

Yoga and Meditation, from Macedonia to the United States

by Ema Stefanova

(Editor's Note: Ema Stefanova has been listing yoga and meditation classes in The Crazy Wisdom Community Journal for a number of years. Having been born and raised in Macedonia, she very much has an Eastern European sensibility, and her Ann Arbor life has been grafted on to that. She is an independent-minded and unique presence in Ann Arbor's yoga scene. We asked her to tell us about herself, her background, and her thoughts about yoga.)

Fourteen years ago, on Christmas Day, I arrived in the U.S. for the first time, sponsored by a friend and planning to stay in Michigan strictly for the duration of my graduate studies. I had come here on a sabbatical leave from work I loved in my native Macedonia, which was then still a part of my beloved native country of Yugoslavia. In August of the following year a series of wars started back home, and despite my strong desire to go back and get directly involved, I took my parents' advice and stayed in Ann Arbor. I lived the horror of what was happening over there while leading a normal life here, teaching yoga and meditation as well as languages. Had it not been for my yoga, and lots of amazing, down-to-earth, beautiful people, and the friends I made in this community, I feel it would have been much harder, and at times even impossible, to go on while relatives and fellow citizens back home were going through the horrors of war.

Yoga and meditation have been part of my life since early childhood in one form or another, and have given me tremendous strength at difficult times in my personal life, especially as it has unfolded here in the U.S. I am forever grateful to my parents and all elders in my family, (many of whom are natural yogis) as well as my yoga and meditation gurus, for an omnipresent and loving support at all times. It has been a fun and magical life in yoga. I have been following my guru Paramahansa Satyananda's guidance filled with joy for over a quarter of a century, and I am looking forward to what is remaining.

In this essay I will share my worldview of the current state of affairs in yoga. I have met, lived and worked with gurus, swamis and other yoga teachers from all continents over the years and I have lived or visited and taught in Europe, Asia and North America as well.

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YOGA IS THE CULTURE OF TOMORROW

Yoga used to be a world culture as archeological findings clearly indicate. Carvings of siddhasana (a traditional sitting pose) have been found in the Mayan culture. Adults and children were both buried in siddhasana in the Balkans, and numerous skeletons were found in graves demonstrating that people were actually buried in this sitting position. Pictographs (drawings) were found in caves in Spain that bear testimony to yoga as well. Mohenjodharo in India is a rich site, one of the oldest archeological yoga sites found on Asian soil. Yoga gurus, yogis, and other spiritual people living yoga agree that yoga at the time of the Atlantis was widespread, and they have predicted that in our day and age there would be a comeback of yoga in the extent to which we are experiencing it right now.

"When yoga comes to every door, that will be the end of yoga." I often remember these words of my guru Paramahansa Satyananda. One could interpret his words in more than one way: that yoga would have fulfilled its purpose since everyone would **be in yoga**, (not including of course those who still only **do yoga**) or that yoga would be so mixed and diluted that true yoga would be completely lost. Which brings us to the important question of what is yoga and what is not yoga, in the sea of yoga and quasi yoga we are surrounded by in the U.S. and most of the world nowadays

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Yoga has nothing to do with whether one can touch one's toes or not, or how far one can stretch one's physical form (also known as the food body in yoga). It is more about evolution of consciousness, individual and collective, through cultivating willpower and self-discipline, and about living in moderation and in harmony with oneself and the



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environment, according to universal laws that apply to each and every one of us human beings regardless of age, sex, race, creed, or place of birth. True yoga is whole and holistic, and includes yoga practices for all aspects of the personality such as **karma yoga** for the dynamic aspect of the personality, **bhakti** for the devotional aspect, **gyana yoga** for the rational aspect, and **raja yoga** for the psychic aspect, **hatha yoga** being one sub-branch of the latter. The system representing the sum total of these practices is known as **tantra yoga**. Many of these basic systems have been distorted or misrepresented in the west. A lot of true yoga and meditation education needs to be done by conscientious, truth loving yoga organizations, ashrams, teachers and other yoga minded individuals and groups.

True yoga and meditation practices learned from a competent yoga guide and practiced in the seclusion of your own home **regularly**, and applied at work, in school and elsewhere in real life bring joy, are easy and pleasant to do, and would be naturally suitable for one's own temperament, as well as health and other needs. Yoga has always been about an individual's journey, personally guided and nurtured by the everlasting relationship between the guru and disciple. The guru and disciple are filled with total love and respect for each other, even in the case of full time yoga renunciates living in ashrams (traditional yogic communities revolving around a guru), in the world or in seclusion. Therefore, according to tradition there are as many yogas as yoga aspirants in the world; every person's needs and understanding of life and therefore yoga being naturally different. There has never been such a thing as one yoga fits all.

