

A BRIEF HISTORY AND INTRODUCTION TO YOGA SPORT

By

Yogacharya

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Yoga is an art and science that developed from the core of **Sanathana Dharma**. The Yogic life is the living of a unified holistic concept that assures positive health, happiness, longevity and spiritual evolution. The goals of the Yogi are the sustained struggle against past conditioning, an attempt to control one's inner environment in order to focus inward. Yoga is isometric, pitting one part of the body against the other and the Yogi strives to be "more perfect today, than he/she was yesterday". It is practically impossible for classical Yogasanas, Pranayamas and other Yoga practices to harm the practitioner when they are performed in the proper manner.

Though the world of sports and that of Yoga lie on nearly opposite poles, they have a lot to offer one another. They can stimulate, strengthen and benefit the practitioners of either science to a great extent when approached properly and with an understanding of their respective merits and limitations. **Yogasana competitions can be an effective link between Yoga and sports.** It is now necessary for the practitioners of Yoga and sports to understand the benefits of their close association with one another and create the needed framework in which both can complement each another more effectively. **The association between these two sciences can provide humankind with a disciplined, strong, efficient and healthy body and mind for further evolution towards the Divine.**

Yoga in its wholistic sense can never be competitive, and there exists no objective measurement by which one person can be declared more yogic than another. Therefore the term "competitive Yoga" is a paradox and has no real meaning. However the proficiency of the Sadhaka can be compared with that of another in the performance of **Yogasanas, Kriyas, Mudras, Pranayamas and Shat Karmas.**

Yogasana competitions are a 'fact' in today's Yoga world and are mushrooming up in all directions. When conducted efficiently and when the competitors approach them with the right Yogic attitude of 'Nishkama Karma', (i.e., selfless action), then Yogasana competitions have a lot to offer. They stimulate the young minds and give them an outlet for their competitive spirit, drive and energy. Youngsters learn to take a 'win' with the same equanimity (Samabhava) as a 'loss'. They learn to accept that on any given day someone else may be better than themselves. They learn to accept the 'highs' with the 'lows' and realize that proper planning, dedicated and disciplined practice, and enthusiastic participation are more important than the result. The youngsters are stimulated to intense practice and thus develop amazing body skills, which they may not develop otherwise. The Yogic attitude, "If you win, you win and if you lose, you also win because you learn" can be inculcated as a healthy positive life attitude.

Yogasana competitions provide a meeting point for youngsters to meet and interact positively with others having similar interests. Formation of a group of similar minded Yoga Sadhakas can reinforce the individual's practice whenever it slackens due to any reason. **Positive 'peer pressure'** creates a back up to counter any inertia that may hinder the practitioner in their Sadhana. Due to competition, the Sadhaka is shaken out of the complacency that tends to creep in when the practice of Yoga becomes a habit as monotonous as brushing of teeth in the morning. They make sure they don't miss their practice and put in extra energy and time to keep in shape. The competitive edge sharpens and focuses the body awareness, thus fostering greater accuracy and perfection that in turn stimulates the real Yogic growth.

Spectators and lay observers at these competitions get stimulated to take up the practice of Yoga and this draws them as well as the participants into a deeper Sadhana. The basic idea of **Yoga receives wide general publicity** and this can 'open doors' for many who are ignorant of this ancient art and science of mind and body. Thus we can see how Yogasana competitions, when put in the framework of competitive sport can restore the competitions to their original purpose, which was to produce a **'healthy mind in a healthy body'**.

To prevent Yogasana Competitions from falling into the trap of other sports, it is important that those in-charge of such competitions must stand firm on moral and ethical issues. Competitors must sign a statement that they are vegetarian, non-smoking, non-drinking and non-drug users. They must have a basic knowledge of Yoga theory and marks should be allotted for Yoga deportment and character. They must be regular practitioners who are attached to either Yogashrams or accredited Yoga groups. When all these considerations are taken into account, then 'Yoga Sport' can be a beacon light for other sports in terms of living the Yogic and sporting ideals. Thus Yoga Sport can add as well as benefit from the association with the sporting world and be a proper link between the two worlds of Yoga and sports.

IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF YOGA SPORT:

Yogasana competitions are part and parcel of the modern Yoga world and various national and international organizations are involved in the development and propagation of the ideals of Yoga Sport.

In India we have the **INDIAN YOGA FEDERATION** and the **YOGA FEDERATION OF INDIA** that have been conducting Yogasana competitions in various age groups for more than **three decades** in all states of our country. We also have the **Yoga Confederation of India** and the **South Indian Yoga Federation** that are relatively more recent in their inception. The **Asian Union of Yoga** is also working for the propagation of Yoga Sport in the Asian countries.

Pondicherry Yogasana Association (PYA) founded by **Yogamaharishi Dr Swami Gitananda Giri** has been in the forefront of the **Yoga Sport** movement and Swamiji is hailed as one of the **founding fathers** of this concept. Since **1975** the PYA has held Annual Pondy State Yogasana Championships and the **17th and 18th Pondy State Yogasana Championships** were held at the International Centre for Yoga Education and Research in **November 2002 and 2003** with 400 competitors. In order to create interest in the art and science of Yoga, the **PYA** organised **Swami Gitananda Best Yoga Youth Award** competitions since 2000. In this competition the competitors are tested not only in their Asana skill but also in their Yogic thinking and exposition in addition to other aspects of the art and science of Yoga.

19th Pondicherry State and 1st Tamil Nadu State Yoga Sport Championship 2004

The 19th Pondicherry State and 1st Tamil Nadu State Invitation YOGA SPORT CHAMPIONSHIP 2004 was organised by the PYA in November 2004 and **600** competitors from Pondicherry and all over Tamil Nadu participated in this championship. Nearly **750 medals** and **1500 merit certificates** were won by the worthy winners in **8 events** such as common group, front bending, back bending, twisting, standing and hand balancing Yogasanas spread over **6 age groups** ranging from the below 5 years to the above 40 years categories.

20th Pondicherry State and 2nd Tamil Nadu State Yoga Sport Championship 2005

The logistics of the event were staggering: more than 500 contestants ranging in age from three to 78 years, representing every nook and cranny of Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry; 200 separate competitive events in six age categories; 600 medals and 1200 merit prizes awarded; four competitions held simultaneously on four different stages from 8 am to 10 pm on August 14; prize distribution within two hours of the event's completions. A large auditorium hall buzzing with the excited, happy chattering of hundreds of children and adults alike. These were the spectacular circumstances of the 20th Pondicherry State and 2nd Tamil Nadu State Yoga Sport Championship staged August 13, 14 and 15th in Pondicherry. Thirty teams from all over Tamil Nadu including Neyveli, Tanjore, Trichy, Erode, Coimbatore, Chennai, Madurai, Karur, Vilupuram, Cuddalore and Chidambaram as well as wide areas of Pondicherry attended the

championship in full strength. More than 200 competitions were held for the participants from 8 am to 10 pm on the 14th August in six categories of Yoga Asanas: common group, forward bending, hand balancing, twisting, standing and back bending events. 600 medals and 1200 merit certificates were awarded for male and female categories separately in six different age groups. Students of SADAY, a school for mentally challenged special children presented a heart warming Yoga demonstration on the occasion along with Lalith Kumar, a visually and mentally challenged special youth from Chidambaram.

21st PONDICHERRY and 3rd TAMIL NADU YOGA SPORT CHAMPIONSHIP 2006

Nearly 600 contestants ranging in age from three to 70 years, representing every nook and cranny of Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry took part in the 21st PONDICHERRY STATE and 3rd TAMIL NADU INVITATION YOGA SPORT CHAMPIONSHIP 2006 held at Pondicherry from the 17-19th November 2006. The competition that had 200 separate competitive events in seven age categories with 1000 prizes and merit certificates was organised by the **Pondicherry Yogasana Association** which is the official body for Yoga Sport in Pondicherry.

