

LA YOGA

AYURVEDA AND HEALTH

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SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA'S
FREE YOGA MAGAZINE

KARMA YOGA

CONTEMPLATING SELFLESS SERVICE

NEW PARADIGMS EMERGE
FROM THE RAINFOREST

THE GITA ON
SKID ROW

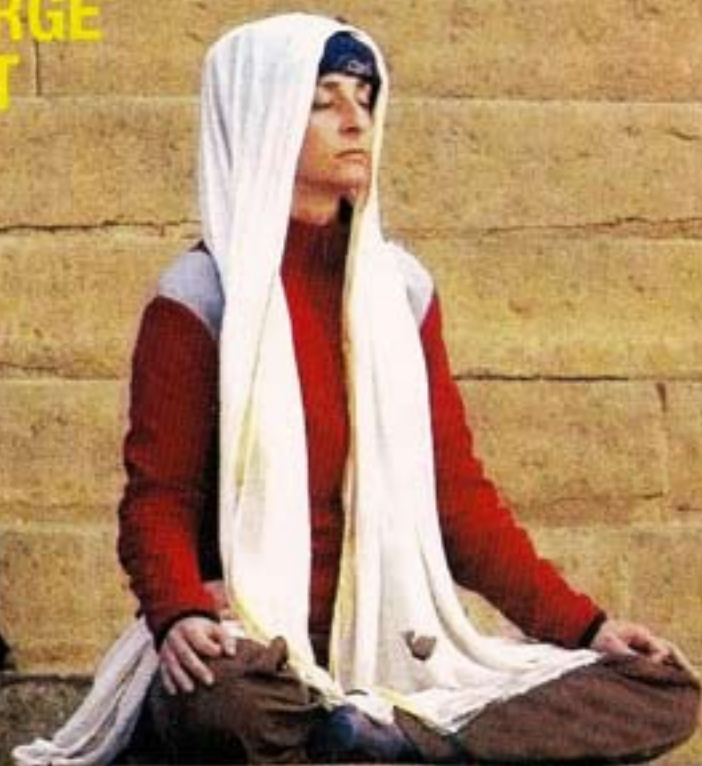
SOOTHING THE SKIN

PEACE ACTIVIST
SNATAM KAUR

STANDING TALL

LAS HORMONAS
SEXUALES Y EL YOGA

AN AFRICAN JOURNEY



interview:

India Supera

by Felicia M. Tomasko



I first traveled to the Feathered Pipe Ranch in Montana in 2004 to take a workshop with Seane Corn. Getting there felt like a pilgrimage, to reach a hidden location outside of Helena, surrounded by expansive National Forest, bordered by a tranquil pond and thousands of miles of fragrant pine. While there, the founder and director India Supera would lead morning hikes at dawn, wander the grounds with her dog, sing and pray in the sweat lodge, and tell us stories around the fireplace in the evening. India talked about her meanderings around the world, finding her spiritual teacher Sai Baba and her commitment to seva, selfless service and right livelihood. Feathered Pipe, run by the nonprofit Feathered Pipe Foundation, has been hosting yoga and other health and spirituality-related retreats for more than 30 years. During this

time, India has both witnessed and been an integral part in the development of yoga practice in the U.S. Their first yoga retreat in 1975 was with Judith Hansen Lasater and Felicity Green; later workshops featured teachers including healthy living advocate Dr. Bernard Jensen, luminaries Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and Joseph Campbell and yoga teachers Mary Dunn and Ramanand Patel. The Pipe hosted some of the genesis of Yoga Journal's birth and now offer yoga retreats in Montana and around the world.

India's mesmerizing story-telling and personal commitment to the path inspired others who came to the Ranch. I personally witnessed the birth of projects around mealtime conversations; there was something about her example that made those of us around her feel as though we could accomplish anything. Talking to India again for this

interview brought up that same inspiration and motivation. Whether we live in Montana or Monrovia, right livelihood is possible. Activism can be our every breath.

FMT: How you received the land for Feathered Pipe and started the retreat center has to do with service you performed. Can you speak about this?

