

ॐ DHARMA MITTRA YOGA ॐ

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Teacher Training with Dharma Mittra

By Cara Jepsen

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"God is the innermost Self of all creatures, sitting in the heart as our real Selves. Formless and incomprehensible for the mind. Beyond all conditions, immutable, eternal and action-less. Eventually, as the mind gets purified enough, one goes beyond all names and forms and becomes ready to enter into Samadhi."

--Dharma Mittra, quoted in the book Dharma Mittra, A Friend to All

I took my first class with Dharma Mittra in New York City in 1999, on the advice of Suddha Weixler. He knew Dharma as the creator of the famous Master Yoga Chart of 908 Postures, which he made as a gift to his guru in 1984. Dharma, who is from Brazil, lived as a monk and served as a Karma yogi in Yogi Gupta's New York City ashram for 11 years and began teaching yoga in 1967. Considered the "teacher's teacher," Dharma's students include Jivamukti's David Life and Sharon Gannon, and he has influenced teachers from coast to coast. He's also author of the 2003 book *Asanas: 608 Yoga Postures*.



During that first class, Dharma, who has a compassionate, playful demeanor, led us through his challenging Shiva namaskar vinyasa sequence. In very little time he had me going into poses I'd never tried before, including yoganidrasana (sleeping yogi pose) and parsva bakasana (side crow). The savasana at the end was out of this world.

But I was focused on Ashtanga vinyasa yoga and didn't see Dharma again until 2005, when he held a workshop at Chicago's Moksha Yoga. In addition to postures and other practices, Dharma discussed the chakras (energy vortexes in the body), the laws of karma and reincarnation, cleansing techniques and the yamas and niyamas (rules of self-conduct). He also showed us how to draw energy up the chakras through meditation, pranayama, mantra, visualization and right action. He reminded us that the purpose of yoga is self- or God-realization--"to bring the consciousness up" and see God everywhere. More than once he answered a question I had in my mind but was afraid to ask, and I was intrigued by his compassion and complete lack of ego.

Some months later, I decided to take his master class in New York City, even though I had a sore back. Again we did advanced asanas, and there was a remarkable lack of competition in the room; in fact, it felt like the other students were rooting for me. (Dharma often says that when you see another person doing a pose well, you should copy them and pretend that you are them: "Don't think 'that is them'--think 'that is me.'") Midway through class, the back pain disappeared. I was hooked.

I enrolled in Dharma's 200-hour Life of a Yogi training in February of 2007, despite having completed two teacher trainings and countless workshops with master teachers, plus making three trips to Mysore, India, to study with Ashtanga vinyasa yoga guru Pattabhi Jois and his family--and despite having already been teaching yoga for eight years. The intensive consisted of ten 15-hour days of classes at his New York City studio, where senior teachers Chandra Om, Ismrittee Devi Om, Andrei Ram and others assisted Dharma. I'm prone to headaches and was terrified about not getting enough sleep and food during the training. I needn't have worried; as the long days wore on, I required less and less food and sleep.

Each day began with chanting, pranayama and meditation, followed by talks on philosophy as well as instruction in anatomy, diet (vegetarian, mostly raw), kriyas (yoga techniques), Hatha yoga, japa mala (prayer beads) and other yoga practices.



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It's called Life of a Yogi training because the focus is on how to be a yogi. (A yogi is a person interested in applying the science of yoga for the purpose of self-realization.) This was new for me. My other teachers had primarily focused on asana and sometimes said things like pranayama is dangerous or that it can't be taught until a student can perform certain poses (which sadly are out of reach for me in this lifetime).

It was also practical; on the first day they sat us down with our neti pots and showed us how to use them. Then we each tried it. I was relieved to find out how easy it was, since I had owned one for two years but had been afraid to try it.

We spent a lot of time studying the Yoga Sutras and the Bhagavad Gita. I'd studied the Sutras before, but not the Gita. "The world is perfect as it is," said Dharma. "You must believe it. Bad things happen due to the deeds from the past. For example, I am born with bowed legs. I hate bowed legs. But maybe in a past life I was tall and proud. Now I am short with a flat head, born in Brazil.