22ND PONDICHERRY AND 4TH TAMIL NADU YOGA SPORT CHAMPIONSHIP: Nearly 500 contestants ranging in age from two to 70 years, representing 19 institutions of Pondicherry took part in the 22nd PONDICHERRY STATE YOGA SPORT CHAMPIONSHIP 2007 held at Subulakshmi Mahal in Muthialpet on the 17th and 18th of November 2007. **R V Krithika** and **Mohana Padmanabhan** bagged the Senior Championship Awards for female and male competitors respectively while **Poonkuzhali** and **A. Kandavel** won the Junior Championship Awards in the girls and boys categories respectively.

THE EIGHTH SWAMI GITANANDA BEST CHILD AND YOUTH AWARDS: The Pondicherry Yogasana Association organized the SWAMI GITANANDA BEST YOUTH & CHILD AWARDS 2007 competitions during December 2007 and January 2008 at the Yoganjali Natyalayam premises in Pondicherry. More than a hundred children and youth participated in this event that was held for the EIGHTH year running. This year the youth category included students who were studying in class seven and above while those below the seventh standard participated in the child events. The Honorable Former Minister of Education, Thiru SP SIVAKUMAR was the Chief Guest of the Awards Ceremony and praised the amazing grace and skill of the young students who put on an excellent show of Yoga, dance and drama. He also inaugurated the Pondicherry Yoga Registry that is aimed at giving opportunities to the qualified and experienced yoga teachers of Pondicherry. The Special Guest of the evening Dr GNANAM who is an internationally acclaimed educationalist and former vice chancellor of many universities praised the efforts of Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani and Dr. Ananda Balayogi Bhavanani in bringing out the creative and spiritual best of their students. He also released three new books authored by Dr Ananda. **S Geethalakala** was declared winner of the **Swami Gitananda Best Youth Award 2007** while **S Vidyashankari** won the **Swami Gitananda Best Child Award 2007**. Both received their glittering trophies for the eminent guests of the evening.

PYA has also introduced **Yoga Theory** aspects into all Yogasana Competitions and this has exposed competitors to the great science of Yoga in addition to developing their skill in Yogasanas. PYA has been the pioneer in introducing awards for Yogic personality as well as Yogic behavior in competitions conducted by the PYA.

The **Pondicherry Government** has held an **International Yogasana Competition** every year **since 1992** during the **International Yoga Festival** conducted by the **Tourism Department** and this draws hundreds of contestants from numerous states of India as well as many foreign countries. PYA has been in the forefront of supporting the Tourism Department in organizing the Yogasana Competitions and the **General Secretary Dr Ananda Balayogi Bhavanani** has COORDINATED these International Yoga competitions since 2001.

15TH INTERNATIONAL YOGA FESTIVAL: As in the past, our Director and Chairman were invited speakers and consultants at this year's festival. Dr. Ananda also organized the Yoga theory exam as well as the Yoga Viva for the championship round and the eminent dignitaries from all over the world very well appreciated this unique aspect of

the Yoga Sport in Pondicherry. Dr. Ananda also compiled a special booklet of Yoga practices and VCD that was released on the occasion. Many faculty members of Yognat were selected as Juries for this year's festival and also taught at the "Feel for Yoga" classes conducted at six venues in Pondicherry during the festival days.

The **INTERNATIONAL YOGA FEDERATION**, which is the international governing body of Yoga Sport, is based in South America and Europe. The IYF has held **International Yoga Championships** nearly every year in various countries around the world. The **First International Yoga Championship** was held in **1989** at Pondicherry under the guidance of Yoga Maharishi Dr Swami Gitananda Giri and **16 International Yoga Championships** have been held since then.

Indian Universities have also taken up this concept of Yoga competitions in their **Inter University Championships** and every year there is an All India **Inter University Yoga Championship**. Pondicherry University team has participated in this competition on numerous occasions and won various prizes.

Vivekananda Kendra Yogas (sVYASA) at Bangalore has conducted the National and International HIMALAYA YOGA OLYMPIAD for the past decade. This was also introduced in Pondicherry in 2001 by the PYA.

Various organizations and state Yoga associations are holding Yoga competitions in their respective states and West Bengal, Haryana, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu are in the forefront of this movement.

Thus we can see how the concept of YOGA SPORT is very well entrenched at both the national and international levels and is an effective tool to attract the youth towards the great art and science of Yoga.