Dutch Teacher Brings Yoga to Holland's Hearing Impaired
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Inez Damen, a professional yoga teacher in the Netherlands for 10 years, is developing a system to teach yoga to deaf and hard of hearing students. Inspired to spread the world's oldest science to any eager student, Inez began training at the Foundation for the Hearing Impaired in Amsterdam with the goal of developing a yoga course using alternative methods of communication such as sign language and mime to meet the unique needs of an often over-looked minority. Yoga for the Deaf and Hearing Impaired in the name of one of the instructional courses offered by Inez at the Dragonhead Center, a yoga school in Holland. HINDUISM TODAY interviewed Inez to learn more about her pioneering efforts in this new territory.

HINDUISM TODAY: What was the source of your motivation for beginning a yoga class for the hearing impaired?

Damen: Before I was a yoga teacher, I went to the Center for the Deaf for something totally unrelated and I saw some of the deaf people sitting together. In struck me that on the one hand, they seemed so sociable, and on the other hand they seemed so isolated. Then I came to the Dragonhead Center with all of its various courses in yoga and someone observed, "We have so many forms of yoga, but do we actually reach everyone?" I thought, "No, we don't reach the deaf."

HT: When did you start the course?

Damen: I started the course last December and have only a few students. The

course is really just developing now, my experience is very limited. I'm hoping soon to offer classes at the Center for the Deaf on a trial basis, not charging any money for these, because I still learning, sorting out how to go along. Communicating about yoga can be difficult in itself, and trying to communicate it to the hearing impaired or deaf presents other unique challenges.

HT: Such as?

Damen: Often these people are inhabited from getting involved in group activities like this, especially if it involves contact with the hearing community which is often uncomfortable for them. In class situations, groups must be fairly small so that everyone can always see the teacher's face to be able to lip-read. In performing hatha yoga, arrangements must be made for how long a posture is to be held, because students may not be looking at me when I call out the next asana. We need to use more written materials, so students can study about yoga outside of class too. Being fluent in sign language is especially important when teaching the deaf; by speaking their language, you bridge the gap, truly communicate and express yourself to them. When this happens, then there is no "handicap" anymore.

HT: How has it been received so far?

Damen: I think that if you come back in about a year then I can give you a much fuller story as I gain more experience, seeing what does and doesn't work. Not many people know about it yet, because I want to make sure it develops well and has a lot to offer. I want to teach people to listen to the voice of the body, feelings and spirit, and you don't need to hear for this.

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