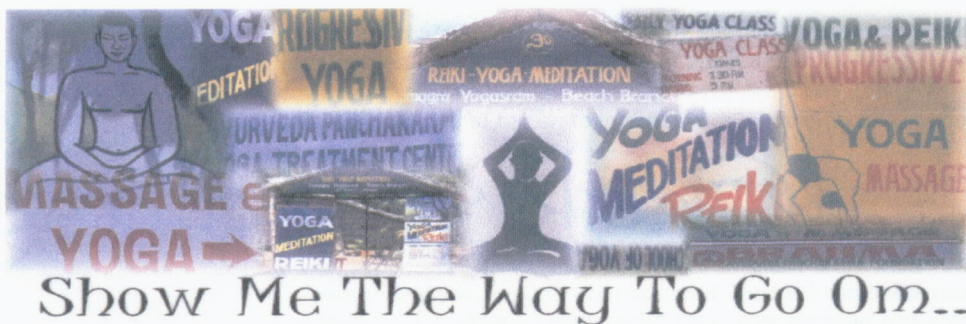


Don't go to India and walk into a class expecting it to be like home. There is a big difference between the Western idea of "teach me lots as I am paying you for your time and teaching" and the Indian way of "little instruction and lots of relaxation between poses".



By Scooby Gill

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Any Yoga enthusiast about to embark on a trip to India could not help but to be excited by the prospect of 'real' Yoga lessons, in the country that gave birth to the 'fitness craze' that is currently sweeping the western world. However, what you actually find when you unroll your mat may be at odds with your expectations, and what we in the west would imagine an 'authentic' Yoga lesson to be.

Go anywhere on the tourist trail throughout India and you will be overwhelmed with flyers, signs and adverts promoting the various different styles of Yoga, alongside those of Ayurvedic and complimentary therapies. We sampled a few Yoga classes in the hope of finding one that met our expectations and in many cases were left wanting.

One of us had very clear expectations of what these classes could offer. Namely, a well rounded set of exercises to stretch, tone and open the body with some meditation and breathing exercises followed by a guided relaxation. Basically, what most people would expect in a good Yoga class over here but without the plinky-plonky music during the relaxation! The other one, with less experience of Yoga all round, didn't quite know what to expect apart from possibly more chanting, Omming and aahing and a bunch of new age hippies "getting cosmic". In practice, both our expectations were wrong.

Our search for an appropriate Yoga class led us to many possibilities, most of which it seemed consisted of the staff of the hotel or Ayurvedic clinic where we enquired advising us to come back the following day, by which time they would have found us a Yoga teacher or at least a suitably flexible acquaintance! We were dubious of such arrangements preferring to at least talk to the person who was teaching the class before we committed ourselves.

