



## Without the Yamas, there is no Yoga

**At age 68, Sri Dharma Mittra continues to practice and teach the majority of the poses he included in his world famous 1984 poster. But he imparts that difficult poses can miss the point if students ignore yoga's ethical rules.**



Dharma Mittra's "Master Yoga Chart of 908 Postures," has inspired students for almost 25 years. It hangs in homes, yoga studios, and ashrams all over the world.

Photoshop did not exist in 1984, when Dharma photographed himself in 1,340 postures. He cut the photos meticulously by hand, cut another set that had to be in dots, arranged them with pins, created the border and background and affixed them with glue. Now the 68-year-old yogi is working on an updated version of the poster, which remains the preeminent inventory of postures. He's scanning the original photos and posing for new ones. It's click and drag instead of pins and glue. "I love to work on the computer now," Dharma, who is an artist as well, says. "If I had the time available, I would be in front of the computer much of day, working with Photoshop." Dharma isn't certain when the next yoga chart— and a CD companion — will be available because teaching duties keep drawing him away from his computer.

Dharma has marginally joined the coterie of globetrotting yoga headliners. As yoga bled from the fringe to the mainstream, practitioners discovered that the yogi in the famous poster isn't a long-dead Indian but rather a Brazilian-born Manhattanite who's alive and kicking — into arm balances that challenge teachers half his age. In the past year he's traveled to, Brazil, Israel, Japan, Malaysia, much of Europe, in between teaching his regular schedule at his New York temple. A Vanity Fair spread on "the world's greatest yoga masters" featured Dharma in *niralamba sirsasana*, a hands-free headstand, on a New York City cobblestone street. At a Florida yoga conference with a who's who list of faculty, Dharma took the stage on opening night and gave an inspirational lecture on the meaning of yoga, lead chants and demonstrated his signature *Shiva-Namaskara* series of postures... It's recognition that Dharma didn't court, but he's using it to spread his message.

**Dharma told us “The goal of yoga is Self-realization: to find out who you are, why you’re here, who God is. God and the Self are the same – exactly the same.”**

Such words from a man who’s mastered the most stunning of postures and even invented a number can be jarring for legions of Westerners who equate complex asana with yogic accomplishment. Even more jarring is Dharma’s prescription for “Self-realization,” which includes giving up meat, fish and eggs, trusting in reincarnation, and making every action an offering to God.

Dharma uses the word “God” with the frequency of a televangelist, but always clarifies to students, “there is the Supreme Brahman, without name and form, that is beyond comprehension, without division, without personal barriers, and one with the ocean of Om. The name God (Brahma) is the one involved in the creation of individual names and forms for all Gods and Goddesses. Brahman is the one in residing in all hearts that can only be realized thru self-knowledge”. Dharma has many subtle ways of reminding students that yoga isn’t physical feats or gymnastics. Where other teachers urge students to “rotate the thighs inward” or “engage the quadriceps,” Dharma offers this instruction for refining postures: “Now think of God.”

Asana – the physical limb of yoga – is part of a process Dharma calls “divine purification.” The postures tone the body and prepare one for seated meditation. Dharma enjoins students to reflect daily on questions such as these: Who am I? Why does everything die? Is anything eternal? Why do some people suffer? Why are some born into privilege and others into poverty? Is there reincarnation? Is there karma? When body and mind have been purified, the answers will reveal themselves, he says.

Breathing exercises and mantra recitation are also part of the purification process, according to Sri Dharma. So is study of ancient texts, particularly the Bhagavad-Gita, Yoga Sutras, and Hatha Yoga Pradipika. He often jokes, “Yoga without these three is like spaghetti without the sauce.” Dharma is especially emphatic about another building block: the proper diet. He advocates a predominantly live-food vegetarian diet and occasional fasting. Stimulants, heavy foods, and foods that foster cravings inhibit deep concentration, he warns.

Seasonal fruits and vegetables, nuts, and sprouts are staples of Dharma’s diet. In the 1970s he enticed new students with flyers that promised free sprouts along with a free introductory lesson and one of his yoga charts. He’s fond of avocados and fresh coconuts, “If you eat fried food, dead food, cooked food, you will feel fried, dead, and cooked,” he tells students often.

Dharma is unequivocal about vegetarianism, citing the first *yama*, or ethical precept of yoga: *ahimsa*. Often translated as “nonviolence,” *ahimsa* calls on us to treat all beings with compassion. Dharma, whose dogs Pado and Pepper are also vegetarians, maintains that eating meat is participation in violence and that it puts spiritual bliss out of reach. “If you keep animals in your refrigerator,” he tells audiences, “you live in a morgue.” He frequently quotes Swami Bua, a yogi who lives in Midtown Manhattan and is said to be 118 years old: “If you put animals in your stomach, you make your stomach a graveyard.”

### **‘The Jack La Lanne of Yoga’**

At a November yoga conference in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., more than 120 students spread their mats under a white tent for a class with Dharma. “He’s like the Jack La Lanne of yoga,” one first-timer whispered to another. A technician affixed a microphone to Dharma’s tunic and signaled for a sound check. “Om Nama Shivaya,” Dharma chanted. “Om Nama Shivaya.”

Dharma’s physical prowess and self-discipline are intimidating only until he begins talking. He’s as genial as he is limber. Senior disciples describe him as shy, but Dharma knows how to warm up a crowd. Within minutes of the opening chant, laughter rippled through the tent as Dharma demonstrated how the less

experienced students could “pretend.” Another difficult asana demonstration inspired applause, prompting Dharma to quip: “You can throw quarters if you wish.”

