REPORT ON DR ANANDA AND DEVASENA IN EUROPE 2010

I count my blessings everyday for I realise every second how truly blessed I am to have this life filled with such wonderful and learning experiences. Pujya Swamiji and my beloved Ammaji continue to bless me in so many ways and it is only because of their potent and loving blessings that I have such exciting opportunities to travel worldwide spreading the great message of Yoga and Indian culture. My seventh trip abroad in four years and second with Devasena was an amazing time in so many ways. Have had an opportunity to meet and interact with so many lovely people who have a sincere interest in the spiritual life and who are dedicated to the path of Yoga. It has also been a chance form to know so many of my Yoga family in a closer manner and get to feel the pulse of their loving families too. A chance to revisit my Italian home, the Gitananda Ashram in Savona, as well another chance to have a deeper understanding of the vibrant city of Berlin have been the highlights of this tour.

MILAN 2010

Devasena and I reached Milan and were lovingly received by Sabrina together with her loving husband Johnny and lovely son Esteban. A good rest at their house was followed by some nice sightseeing around the artistic city of Milan. The Duomo is such a wonderful example of European architecture and the whole city has such an artistic tinge to everything we saw. We also visited the old castle that is now a museum and the riverside with old washing places that are so similar to the Dhobi Ghats in India. The evenings in Milan were planned with precision so that I had sessions with the beginners, intermediate as well as the advanced students and teachers at the Rishiculture Ashtanga Yoga and Raja Center of Milan. Its was a pleasure to interact with the students who are being very well trained by Sabrina and her team. This trip was also an opportunity for me to get to know her husband Johnny in a deeper manner and his artistic talents in varied fields are mind boggling. Hailing
originally from Chile he is a very talented artist, film maker and of course a typical
mad south American football fan who had to watch every match of the world cup and
felt he was playing each time. I can fully relate to that feeling too as it is similar to
what I had for cricket and so was right at home enjoying the matches with him. Their
son Esteban is one of the few kids I have met who is a natural Karma Yogi even at
this young and tender age. His attitude towards his mother is such a wonderful one of
love and it translates into his actions that are done with a sense of calmness way
beyond his age. We also had the chance to meet Johnny's nice daughters of which
Alessandra is deeply involved in the running of the centre. The second evening in
Milan had an enjoyable concert as Devasena and I were joined by Svami Nitya
Priyananda Giri, my dear 'Yoga brother' who plays the Mridungam with such sensitivity
that it touches my heart deeply. He is one of the most responsible humane beings I
know and it is a pleasure to count him as a true spiritual brother in this lifetime. It
was also special for me to have another of my Yoga brothers, my dear Hariharan come
from Locarno to be with us at Milan and come later to the Gitananda Ashram with
family. It was a nice surprise to also meet again Anastasia who had studied at ICYER
17 years ago. She was visiting Italy for a short holiday from Australia and came for
the concert. Having said a ciao to all at the centre we took off on the drive to Savona
reaching Gitananda Ashram just past midnight to settle in for a nice sleep at my
European home, sweet OM.