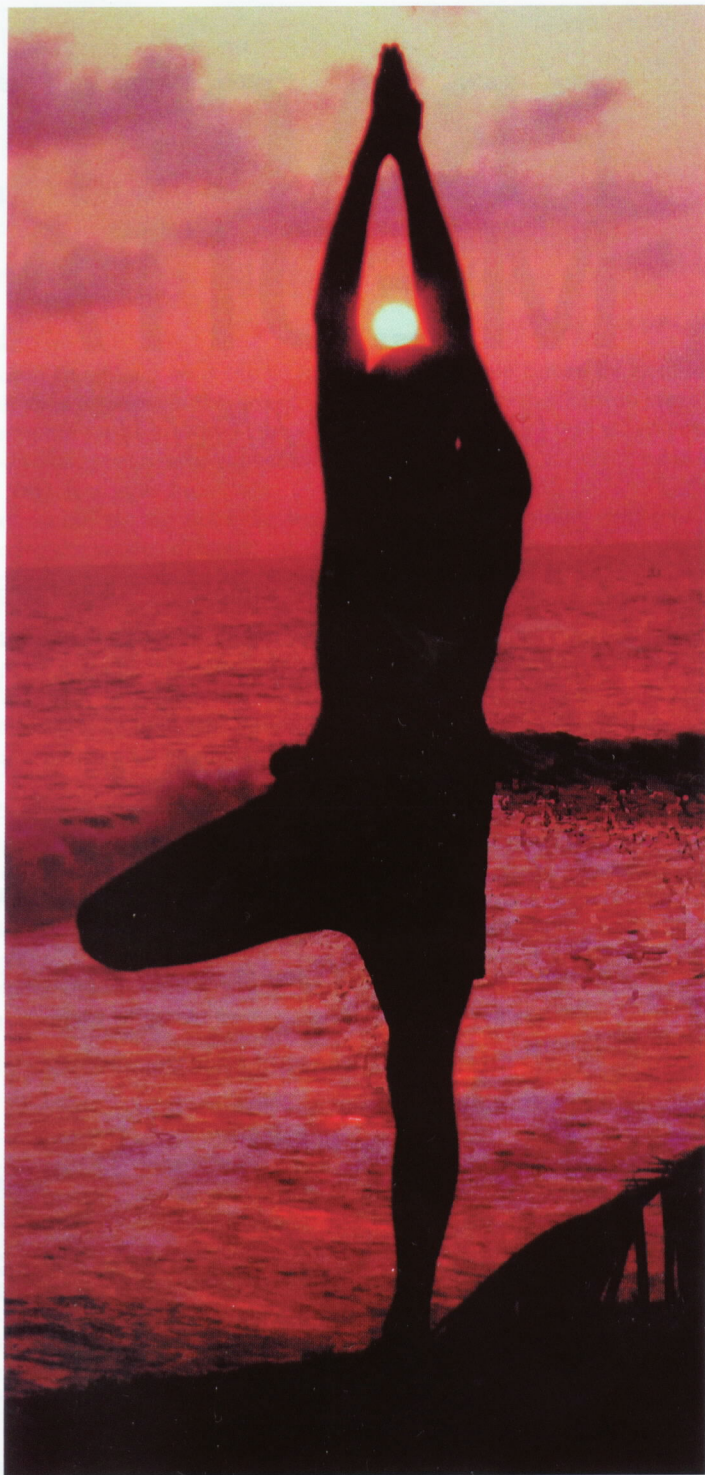
The first class we sampled was an early morning session of Sivananda Yoga taught by an Indian teacher who was spending the cold winter months away from his current home in Northern Europe. We spoke to him before attending the class and were impressed with his clarity and the way he made us feel comfortable. One of us had felt slightly nervous about attending a Yoga class in India and this teacher had an air about him that helped build confidence and remove any feelings of unease. In fact, this was the one class of our trip that not only provided the best all round experience but that provided us both, and one of us for the first time, with entry into the territory of deep relaxation and meditation. Previous explanations and reading around the subject of meditation had not provided the experience that had been enjoyed here with the simple instruction of 'look to the space between your eyes'. It was a surprising revelation for one so cynical of the spiritual side of Yoga and something that has since been brought back home and incorporated into Yoga practice with a greater overall understanding.

One thing that we didn't bring back with us was the amount of emphasis placed on the breathing exercises. Although we recognise the breath as an important factor in Yoga, we felt that the breathing techniques taught in this beginner's class were too far advanced and could have put many people off returning. We found 20 minutes sitting with legs crossed and spines erect, and concentrating on breathing into each chakra in turn quite challenging, and also inappropriate for our abilities and what we were expected to feel. Another example was a four count breathing exercise where at times we were expected to retain the breath for up to a minute at a time, but given no explanation as to why we were doing this. Perhaps more simple breathing techniques would have proved a more rewarding and enjoyable introduction, and provided a better foundation which we could build upon.

