

FRANK TALK BY Dr. ANANDA BALAYOGI BHAVANANI

An Interview by Yogacharini Niraimathi, International Secretary Gitananda Yoga Association of Australia

1. HOW WOULD YOU LIKE PEOPLE TO UNDERSTAND YOGA?

For me, Yoga is a continuous process. The whole problem with something being goal-oriented is that people think that the goal is something to be reached at the end of the journey, but it is the journey itself that is important. This entire yogic process is not what you learn and not what you achieve. Yoga is something that you “live” until your last breath, and even that last breath should be completed with awareness. You should go with the satisfaction of knowing that you have done your best. Yoga is a continuous process. It is a journey and the goal is the journey itself.

Yoga is getting to know what your body can and cannot do. Yoga is watching the breath, slowing down the breath and discovering that you can have a wonderful control over your emotions when slowing down the breath, because breath is the seat of our emotions.

Yoga is not about the number of Yoga practices we do nor is it about how many times or how long we do them. It is all about how we live our life in tune with Dharma.

Yoga is life and everything we do is Yoga. Yoga is in every second of life, Yoga is in every action you do and in every thought you have and in every emotion that you feel. For modern man in a modern setting, I feel more than anything else that Yoga is skill in action. Whatever you do, you should do with the attitude that it is to be done to the best of your ability and with total effort. I think that to have action that is skilful and yet not motivated by any desire is a model concept for modern man. I see Yoga, in its modern context, as skilful action without desire or concern about the fruits of our actions.

2. WHAT DO YOU SEE AS BEING IMPORTANT IN THE TEACHINGS OF THE GITANANDA LINEAGE?

In a modern world where Yoga has been equated to mere physical postures with a little breath manipulation and so called mediation, Swamiji’s contribution to the development of Yoga in the past century and his codification of the ancient teachings in a modern scientific manner is unparalleled. Swamiji’s teachings like him are huge and seemly never ending in their depth.

Yoga takes a telescopic view of human nature whereas modern medicine takes a microscopic view. When we are blessed to have both, we understand the human nature much clearer. This is what the Rishiculture Ashtanga Yoga tradition, the Gitananda lineage is all about, understanding the ancient art and science of Yoga through a modern practical perspective. In my own case, understanding anatomy,

physiology, biochemistry and psycho-pathology through my training in modern medicine has enabled me to put the ancient and living concepts of Yoga into a more modern and scientific framework. This is a continuation of my Guru-father's path breaking work and has appealed to the modern mindset. I feel like a human bridge between both the Yoga and modern medicine communities.

Coming back to your questions, I would say that some important aspects of the Gitananda teachings are:

- **YOGA IS A WAY OF LIFE:** Yoga is not something you do but a way of life to be lived 60/60/24/7/365/x. This requires a lot of introspection, consciousness, awareness, dedication and determination.
- **CREATE GURUS NOT FOLLOWERS:** Swamiji never wanted to have a huge number of students or a huge million strong organisation. He was more interested in bringing out the potential inherent in each one of his students even if they later hated him for it! Each and every one of Swamiji's students is the best they could have been in this lifetime. Each is an individual and Swamiji brought out the best in each one. No stereotyping or mass mould production at all. Swamiji made them so aware of their Divine nature that many times they forgot him!!
- **BREATH IS LIFE:** No other system comes close to Swamiji in terms of the vast repertoire and depth of his Pranayama teachings. Starting with the Vibhagha Pranayama and then step by step building up to more than 120 intricate Pranayamas is done in a manner that Prana, that vital cosmic catalyst fills every cell with life and light.
- **NO OPTION YOGA:** Swamiji termed Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga as the No Option Yoga and placed great importance on a deep understanding of the Yamas and Niyamas which are the firm foundation upon which the real Yoga life can be built. "You wouldn't build a colossal building without a foundation but you want to do it with Yoga?" he would ask numerous easy going aspirants who wanted some 'quick fix' Yoga.
- **STEP-BY-STEP APPROACH:** Every aspect of Swamiji teachings follows a step by step structured approach that is easy to follow and methodical. Emphasis is placed on learning and re-learning the preceding steps and then proceeding further. No shortcut please was his refrain for it is always better to be slow and steady than fast and sorry. The emphasis is on growing into the practice rather than forcing oneself into it and that is why the use of props and other contraptions that make Yoga so expensive today have never been part of this tradition.
- **LOVE FOR INDIAN CULTURE:** The major problem facing Yoga in the West is the fact that Yoga has been cleaved away from Indian Culture (Sanathana Dharma). Without an understanding of the Indian (Hindu) culture and the way of life where Yoga originated, it is very difficult to find answers to many of the questions that confront the sincere seeker. Swamiji tried to inculcate in all students a deep love and understanding of the culture from which Yoga has sprung. Ammaji has continued this with her unique contribution to the cultural renaissance in Pondicherry as well as all over the world.

