teaching staff is Yogendra's son Dr. Jayadeva and his wife Srimat Hamsaben. Dr. Jayadeva is an expert in the Sankhya philosophy (atheistic dualism of consciousness and matter) that is often, though many feel wrongly, associated with Patanjali's yoga system. Hamsaben specializes in overseeing the wide range of women's classes, again a specialty at the Institute.

Sitting down for an interview with Shri Yogendra is tough. He doesn't like to talk about himself past or present. Understandable, but we're left with little sense of biography. Inside the neuronic mesh of his brain is a prodigious knowledge of yoga and the memories of umpteen adventures in acquiring that knowledge, not to mention the collection of artifacts, texts and yoga science displays arrayed in the Yoga Museum in the building to our right. Yogendra is outspoken on what he calls the commercialization of yoga, but he overlooks the fact that even his institute is a commercialization compared to a little over a century ago when yoga was a truly Hindu occult art. He has carefully bred any Hindu genetics out of the Institute, choosing, as have many yoga instructors, to use Western science as the background for yoga. This is persuasive, but it is also commercial. There is no celebration of Hindu festivals here, but all secular holidays, such as New Years, are indulged.

All this is not surprising in contemporary India, and it has produced admirable results. As Shri Yogendra tells in impeccable English, only a year after he started the Yoga Institute where we are sitting, he left and sailed to America. He had successfully healed over a hundred people who had come to his school as patients, not pupils, and his then-novel integration of yoga and medicine seemed a valuable export from India to America. It was 1920 or so, a time when yogis were making the circuit into the American era of the Roaring 20's complete with tales of yogis

floating across lecture stages in lotus-bound levitation. Yogendra started The Yoga Institute of America on Bear Mountain outside New York City. Working with avante garde American doctors, he ran the institute for four years, but his guru, Yogi Madhvasji, persuaded him to return to the Bombay mission. He returned with more medical knowledge, experience in treating diseases peculiar to the Western culture and a burst of industriousness that established his institute as a yogic/healing haven. Over the decades world class medical scientists have toured the facilities, including Dr. A. Vishinvisky, the first heart surgeon in America and Nobel-winner Dr. Jonas Salk, famous for developing the polio vaccine and who is currently engaged in brain/mind research. Perhaps in moments of memory he touches into his visit to Yogendraji's pioneering yoga school.

On our way out, we pause at the museum, chunkily filled with pictures and props and displays - a time-line of yoga. The only time missing is the future: where will the science of yoga take humanity over the next century?

Article copyright Himalayan Academy.