

Happiness Guru

Dr Ananda Balayogi Bhavannani

Dr Ananda's infectious laughter and joy brings new meaning to the saying, 'Smile, and the whole world smiles with you'. I was fortunate enough to experience this first-hand during his recent trip down-under to reunite with his Gitananda Yoga family, and to present as keynote speaker at the International Yoga Teachers' Association (IYTA) World Yoga Convention. Dr Ananda first graced our shores as a small boy of three years old accompanying his world-famous guru father, Yogamaharishi Dr Swami Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaj, in 1975.

With a healthy dose of wit to match his warmth and wisdom, Dr Ananda has a captivating presence that shines with colour, creativity, and compassion.

by Dianna Timmins

It is rare to find a person whose happiness is genuinely derived largely from their profound ability to make others happy. Dr Ananda is undoubtedly one of those rare people, successfully merging facets of modern medicine and ancient yogic principles to help others reclaim health and happiness.

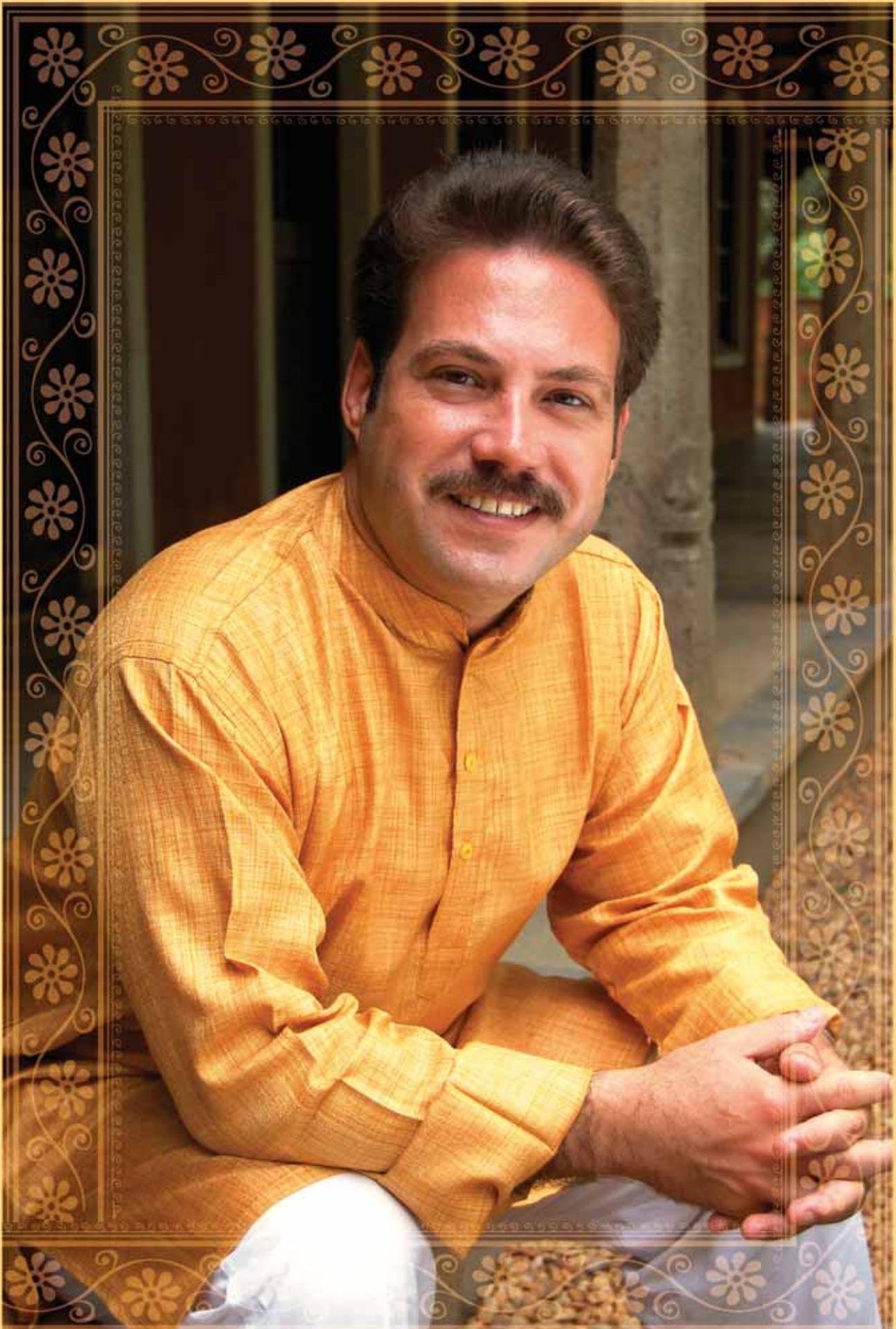
Q: You were raised in the yogic atmosphere of Ananda Ashram in India. What memories do you have of your childhood?

