

# “ॐ शान्ति, शान्ति, शान्ति”

*Voices harmonise in the deep calming quietness of the mantra.*

*In darkness the figures sit, shrouded in their shawls.*

*Stars shine out in the black of the morning sky.*

*Venus, a piercing spot, the moon, a heavy crescent of light.*

*The figures sit in silence.*

*Then, bowing, move to standing.*

*As the slow poses continue, the sky over the mountains lightens and brightens to pink, then yellow and finally blue as the sun rises.*

Maharashtra is one of the 12 holiest areas in India. Millions of pilgrims visit for the Maha Kumbha Shivaratri festival, take their ritual bathe and do pooja at the Shivalingam amidst chanting, and ringing of temple bells.

The ashram faces south, which is extremely unlucky. But this bad luck is reversed, by a large statue of Shiva as Protector, and so the ashram has gone from strength to strength. As March continued the days grew warmer, and snakes (Shiva's energy) became more evident. During the month the ashram men captured 9 snakes (2 were magnificent cobras!) and I saw an amazing snake hunt lasting 45 minutes in the field just outside the gates.

Yoga Vidya Dham is a University, training yoga teachers and therapists. More than 250,000 people have completed basic courses, with many more attaining advanced levels, in pranayama, meditation, and Yoga Therapy.

A Research Institute, it runs 5 well-equipped Yoga & Naturopathy therapy centres in Maharashtra, where more than 21,000

patients have been treated, using yoga, ayurvedic medicine and naturopathic therapies. Curing diseases like heart problems, hypertension, asthma, diabetes, backache, arthritis, psychosomatic diseases, as well as providing courses for pregnant women, children and people with special needs etc.

Ashram life begins at 5am with chanting, then yoga, serving the community and, eventually, breakfast. The food is vegetarian and served in huge metal pots in the shady dining room. Students sit cross-legged on the floor, eating in silence (to promote awareness of the food during the meal).

The schedule is full. The yoga therapy course I attended was presented by eminent doctors specialising in anatomy/physiology, osteopathy, HIV/Aids, Naturopathy, ayurveda, radiology and imaging and meditation.

Guruji, who founded the ashram, presented lectures on the efficacy of yoga, relaxation and chanting, to rebalance the systems of patients with serious and life-threatening illnesses.

The days end with a Havan, where the ashram meet to chant the mantras, and a ritual fire is sprinkled with ghee to purify the air and sanctify the participants.

On the night of the spring full moon, came the festival of Holi, the official beginning of summer. We lit a huge fire and danced around it in the moonlight, chanting, to request a successful harvest.

Every day the skies were blue, the scenery spectacular, the course challenging and inspiring. For western yoga teachers, the opportunity to learn from traditional yogis the art and science, so highly respected in India, was a dream come true.

Traditional yoga is 100% holistic; in one breath, dealing with body, mind, soul, spirit, voice and energy; a ray of clarity for a goal-centred, fitness-centric gym culture.

In India, PhD students study the 'Science of Yog', and Doctors regularly prescribe yoga as part of their patient's care. Diabetics, patients with heart disease, thyroid problems, high blood pressure and asthma, all pitch up to the therapy centre, where they begin a regimen of vegetarian food, yoga breathing, chanting, gentle poses, steam baths, and relaxation. After 10 days they return home with their after-care plan. Few need to return as in-patients. Most see their ailment totally recede. Many go on to be healthier after their disease than they were before!

Yoga therapy is a relatively new discipline. It offers hope of complete reprieve to sufferers of all kinds of chronic ailments, and tremendous improvement in the quality of life for sufferers of incurable diseases. Instead of simply managing symptoms it

enables people to reverse out of illness down the path they came. Choosing simple healthy food, exercising in tune with their body and discovering ways to release stress levels, their bodies heal themselves, find balance and become strong.

*I was amazed but convinced!*



Returning to the UK, in the run-up to Easter holidays and the Royal Wedding, to-do lists abound, the everyday routine moves inexorably onward and life continues as if there had been no interruption.

Back in India, the nights are cool, the stars are bright and the ashram sleeps at 10pm ready for an early start.

**Dinah Facius is a Registered Yoga Teacher and Yoga Therapist in Cobham.**

For more info on yoga therapy, local classes, or to see more pictures and info about the ashram please go to

[www.freedom-yoga.co.uk](http://www.freedom-yoga.co.uk)  
or call 07976 824253.