Yoga for Peace



Posted on June 23, 2019 by team



Yoga is one of India's greatest gifts to humanity. This ancient yogic science continues to spread across the globe to alleviate the masses from afflictions at the physical and mental level. On 11 Dec 2014, 177 nations at the UN co-sponsored the Bill to institute the International Day of Yoga (IYD) on 21 June every year. This was a historic moment in the UN, and also a reflection of the growing popularity of yoga around the world.

Moment of Truth

In 2016, the UN took this one step further and proposed yoga as a means of achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically, yoga was proposed as a tool to achieve inner peace and harmony in alignment with the UN SDG 16, which addresses the need for promoting peace, justice and strong institutions around the world.

The theme of the 5th IYD on 21 June 2019 is 'Climate Action'. The themes of the IYD are also an acknowledgement of this moment of truth in our collective evolution, where sustainable

living in peace and harmony with the people and nature around us has become a matter of utmost importance.



Image courtesy of UN Photo/Manuel Elias

Some of the consequences of the ideas of growth and development that we have adopted in the recent past have been a steady rise in stress in professional and personal lives and a sense of alienation from the larger community that one is part of, not to mention a sharp rise in “lifestyle diseases”. It is against this backdrop that yoga started becoming more popular among the Western world and then made a comeback to the Indian urban elite and middle classes in recent times.



Image courtesy of https://aroundambler.com/horse-and-goat-yoga-comes-to-maple-glen/?

The growing popularity of yoga in the modern context also brought with it many distortions and dilutions to the practice of yoga. Teachers and studios became brands that were trying to market their style of yoga. New coinages started sprouting up every other day and one may read about acro yoga, beer yoga and even goat yoga, most of which has nothing to do with yoga in the real sense.

Even within the established traditions like Ashtanga Yoga Tradition (Mysore School of Yoga) and many Hatha Yoga Practitioners, it is often found that some of the fundamental principles of yoga such as ahimsa (non-violence) towards the self or focus on breath is compromised in an attempt to push the body into difficult postures without honouring its present limitations. The rise of 'Instagram Yogis' has also in a way reduced yoga into a visual experience/art similar to gymnastics or dance.

The very practice that was meant to establish the practitioner in a space of 'Santam' within started becoming more about 'fun' and 'excitement' and even indulgence in the senses in some cases. How does one hope to achieve peace and harmony through such a practice?

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A rediscovery of yoga by a return to its fundamental tenets is the need of the hour. A return to the yama-niyamas and to a practice that helps the practitioner delve deeper into themselves in a self-reflective manner is needed. Understanding yoga as taught by its true ambassadors like Sri T Krishnamacharya, who is known as the father of modern yoga, is one way of moving in that direction.



At Ritambhara, we conceptualised an international event on the theme ‘Yoga for Peace’ with the intention to present yoga in a holistic manner. As part of the event, we chose to explore the concepts of Maitri (Friendliness) and Karuna (Compassion)
mentioned in Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras through a combination of asana-pranayama practice (Bahiranga Yoga) and through a contemplative engagement with stories from Indian mythology (Antaranga Yoga or Inner Work Through Yoga).

We coordinated with 19 trainers from 14 countries across the world to be part of this international event. Raghu Ananthanarayanan, co-founder and trustee of Ritambhara Ashram, offered online mentoring to the trainers on how to look at the Indian mythology as a mirror to rediscover answers to some of the fundamental questions that we hold in life, such as, “Who am I?”, “Where am I?” and “Why am I here?”



Image courtesy of Padmakar Kappagantula

As we met every week to engage with a new story from Mahabharata, the virtual space transformed into a Sangha enabling each person to get in touch with their inner evocations as they read the story. We were able to share from a space of vulnerability and trust. As we listened to each others' evocations from the story, I was left in wonderment (a true sense of 'adbhutam) at the universality and relevance of this ancient saga of human condition in the modern context. Most of the participants had no background of Indian mythology and yet a small excerpt from it had the power to evoke a response that could connect all of us together. We discovered a true sense of Maitri and Karuna to ourselves and to each other cutting across borders and cultures in these engagements.

As we engaged with the reflections about our personal life in all its varied hues, stories of valour, pain, disappointment and contentment, we also arrived at the realisation of the commonness and unity of our emotions and experiences in a totally different geography, culture and time. As the Antaranga Yoga Sadhana proceeded, we could find connections between our life experiences and the wisdom encapsulated in the Yoga Sutras. Yoga Sutras were coming alive in our contemplative engagement and holding a mirror to ourselves to reflect. It was beautiful and serene.

On this International Day of Yoga, all the 19 trainers from around the world will now facilitate this event 'Yoga for Peace' in over 20 cities across 14 countries. We hope to create oases of contemplative engagement and inspire aspiring yogis around the world to return to the fundamentals of yoga on this day. Through individual peace and harmony alone can world peace and harmony be achieved. May we all take one step in that direction on this day and every day, one breath at a time.