GITANANDA ASHRAM 2010

Both Devasena and I feel completely at home in the Gitananda Ashram that has been
created as a respectful homage to his Guru by the grateful thoughts and magical
touch of Svami Yogananda Giri. It is truly a mini India nestled at the base of the
Italian Alps and has a vibrant and invigorating atmosphere created by daily Puja at
the Sri Maha Tripurasundari temple. We had a very special weekend retreat with
Sabrina and her group who came down from Milan to enjoy the Yoga Sadhana with the
devoted students and Ashramites. Sabrina is a real spiritual seeker and has prepared her students very well to understand the concepts and practices of Gitananda Yoga. Energising Janita came all the way from France with her daughter and granddaughter and it is always a treat to be with Janita who has such an artistic mind and loving heart. To have three generations of the Stenhouse family in class was something special for me and may be a record too! Sridevi made the long journey from Basel to be with us and she is one of the few who laugh at the right moment for all of my jokes. It is sometimes a bit upsetting when no one understands your jokes and so having Sridevi in the class makes sure that I am always in good humour. Another of my favourites, Saranya made the trip from Germany to be with us and also enjoyed a short holiday away from her lovely kids and loving husband who stayed home. Her elder daughter Anandhi is always a special person for me as she was in ICYER for the six months course with her parents and Viswakarma has flowered in his photography over the past few years expressing exceptional talent with an artistic eye. My dear friend Maxine came all the way from London to be with us and this trip surely deepened the loving relationship between us in a special way though the greatness of Yoga. Ma Uma Shakti, Hamsananda and Nirajitananda are such a loving trio of Shaktis of the Ashram and shower their love and care on all with no holding back at all. Svamini Hamsananda always has the difficult job of translating my classes but does so with skill and ease making me forget that we are translating the classes in the first place. The retreat ended with a cultural performance of Indian classical dance by Devasena and her “Yoga sister-in-law” Atmananda who is such a talented dancer. Her excellent and dynamic portrayal of the Mahishasura Mardhanam though Kuchipudi was really awesome. Devasena performed the Akara Ukara Makara composition that was composed on our visit to the Gitananda Ashram last year. She also brought out excellent Bhava as the Nayaki (the heroine) pining for her Lord in the form of the peacock riding Lord Muruga. It is always a treat to see Devasena and Atmananda dance together for there is such a great and loving bond between these
two wonderful ladies of exceptional talent. Atmananda is also such an animal lover and has a caring bond with all the 75 dogs in the Ashram and even assists in the delivery and medical care for them with the vets! In a day-and-age when it is so difficult to even understand other ‘speaking’ humans it is rare to find one blessed with such an understanding for those unable to communicate through spoken words. I am truly blessed to have such a loving ‘Yoga sister’ in the loving form of Atmananda and have expressed this on this tour through song too.

**BERLIN 2010**

An early morning flight from Torino takes Devasena and me to Berlin where we are greeted warmly by the loving trio of Latha, Prema and Simo. Latha’s husband Simo is a lovely character we had many a great laugh echo throughout our week-long stay. Latha and Prema have evolved into an excellent Yoga team and everything is organised in the best possible manner. Berlin is a lovely city of old and new history and we had a chance to revisit the Reichstag, Fernsehturm, Potsdamer Platz, Brandenburg Gate, Berliner Dom, Check Point Charlie and the remnants of the dreaded Berlin wall. It is amazing how the human race has always struggled with those in power trying to divide and rule the people they ruled. The Berlin wall is another reminder of human suffering resulting from such artificial and man-made division and yet also a symbol that this may be overcome by the spirited struggle for unification, inherent in us all. Of course the greatest struggle is the one we must undertake for the final spiritual unification with our “Real Self”, but that is a story for another day altogether.

Our first evening in Berlin together saw a warm welcome party from members of the **Gitananda Society** held at Kirsten’s **Behring Café** with a wonderful accordion concert by a young musician from Russia. Lots of tasty goodies are there to eat while we listen to the music and soak in the atmosphere. A day of local Berlin sightseeing on the bus top was capped by an excellent session with the GYS members at Latha’s
Yoga hall. Latha has trained her students so well that it was a pleasure to enjoy Yoga Sadhana with them despite the trains that run by their house. In fact as time passes one actually forgets about the trains passing by and it is amazing how the human mind can shut off such distractions when we are willing to focus on the 'present' alone and nothing else! A day long Chakra Workshop goes very well with the students and teachers at the Yoga Academy that is celebrating its 20th anniversary in style. Rahula (Ananda Leone) has created a very nice ambience in the centre that has won awards for being the best in Berlin on many occasions. Attentive students enabled me to do my best and we had a great day with lots of interesting moments and loads of fun. An excellent lunch at the Yogi Haus went well with the day though we missed the Chennai Dosa place that was closed for renovation. The next day saw a nice concert and dance performance by Devasena and me at the Yoga Academy and it was a pleasure to perform for those who love and enjoy the Indian fine arts so much. Claudia made the journey to be with us and it means a lot tome when members of my Yoga family take the time and efforts to be with us on these trips. She has gone through a Dharma Yuddha and is stronger and has grown a lot as a result of the trials and tribulations of living a spiritual life in this materialistic world. Both Ammaji and I understand the difficulties faced by our Yoga family in their journey and support you all in your efforts at all times. Just remember, difficult times will pass too and we all only grow as a result of these challenges.