"If you do not believe in the laws of karma you suffer. If you do, you are not worried, depressed, restless. You feel contentment."

I began to see unpleasant events in my past from a new perspective--perhaps they really were blessings--and began to stop taking everything personally. It felt like a huge weight had been lifted.



It lifted even further when we learned that the greatest cause of all suffering is ignorance of the true self. Dharma explained that our innermost self is located at the right side of the heart and is perfect and unchanging and beyond disturbances of the body and mind. When he said that all living beings have this same spark of the divine inside of them, something cold and hard inside of me began to melt. Tears fell, and I began to feel a sense of peace, along with tremendous compassion for others.

Tears fell often during the training, which also stressed Karma yoga. Each of us was given a daily task to perform. Mine was to sweep the front stairs before class, which meant I got to greet my teachers and fellow sadhakas (aspiring yogis) each day. I also got to see Dharma calmly lug his Segway Personal Transporter up the steep staircase each morning.

The training included four or more Hatha yoga classes each day, and I made huge leaps in my asana practice. Suddenly I was able to do splits on both sides for the first time, touch my feet in kapotasana (pigeon pose)--with the help of Andrei Ram--and drop into backbend with relative ease. Yet whenever it was time to take a Level I or Gentle class, we trainees were grateful for the break.

But I also learned it wasn't really me doing the poses anyway. We learned, over and over, that we are not the doer but an instrument of the divine, that we are not the body or the mind. We were reminded that yoga is for self-realization and that when we practice together it's a communal offering, and we should move together. "Every breath is a mudra (gesture), every pose is an offering," Dharma would say. The whole time I felt like I was getting a lot of spiritual help from my teachers and fellow sadhakas--especially when it was my turn to teach a Level I class to the public. It felt like everyone in the room was pulling for me, like we were of a single mind.

Dharma says that as a teacher you cannot bring anyone further along the path than you've gone. He stressed following yamas, or ethical roots of yoga, saying, "Without the yamas, there is no yoga." At the end of each class he usually talks about the first yama, ahimsa (non-harming), which includes following a vegetarian diet since the Supreme Self is the same within all beings. Dharma says, "If you eat the animal, you are somehow participating in violence."



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Another highlight was being chosen to teach a Level II class in front of Dharma, who ended up adjusting the students in poses while I attempted to teach! I think I am one of the few in the world to have had such an experience. I learned so much from watching him (and from his feedback--especially when he said that in order to teach a pose, I must first be able to do it!).

Words cannot express the progress that was made in my spiritual practice during those ten days. What I also received from the training--which was followed by several weeks of homework and Karma yoga classes--was no less than a blueprint for how to live life.

I wanted to know more, of course, so I signed up for last year's 500-hour teacher training, which took place for one long weekend each month from February through May. I couldn't really afford the training, but as soon as I signed up, more work poured in and the money appeared.

This training built on everything we learned in the earlier training, and it was wonderful to see many of my fellow brother and sister sadhakas once again. In addition to more instruction on philosophy, pranayama, concentration, meditation, anatomy and chanting, we learned to teach the more advanced asana sequences.

We also learned more about the guru/disciple relationship and studied the Bhagavad Gita and Yoga Sutras with Bhakti yogi and Rutgers University religion professor Edwin Bryant.

Another highlight was spending five hours with kirtan wallah (chant leader) and Bhakti yogi Krishna Das, who spoke to us at length about kirtan and what makes a good teacher. Afterward, he led us in a kirtan, which was transformational. Even though I was on the cleanup crew that night, I didn't want it to end.

We also learned how yogis should conduct themselves. They control the senses and renounce the fruits of their efforts and perform actions because they have to be done, with no attachment to the outcome. The yogi does not identify with the body or the mind.

I learned this firsthand when it was my turn to teach a public Level II class while recovering from an upper respiratory and throat infection (at that point I was no longer contagious). Before starting, I asked mentor Andrei Ram to teach "through" me, and made a similar plea to Lord Shiva--and ended up leading a decent class. As soon as it was over, though, I began to cough. "You see?" said Andrei to my fellow students. "She went beyond body and mind to teach the class. Now, she is back to the body."

