



## **Getting There - My Experience in the Life of a Yogi Teacher Training or June 2007**

We almost didn't get our act together to make it to the Yoga Journal conference in Estes Park, Colorado. I was concerned about arranging child care for my son, Corbin. The other girls in the group had the same problem, too. With the help of grandparents and our husbands, we pulled it off. So, we rolled up our mats and headed out West.

I had a difficult time picking and choosing the teachers I wanted to study with while I was in Colorado. My teacher, Pam, signed up first. We agreed not to take the same classes so we could all share our different experiences. Pam chose most of the teachers I was planned on signing up for, so I was left with a long list of teachers I was unfamiliar with or had never heard of prior to this conference. As I looked over the list repeatedly, I kept going back to Sri Dharma Mittra. They say to never judge a book by its cover, but that was what I was doing at this point. I scanned the photos of each teacher to size them up. Dharma had a friendly smile and the information about psychic sleep sounded like something I should try. So, I signed up for the class based off of a beautiful smile and the promise of a psychic snooze!

Dharma's class was the second on my first day at the conference. The class was packed and I ended up in the back of the room. Once Dharma started talking, I was hooked. The class was difficult, but I managed my way through, stopping along the way to look at the more advanced students twist and contort themselves into poses I had only seen in books. During the class, I was taking notes and trying to do the sequence, too. That's not real easy. Dharma told us to stop writing and just do the poses that he would be happy to send us the class via e-mail, which he did. At the end of the practice, Dharma led us through the psychic sleep experience. After that, I knew I was on to something special with Dharma. I continued through the weekend with the other teachers while encouraging my girl friends to try to get into Dharma's other classes.

A few months later, my teacher, Pam, was seriously considering closing the yoga studio where I practiced. She was expecting her second child and was overwhelmed with anxiety about keeping the studio open and taking care of her growing family. Pam had several substitute teachers, but none of us were certified through the Yoga Alliance. This was the point in time when I knew that I needed to pursue my certificate. That studio was a sacred place to me and I could not let Pam close it down, not even for a few months. After talking to my family about the commitment, I decided to move forward with my training. I knew instantly who I wanted to study under. Dharma Mittra.

After spending several days and countless hours on the computer researching all of my other options, I applied with Dharma. Everything about Dharma's program fit into my schedule perfectly. I could complete the majority of the hours in two weeks. New York City was an easy destination for me to get to. The time of year work out well, too. So, the application was mailed. I was accepted. The fees were paid. And then a huge box of books showed up on my door step! So, the homework began. I learned a lot and confused myself even more about the

Sutras and the Gita. I was happy to know that someone in New York City could help me sort it all out. At least I hoped they could.

## Training

The schedule started every morning at 7:15 a.m. I've never really been a morning person, so I was a little concerned about the early starting time. At first glance, it was very overwhelming to look at that schedule and see an entire day filled up with yoga! What had I gotten myself into? How in the world would I be able to finish the program? I had a lot of questions running through my mind. All of which would be answered by the time I finished my ten day yoga-thon!

We were quickly placed into small groups. Little did I know at the time that I would come to love my small group just like my own family? I wasn't sure what I expected, but I didn't expect the training to unfold like it did. We spent each morning practicing and teaching Dharma's level 1 sequence in small groups. Everyone taught, everyone practiced, everyone offered advice and everyone was very receptive. It was really awesome. Small group was followed by Dharma's Level IV Master class. We all did this practice, too. The first few days, I kept counting the hours of yoga that I had completed. By the time my ten days were up, it really didn't matter how many hours of warriors, shoulder stands, cobras, lunges, etc., I had completed. It truly was an honor to have practiced and studied with Dharma and every single person in the center during those ten days.

I can't recall when I heard Dharma say this, but at some point, he told us that yoga is a science created thousand of years ago that is used to get man closer to God. That is truly the biggest and most poignant thing I brought home from training. I knew that I saw a great change in my mind, body and spirit when I practice yoga. But I really wasn't sure what it was about yoga that made all of that happen. My yoga practice started seven years ago when I was at a cross roads in my life. I decided I could try yoga or see a psychiatrist to help me find my way. I started with yoga and haven't really looked back. Although, I could probably use a shrink from time to time! I had approached yoga as a way to calm my mind and stretch out my tight muscles. When Dharma talked about yoga being used as a means to get closer to God; that is when my entire outlook on my seven-year practice shifted. My focus on my own practice before training was on seeing how far I could advance myself in the asanas. I wanted to do amazing balancing poses, stand on my head, put my foot behind my head and finally get my heels on the floor during down dog. What happened during training is I checked my ego at the door and offered the practice to God. That's when everything really changed for me as a yogi, mother, wife, friend and daughter.