One of the special advantages (if you like it) / disadvantages (if you don't like it) of touring Europe at this time was the simultaneous occurrence of the soccer/ football World Cup. Speak of mania and frenzy and this was it personified!! We had a gala time watching Germany play and beat the spirited guys from Ghana from the German living room of Dirk and Kirsten. A great experience to be part of the football mania (have always enjoyed the game though personally preferring Maradona’s Argentina) and have tasty snacks along with it too. Devasena learnt to play the Vuvuzela under the 90 minutes of the game and blew down the neighbourhood along with dirk when
Germany scored (what a terrible sounding instrument!). Luckily we were not there to watch Germany thrash Argentina as to take sides in a German household would have been downright dangerous to health on that day. (However we were in Milan for my talk on that day and Sankara kept reminding me of the score thus rubbing salt in raw wounds nearly as bad as the ones inflicted on Maradona’s psyche).

We all had a great day when we journeyed out into the countryside and to visit the lovely garden house of Latha and Simo situated in Eberswalde. They have a beautiful small garden with fruits, vegetables and flowers and a nice wood cabin where we all enjoyed a gala picnic. It was a chance for us to enjoy the small town country experience and we all had nice walks down the nearby canal and short visits to the gardens of all the houses around the locality. Lots of fresh air and a reinvigorating experience for us all and it ended with a super-duper Indian dinner at the tasty Shiva Restaurant. Got back near midnight but must say it was a really special day for Devasena who enjoyed plucking the potatoes from the garden (never knew there are so many under one plant) while I plucked strawberries for the first time (never knew they grew on the ground). She also enjoyed Simo’s great humour that had her in splits with his rolling his R’s on every word of Finish he spoke. Seems to me that the Finish people and their language have a lot in common with Punjabi’s and their language for they seem to be similar and have a great sense of humour too.

Another trip around the old part of Berlin was done by us on the big boat and it was a special chance to see the huge lake they have with the beauty of the river spree pervading the whole city. It was surely a leisurely morning with us enjoying every moment of the experience. On a contrasting yet very enjoyable note was our final evening in Berlin that we spent watching the German version of Avatar in 3-D at the Sony Centre. The movie and the Sony Centre itself are both amazing technological marvels. Having watched the movie in English earlier I was able to understand and even translate for Devasena and really enjoyed the whole experience of becoming one with the un-real through 3-D and excellent surround sound. Made me wonder if we
are not doing the same in our day-to-day life with the *MAYA OF UNREALITY* in which we pass our mundane lives. When are we going to wake up and experience the true reality of the *Self*?

**BACK TO GITANANDA ASHRAM 2010**

Coming back after to the ashram after our lovely time in Berlin was a nice chance to catch up with the life in the ashram and go out for book presentations at numerous book stores and libraries. One of the important developments in the past year is the inauguration of the publication house of *Laksmi Edizioni* ([www.laksmi.it](http://www.laksmi.it)) dedicated to translation and publication of the Gitananda Yoga teachings and Indian classical Yoga texts into Italian. To further this excellent project conferences and book presentations were organised on this tour. The first was at the big commune library in Genova while the second one was in the huge book store in Liverno. An introduction to the Italian translations of Swamiji's book on Pranayama and my *Yoga: 1 to 10* were the main topics at each presentation and then we faced questions on a wide range of topics from the interested participants. Lots of interesting questions come up in such places and it is always a learning experience to explain the concepts of Yoga to different levels of audiences in different places. Hamsananda does a lovely job of translating on the spot and it really feels as if there is no break in between sentences when she translates for me. The third presentation was in the famous esoteric book store in Milan which stocks books on everything under the sun from A to Z of an esoteric nature. A good response was seen from the appreciative audience who attended the presentation and it is hoped that this project will meet with great success through benevolent blessings of both Goddess Lakshmi and Saraswathi. Laksmi Edizioni has brought out excellent Italian translations of Swamiji's book on *Pranayama* in the Gitananda tradition and also my own *Yoga: 1 to 10* that I consider my best till date. Both books are professionally edited and published at a high international standard and are being marketed throughout Italy. Plans are in motion
to also bring out other ICYER books on Mudras, Hatha Yoga and the Ashtanga Yoga of Patanjali in the coming year. Excellent books on various Yogopanishads have been produced with in-depth commentaries by Svami Yogananda Giri and these are real treasures for sincere seekers. I must make a special mention of the amazingly excellent book on dogs and their role in various cultures. It is a virtual encyclopaedia of dogs and is a must for all canine lovers. The Ashramites take care of the nearly 75 huge dogs at Dharmapuri (as that part of the Ashram is known) and so you can surely trust that they do know a thing or two about them too!