We also learned a lot more about what makes a good teacher. "If you are going to be a yoga teacher, you have to be a yogi," said Chandra Om, Dharma's senior disciple. "Teaching yoga is not part-time, it's not a profession, it's not a business and it's not logos.

"You cannot teach what you have not personally experienced. You cannot teach spiritual knowledge unless you have some yourself. You cannot straighten out another until you have straightened yourself, so you really have something to say. Teaching is information passing through you--that's why it's not about you, or your personality. You're transmitting your personal environment. Once you've cleaned up your own self, you give up your personality and ego and who you think you are, so God can pass through you and use you, so your lower self does not get in the way."

After each session we went home with a 30-day plan of mantra, pranayama, concentration and meditation practices plus Karma yoga (in the form of teaching free Dharma Mittra yoga classes) as well as homework, such as coloring and keeping a practice journal. Each month's plan was more intense and eventually included diet plans, the last of which was an optional live purification diet that included green juice, a colorful salad and lots of pineapple. I chose not to do it, but ate from it regularly in solidarity with my fellow sadhakas. When we returned for our final weekend, everyone in the training was thinner and so blessed out they could have been in a state of lower samadhi.



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During the training I also tried to practice yamas and niyamas. I didn't rip or burn any CDs (asteya, or non-stealing) or kill any cockroaches (ahimsa, or non-harming). It was not easy, especially when the latter began to multiply. But Dharma says they just want to be left alone to raise a family. Even harder to put into action was his advice to be nice to everybody.

Our last weekend session coincided with Dharma's 69th birthday, and after the three-hour maha sadhana yoga session that included asana, satsang and pranayama, some sadhakas read pieces they'd written about their experience during the training, and under the direction of Ismrittee Devi, our group performed a beautifully synchronized version of the Level III Shiva namaskar sequence for him.

Afterward, we had more homework and Karma yoga in the form of teaching free classes over the next few months, plus there was another 30-day plan. Graduation in October made me reflect on how the training had changed me.

Now, each day begins with the neti pot and cup of hot lemon water and a sitting practice that includes japa, pranayama, and dharana (concentration) and dhyana (meditation).

Now, I try to enter a sattvic (pure, peaceful) state before I teach. Then I ask students to line up their mats, and move together "like a school of fish" to create a collective consciousness and share the energy. I'm more comfortable talking about philosophy--especially the yamas--in class, since Dharma says you can only progress so far without them. I also feel like what I'm teaching these days is yoga, not just asana. Since the training, several students have been experimenting (and succeeding) with a vegetarian diet. They have also been asking some very good questions.

After spending time with Dharma, you start to absorb some of his essence and begin to act a little bit like him and (slowly, in my case) become a better teacher and person. I do my best to copy the teacher, but many samskaras (latent tendencies) are there. I fail often.

Every once in awhile, though, it feels like Dharma is teaching through me.

Like one day when a student said to me after class, "You say 'cobra pose' just like Dharma."

It was one of the highest compliments I've ever received.

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Dharma Mittra will make a rare Midwest appearance at the Yoga Journal Conference March 26-29 in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin (www.yogajournal.com/conferences). He has two 200-hour teacher trainings scheduled for this summer, and the next 500-hour session begins in November; visit www.dharmayogacenter.com for more.

Cara Jepsen teaches Dharma Mittra yoga Sundays at 10 a.m. at the Chicago Yoga Center, Thursdays at 7:30 a.m. at the Lincoln Park Athletic Club and Fridays at 10 a.m. at Silverspace in Wicker Park. She will lead Dharma Mittra yoga workshops Sunday, March 21, at the Beverly Yoga Center in Chicago and Saturday, March 14, at Yoga Trek in Oak Park. For details visit www.carajepsen.com. Multi-level Dharma Mittra yoga classes in West Rogers Park are now forming; to learn more, call 773-315-5489 or e-mail carajepsen@yahoo.com.



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