From a physical point of view, this teacher's instruction was clear and detailed and he made many physical corrections to our *asanas*, although some of our familiar poses were given different names, which sometimes caused confusion. Although physically, this style of Yoga was less challenging than what we were used to, following each pose with relaxation gave a deeper insight into the energy that each pose released in the body.

One puzzling aspect of our classes, which was not totally unexpected, was the chanting in Sanskrit, which usually preceded and concluded each class. While this was not given with an explanation as to its meaning or purpose, the delivery was soothing enough as to leave us feeling uplifted by the experience.

Yoga mats were provided and gave us some form of padding but resembled packing material and became extremely slippery as we warmed up and began to sweat. If you have



your own mat and are serious about getting the most from your classes you would do well to bring it along. Overall the environment in this first class was well suited to Yoga, although the frequent power cuts, noise, and cooking smells from the nearby kitchen often distracted us. This was certainly preferable to the other classes we attended where we fought off ants, flies and especially mosquitoes during the evening sessions, which were not at all conducive to relaxation and peace of mind.

Our travels had taken us further up the coast to another tourist hot spot where we found a number of classes held in palm huts on a cliff top overlooking the sea. We chose an early morning class where we had spoken to the teacher the previous day. Other travellers had also told us that it was a particularly popular class. However, on arrival we found that we were the only people attending. The class began with a beautifully executed but totally incomprehensible (to us) chant in Sanskrit, which continued for a few minutes. The teacher had



explained that the morning session was the most intense class and not suitable for beginners but as we had done some Yoga before, we didn't think this would be too much of a problem. As it turns out, it wasn't and the word 'intense' may have got lost in the translation. The first exercise was a standing forward bend, held for far too long which made us both struggle for consciousness as we stood up and fought to regain our balance. Over the course of two hours we did no more than six very slow *asanas*, all punctuated with relaxation in corpse pose, which seemed to go on much longer than necessary. The Yoga was only made slightly more interesting by the teacher's corrections to our postures, which was the only teaching we felt we received. Needless to say, we didn't return.

For the next few days we were happy with our own self-practice on the roof of our small guesthouse. This provided some of the most satisfying experiences from a physical point of view. Despite the fact that our neighbours overlooked us, we seemed to be accepted, and the people around us just carried on with their daily tasks. The only exception was a young boy who took enough interest in what we were doing to mimic our poses, which he interspersed with dancing to the loud music emanating from the temple next door. This environment, away from the formality of a Yoga class, made our practice feel very natural and the smiles we exchanged with our 'young student' gave us a sense of fun and playfulness that was often lacking from our classes in India. One of the only distractions was keeping an eye out for falling palm fronds that crashed to earth on a daily basis due to the unseasonably dry weather.

Perhaps our most entertaining class, and indeed the one that inspired this article, was taught by a 69 year old 'Swami', dressed head to toe in regulation saffron robes. When we first arrived to enquire, the swami was busy elsewhere with his washing but we were informed he would be back shortly. This gave us a chance to speak to a fellow student who was also enquiring about the classes, but quickly changed her mind when she saw who was teaching it. Upon making our introductions to the swami, she quickly made good her escape by gesturing to us and stating, "these people are interested in your Yoga class". We caught up with her later and she told us about her experiences with this teacher. She was a self-proclaimed 'advanced' student of *Iyengar Yoga*, who had tried his class in a different location. She described the Yoga he taught as more like school gym exercises than any Yoga that she had come across before. Like 'lambs to the slaughter' and in the true spirit of investigative journalism, we had to try this class!

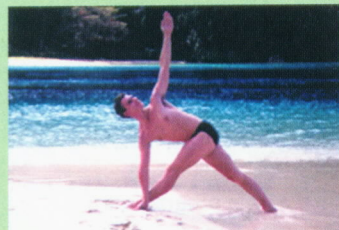
When we arrived, we found we were the only people attending. It soon became obvious that he found it very difficult to communicate with women. He directed his gaze and teachings only at the male in the class. This could be due to the fact that less Indian women seem to practise Yoga. In contrast to Yoga classes in the UK, no instructions were ever given about altering the practice during menstruation, such as omitting inversions.

