Discovering Yogis in the Modern World!

“Just buying a Yoga mat does not make you a Yogi” says my alter ego “Gangsta Yogi” in a recent YouTube video in response to the modern trend found everywhere nowadays.

The word “Yogi” means “One” i.e. one who has attained to the “State of Yoga”, a Unitive State of Oneness.

“Tasmad yogi bhavarjuna” extols Yogeshwar Sri Krishna in the BhagavadGita stating that the Yogi is greater than the ascetic (tapsvi), greater than the empiricist (jñāni) and greater than the fruitive worker (kārmī).

What an exalted, elevated “state of being”, one where we consciously manifest Samatvam and Stithaprajña in every living moment of our lives.

Yet, when we look around us, it seems like anyone who just signs up for 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”. I cringe when at so many conferences I see speakers get up on stage and intone all so very spiritually, ‘My fellow Yogis and Yoganis!’.

At the most we can be “Yogins in the making” or ‘Aspiring Yogins’…” In all humility we need to real-
ize that we are always a work in progress and not yet the finished product. Traditionally, such aspirants were known as “sadhakas”. A sadhaka is one who is mindfully walking the path of Yoga through dedicated and disciplined sadhana, or a purposeful, focused effort on the path to reality.

Decades ago, Pujya Swamiji Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaj and Ammaji Yogacharini Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani 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 “practising Yogis”!!

Traveling all over the globe in recent years has given me the privilege of experiencing both the similarities and dissimilarities between the East and the West. I grew up in the Modern Yoga Gurukula of Ananda Ashram at Pondicherry, India (www.rishiculture.in) and having been exposed to students belonging to a multitude of nationalities I thought I knew all about them. Yet, I have now realized, one needs to experience a dolphin in the water and not on the dry ground if one is to know it truly. I have also come to know that many sharks abound too!

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 51st 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 takes 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.

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 do 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**, and I have wonderful students and members of my Gitananda Yoga family from every corner of the globe today.

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 pre-eminent researcher Dr Sat Bir Singh Khalsa. It was also a pleasure to meet the famous personalities of Yoga such as Mukunda Stiles, 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 also invited to be major presenter at the “**Reunion in Yoga**”- IYTA World Yoga Convention held at Sydney, Australia in 2010 and for their Golden Jubilee in 2016 with hundreds of delegates attending from all over the world. I also enjoyed presenting the Keynote at SYTAR of the IAYT a few years ago at Reston, Virginia, USA with amazing colleagues including my dearest “**Yoga Dada**” Dr Dilip Sarkar, a Life Member of IYA. These were truly lovely experiences- to meet and interact with so many loving souls who were motivated by the ‘real thing’.

I met so many wonderful people and the love, respect and attentiveness of all the enthusiastic 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 true Yogic balance and integration.**