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A Personal Reflection on my LOAY Training Experience

By Justine Hoang

As I prepare to record my reflections on my LOAY 500 hour teacher training experience, I am at once filled with a sense of nostalgia and wistfulness. To be able to relive those days spent immersing ourselves in the practice would indeed be a great gift; I cannot conceive of ever falling short of new things to learn!

I can clearly recall the gamut of emotions as I read through the Registrar's acceptance letter: elation and excitement at the forefront, with a twinge of apprehension and self-doubt lurking in the background. Would I, with my limited background in this style of yoga, be able to keep up with my fellow Sadhakas, most of whom would have already grown solid roots in the Dharma Yoga tradition, through the LOAY 200 hr TTC program and regular attendance at the yoga center? Nonetheless, it felt like the right time to embark on this training initiative...

From the first moment I ventured into the Dharma Yoga West Temple, I was in awe. I could see how the term 'Temple' came to be chosen; such a strong sense of tranquility and reverence hung in the air, it could never be anything other than a sanctuary. As I stepped inside that first time, I was greeted with such open and welcoming smiles, that I felt immediately right at home. This feeling of belonging and being nurtured prevailed throughout the entire stay, and was elemental in enabling me to develop a deep trust towards my teachers and fellow Sadhakas. Their support and encouragement made it much easier for me to share my thoughts and questions, and to be more receptive to feedback; this is often a stumbling block for me, as I am timid by nature, low on self-confidence, and frequently harbor fears of being judged.

That first module exceeded the bounds of my imagination, in terms of the diversity and depth of topics covered, but this also gave rise to very long and demanding days. The addition of more frequent or longer breaks between the sessions would have greatly enhanced our



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ability to stay focused and alert, as well as given our bodies more of an opportunity to recover from back-to-back asana practices. Our mentors had given us numerous warnings to pace ourselves; however, in the presence of a guru, the tendency is to offer up one's best efforts by way of demonstrating devotion, even at the cost of personal comfort. In the end, I think most of my colleagues would agree that the gains far exceeded the pains!

I remember leaving New York City after the January session feeling considerably less confident of my aptitude for completing the program. The feedback that I had received from our small group teaching clinics reflected the insecurities that I was trying hard to keep from adversely affecting me. How, for instance, would my students react to this new class format and teaching style, which employed less verbal cues, hands-on assists and a pronounced spiritual slant (i.e.: the emphasis on devoting oneself to God)? Would I be able to keep my students engaged if I were to revert back to a more beginner level class that would not change appreciably from week to week? Most importantly, would I be able to let go of my attachment to my usual style of teaching, and embrace the Dharma Yoga style? I wasn't convinced that I was completely receptive to this changeover yet, and was concerned that this would come across in my teaching as stiffness, unfamiliarity with the practice, and lack of genuine belief in this new style. Fortunately, though, I still had some time to absorb the information and explore my feelings: I expected that I would feel much more secure about this new practice by the end of the next in-class module.

It took even less time than expected. As I worked through the daily practice plans – which encompassed asana, pranayama, japa, dharana, dhyana and journaling – my appreciation for the Dharma Yoga method grew ever stronger. Within a few days, I had already begun to notice improvements on several fronts. The feeling of ease and lightness that had suddenly manifested in my asana practice during Sri Dharma Mittra's Master Practices did not diminish as I had expected; this phenomenon, I presumed, drew from the collective energy of the Dharma Yogis that permeated the space within the Temple. Furthermore, I noticed a significant increase in my alertness and concentration:



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for once, I was able to meditate without falling asleep, I was no longer plagued by grogginess at the usual times of day, and I was enjoying a quietness of mind that enabled me to become more self-introspective. These new-found qualities effectuated a calmer demeanor, which was, according to my students, reflected in my teaching.