The daily discussions about the eight limbs of yoga were great. Before the training, I never really understood anything more about yoga other than the asanas and meditation. The training really opened up my eyes to the complete picture of yoga and what it represents. Dharma talks a lot about not being cruel to others, including the animals. Dharma referred to the first of the Ten Commandments, "Thou shall not kill". That means the animals, too. It's amazing no one ever mentioned that during catechism class at St. Rose. I first heard Dharma talk about this at the conference in Colorado. Dharma talked about it daily during our training. I had never seriously considered becoming a vegetarian until I attended the training. I was raised in the South and surrounded by a lot of people who love to cook. So, of course, I was raised eating meat and a lot of it. Since returning home from training, my eating habits have changed. I really took a long hard look at what I was eating and how I felt after I ate. It's amazing what you realize when you slow down and pay attention to what you are eating in relation to how you feel afterwards. I'm not a vegetarian yet, but I am slowly working my way in that direction.

Keeping my house neat and clean is a daily battle. One that I thought I would get to leave behind when I went to New York City for my training. The karma yoga duties were totally unexpected. I mean, after all, I was being trained to teach yoga, not house cleaning 1-0-1. However, once karma yoga was explained and I understood where it comes from, I had no problem sweeping the steps and sidewalk or washing the stairs. My outlook on a lot of things shifted when I started doing my karma yoga duties. My attitude toward cleaning, helping, giving of my time, etc, totally shifted for the better after my training with Dharma.

Before Dharma told us to give our practice as an offering to God, I was just pushing myself through the process of doing each pose with exact alignment and not thinking about anything, except what I was going to do after class. The classes I attended were filled with more about doing certain poses and focusing on certain areas of the body. Of course, the classes that I taught were structured in the same manner. Dharma's approach to his yoga is based off of mirroring your guru's every move. This means doing everything exactly as your teacher is doing it. This really is the best way to learn how to do the asanas. Previously, I would have seriously over-instructed a student about each pose, each breath and where we were going next. It's much easier to just do the pose for them, ask them to do mirror the pose and quit talking so much! Of course, I always can adjust them once they get into the pose. I've found since my training with Dharma, that I have a difficult time focusing when my teacher is talking all of the time during the class. We are hammered constantly in daily life with sounds and noises. It is such a gift to go to Dharma's yoga class and just have him call the poses. He tells you where to go and that is it! He will come around and make some adjustments. But, he can get more people to do more yoga with fewer words than anyone I have ever studied with. Again, once I learned that the practice is an offering to a higher power, everything about my practice changed for the better.

## Teaching

During my training, I began to think about incorporating Dharma Mittra Yoga into my teaching schedule. How was this going to happen? Would my teacher allow me to teach it at the studio? Would my students be receptive to offering their practice to a higher power? Would they run out of the studio when I mentioned God? After all, I live in the buckle of the Bible belt. Most people only want to talk about God, Higher Powers, inner-self in church and not in yoga, right? I was very concerned that my students would not be receptive to this new way of teaching at our studio.

When I returned from New York City, I sat down with my teacher and talked to her about my training. My training experience was completely opposite of how she was trained. But, she really was excited to hear about the classes and more importantly about offering your practice to a higher power. It all seemed to really click with her when I explained how yoga was intended to be used and therefore taught. Not long after I returned home, I taught the Dharma Mittra Yoga level 1 class to our teachers at the studio. They all loved it. My teacher, Pam, even cried during the class. This was the first yoga class she had attended since the birth of her second child. So you can imagine all of her anxiety upon starting any yoga class, must less one in which she had never participated. Afterwards, everyone agreed that we should add the class to our weekly schedule. As you can imagine, I was thrilled and terrified at the same time. This was going to be a different yoga experience for our students. And I wanted to teach Dharma Mittra Yoga to my students with all of the love and grace that Dharma had given it to me.