- **BOUNTIFUL PRACTICES:** Scores and scores of practices and techniques are part of this tradition that has numerous Hatha Yoga, Laya Yoga and Jnana Yoga practices for the sincere aspirant. Polarity practices and the Mantra Laya deserve special mention as also the Laya Yoga Kriyas. The intricate and in-depth understanding of Chakras, Nadis and Bindus etc from the Dakshina Marga Tantra tradition of Yogamaharishi Swami Kanakananda Brighu is not found elsewhere in any system.
- **YANTRA, IN TUNE WITH NATURE:** In this Paramparai there are three important sciences, namely Mantra, Yantra and Tantra. Yantra is the mystical science of number, name and form and is a method by which one can live to learn “in tune” with the cycles of the universe rather than be “off tune” with those very cycles. According to the Yantric concept as taught by Swamiji each number has a special quality to it and is not merely a measure of quantity as is usually presumed. Every aspect of life goes through a phase of Nines. This phase may be nine years, nine months, nine weeks or even nine days. This concept can be further extended both ways to go up to nine milliseconds on one hand and nine lifetimes on the other.
- **MUDRAS, DIVINE COMMUNICATION:** One of the main features of the Gitananda tradition is the detailed exposition and understanding of Mudra, the ancient Yogic art and science of gesturing and sealing vital Pranic energies. These advanced techniques designed to improve neuromuscular coordination, culture human emotions and still the restless mind are a means of non-verbal communication that is subtle and refined. They enable us to communicate intrapersonally with our inner self, interpersonally with others and transpersonally with the Divine. The Oli Mudra teachings as well as the usage of Hatha Mudras with the breath in Vibhagha and Pranava Pranayamas are unique to this tradition.

3. WHAT EXPOSURE HAVE YOU HAD TO THE MODERN 'INTERPRETATION' OF YOGA AND WHAT IS YOUR PERCEPTION OF IT?

I have been privileged to travel abroad 13 times in the recent years. Of course I travelled a lot with my parents when I was a child but those memories are not as fresh as the ones I have had in the past few years. Having given workshops, classes, lectures, performances and talks in the USA, UK, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa I think I have seen a bit of the modern Yoga world. I have also had the chance to be “up to date” on all modern Yoga news thanks to the numerous Yoga journals that come to us from every part of the globe in exchange for Yoga Life, the wonderful monthly journal of our ashram that is now in its 42nd year of publication under the excellent editorship of Ammaji. The general impression one gets from most Yoga magazines is that the west is only interested in the physical aspects of Yoga or take to it as a fancy that lasts not too long. I have however found that my experiences in the west have been quite different! I have found that there are many sincere seekers who desire the ‘real thing’ and some who have imbibed Yoga into their very essence.