While sitting on the grass mats, he began to explain various aspects of what he was going to teach us, going off on many tangents,

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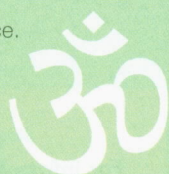
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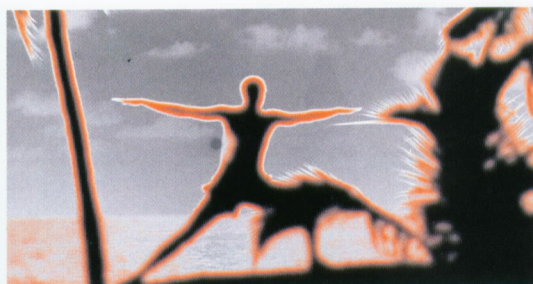
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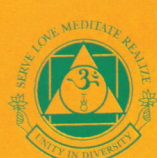
including giving us a full blown history lesson on the old colonies of the UK. This was the first of many irrelevant one-sided discussions that had us glassy eyed and longing to actually do something, although he did give us a good grounding in the history and cultural context of Yoga. Meanwhile, the grasshopper perched on the floor in front of him kept us amused enough to prevent sleep until such time as we finally got around to doing some *asanas* one hour later. This started with strange head jerking exercises, which were definitely not for people with neck problems! Then followed the 'school gym' exercises and some loose interpretations of classical Yoga postures, many given the wrong name. We were not sure if this was a product of an aging mind or a lack of knowledge. Another thing we were not comfortable with was his instruction to push each movement to the point of pain. Given the lack of attention paid to alignment, his instructions, if followed blindly, could easily result in serious injury. Thankfully we had enough experience and awareness to stay within our limits. Although we found his physical instruction somewhat lacking, this swami had obviously benefited from his own practice, and despite a leg injury he remained impressively strong and flexible for a 69 year old.

At the end of the class he called us over and, while he sat on his bed, he put our names in a register. He had previously been a schoolteacher, and when becoming a swami and giving up his previous life, he had been unable to shake off these old habits. It was obvious he had a very strong love of teaching, and he proudly showed us photos of his past students.

The strength of his passion for teaching was one of the deciding factors in our return the following day. It might have been his age but somehow he did manage to communicate something of the timeless quality of Yoga through his teaching. Whether this was a product of the saffron robes or the long flowing grey hair and beard, he definitely carried an aura of wisdom.

At the start of the next day's class he promised that he would not talk as much but he soon forgot this promise and told us about a hotel he worked at in Germany, followed by a biology lesson about the relative sizes of human and animal brains, and how this indicates the superiority of humans. He then went on to espouse the benefits of a vegetarian diet, despite the fact that we had previously told him that we were long-term vegetarians (vegans even). If he had listened, it could have saved him 15 minutes of 'preaching to the converted'.

We had changed the position of our mats around today, to see if this made a difference to whom he directed his teaching, but found that he still favoured his 'young man'. This started to rub us both up the wrong way but he remained oblivious. After going off on another one of his 'tangents', he amusingly and ironically discussed the importance of not talking too much and making time in your life for quiet and contemplation. Then from somewhere, came a question about whether, as a couple, we argued. When we said we didn't (and miraculously this is true), he told us that surely then, we were not deeply in love! Bearing in mind he had already told us about the importance of not being angry in our lives, he now told us that it was a necessary part of a good loving relationship. His argument was 'strengthened' by quoting that famous guru of broken marriages, Elizabeth Taylor, who had said much the same thing in a TV interview apparently!