Of course, I was rather nervous the first time I taught DMY 1 to my class. I told myself just as Dharma told us, be receptive to the grace of God. You are an empty vessel that God is working through. That quickly took a lot of the pressure off. Before class, I talked about Dharma and his approach to yoga before we did anything. I gave an over view of what we would be doing and why. So far, everyone seemed receptive. I kept thinking to myself that at any moment they would all get up and leave or bolt out the door as soon as I closed my eyes to begin the Om. They were all still there when I opened my eyes, unlike Dharma's first time teaching in his studio! I knew that my students would be able to do the asanas. I was just concerned that they would not be receptive to the idea of offering their practice to God. Most of the time, I don't like to be proven wrong. But, this time I was dead wrong about everything. I could see a difference in the class from the start. Everyone moved differently, stretched further and bended a little closer to the floor with each asana. After sivasana and the pranayama, everyone really looked so calm and peaceful. It was such a beautiful thing to witness.

What I have come to realize is that it is my own discomfort of talking about God outside of a church that I was worrying about. I live in an area with a lot of evangelical Christians who talk about Jesus all the time and every where. I have always felt as if they are pushing it on me whether I wanted to hear about it or not. Being raised as a Catholic, I have spent most of my time talking about God in church and not really anywhere else. For me, I felt as if I needed to approach talking about God in my yoga classes with a lot of caution. Once I removed my own ideas of "religion" that are attached to God, and just talked about your God or my God, everything was fine. During my training, I learned more about God in ten days than I ever did in thirty seven years in the Catholic Church...without all of the guilt! Thank you Dharma, for that gift!

### The City and the Students

New York City is one of my favorite places on Earth. There are so many wonderful things to see and experience in one small place. It amazes me each time I visit. My previous trips to New York City were all based around sight seeing, shopping and checking out the best restaurants the City has to offer. As you can imagine, I was a little concerned about spending ten days in New York City and not having an extra time to do anything else but yoga.

What I realized is that you have to submerge yourself into a society to really get a better understanding of how that society works, exists, etc. Without the training, I would have never really learned much more about New York City other than what I already knew as a tourist. I quickly learned that I was not going to be able to afford to take a cab each day to the center. I knew that I was not willing to get up a half hour earlier than planned to walk to the center, either! So, I was forced to take the time to figure out the city bus system! I live in Jonesboro, Arkansas. Just this year, our city started a bus route system. Basically, before the city added the bus routes, if you need to get anywhere, you would get in your own car and drive. We don't even have a large taxi cab service. Public transportation is not something I'd ever spent much time having to deal with, until the teacher training. I still haven't mastered the New York City subway, but I'm sure at some point I will.

New York City is a huge melting pot of nationalities. Our group of trainees was no different than the city. We had a very international group of teacher trainees. I was not expecting there to be so many international students in the training. After all of our introductions, it was clear that

Dharma's way with yoga was known around the globe! If students were coming from every where on the globe, I knew I was in for an amazing experience.

When you spend ten days with any group, you slowly start to learn more about each of them. Initially, I spent most of my time with those in my small group. That small group became my family away from home. We spent each morning teaching and taking Dharma's Level 1 class. So, we knew a lot about each other rather quickly. Through out the training, I began to learn a little more about each student. It's funny how quickly your first impressions about someone can change over time. This is one case in point where you should not judge a book by its cover. We were a very diverse group. But we all had one thing in common. We all wanted to train with Dharma Mitra.

Dharma has the most amazing group of teachers and staff. I would have never imagined there would be so many teachers helping to guide us through our training. Dharma made sure to spend a lot of time with all the groups.

With my background in pharmaceutical sales, I know first hand how painfully boring it can be to sit through any lectures dealing with anatomy and physiology. Dr. Jeff did a great job guiding us through the anatomy and physiology portion of the training. We were twice blessed in that Dr. Jeff is a yogi himself and an interesting teacher, too! Dr. Jeff and Antonia were my teachers in our small group. I knew the first day they were dedicated to making sure we knew exactly how to teach Dharma Mitra Yoga. Their guidance was excellent. Andre' Ram and all of the others were also very instrumental in helping me through any difficulties I was feeling at any point in time. The Center is just an empty building without the students and staff. They breathe life into it on a daily basis, all for their guru, Dharma Mitra.

Moving on

Who would have ever imagined that one trip to Estes Park, Colorado would have led to all of this? I certainly could not have imagined it. As Dharma says everything in this world unfolds as it is supposed to, as God wants it to. Life is perfect, although at times it can be tragic and difficult along the way. It is my hope that I can continue to be an empty vessel and allow God to work through me. And that my students and I will continue to be receptive to the grace of God.

In Thanks  
Om Shanti,

D.J. Duckworth  
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