A few years ago I was invited to present at the International Yoga Therapy Conference in the USA and had the chance to interact with great American Yoga teachers such as Larry Payne, Rama Jyothi Vernon and the eminent researcher Dr Sat Bir Singh Khalsa. It was also a pleasure to meet the famous personalities of Yoga such as Mukunda Stiles, Nina Priya and Amy Weintraub who are amazing human beings. I had one of those very special astonishing experiences during the first panel presentation when Larry Payne who was to speak got up from the panel and invited me to come and take his place and share my views instead. I was blown off my feet with that magnanimous gesture that I would have never expected anywhere in the world and it was happening right here in the USA! Larry set the stage for a successful conference with that heartfelt gesture that I will treasure for my whole life. I hope that I will be able to do the same for others in the future as it propelled me to do my best in all ways possible. All in all I can only describe my American experience as a magical one that enabled me to see that there are sincere people on the Yoga path willing to see the grandness of Yoga.

I was recently invited to be major presenter at the "Reunion in Yoga"- IYTA World Yoga Convention held at Sydney, Australia in September 2010 with nearly 200 delegates attending the convention held after a gap of 13 years. It was something special to note that previous such special invitees have been Swami Satyananada Saraswathi, Swami Gitananda Giri, Swami Satchitananda, BKS Iyengar, Andre Van Lysbeth, Liliias Folan, Howard Kent, Mansukh Patel and Swami Maheshwarananda. It was a truly lovely experience to meet and interact with so many loving souls who were motivated by the 'real thing'.

Personally it was such an honor to be invited as the Major Presenter at the convention and share the stage with eminent personalities representing Yoga 'down under'. It was indeed a pleasure to meet and interact and exchange views with such loving people like Wendy Bachelor, Leigh Blashki, Louise Wiggins, Margo Hutchison, Trish Brown, Michael de Manincor, Anne Nakhoda and Mary- Louise Parkinson. We met so many wonderful people and the love, respect and attentiveness of all participants moved us greatly. It was a joy to share with such human beings and, 'Do your best and leave the rest' became a household word for us all.

What I have understood from all these experiences is that there are sincere Yogis and Yoga Sadhakas everywhere in the world and that we must not label the east or west either as good or bad. Instead we need to work on imbibing the best of the east and the best of the west in a true yogic integration.

4. WHAT IS YOUR EXPERIENCE OF TEACHING TO A WESTERN AUDIENCE?

There is a modern trend found everywhere nowadays. It seems like anyone who just attends a Yoga class can call themselves a yogi. There was even a recent article that said matter of fact, "Those who practice Yoga are known as Yogis". Many years ago, Swamiji and Ammaji were returning after a long world tour and decided to make a list of the ten top yogic personalities they had met on that long tour. At the end of the whole exercise, it was most surprising to find that not even one of the top ten were "practicing yogis"!!

Generally Indians seem to have Yoga built into their genes whether they know of it or not. Scratch any Indian and you will find a Yogi hidden inside. However we take our cultural heritage for granted and will not appreciate 'that' which is right in front of us. We lack a sense of discipline and easily fall back on the crutch of 'it's my karma'. On the other hand, I find western Yoga students more disciplined and capable of greater intellectual analytical understanding. Yet, they are handicapped by the lack of a typical Indian understanding of universal connective-ness and don't have the benefit of cultural concepts that have been around for thousands of years. Ultimately a good student transcends every barrier and every limitation and I have wonderful students and members of my Yoga family from every corner of the globe today.

5. HOW WOULD YOU WISH TO ENRICH A PERSONS YOGA PRACTICE?

From my own experience I have found that the basic practices of Yoga have given certain energy levels to my life. Of course I cannot compare this with a 'before and after' effect, because there has not really been a before and after of Yoga in my life. Perhaps I took certain high energy levels that I had as being normal, because people would ask me how it was possible for me to do my college studies for so many hours on end. People would ask me how I could sing for three hours, or how I could dance for two hours without tiring. On an energetic level, I would say that the Asana and Pranayama practice gave me a certain energy that helped me to push through my limitations. That doesn't mean that I didn't rest or sleep, but the concept of feeling weak or tired was something totally foreign to me. I also saw those high energy levels in Swamiji and Amma. They were and are amazing; they could sit and work on something together for so many hours on end. I also developed the ability to be alone with myself, which Swamiji and Amma also possessed. I can sit on my own for hours without getting bored. Most people don't understand how I can be alone for so long without needing something to distract my mind. I am at peace with myself, I am not afraid to look at myself, or to look inside myself. Yoga as a whole, not just the Asanas, has helped me to look at myself more closely.

