"Unity in Yoga" Gets It All Together in California
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San Diego Conference Matches 300 Prominent Teachers and Willing Students

"I had a vision in meditation," Rama-Jyoti Vernon explained to me. "An inner voice said, 'Bring the teachers together, for if those who teach in the name of union [yoga means "union"] cannot come together in the spirit of that name, who can?"' Her vision was fulfilled when 300 teachers and students gathered February 15th to 18th for the fifth and most successful Unity in Yoga Conference at the exotic Murrieta Hot Springs resort near San Diego.

I have attended numerous conferences, but this one struck me as quite different. It was unpompous, unpretentious and full of people seeking their essence and spirituality, striving to find life's meaning in this maddening, materialistic, roller - coaster society of ours. The participants wanted to join hands and minds to bask in the sunshine of mutual love and shared knowledge.

"I am impressed by the high standard of the instruction and the instructor's expertise in their respective sciences," said one of the participants. Since my focus was reporting, I could not attend many classes, but among the ones I did, I liked Dr. Lad's ayurveda class, Gary Kraftsow's on the Patanjali Yoga Sutras, and David Frawley's profound knowledge of the Vedas.

What inspired me most was the fact that so many Americans are taking serious interest in the classical ancient Indian life sciences like yoga and ayurveda, and discovering their immense value in the 20th century. Modern western civilization,

still in its infancy, has much to learn from the 5,000 - year - old Hindu civilization in terms of spiritual enhancement and refinement, the art of cultivating philosophy and literature and preserving it for the generations to come. I admire the zeal of Westerners working hard and long with utter devotion to learn the disciplines rooted in the East.

The two purpose of the conference were networking and cooperation among yoga teachers and yoga enthusiasts. "This year's conference is the culmination of our work of the last several years," said Vernon, herself a yoga teacher for over 25 years and president of Unity in Yoga, a non - profit organization based in Vancouver, Canada. "I see around here maturity, love, depth and a new threshold of cooperation." Joseph Duggan, a yoga student for the last seven years and the organization's financial administrator, said, "Almost all the teachers pay their own air fare to the conference. They also volunteer their time and instruction. What we provide is the room and board."

Veteran swamis and writers of yoga books, including authorities like 90 - year - old Mataji Indra Devi, learning and teaching yoga since 1927, known as the first lady of yoga in the US, and Swami Satchidananda, founder of the ashram carrying his name in Yogaville, Virginia, assembled together to share each other's ideas, camraderie and understanding as they work toward the common goal of teaching and deepening the knowledge of yoga and other allied disciplines like meditation, Sanskrit, etc. The conference was open to yoga students from cities all over the USA, Canada, Europe, India, South America and even Russia. The religions represented were Hindu, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Sikh, Christian and Muslim.

Programs and People

Murrieta Springs was bathed in cold weather, cloudy skies and incessant showers all through the conference days. Yet, this weather did not dampen the spirit for the event. Ardent participant were there at 6:30 AM each morning with bright eyes and peaceful faces, their disciplined slim bodies clad in easy attire, ready to flex and bend.

The day formally began at 8:30 AM with a meditation for world peace led by one of the swamis. Next came hatha yoga, followed by a smorgasbord of workshops and

classes in subjects like meditation, kundalini yoga, pranayama, ayurveda, sanskrit, Patanjali yoga Sutras, vegetarianism, Bhagavad Gita, karma yoga, Vedic philosophy - a hundred in all. Indeed, it was a feast for those who yearned for spiritual knowledge about the beauty and the refinement of the inner self. Students energetically attended the programs that ran until 10 PM.

The enthusiasm shared by everybody was catching. Students clustered around the instructors everywhere - in the main lobby, at breakfast, lunch and dinner. It seemed like the teachers were never left alone.

The gourmet vegetarian cuisine, served buffet style in the Spring Garden dining parlor, included mizo, rice syrup, health breads and muffins, herbal teas with honey, wild and brown rice, millet cereals, tofu burgers, savory sauces with steamed vegetables, an abundance of fruit and deliciously healthful deserts.

The Place of Hinduism

There was a strong Hindu influence at the conference. David Frawley, a self - professed Hindu, carries a small idol of Devi and a copper yantra in his briefcase. He expressed these refreshing views to me: "People interpret Hinduism narrowly. We have to explain it in a broader perspective. Many Americans want rituals and worship, also mantras, which Hinduism has been embraced by Americans through yoga. Many Americans have practiced yoga for one or two decades and are very good at it. They learned it as teenagers and still practice it in their forties. It is integrated in their life style - here is a generation brought up on yoga."

Others like Rama-Jyoti Vernon do not formally call themselves Hindu but believe in some kind of deity worship. "I feel very close to the God, Ganesha, the remover of all obstacles," said Vernon.

Gary Kraftsow calls himself a yogi, but not a Hindu, though his teachers were Vaishnava. So, Narayana is still his Ishta Devata (chosen deity), and he has a Krishna at his home altar. There are others with different faiths who have no trouble integrating yoga principles into their lives.