The two-hour class included his vigorous asana sequence Shiva Namaskara Vinyasa, breathing exercises, deep relaxation, and discourses on vegetarianism, chakras, and reincarnation. It ended with one of many of his rituals called, Dharma Asana Satsang Jam, that recalls the break dancing era. As kirtan king Krishna Das blared through the speakers, all students were encouraged to take turns performing their favorite postures as an offering for Lord Shiva or their Guru. Many bolder yogis came forward in the middle of the clapping crowd. It was a testament to Dharma’s understanding of the sense of joy inherent in humankind, and offering us spirituality’s and party side.

If he had his way, Dharma says, he would like to reincarnate as the pope or a famous celebrity. As the head of the Catholic Church, he could speak to millions instead of hundreds. He could urge people “to become vegetarian, to keep the ethical rules, to surrender to the Lord, to not be attached to happiness from material things.”

Pope would be a far cry from a horse thief. Dharma has owned more than a twenty bicycles, and one by one they’ve been stolen. His hunch is that he was a horse-napper in a past life. “Everything is due to one’s deeds from previous lives,” he says. “It’s like paying your bills.” These days, Dharma commutes from his small New York City apartment to his yoga center, several blocks away, on a Segway scooter. He’s learned how to negotiate icy patches after a few falls. It’s his second Segway; the first was stolen.

Faith in reincarnation and karma is essential for spiritual bliss, Dharma says. People who do not believe in reincarnation tend to fear accidents, old age, and death. Many people who do not understand the laws of karma and blame others or even God for their problems, weep for the destitute, and envy the prosperous. “If you don’t understand the laws of karma, you will be restless all the time,” Dharma says. “If you do come to realize and understand the laws of karma, you will become fearless and content. It is only a content mind can meditate.”

“I have many yoga teacher friends who are now getting old. Many of them come to me very depressed,” he says. They are upset that they don’t look the way they used to, and they struggle in postures that once came easily. Their children are now grown. Adoring students and spouses are gone. “I keep telling them: ‘You must realize reincarnation! Get busy with learning the practices which bring Self-knowledge and Self-realization. ‘“Because you must know that you are not this that is passing away.’”

## **Mr. Minas Gerais**

**Sometimes when there is time I like to target specific muscles with modern gym equipment he explains. Dharma knows a thing or two about building muscle.**

As a teenager in Minas Gerais, Brazil, he took up bodybuilding, wrestling, and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. During his 7 years in Air Force he also ran a weight training school in the states capital. In the early 1960s, he captured the Mr. Minas Gerais title.

But his most recent trip to the gym did not go smoothly. “I ended up hurting my shoulder badly,” says Dharma, who moved to New York from Brazil in 1964. His muscles are less resilient than they used to be. But his classes are no less rigorous than they were four decades ago. In fact, as Dharma has gotten older his classes are now harder to satisfy the palates of newer generations. “Always thinking of others first, Dharma may adjust classes a bit to make people feel good,” says Ismrittee Devi Om, who has studied with Dharma since 1984 and is co-director of Dharma Mittra Yoga. “He didn’t need to change a thing, but he’s moving it forward. Years ago it was the hardest class in Manhattan, but now it’s *really* hard. I have to tell people. They think Dharma is old-fashioned, but in terms of the asana practice its not. He is catapulting yoga practice into

the 22<sup>nd</sup> Century and at the same time giving practitioners and young teachers a firm grounding in the roots of classical philosophy.”

While waiting for his shoulder to heal, Dharma has taken to practicing postures like *urdhva dhanurasana* (upward bow) and *vrschikasana* (scorpion) with one arm. “I have to be able to do the poses because it is easier to teach when you do it,” he says. “But I don’t spend too much of my time practicing advanced poses anymore except when I am teaching. I no longer feel any need to.”

He estimates he can still do about 80 percent of the poses in his groundbreaking poster. For the updated version, he will be adding about 20 with more popular variations. “There’s something mesmerizing about that poster. People are drawn to it,” says Chandra Om, a senior disciple of Dharma’s and founder of the Dharma Mittra Yoga North Carolina Center. “A little-known fact is the state of consciousness that Dharma insisted he be in for 1,300 photographs. If his mind was not fully concentrated on God, he would redo the posture. He would never use any photos where his mind was distracted for even one moment. That is the real practice of the postures. The postures mean absolutely nothing, no matter how adept one is at them, if they’re not done in a spirit of devotion.”

The mistake so many yoga students make is expecting benefits from their practice, Dharma says. “That is the natural tendency. People are always expecting. If you practice meditation, you’re always expecting to have some results. Even in your prayers, you’re always asking, asking, asking.” Expectations frequently give rise to disappointments. When selfishness is stripped from the practice, when the ego recedes, the benefits will come, and swiftly he says. “Please make sure to keep the ethical rules, eat the right food, surrender to the Lord, and let go of your ego.

That’s all. Don’t worry; putting your legs behind your head is not the important thing. “But if you enjoy all this jumping,” he says with a chuckle, “go ahead.”

*To find out more about Sri Dharma Mittra, his Maha Sadhana DVD’s, The Master Yoga Chart of 908 Postures and Dharma Mittra Yoga Life of a Yogi Teacher Trainings visit: [www.dharmayogacenter.com](http://www.dharmayogacenter.com)  
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