Worldly, warm and wise, Yogacharini Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani - affectionately called Ammaji by her devotees - has touched countless within the vast yoga network.

Born and bred in America before relocating to India at the age of 25, she is both wife and senior disciple of the late Yogamaharishi Dr Swami Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaj, who pioneered the popular Rishiculture Ashtanga (Gitananda) Yoga system.

Ammaji has many other strings to her bow, including being an acclaimed author and adviser to the Government of Pondicherry (Southern India) for its Annual International Yoga Festival. She is also director of the International Centre for Education and Research (ICYER) at Ananda Ashram, which recently hosted her 70th birthday celebrations, which were attended by many worldwide followers.

You were initially interested in studying Zen in Japan; what steered you toward yoga?

“I don’t think I had even heard the word ‘yoga’ before I left on a sabbatical from my position as a PhD Scholar and Teaching Assistant at the University of Minnesota (US) to travel through Europe in 1964. I spent nine months in Crete (Greece) while preparing to travel to Japan. There I picked up a book a friend left behind called Teach Yourself Yoga. It contained profound thoughts that struck my soul deeply, such as, ‘Yoga is becoming conscious in every cell of your body’. I was enamoured with these ideas, changed plans and began the overland trek to study yoga in its homeland of India in 1967.”

What made you fall in love with India so much that you never returned to America?

Perhaps it was the light, which gave such an enchanted magic to absolutely everything. Maybe it was the sacred smell of the earth, which I had never experienced elsewhere. The simple and natural lifestyle, the exquisite sensitive customs of daily life, the sense of holiness hovering around even mundane activities; there was nothing that was not ‘familiar’ to me. I felt like someone who had come home after a long, weary exile. Receiving my Indian citizenship in 1992 was one of the happiest days of my life.”

When did you meet and marry Dr Swami Gitananda (Swamiji)?

“I met Swamiji at Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry in October, 1967. He radiated the most cheerful liveliness. I felt absolutely at ease with him, and accepted that this was my path and he was my guru. I joined his yoga teacher training course and we were married soon after on February 25, 1968. I was firstly his disciple, and secondly his wife; that was always our relationship. After our marriage, we spent 10 days in a cave in the Himalayas. We didn’t speak or eat the entire time, and that was our honeymoon. Swamiji was 30 years older than me, and as a swami he wasn’t supposed to marry. We faced a lot of opposition initially, although the marriage justified itself over time.”

Why was Swamiji called the “Lion of Pondicherry”?

“He was called this for many reasons. Later in life, he looked like a powerful lion with long hair and flowing beard. He had a booming voice like a lion’s roar, and burning intensity which was often interpreted as ferocity. His roar was a protection for an immensely sensitive inner life. Many misunderstood this aspect of his personality, because a common misperception is that the guru spirit is always soft, gentle, kind and permissive. Swamiji said, ‘a kick in the back end will take you further forward than a pat on the back’.
“Yoga is such an elastic word; it can be stretched to contain universes”

Clockwise from top left: Amma ji with a young admirer; in a moment of relaxation; with Swamiji; teaching a yoga class back in 2004.
His only desire was that his students should change and grow, and he was prepared to use whatever means was necessary to achieve that. The last year of his life, Swamiji did become softer. From when he began to totally fast on water on 15 November, 1993, to his exit from his body on 29 December, 1993, there was an incredible transformation of the lion into a lamb."

Your son, Dr Ananda Balayogi Bhavanani, sustains the Gitananda tradition by presenting to a worldwide following; what hopes do you hold that Ananda’s children will continue these teachings in the future?

"Ananda has carried his father’s tradition into this generation brilliantly. He has refined the teachings and made them more digestible for modern man. Swamiji’s young grandchildren, Anandraj and Dhivy Priya, are brought up in the Ashram atmosphere and immersed in the teaching in the very air they breathe. I am consciously trying to guide them so they will not only follow their grandfather and father’s footsteps, but be able to carry the teachings to an even greater height. Is that not the law of evolution: that the father should see the son move even higher than himself?"

ICYER hosts people from various nationalities for annual residential teacher training; what common challenges do students encounter?

"The greatest problem students have is learning to live with themselves without distractions or excuses, and within a structure based on the Three Rs: regularity, rhythm and repetition. The Ashram is a confined space and ego often brushes against ego. Adjustability and flexibility must be cultivated daily. One must learn to do things not because they are easy, pleasurable or profitable, but because it is right to do them. There is no escape from oneself in the Ashram. One comes face-to-face with tendencies of character (Vasanas), which one could hide from in ordinary dissipated life. After some months, one learns to be more comfortable with who one is, qualities of character begin to develop, and Ashram living becomes easier."

The understanding and practice of yoga often differ between east and west; do you believe there is a wrong way to approach yoga?

"Yoga has come to mean whatever the person who utters the word wishes. It is such an elastic word; it can be stretched to contain universes. I think there is a wrong way to use this old Sanskrit word. One must test one’s understanding of its meaning by reading scriptures like the Upanishads, Puranas, Itihasas, Yoga Sutra and Bhagavad Gita. Asana and pranayama is only the tip of the iceberg. Yoga is a way of life and a state of consciousness in which one grows moment by moment into an expanded field of higher, sublime consciousness." ✝

Visit icyer.com and gitananda-australia.org for details regarding Gitananda Yoga teacher training and events.