I believe that these changes were largely brought about by the ahimsa diet. Prior to embarking on the training, I had admittedly been rather skeptical upon hearing the claims that such a diet could literally transform one's practice; now, I had no cause to doubt. I had become a believer, and hoped that I could find the willpower to adhere to this diet long after internship period ended. Once back at the Dharma Yoga Center for the second in-class installment, I noticed a distinct shift in the group dynamic particularly within our small teaching groups. There was a quietness and calmness in the atmosphere that everyone worked hard to maintain. I very much appreciated this observation of mouna, as it really did seem to help us to conserve energy and to turn our thoughts inward. At the same time, we became more conscious of the moods and mindsets of our peers. There was an intimacy within our group that developed to the point where words were no longer necessary for communicating. This was most apparent when we were taking turns teaching: we moved in union with each other like a well-rehearsed ballet chorus and remained attentive to one another's needs by adjusting the level of intensity of the physical practice higher or lower as required. During the feedback sessions, the comments were delivered openly with the utmost respect and care; it was obvious that everyone took this duty very seriously and made their best effort to come up with meaningful remarks. In truth, however, no one should have been worried about receiving a 'bad review'...every class that was delivered was a veritable gift.

On the whole, everyone seemed significantly more self-assured and relaxed. Evidently we had all benefitted from having those 2 months between the sessions to immerse ourselves in the Dharma Yoga practice, and to apply our knowledge through teaching a few classes. We had come to realize that we could still deliver a class that reflected the Dharma Yoga style, values and traditions, without having to imitate



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Sri Dharma Mittra exactly. This knowledge was very reassuring to me personally, since I now knew that, even if I were to switch over to teaching Dharma Yoga exclusively, I could exercise my creativity to impart a hint of my own flavor to my classes.

The internship period that followed the March session proved to be a very valuable learning experience for me; however, it was not without some difficulties. As experienced during the waiting period between the in-class training modules in New York City, I had to rearrange my already packed schedule to squeeze in an extra 2 hours, minimum, of activity per day related to the daily practice plans. Failure to do so, without incurring noticeable impact to my family, would have been indicative of problems to come, since I also had 36 Dharma Yoga classes and 20 hours of karma yoga to complete; hence, time management was of the essence in order to maintain the balance between these activities, my day job and family life. It was, in my view, a good test in regards to observing the yamas: ahimsa (by helping people to recognize the greatness that lives within them, as well as avoiding the tendency to self-deprecate), satya (by being honest with myself with regards to my availability for all my tasks/activities; I tend to be over-optimistic with regards to time allocation), asteya (by putting my family's needs at the top of the priority list to ensure that they did not feel deprived of my love and attention), bramacharya (now was the ideal time to apply what we had learned and adhere strictly to our yoga practice, as per Dharma's direction), and aparigraha (by renouncing my own desires and hobbies and setting higher priority to the needs of others. In addition, I was reminded of the importance to let go of expectations, especially in regards to people's willingness to explore an unfamiliar style of yoga, and their availability to commit to a regular practice. To illustrate, I had to teach more than the required number of classes for Dharma IV certification, to make up for those that did not draw enough students).

The Dharma Yoga Life Of A Yogi 500 hr program was, in a nutshell, life-changing. Never could I have anticipated the extent to which my yoga practice would transform. The training program was certainly intense, maybe even grueling at times. However, now that I have witnessed, through Sri Dharma Mittra's example, the incredible amount of resolve and faith that is required to become a true yogi, I know



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enough to recognize that the real challenges lie ahead of me. Who knows how far I will get in his lifetime? I accept that I may never attain self-realization, but I am most humbled and grateful for having had the opportunity to study with an incredible guru who has worked through his own struggles, and who is undeniably as close as one can possibly get on this earth to become an enlightened being. Armed with the tools that Sri Dharma Mittra and his exceptional staff shared with us, I feel more confident now to set out on my path and embrace my own challenges...

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And finally, to our great guru, Sri Dharma Mittra, for bringing us all together in the first place through Dharma Yoga; it is truly a blessing beyond description... In loving service to the Dharma Yoga community, Om Shanti and Namaste!