Consciousness is the key to control and intelligent Hatha Yoga makes the practitioner conscious in every cell! It may be said that the motto of Hatha Yoga is, "Exercise to Exorcise." Intelligent Hatha Yoga purifies body, mind and emotions of primordial reptilian / animal instincts. A rule of the human organism is "Use it or lose it." Hatha Yoga aids the practitioner to attain skill in right-use-ness of the body. Lower animal passions are exorcized by using the unconscious animal-like areas of the body in a conscious human manner. Essential body functions are used systematically, bringing normally autonomic functions under the conscious control of mind. In this way, the Jiva takes control of its own evolutionary trajectory. Instead of being a puppet dangling on the strings of the primordial nervous system, locked into the "4 F" Response Syndrome:-Fright, Flight, Fight or Freeze", the Jiva is able to use its cerebral cortex to consciously determine the proper response to each situation. In other words, one learns to act in the proper manner, rather than re-act in an unhealthy unconscious knee-jerk manner.

“There can be no Raja Yoga without Hatha Yoga, and no Hatha Yoga without Raja Yoga” declares Swatmarama Suri, in his Hatha Pradipika. When the entire array of Hatha Yoga practices such as Asana, Pranayama, Kriya, Mudras and Bandhas are practised extensively within the correct wholistic framework of Yoga as an entire life style, great peace, serenity, strength and happiness springs eternal in the heart and soul of the Yoga Sadhaka. May all attain such a state through the benevolent blessings of the great Masters who continue to guide sincere seekers on the path of Yoga.

6. ARE THERE ASPECTS/ PRACTICES OF YOGA THAT RESONATE MORE STRONGLY WITH YOU?

The main aspect that resonates deeply within me is the concept of yoga as four-fold awareness as expounded by Swamiji. Awareness of the body is the first of these four while the second is to be aware of one's emotions. The physical practices of Yoga such as the Asana and Pranayama help us in this regard. The loosening techniques like the Jathis and Kriyas help us release pent up tensions and clear out the Pranic-cobwebs that may have accumulated by our negligence towards a natural way of life. In the third we become aware of our thoughts and then through such a process of constant awareness, one attains a state wherein one is aware of awareness itself. This is enabled by the inner practices of Yoga such as Pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses), Dharana (intense concentration), and Dhyana (a meditative state of being), leading to Samadhi. The Yama and Niyama play a vital role in developing all states of awareness but are of even greater importance for these inner states of awareness. Analytical self-analysis through Swadhyaya helps us to become aware of our thoughts and emotions and hence develop these inner states. A conscious effort must be made for this to be part of every moment of our life and not limit it to just a Yoga class framework.

Yoga has to be practised with “every moment awareness” and we must make a constant and uninterrupted effort towards being in the ‘NOW’ if we are to truly live Yoga. Of course, before we attain any of these states of awareness, we first need to be aware of how unaware we are. Waking up is not always pleasant but it is important. Yoga is something you live until your last breath, and even that last breath should be completed with awareness. There are so many seekers who want the “highest’ states of awareness and consciousness but lack the basic common sense awareness of even their words and actions let alone their thoughts and emotions. Many of them are virtually standing on the toes of their Guru, demanding that they be given the highest state. This is where the real Guru does need to sometime ‘whack’ some good common sense into the student if they are to wake up. However many modern ‘Gurus’ are afraid of having their students wake up as they will then lose them. Swamiji told us that a ‘breakdown’ is often an opportunity for a ‘break through’. Often illness and disease is also a ‘wake up call’ from nature telling us we need to wake up.