. Unfortunately, most commercially known types of yoga exercise now existing in the western world abound in practices that are at least unnecessary, and in some cases outright dangerous, for most people — the headstand being a widespread example. Amazingly most yoga exercise places do not even check people's health as they join a class!

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Yoga in America has become yet another industry in the last few years. Numerous yoga businesses are run by former businessmen who also pose as yoga teachers, and just about anybody can get certified to teach yoga - even over only a weekend! People are injured in yoga classes! Teachers carry insurance to "protect" themselves from their "clients." Unlike traditional yoga gurus, yogis, and siddhus (traveling monks) who even to this day have always lived totally independent from existing social systems, yoga for so many in the west is just a job done in exchange for money. These teachers' minds are as soft and as undisciplined as those of their students', with egos often bigger than those of the students.

Speaking of the U.S., I would say thank God for places like Siddha Yoga ashrams, the Self-Realization Society, the Vivekananda Monasteries, and other places where yoga is practiced as a way of life, and where it is still alive in its tradition. Various imitations in the form of acting-as-but-not-really yogic communities should be excluded. Dispelling the darkness of ignorance, which is at the root of all suffering, is one of the goals of yoga that is disregarded by so many western yoga practitioners. Inventing new “yogas” (which has been mostly a U.S. phenomenon) has served the purpose of creating confusion rather than dispelling the darkness of ignorance.

The yoga as a culture of tomorrow cannot be other than the same true yoga that stood the test of millennia and enabled the human race to advance through advancing its awareness. The true yoga of today has relaxation and meditation as well as devotion at its heart. More and more people are doing yoga in the workplace, at school, in hospitals, and in jails, to relieve stress, improve concentration and develop or preserve their creativity. Western European countries have been the leaders in these kinds of applications of yoga in real life. Yoga has been integrated in the school curricula in France and many other Western European countries for over 30 years now. There has been a program in the U.S.

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for teaching yoga and meditation in schools called YES (Yoga Education in Schools) put together by teachers of the Satyananda yoga tradition. These kinds of programs, stemming from tradition and bridging the eons of time, will lay the foundations for the right understanding and practice of yoga as a culture of tomorrow.

YOGA AS A WAY OF LIFE

Yoga is a big and fascinating subject. To fully experience what it is and what it can do for you, I would recommend that you spend at least a month in a truly traditional yoga ashram environment, away from the distractions of modern material life. This should be done more than once in your life, as householders used to do and still do in some parts of the world. Ashram life trains one in personal responsibility, high thinking and simple living. It deflates the ego and lets your true self shine in no time. Mind you, an ashram by definition is a place where there is an enlightened person in the yogic sense of that word, i.e. a guru at the center of it. No substitutes will do!

If spending time at an ashram away from home is not feasible at this time in your life, a genuine yoga and meditation retreat with fasting, yoga cleansing, and practicing inner silence and meditation should be done now and then. This can be done while staying in a quiet place away from home, or if you have enough discipline, in your own environment at home. Ideally this retreat will be put together for your specific needs and goals by a teacher knowledgeable in true yoga. Traditional yoga texts such as the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, the Serpent Power (translation and commentary by Arthur Avalon) are the next best company if you cannot be directly in the company of evolved yoga souls at this time.

LOVE, SERVE, MEDITATE, REALIZE

A lot of what true yoga is about is love, service to the humanity at large, meditation and self-realization. Human life is precious and yoga and meditation are the art form and science that uplifts it and make it even more worth living. Human consciousness is what distinguishes us from the animal world, and true yoga facilitates the transformation of consciousness, offering at first glimpses of, and then completely, life in freedom from desires, fears, envy and jealousy, and the like. How, you may ask? By expansion and liberation of consciousness that takes place through the traditional practices of **mantra**, **yantra** and **mandala** which comprise the very foundation of every traditional yoga and meditation system. Mantra has to do with practicing meditation using sound, yantra has to do with concentration on mystical geometrical forms, and mandala has to do with meditation on three-dimensional forms that one's mind is naturally drawn to.

OM PEACE TO ALL IN THE COMING YEAR! MAY IT BE A TRULY YOGA AND MEDITATION YEAR FOR ALL!

MAY ALL BE HAPPY
MAY ALL BE FREE FROM DISEASE
MAY NONE BE SUBJECT TO MISERY
MAY ALL REALIZE WHAT IS REAL.
OM PEACE TO ALL
[A traditional yoga prayer]

Ena Stefanova lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and has been teaching yoga and meditation in the Satyananda yoga tradition since 1979.