LIGHTING THE FLAME OF YOGA IN THE YOUTH OF PONDICHERRY

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Yoga, the mother of all sciences has so much to offer the dynamic and talented youth of our beloved country and hence it is vital that our dear children and youth are stimulated to take up the wholistic practice of Yoga right from an impressionable and tender age. Great efforts have been made to benefit all sections of our society by the Pondicherry Yogasana Association ever since its inception by our visionary founder Yogamaharishi Dr Swami Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaj in 1975. Spurred on to greater heights by the incomparable living example of our President, Puduvai Shakti Amma, Kalaimamani Yogacharini Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani, the PYA has been more dynamic and busier than ever in the last few years.

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 25 Annual Pondicherry State Yoga Sport Championships including the ‘Silver Jubilee’ Championship in 2010. All these events have tested the proficiency of participants in both the physical as well as theoretical aspects of Yoga. In fact it is the PYA who introduced Yoga Theory aspects into all Yogasana Competitions exposing participants to the great history, philosophy and psychology of Yoga while simultaneously developing their amazing skill in Yogasanas. The Pondicherry Government has held International Yogasana Competitions every year since 1993 during the International Yoga Festival conducted by the Tourism Department and this draws thousands of contestants from all Indian states as well as many foreign countries. PYA has been in the forefront of supporting the Tourism Department in organizing the event and the PYA General Secretary has coordinated these competitions since 2001. It is notable that PYA has been the pioneer in introducing awards for Yogic personality as well as Yogic behavior in competitions conducted by the PYA and more than 20 eminent Yoga teachers have been awarded the “Yoga Chemmal” Award in recent years in recognition of their outstanding contributions to Yoga.

To further create interest in the wholistic aspects of Yoga, PYA has organised 11 Swami Gitananda Best Yoga Youth and Child Award competitions since 2000. In this unique 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. This is done by special individual based events such as Yoga Art Designing, Yoga Art, Fancy Yoga Skit, Fancy Yoga Novelty, Yoga Novelty, Alert Yoga and team events like Team Quiz, Team Crossword, Team Dumb Charades and Rhythmic Yoga Demo. The aim of the Swami Gitananda Youth and Child Awards Competition is to stimulate the youth of Pondicherry to take up the study of the wholistic concept of Yoga. This ensures their present and future health, happiness and well being, and enables them to avoid the pitfalls of modern living, that is, various bad habits like drug addiction and alcoholism etc. Furthermore, the Project aims to educate the public as to the true meaning of Yoga.

PYA organised the 26th Annual Pondicherry State Yoga Sport Championship on December 10th and 11th at Sri Subulakshmi Mahal in Muthialpet, Pondicherry-3. The much awaited event
showcased the flowering of pioneering Yoga Seva of Pujya Swamiji manifesting through yeoman service of our most beloved and respected Ammaji. All credit for such a grand success lies at the lotus feet of our beloved Ammaji who continues to stimulate all of us to do our best for Yoga. The competitions were conducted on three different stages and the audience comprising of the parents, participating students and teachers as well as Yoga enthusiasts kept moving around and enjoying the grand spectacle. More than 900 participants from 30 Yoga and educational institutions ranging from the age of 3 to 18 years took part and were divided into various educational and gender-based categories so that the competition was amongst equals. Each group had six separate prizes and honour certificates for male and female competitors who could participate in the general competition where they did three compulsory and two own choice Asanas or in the special category where they performed five Asanas of their choice from a list of 50 Asanas belonging to the front bending, back bending, twisting, hand balancing and non-hand balancing varieties. There was also a demonstration event held for nearly 100 children under the age of 5 years to stimulate them to adopt the Yoga life. Enthusiasm and cheer shown by jubilant participants and their parents gladdened our hearts for it meant these children would continue their Yoga journey for at least another year if not more due to this stimulation. Motivation is such an important aspect of growth for children and these events surely do that at multiple levels.

Apart from all these groups another special group consisted of 40 mentally-challenged special children, from the SADAY School for Children with Special Needs run by the dedicated Dr. Sugatham and his wife Asha. More than 20 dyslexic children with various learning disabilities also participated from the Bridges School run by Dr Bhuvana Vasudevan. This is a very special and significant event, a trendsetter to encourage the enthusiasm of such mentally and physically challenged children of Pondicherry who stand to gain so much through Yoga.

All the competitive events got over the same evening with the cooperation and support of jury members and dedicated volunteers who worked in tandem to have everything fit in place as smoothly as possible. The theory exam was conducted in the evening and the children had to write a paper on Yoga philosophy, theory and psychology as well as technical aspects based on the Primer of Yoga Theory compiled by Dr. Ananda Balayogi Bhavanani. Students had to be proficient in both the physical as well as theoretical aspects of Yoga in order to succeed. At the end of a gruelling and hard fought event, Master SM THANIKAIVEL and Miss N POONGUZHALI emerged as the well deserving “CHAMPION OF CHAMPIONS” in male and female categories respectively. They both received glittering trophies in the valedictory and prize distribution ceremony held on the second day. Sri BR Babu, Special Secretary Tourism in the Government of Pondicherry was the Chief Guest of the event that was also graced by the State liaison officer for NSS Dr EM Rajan, the eminent ophthalmologist Dr Vanaja Vaithyanathan, the MD of Harmoney Wealth Advisory Services Sri M Ramesh Kumar, the eminent social activist Dr N Ardhanari and Mutthamizmamani Pulavar Pattabhiraman. International invitees included Yogacharini Janita, Yogacharini Aishwariya, Yogacharini Shwetha and Yogacharya Michael.

Yogacharini Janita Stenhouse of France, Yogacharya Michael Deslippe of Canada and Smt Megalai Senthilkumar and Dr R Balaji of Pondicherry were honoured with the Yoga Chemmal Award on the occasion in appreciation of their dedication towards Yoga and their Worldwide Yoga Seva. This award is given by the PYA to eminent Yoga teachers and Yoga Sadhakas every year in recognition of their Yoga Seva. PYA’s newly reconstituted Jury Board for 2011-14 was announced and all 22 members were honoured with shawls, mementoes, honour
certificates and ID cards. The five new members inducted in the Jury Board this year are Selvi R Varalakshmi, L Vithiyalakshmi, D Pushpa, Smt Sridevi and Smt Pandimadevi.

More than 250 winners in each of the 40 categories were really pleased to lay their eager hands on these glittering awards that were a fitting reward for all their hard work. All jury members and volunteers who had contributed towards the grand success of the event were honoured with shawls and special mementos. The whole event truly represents the manifestation of Swamiji’s dreams of taking the message of Yoga to all sections of our society in an inspiring and enlightening manner and Sri Krishna Rao, a long time ardent Yoga practitioner and enthusiast commented, “Pondicherry is blessed by the intense efforts of Yognat and Dr Ananda, Ammaji and Guruji”.

**YOGA AND YOGA SPORTS**

A fiery debate continues to rage worldwide on the validity of the concept of Yoga Sport and I have the following to offer as a justification of the good I see happening through such events. 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 backup 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.

As Sally and Surender of the Yoga Satsanga Ashram in the UK said, “Yoga sport is a beautiful way to motivate young generation to yoga and health. Practice of yoga on that level definitely helps students attain healthy body and mind which can allow their teachers to initiate them towards the wholistic yogic life”. 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’.

Yogacharini Sangeeta of Italy commented, “Having participated in two of these Competitions both as a participant and as part of the jury I can say that they are miraculous events. To have hundreds of kids stay together for three days, learning, sharing, eating together, and developing their personalities in a healthy environment. Yes, this is yoga for me”.

A word of caution is surely apt as 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.