Some of us may have been fortunate enough to experience a moment of our life in an Ashram environment. Few of us have had the blessing of being born and raised in one. Running through the Sadhana Hall, playing chase or hide and seek amongst the meditative gardens may seem an idyllic and tranquil childhood, for Yogacharya Dr. Ananda Balayogi Bhavanani, it was a privilege.

Being the son of internationally acclaimed Yoga master, Yogamaharishi Dr. Swami Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaj and Yogacharini Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani, he is a modern day, true blooded Yogi and continues his development in both Eastern and Western sciences. Amongst many other achievements, Dr. Ananda has become a Gold Medallist in Medical Studies (MBBS) with postgraduate diplomas in Family Health, as well a postgraduate and Advanced Diplomas in Yoga.

But it is his day to day environment that makes him unique as a Yogi. ‘It is a great privilege for me to have been born to Swamiji and Ammaji and to have grown up in an atmosphere like Ananda Ashram’. From the meditation classes at four-thirty in the morning to the mantra chanting and Satsangha that ran well into the evening, Dr. Ananda was surrounded by people intent on deepening their practices and integrating the wisdom of Yoga. ‘It was a privilege that I can only explain in terms of positive karma from my past lives.’

Growing up in the walls and gardens of Ananda Ashram meant that Dr. Ananda was witness to the many facets of a Yoga life. Therapeutic aspects of Yoga, pranayama practices, Hatha Yoga classes under the big tree, there was always something going on and much to learn. But he also learnt that Yoga wasn’t something solely done when one got up in the morning. Swamiji taught him that ‘the entire day was Yoga. Whatever you did was Yoga’. This included handing out free food and clothing to the hundreds of local children that came to Ananda Ashram on a Sunday. Of course, the motive was to entice them to the path, but once there, Yoga did its work and children from all parts of Indian society and religious orientations came together to enjoy the practices.

At a very young age, Dr. Ananda was named as his father’s successor and he still recalls the occasion vividly, despite people being unsure about the depth of understanding or knowledge a four year old may have. ‘There was no way that I could escape that atmosphere’s influence on me, and I knew that I had been put there for a definite purpose’. From then on he was also exposed to mantra chanting of the Vedas with a Sanskrit Pandit.

Having been deeply ingrained in the Yogic system and under the guidance of his guru parents he had blossomed in his educational development, despite not attending school. At the age of twelve, when it was considered that he had to have an official education, he was already conversant in English, Tamil, Sanskrit, maths, general knowledge, geography and history and easily climbed his way to the top of the class.
Living in the natural environment of an Ashram in India, he was exposed to monkeys, deer, foxes, mongoose, ducks, and rabbits and so considers that he was educated in ‘real life’, where a young mind could grasp concepts effortlessly. ‘People ask me what special lessons Swamiji taught me, but he didn’t have to do anything because each moment was a learning experience.’

‘I didn’t always understand what Swamiji taught me, but it still made an impression.’ And those impressions remain strong in a man who was absorbing his incredible surroundings day in and day out. His participation in classes, his teaching, his monthly one page articles about Yoga were all part of his education and integration. He studied, just as the other students did, at the feet of his father for two years, once his official schooling was finished. It was at this time he began to see how systematic and interlinked the Rishiculture Ashtanga Yoga teachings were. At this point it was as though ‘all the pieces of the jigsaw from my childhood came together’. Of course, he also had the advantage of living with his Guru and so he could ask questions, with conversations often running late into the night.

His father wisely taught him how to look for something in the right place, to know how to find the information, instead of filling his head with useless knowledge. It is better to know where to look than to try to know everything. ‘In those talks he didn’t teach me magical things or tell me secrets about special techniques, what he said was always very practical.’ Swamiji understood that the brain had a capacity and it was better to use that capacity wisely, to know which book and chapter to go to, instead of the entire book. And thus, Swamiji prepared Dr. Ananda for what was to come in his five years of medical studies.
‘He made me think about how I was going to link my studies at medical college with Yoga.’ It was through Swamiji that Dr. Ananda found the way to view both the sciences of medicine and Yoga without limitation. This brought a clear perspective and helped birth a firm decision to continue his father’s work.

Since then Dr. Ananda has gone on to become Chairman of the International Centre for Yoga Education and Research at Ananda Ashram, India, Chairman of Yoganjali Natyalayam, the premier institute of Yoga and Carnatic Music and Bharatanatyam, India. A Fellow of the Indian Academy of Yoga and also Programme Co-ordinator of the Advanced Centre for Yoga Therapy Education and Research at the prestigious JIPMER hospital in Pondicherry.

He has authored 18 DVDs, 15 books, published five dozen papers, compilations and abstracts all on Yoga and Yoga research in National and International Journals.

Amongst this, Dr. Ananda has also found time to become a Classical Indian Vocalist, Music Composer, Percussionist and Choreographer of Indian Classical Dance. More recently, he has travelled abroad, conducting invited talks, public events, workshops and retreats and been key note speaker at Yoga conferences in the UK, USA, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Australia and New Zealand. He is an Honorary International Advisor to the International Association of Yoga Therapists, USA and various Gitananda Yoga Associations all over the world.

And so we see the birth of a simple and deeply enriching life lived within an ancient spiritual tradition has allowed Dr. Ananda to flourish into a man of intention, of purpose. A man of Yoga who bridges the shores between two seemingly separate sciences with grace, with wit and with humour. ‘Lord Krishna tells us he will place into the wombs of Yoginis those who have not fulfilled their purpose in the present incarnation, thus enabling them to do so in the next.’ Surely we could say Dr. Ananda has fulfilled several lifetimes work and continues to inspire and impart the teachings so wisely handed down by his mother and father.

‘Hence I couldn’t have been born to any other parents. Even if otherwise, I am sure Yoga would have found me even I had been raised in any other circumstances, for Yoga is my life. Yoga is my very being itself.’

Nicole Rubio is yoga teacher and freelance writer. She is currently living in the UK where she is enjoying the time to devote to her own practice and family.