A: I was officially named to be my father's successor at the age of four. Many people asked what a four-year-old could know or understand, but I recall the occasion vividly. I was not only exposed to yoga, but also to mantra chanting, through a Sanskrit pandit who taught me different mantras from the vedas. I grew up with music, dance, yoga, and Sanskrit chanting as part of my life. We had a small zoo at the ashram, so I also grew up with monkeys, deer, foxes, mongooses, ducks, and rabbits. My close interaction with them taught me the unity of spirit in all beings. Hundreds of local children from every aspect of Indian society used to come to Ananda Ashram on Sundays, so I was never short of friends or challenges. They would receive free food and clothing to entice them to yoga. There was no way I could

escape that atmosphere's influence on me, and I knew I had been put there for a definite purpose.

Q: Have there ever been periods in your life when you have strayed from yoga?

A: Yoga has always been a part of my life, so there really hasn't been any time that I 'strayed' from it or it 'strayed' from me. However, the closest I would have come would have been when I was about 17 years old and my rebellious side surfaced. I decided I was going to become an architect after reading Ayn Rand's book, *Fountainhead*. I thought I wanted to have my own life, rather than follow in my father's footsteps. He was not happy about my rebellion because he had dedicated himself to guiding me. Many of my father's dear students including Sri Bala, founder of the Vibrational Breath Therapy in Melbourne, played an important role in helping me 'realise once again' the purpose of my birth. I still remember vividly the day when my school principal said to me, "Ananda, your father is a doctor who has done so much good for the world through yoga. Don't you think that you are closing your options? If you follow him into medicine, then you can use it to complement your yoga." Once the idea clicked, I immediately wrote to my father and said, "Swamiji, as soon as





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I have completed my education, I would like to do the six-month yoga teacher's training course with you." He wrote back and said, "I'm so happy".

Q: What is the relationship between yoga and modern medicine?

A: Yoga takes a telescopic view of human nature whereas modern medicine takes a microscopic view. When we are blessed to have both, we understand human nature much more clearly. Understanding the body's anatomy, physiology, biochemistry, and psychopathology has enabled me to put the ancient and living concepts of yoga into a more modern and scientific framework. This has appealed to the modern mindset and hence I have become a 'human bridge' between the yoga and modern medicine communities.

Q: There is a certain amount of knowledge required for both yoga and medicine. How does knowledge differ from wisdom?

A: We all collect information, and the assimilation of that into our system becomes knowledge. When we experience that knowledge, it gets transformed into wisdom. When we understand the bigger picture and take on a universal perspective, it becomes transcendental wisdom (prajna). When we start to live in that plane of highest wisdom, of prajna loka, we begin to know ourselves and are then able to put everything in the correct perspective. When we are not there in the prajna loka, we have limited vision and hence

base all decisions on selfish motives. The ego is present in the information stage, and possibly in the knowledge, but the others are beyond the ego and hence cannot be copyrighted. You can own information and maybe knowledge, but never wisdom, for wisdom is universal.

Q: In yoga, we are often advised to dissolve the ego. Are you saying there are times when it is essential?

A: The ego, or ahamkara, is an important step in our evolution from 'subhuman-ness' to 'human-ness' on our journey towards divine-ness itself. The ego is part of our inner processes, the antah karana, and is a ladder that enables us to climb high on the path. In fact, one of the states of inner absorption (samadhi) in the yoga sutra, the Sasmita, is actually based on ego awareness. The ego can take us up to the state of concentration, dharana, but no further; there cannot be ego in real dhyana (meditation) or samadhi.

Q: How can the ego be beneficial in daily life as well as our spiritual pathway?

