

The History of Integral Yoga

by Chandra/Jo Sgammato

Forty years ago, Americans knew almost nothing of Yoga. There were no Hatha classes at the local YMCA. Health food stores contained only bottles of vitamin supplements and photos of bodybuilders. Few understood the meaning of karma. When most people thought of a Yogi, they remembered a popular cartoon man sleeping on a bed of nails. All that changed when Sri Swami Satchidananda arrived on these shores in 1966.

He taught what he termed "Integral Yoga," a combination of physical and spiritual practices, of psychological and philosophical approaches to life. He encouraged selfless service to others, which would help anyone discover and maintain the peace and happiness that were, he said, the birthright of all. His message resonated with many people in the 1960s who were looking for something greater and deeper than what they perceived as a superficial, materialistic, and unjust society. His talks drew crowds of young seekers.

Swami Satchidananda taught classes in Hatha Yoga, led Kirtan chants, and offered Yoga in the living room of a large apartment at 500 West End Avenue. Soon the classes and lectures moved to a larger venue, the Universalist Church on Central Park West. In August 1968, a group of students, mostly hippies, took up residence in an apartment adjacent to 500 WEA so that they could immerse themselves in the Yogic lifestyle.

His followers in New York City set their sights on planning and organizing a public lecture for him to deliver in the world-famous Carnegie Hall. The Hatha demonstration and lecture took place in January 1969 in the renowned venue in front of a standing-room-only crowd. In August 1969, Swami Satchidananda was invited to give the invocation at the opening of the Woodstock Music and Art Festival. There he said to 400,000 people, "The entire world is going to watch this. The entire world is going to know what the American youth can do for humanity."

Integral Yoga Institutes, teaching centers, and ashrams opened in the late 1960s and early 1970s across America. Those centers, and IYI's public talks and retreats, drew thousands of people from all walks of life to the teachings of Integral Yoga. Some were attracted when they simply saw Swami Satchidananda's photograph; others said they had had visions of him long before they ever actually learned of or met him. Many have described the experience of connecting with this teacher in these words: "...and that was it!" Some knew they would dedicate their lives to this guru and his teachings, and many have considered themselves his students ever since. Their love for Sri Gurudev, as he was affectionately called, was unwavering.

Sri Gurudev was one of the featured speakers at the Holy Man Jam, which was part of the 1970 Whole Earth Festival in Boulder, Colorado. His talk there led to the founding of an Integral Yoga

Institute in Boulder. In August 1970, the first Integral Yoga interfaith retreat was held, at Annhurst College in Woodstock, Connecticut, and was attended by more than 400 people, including two members of the music group the Young Rascals and the singer Laura Nyro, all of whom had become devotees. Many other multiday silent retreats were held, like the one in Monticello, New York, in 1973, where hundreds of people came together to learn and live the Yogic life and take mantra initiation, dedicating themselves to a path of growth and peace. The retreats offered a chance to experience ashram life for as long as ten days and replicated the daily schedule (including rising early for meditation and experiencing the different Yoga practices throughout the day) that Integral Yogis were observing in Integral Yoga centers all over the country.

The Integral Yoga Hatha class was for many the first experience of Yoga. Hundreds of Integral Yoga teachers were trained, and they taught thousands of students in all kinds of settings—community centers, schools, prisons, hospitals, churches, drug treatment programs, and universities. The dissemination of the teachings of Yoga by Sri Gurudev and his disciples laid the groundwork for the immense popularity and the widespread acceptance of the ancient science of Yoga today.

In 1972, Sri Gurudev spoke to his students about his vision for “Yogaville,” a “Yoga village” where seekers would live together practicing Yoga, a large community where they could grow their food, educate their children, and create an economy based on Yogic values and high ideals. The various ashrams in New York and California were by this time engaged in beekeeping, operating health food stores, and other endeavors. In 1970, Yogaville was established in Pomfret, Connecticut. In 1972, Yogaville West was founded in Lake County, California, north of San Francisco. Another Yogaville West was formed near Santa Barbara, California.

Sri Gurudev also envisaged a temple dedicated to honoring all of the world’s faiths in one place. He called it LOTUS, or Light Of Truth Universal Shrine. The search began for land for the LOTUS and for accommodating the expanding group of seekers wishing to live in Yogaville.

In the mid-1970s, the singer-songwriter and devotee of Sri Gurudev’s Carole King donated her Connecticut estate called Music Mountain to Integral Yoga. With her blessing, that property was sold, and the sale enabled the purchase of 700 acres of land in Virginia. Yogaville was moved away from the harsh New England winters to a beautiful, rural location on the James River, where the LOTUS would ultimately be built.

Initially there was only a single building on the property, and the first few families who arrived in Buckingham County, Virginia, in 1979, lived in it communally. Sri Gurudev soon joined those pioneers, and they began clearing land, bringing in trailers where other ashram members would come to live. Sri Gurudev, operating a bulldozer, cut all the original roads. Eventually, more people

came to live in Yogaville. Dorms were built, private homes sprang up around the ashram, and the community grew to the impressive size it is today.

The centerpiece of Yogaville was to be the LOTUS, a domelike structure that would replicate the lotus flower. The roots of the lotus are in muddy water, but the petals remain dry and pure, representing the way that Yoga enables people to live in the world but not be sullied by the world. On the Guru Purnima weekend in 1986, after years of planning and hard but loving work, the LOTUS was dedicated during two days of ceremonies that brought religious leaders from all over the world to Charlottesville and Buckingham, Virginia, to celebrate the world's first shrine dedicated to harmony and understanding among all faiths.

Thousands of people have traveled to Yogaville to attend programs, learn to become Yoga teachers, and simply experience one of the most magical places on Earth. There, a loving community of sincere spiritual seekers performs duties and tasks in the spirit of selfless service and devotion to peace and understanding that their beloved Gurudev patiently and consistently encouraged in them. As Yoga becomes more popular in the United States and the world, Yogaville stands as a shining example of what love can create.

At the beginning of the new millennium, Sri Gurudev, in his weekly Satsangs with the people of Yogaville, began to remind them that he had taught them everything he could and that it would one day be up to them to continue to run the ashram and spread the teachings. He was invited to India in August 2002 for a peace conference, and on August 19, while in India, he entered Mahasamadhi, the time when a God-realized soul makes a conscious final exit from the body.

In October 2002, the long-planned rededication of the LOTUS following extensive renovations became a memorial tribute, which culminated in the same ritual that was performed in 1986, with blessed water poured over the shrine. A banner was unfurled by the LOTUS that read, "Victory to the Light." Hundreds of students, disciples, and admirers who had found, over their years with this holy man from India, the very essence of peace and joy, love and light, celebrated his life and legacy.

Sri Swami Satchidananda was one of the great Yoga masters of our time. He touched the hearts of millions of people all over the world, from all strata of society. Acknowledged by government and religious leaders including George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, Pope Paul and the Dalai Lama, he received numerous awards for his tireless teaching of the ideals of community, peace, and religious and racial understanding.

Those ideals have been demonstrated in wise and practical ways by members of the Integral Yoga community and their beloved Gurudev. Today—in Yogaville, in more than 50 Integral Yoga centers, and through thousands of Integral Yoga teachers—the great science of Yoga continues to be passed on to new generations.