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It was during the relaxation at the end of the class that the familiar sound of 'Omm' brought us out of what relaxation we had been able to achieve, and spontaneously an old song started playing in one of our minds, with the words slightly changed to fit the situation and the mood. With immaculate timing the lyrics flowed, "Show me the way to go Omm, I'm tired and I want to go to bed!" This perfectly summed up how we felt about the class, and after giving him a second chance, we felt that we owed him an explanation as to why we would not be returning again. After explaining our reasons he seemed visibly disappointed, but offered no response to the points we made, and thanked us for our honesty. He sent us on our way with a worksheet and implored us to continue regular practice.

Don't go to India and walk into a class expecting it to be like home. There is a big difference between the Western idea of "teach me lots as I am paying you for your time and teaching" and the Indian way of "little instruction and lots of relaxation between poses". Likewise, just because Yoga originates in India, that doesn't mean that you will get an original and full experience or necessarily find what you are looking for in any one class.

However, there is no doubt that taking Yoga classes in India is a worthwhile experience. Everyone has different expectations and needs and what was right for us might not be right for other people. But, from our experience, sampling several classes and several styles and then piecing them together to suit our own self-practice reaped the best rewards. It seems that other people may have got the same idea too as we witnessed many people practising Yoga on their own in the cool of the sea breeze at dawn or the magic glow of a beach at sunset.

There is no doubt that the sights, sounds, smells and general atmosphere of India promote a more "concentrated" experience whilst practising Yoga. Exactly why is hard to put your finger on but it leads to a more spiritual and contemplative emphasis as opposed to the more physical one at home. This was particularly evident during the relaxation sessions. The soothing, melodic and sometimes hypnotic voice of the Indian teachers repeating instructions to focus on certain areas really did relax and concentrate your mind. The chanting also, however incomprehensible to us, was far more effective in relaxation than the tape-recorded waterfall effect or "plinky-plonky" new age music often employed in Western classes.

A final thing to remember about the classes in India is that they are intended predominantly for Western tourists. There are however some people who will shy away from such classes and seek out, with dedication and time, the truly authentic

teaching of Yoga. Perhaps these are the people who bring that teaching back to the Western world, whose books eventually end up on the shelves of bookshops worldwide and even back in India, and whose teachings inspire many to go to India to experience for themselves the magic of Yoga in its country of birth. Whatever your expectations, experience, hopes and dreams, India will provide many answers, many questions and a whole lot of interest along the way.

Scooby Gill lives in Plymouth and is a freelance writer as well as working as a travel and landscape photographer. She can be contacted at: scooby@shadowwolf.freemove.co.uk.

Phil Chapman lives near Newquay, Cornwall and has a keen interest in the healing powers of Yoga. He is a Reiki master and can be contacted on reikichap23@yahoo.co.uk.

STOP PRESS

APOLOGY: On page 8 of our October issue, the contact details of Linda Markley were omitted in error. For details of Linda's classes, you may Tel: 0845 123 5109 or visit www.journeyworkshops.com. A 'Wholeness Workshop' based on the journey will take place in Brighton on Saturday, 16th November.

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55

संकल्पयति कार्याणि
यानीह शिशुवन्नरः ।
सैकतेष्विव हर्म्याणि
दैवौघस्तान्यपास्यति ॥

[KSA]

samkalpayati karyāṇi
yāniha śiśuvan naraḥ /
saikateṣv iva harmyāṇi
daivaughas tāny apāsyati //

Whatever projects
Man proposes in life,
As a child builds
Castles on sand,
The wave of fate
Will wipe them out.

56

समौ ग्रन्थस्य कर्ता च
नारी च प्रसवोन्मुखी ।
गर्भवृद्धिश्चिरं कालं,
तीव्राः प्रसववेदनाः ॥

[KSA]

samau granthasya kartā ca
nārī ca prasavonmukhī /
garbha-vṛddhiś ciram kalam
tivrāḥ prasava-vedanāḥ //

Alike are the author of a book
And a woman about to deliver:
The seed takes a long time to develop,
And the labour pains are acute.

This series has been compiled by Professor K S Arjunwadkar.