7. HOW WOULD YOU ADVISE SOMEONE JUST STARTING OUT ON THE YOGA PATH?

Love for Yoga is the key component of a Yoga life. Of course, joy and fun are part of the Yoga life at all times. Develop an ardent desire to evolve on the path towards oneness and keep working on it non-stop. Compassion, empathy and love are important dynamics that are to be worked on while petty egocentric stuff needs to be kept at the bottom of the pile. The ability to sublimate one's individuality for the sake of the group is an important part of the Yoga life. Constant growth through Satsanga is very useful, and being open to correction and change at all times is a must. We need to remember that the Guru is not just the physical manifestation but is a spirit of guidance that can manifest through so many vehicles. One must be constant on the lookout for its manifestation as such a spirit may manifest through our partner, our children, our neighbours, our students, our friends and often through our worst enemies too. I have found that people who consider me their worst enemy have actually helped my growth more than some who have always been caring and considerate. The ones who always looking for chances to degrade me keep me on my toes, and make me do the best I can without fail. They are the stimulant that enables the best to flower through me. When they play such a great role in my life, is not it right that I thank them for being a manifestation of the Guru spirit too?

8. WHAT WORDS OF WISDOM WOULD YOU OFFER TO THE DEDICATED SADHAK?

The universe is the Divine, nature is the Divine and every being is the Divine. You are the Divine and the Divine is you. Of course we must be careful that we don't go on an ego trip by misunderstanding this reality. The Divine is 'that' which is beyond name and form yet manifests to us through every name and form dear to us. He, She, It manifests to me personally through my father, my mother, my wife, my children, my students, my patients, my teachers, anyone and anything I choose to hold dear to my heart. Yoga is the dearest thing I hold to my heart and so for me the Divine is Yoga and Yoga is the Divine.

Patanjali says that the Divine, or Iswara, is beyond the impurities of klesha (affliction or poison) and karma. He also implies in the Yoga Darshan that 'we' can become 'that' divinity itself when we rid ourselves of the impurities that prevent that awareness. Every Yoganga, every part of Yoga, every part of life itself is a state of being, a state wherein we are a pure vehicle for the universal nature to manifest in its totality. The Divine is therefore for me a 'state of being'. If you are in that state, everything is Divine. On the other hand if we are not in such a state, then everything seems to be non-Divine.

Some of the important qualities one must develop are:

- Always be a good learner and be ready learn through the process of teaching
- Develop a strong self-introspective ability

- Be disciplined and dedicated towards the cause of Yoga
- Try to develop an understanding of the wholistic nature of Yoga physiology, philosophy and psychology along with a strong desire for spiritual evolution
- We must be willing to learn from all situations and learn not to have an, “I know it all!” attitude.
- We need to possess a sense of empathy for others and be willing to sublimate our own EGO
- Have a good sense of humour and laugh at yourself without reservation
- Try to motivate others by self-example and lead the way as a true Yoga Acharya.
- Always have devotion to the Guru who has guided you for Guru Droha or treachery to one’s Guru is considered the worst sin.
- Do your best and leave the rest for everything only happens for our spiritual evolution.

9. COULD YOU SHARE WITH US THE EXPERIENCE OF GROWING UP WITH YOUR FATHER DR. SWAMI GITANANDA GIRI AND YOUR MOTHER MENAKSHI DEVI BHAVANANI?

It is a great privilege for me to have been born to Swamiji and Ammaji, and to have grown up in an atmosphere like Ananda Ashram. It was a privilege that I can only explain in terms of positive karma from my past lives. To Swamiji, everything was Yoga, it wasn’t something you got up in the morning to do, or something you did in the evening, the entire day was Yoga. Whatever you did was Yoga. If you got up at four-thirty in the morning you would find students practicing meditation, if you went at six o’clock you would find Hatha Yoga classes under the big tree, if you went at eleven o’clock they would be doing Pranayama, if you went around in the afternoon you would find classes on the therapeutic aspects of Yoga, and in the evenings there would be mantra chanting followed by the Satsanga that often stretched in the late night. The entire day, wherever you looked, had something going on and there was something to learn. In addition to that, hundreds of local children used to come to Ananda Ashram on Sundays. They would receive free food and clothing, and this was done in order to entice them to Yoga. There had to be a pull to get them to come and then once they did, the Yoga took over. We had children who came here from every aspect of Indian society, the rich and the poor and from all religions. There was no way that I could escape that atmosphere’s influence on me, and I knew that I had been put there for a definite purpose.