On our trip to Liverno we took advantage of the closeness to the town of Pisa and so Devasena and I had a great time trying to correct the leaning tower in so many different ways!! It is a bit straighter this time as I keep straightening it a few inches on each visit. This makes sure that I always have a good reason to re-visit there again. We also had a chance to spend the evening with dedicated Yoga Sadhakas of Liverno having a nice dinner before heading back to the Ashram.

**It is very important that you matter to those who matter to you!** I realised the truth of this fully when my Yoga bother Sankara Kumar made a very long journey to spend a day with us at the Gitananda Ashram. One of my ‘most liked people’, Sankara has evolved into a wonderful humane being and we had such fun sharing insights on our journey back from Milan that made his ‘on road driving time’ nearly 9 hours that day!! It is always confusing to analyse him for he is a 7 birthpath, and yet has cultivated a 3 nature in many ways. It is most rewarding of course to listen to him as that combination makes him real interesting and humorous too. Having a chance to chat with his lovely wife Anna and learn of their growing experiences with Jacob and Peter made me realise that all twins are not one and the same!

My other darling Yoga brother Hariharan and his loving family made the extra effort to be with us at the Ashram and we had a very enjoyable time with family updates and loads of fun together. It was a pleasure to have Patti, and Hariharan’s mother with us for the weekend and it is always a joy to see Jeya and Nila grow up. They have grown
a lot in the past year and are on the right path for sure. I am so happy that Dhivya and Anandraj have their own Yoga generation to grow up with and the future looks much better this way than when we look out there at the modern generations that have really ruined our beloved mother earth.

The last few days in Italy were spent productively in Devasena teaching Atmananda and Saraswathi some new Bharatanatyam compositions while Priyanananda took Mridungam and vocal lessons from me. Recording the new items and also the special “Ashram Song” I had been inspired to create on this trip was a lot of fun. They have made a wonderful video of the Ashram’s history and it has done with humour, light and love. There is some lovely archival footage of Swamiji at the Kumbha Mela in the 1980s and it brought back so many lovely memories of that golden period where we all witnessed the great and true divine energy manifesting through the most lovable form of our beloved Swamiji. What a man, what a great human being he was. Can we ever repay even an iota of the debt we owe him for guiding us on this path, the only path of sanity, the path of Yoga? Of course this reminds us to “consciously remember” that we must never forget how lucky we are to have our beloved Ammaji with us continuing spiritedly that thankless job of showing us who we really ‘are’ and what we can ‘become’ by manifesting our inherent potential divinity. We must never forget to “consciously remember” what a blessing it is for us to have the benevolent grace of both these great humane beings in our life. We are richly and truly blessed forever.

All of these grateful thoughts stirred in me as we watched the video and as a tribute to the great Ashram spirit and its 25 years of magical existence the “Ashram Song” was created in my mind, springing from my heart and was then sung from my soul.

’anbullam konda atmananda perumai serkum priyananda

asayai pazhagum hamsananda magizhchi oottum ma uma shakti

arpanikkum antha altare nagar peligrino gramatthil ashramam amaaittha
I hope that it will be used as the title song for the excellent video that carries a lesson for us all on what dedication, determination and discipline can achieve on the spiritual path. What has been achieved there is real magic, the magic of human will, perseverance and Seva resulting from a deep Guru Bhakti and gratitude towards the Guru. Pujya Swamiji never got to see the Ashram himself but today witnesses, enjoys and blesses it through my very being. Swamiji's spirit is very much alive here at the Gitananda Ashram!!

Each of my trips abroad teaches me so much and I learnt so many valuable lessons about human nature this time, the seventh time around. All these experiences of the worlds both external and internal are important parts of my journey towards that eternal reality, the one and only goal of my human existence. May my most beloved Swamiji and dearest Ammaji continue to guide me on the right path, the path of Dharma and may the greatest of the sages, Maharishi Patanjali (who has such a lovely statue in the Ashram) bless me with that physical, emotional, mental and spiritual purity for the highest state of Kaivalya as everything else is immaterial.

Hari Om Tat Sat!