A: The ego is often mistakenly made the big villain. So many seekers try to 'kill their ego', forgetting that an attitude of non-violent-ness (ahimsa) is the first rule of yoga. The ego enables us to face challenges in our daily life, enables us to work with a sense of self-confidence, and gives us the drive to move out of the tamasic state of inertia. The ego is important for us to become aware that we are an individual (the indivisible).

The main thing to be aware of is that we must be the master of it and not let it become our master.

Q: You mentioned earlier the 'journey to divine-ness'. How would you explain the concept of the 'divine'?

A: 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.

Q: So by this do you imply that the divine is a state of being, as opposed to a God-like figure?

A: Every part of yoga and life itself is a state of being 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. The Bhagavad Gita tells in verse 29 of the sixth chapter that the realised yogi sees the divine in all beings and every being in the divine. Patanjali says that the divine (ishwara) is beyond the impurities of klesha (affliction or poison) and karma (discipline of action). He also implies in the Yoga Darshan that we can become that divinity itself when we rid ourselves of the impurities that prevent such awareness.

Q: What is the 'four-fold awareness' your father used to refer to in order to define yoga, and how can it be achieved?

A: 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, as do the loosening techniques like the kriyas (cleansing practices) and jathis (simple

units of movements). In the third stage of awareness, we become aware of our thoughts; 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 withdrawal of the senses (pratyahara), dharana, and dhyana, leading to samadhi. The yama (disciplines) and niyama (observances) play a vital role in developing all states of awareness, but are of even greater importance for the inner states. A conscious effort must be made for this to be part of every moment of our lives and not limited just to a yoga class framework. Of course, before we attain any of these states of awareness, we first need to be aware of how unaware we are.

Q: Does the ancient Eastern yogic way of life differ greatly to the approach taken by modern Western civilisations?

A: 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

The mind and body are like a couple who hate each other, but are forced to live in a one-room flat for their entire lives. The mind wants to do something, but the body says, “No, I’m too lazy”. Yoga is the origin of mind-body medicine. Through yoga, we learn how to move the body with the breath, thus creating psychosomatic harmony. – Dr Ananda.

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 connectiveness 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.

Q: How would you describe the dynamics of one’s yoga family?

A: Of course, joy and fun are part of the yoga family life at all times, but love for yoga is the key component. A desire to help one another evolve on the path towards oneness keeps the spirit together. 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 family life. Constant growth

through satsangha (interaction with fellow seekers of the reality) is very useful, and being open to correction and change at all times is a must.

Q: How might one be able to continue to evolve through satsang if their guru lives abroad or is not readily accessible?

A: Many students use the excuse that their guru is not near them and hence they cannot have satsangha. 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 constantly 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.

Q: Is it acceptable to be under the guidance of multiple gurus?

A: The guru spirit is one, yet the guru may manifest at different times through different forms. Guru shopping and guru hopping are not good for one's growth. Most people change gurus because they

want a loving, caring guru who doesn't offend them in any way. The role of the true guru is to help us evolve, even if we end up hating them for it. They want the best for us, even if we don't know what is best for ourselves. We can learn from many sources and grow as a result, but the dedication towards the guru needs to be focused. A guru is not just an instructor, guide, or teacher. A guru is the one who enables us to realise our innate divinity. This transformation requires one to have a very personal relationship with their guru; a relationship that is of a very deep nature. How then can one have many?

Q: Your father, Swamiji, was also your guru. What other major lessons did you learn from him?

A: He taught me that our brain has a certain capacity, and that I should not waste it by filling it with useless stuff. He said that I should know where to look for something when I wanted it; in that way I wouldn't have to learn everything. Everything I know today is what he and my mother have given me and I am nothing without their grace. They have

taught me that life is fun. They have blessed me with an understanding of my real universal nature and have given me the tools to reunite with myself through yoga. What else can I ever ask for?

Q: What is your real universal nature?

A: Happiness is my real nature and I am truly always happy. Happiness comes from contentment and I do try my best to live that every moment of my life. There are moments when I fall away from my real nature and then I feel a sense of sadness, frustration, or even sometimes anger. However, I am blessed to have my mother with me at all times and she does get me out of it with a good kick in the back by reminding me of my real nature: that is bliss. That is anandam.

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