Students provided several testimonies of how yoga had worked miracles for them. Dorothy Hiestand has been doing asanas since 1982. Currently under the direction of teacher Aadil Palkhivala in Bellevue, Washington, she said, "I suffered from severe scoliosis (curvature of the spine). The doctors had recommended operations, but I opted for yoga. Now, Aadil is keeping me away from the operating table."

A professional woman said that yoga enables her to keep her intellect sharp and mind clear, and to conquer stress while relieving mild asthma attacks.

Like sunflowers turning their heads towards Surya, the people I met at this conference are turning Eastward, to India, to retrieve the gems of the gems of the ancient wisdom.

The Russian Yogis - From Moscow's Yoga Underground to an International Conference

Three young representatives from Moscow witnessed their first yoga conference in the free world, and they were amazed at the openness, warmth, mutual love and cooperation shared by students and teachers alike.

Yuri Belous, Yelena Fedotava and Boris Golembo got to the convention thanks to Judith Lasater, a San Francisco yoga teacher.

Golembo told me that yoga was prohibited in Moscow until 1986. A physicist by profession, Golembo had been teaching yoga under cover (by using disguising titles) for the last 15 years at the Center for Non-traditional Medicine in Moscow. "Swami Vishnudevananda visited Moscow in 1967 and stirred in me interest in yoga. I learned yoga mainly through books and retreats." Golembo lived in an area called Asia Republic Region where there were many Chinese and Indians. "So I learned oriental massage, Chinese art of healing (Tai Chi), exercises like yoga and also the Muslim Sufi tradition."

Golembo told HINDUISM TODAY, "For the first time in my life, I came in contact with so much knowledge about yoga and allied disciplines at this conference." He wrote articles about yoga in Soviet magazines. "Russians like the spiritual, mental and physical benefits of yoga," he explained. Two years ago, he opened his own center, called "Krug" which is Russian means "circle," and he has 100 students.

"I have read many books on Hinduism, including Upanishads, Tantras and Patanjali Yoga Sutras. I was impressed by their profound knowledge," said Golembo.

Golembo is on his way to Australia to settle with his wife and two teenage children. "I feel very sad," he confided in me, "to leave my 100 students behind."

Teachers and Students Share Thoughts on yoga

The unity in Yoga Logo

Mataji Indra Devi: This lively, resplendent and elegant yoga teacher, even at age 90, exudes an inner glow. Her message: "Yoga is love, and yoga is light." Although she was born in Russia, she considers herself "spiritually related to India." She has studied yoga since 1927 under the instruction of such masters as Sri Krishnamacharya and Swami Somnathashram and has written a number of books on yoga including: Yoga for Americans, Forever Young - Forever Healthy.

Aadil Palkhivala: "Yoga is my life, my passion," says this Zoroastrian who is director of Iyengar Yoga Institute of Washington State. He says that his faith talks about perfection, good thoughts, good words and good deeds; and he can very well include yoga principles with it. An attorney by profession, he is also licensed in clinical hypnotherapy, Swedish massage and Shiatsu. "I think that more and more people will learn yoga. They will realize the folly of being entranced by materialism and the ego," says Palkhivala.

David Frawley: He has written numerous articles and books drawing on his 20 -

year study and in - depth knowledge of the Vedas, yoga and ayurveda as well as Chinese and Indian herbs. Frawley has been graced with the title of Vedacharya (teacher of Vedas) by Indian scholastic authorities. "The Hindu religion in its broad sense is a point of unification for today's world. Basic Hindu religion in its broad sense is a point of unification for today's world. Basic Hindu teachings can be applied East and West."

Noor: A Muslim of the Sufi tradition, Noor adopted the Islamic faith while living in Turkey a few years ago, taking the name "Noor" which means "Light." "I deeply believe in the spirituality of Sufi faith and can easily involve yoga in it," he said.

Swami Nishalananda: This tiny saffron - clad woman of delicate features and long flowing hair exudes a sense of warmth and love. A disciple of Swami Satchidananda, and teacher of yoga for the last 20 years, she lives in Yogaville, Virginia, yet travels all around the world as a sought - after yoga instructor and seminar lecturer. "People is my worship," asserts the Swami. "I see the light emanating from people."

Father Joe Pereira: He is a Catholic priest in Bombay, India, and also a yoga teacher in the tradition of B.K.S. Iyengar. About to begin his priesthood in 1968, he found that his health was not strong enough to meet the demanding duties. He also liked alcohol and found it difficult to maintain celibacy. He turned to yoga and found that, "The extensive training to become a Catholic priest lacked something - it lacked the holistic approach which yoga provided. The practice of yoga gave me mental and physical strength, enhanced which yoga provided. The practice of yoga gave me mental and physical strength, enhanced my entire mission as a priest, enriched my life as a person and a seeker of truth." It also solved his personal challenges. In addition to running several clinics for drug addicts, he has taught yoga to three of Indian's Catholic cardinals, successfully relieving them of their health problems.

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