At the age of four, I was officially named to be my father’s successor. Many people asked what a four-year-old could know or understand, but I recall the occasion vividly. I was then not only exposed to Yoga, but also to mantra chanting through a Sanskrit Pandit who taught me different mantras from the Vedas. When I was 12 years old I had to go to school because I had to have an official education. My teachers thought that I would be uneducated but they didn’t realise that my elder sister Yogacharini Renuka Giri taught me maths, and my mother English, general knowledge, geography and history. I also had a local tutor who taught me Tamil, and a Pandit who taught me Sanskrit. I had received all the education that I needed

so when I went to school I did very well, and was always easily at the top of my class. I tell the children I now teach that I was lucky to have been spared that 'so-called' education because I grew up in an atmosphere where I was exposed to real life. We also had a small zoo at the ashram, and so I grew up with monkeys, deer, foxes, mongooses, ducks, and rabbits running around. It was an atmosphere where concepts simply entered my young head effortlessly and in a natural way. People ask me what special lessons Swamiji taught me, but he didn't have to do anything because each moment was a learning experience. I didn't always understand what Swamiji taught me, but it still made an impression. Those memories stayed in my thoughts so that when I wanted to call upon them, they are there. I think that consciously and unconsciously I was imbibing everything from my environment - I was practicing and taking part in classes, and even teaching if necessary. Amma encouraged me to sit down every month and to write a one-page article about Yoga. I wrote about different Asanas for about months with Amma correcting my English, and we published a small book on Yoga for children from my writing.

Later on I studied with my father just as a normal student would at Ananda Ashram (ICYER) in 1991-93 after finishing my schooling. I learnt a lot of what I needed to know in those two years. It is said, 'When the student is ready, the teacher appears', and at that point I was ready to absorb his teaching. I began to realize the systematic codification of his Rishiculture Ashtanga Yoga teaching, and how all his teaching was interlinked. All the pieces of the jigsaw from my childhood came together. The other advantage was that I lived with him, so there was always the opportunity to talk to him about my questions. We would often have conversations after Satsanga where we would sit up late into the night. In those talks he didn't teach me magical things or tell me secrets about special techniques, what he said was always very practical. He taught me that the brain has a certain capacity, and that we should not waste it by filling it with useless knowledge. He said that I should know where to look for something when I wanted it; in that way I wouldn't have to try to learn everything. He said that I should know which book and chapter to refer to, instead of trying to learn the entire book. He made me think about how I was going to link my studies at medical college with Yoga. In those two years of study he taught me and prepared me for what I would face in my five years of medical studies. He influenced my view of the sciences of medicine and of Yoga. A doctor trained in 'the system' would view Yoga within the limitations of modern medicine, while Swamiji taught me to look at allopathic medicine without limitation. Those two years gave me a perspective that I did not have before, and it helped me to see what it was I had to do. I could see the greatness of his teaching and of him, and it helped me to firmly decide to continue his work.

Lord Krishna tells us he will place into the wombs of Yoginis those who have not fulfilled their purpose in the present incarnation, thus enabling them to do so in the next (*Praapya punyakritaam lokaanushitwaa shaashwateeh samaah; Shucheenaam shreemataam gehe yogabhrashto'bhijaayate-6:41*). Hence I couldn't have been born to any other parents. Even if otherwise, I am sure Yoga would have found me even I had been raised in any other circumstances, for Yoga is my life. Yoga is my very being itself.