IS: The Feathered Pipe Ranch has always been based in service: our initial goal was to serve the public, when we started, we thought it was a vision, it was like having your complete calling set out before you. That calling, 32 years ago, was to bring the idea of conscious living, conscious health and conscious yoga to America.

I got the ranch because I was studying with Sai Baba for many years. A woman came to Sai Baba's named Jeri Duncan. When I was having tooth decay and not feeling well in India, she sent me a ticket to come back to the United States. She had bought this ranch with the idea of creating a think tank and the exchange was that she would fix my teeth and I would help her get started.

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But the Divine always has its own path. Instead of getting started on this think tank and new way of thought, she was diagnosed with cancer. I had training taking care of patients and in natural healing; with this combination, her family asked me to take care of her while she went through treatment. She eventually died and left me the ranch. I never had an idea she was going to leave it to me, but it wasn't something her family was really interested in keeping or using, so they were thrilled that it was going to go to this higher purpose.

What Jeri wanted to do here was service. I was 24 years old when she died and what I always said to people was that I just took her vision and put what limited skills I had to good use. I knew she hadn't left me the ranch; she had left it to this larger vision.

FMT: My understanding is that you were one of first retreat centers dedicated to yoga in this country.

S: Indra Devi had already started her center where people could go for a month and study yoga; she was a real front runner; she was

right next to what eventually became Rancho la Puerta. We ended up doing something between a spa and a yoga workshop. We weren't the first in the country, but we were definite-

Come to learn and leave to serve

ly the first in Montana. And at that time in 1972-1975, there wasn't a yoga school on every corner, or a yoga retreat or a spa in every state. So the consciousness had not changed yet. What we really did was about timing, we got on the crest of their wave.

FMT: How have you seen the interest in yoga change over time?

S: When people first came to the Feathered Pipe ranch for yoga, there were fanatic people like myself; we all felt we had a calling in life. We thought we had a good chance at attaining enlightenment and becoming saints and there was this whole idea of reaching enlightenment through yoga.

Every one of them had a story about how

they got into yoga. It was something like they were sick and dying in Burma and they had a vision of doing yoga and seeing Mr. Iyengar's book. There was story after story, but there was no common story, like "I went to the Y." In the early days, everyone who came had been to India or was going to India; it was a very small club.

Now the range is much larger; I think the understanding of what Hatha yoga will do in life is much clearer and more intelligent. People today are just as serious about their spiritual path, but the spiritual path of yoga doesn't have to go in the Hindu direction. People just know they're doing this practice and it fits into their lives, whatever their religious practice.

One of my memories of the fanaticism of the early days involved Felicity Green, an Iyengar teacher and a fabulous woman. When we had workshops, she would go camp a mile from the main lodge. I would kid her: "The coolest person is the one who camps furthest away from lodge." It was a group of people

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(Continued from p.48)

who were back to nature, back to the land, which we would now call totally green conscious.

FMT: Thinking about the green consciousness and organics, I remember that you own an organic food store in Helena.

S: Yes. We started Real Foods Market and Deli basically because we were in Montana, and although it's an agricultural state, it was hard at first to communicate organic consciousness. We were involved with early organizations that brought a lot of consciousness of organic farming in Montana and today we have one of the largest concentrations of organic farms in the country. There's a co-op in Montana of organic growers and during the summer, I would say, between 50-75% of the food in the store is grown in Montana. That doesn't mean it isn't going to travel 700 miles to get to our store. But it is local and it's not coming from Portland or other places. The co-op has made it so that even in the conventional stores you can get all this locally grown organic food.

Organics in our ranch was something we started to think about early on; we have food that is organic and grown here. This is embarrassing to say now, because of all the carbon footprint stuff, but we'd actually have the food flown in from California or Oregon so we would have organic produce for our guests and our store. This was an evangelical attitude we had: that the only way to save the planet was to eat organic and vegetarian. There is a lot of truth to that, but we didn't have the other piece of local in our minds, and now we think if you really want to be a political activist, organic, local and vegetarian are all certainly helpful.

FMT: I'm thinking about what you just said about being a political activist: organic, local and vegetarian. Is there anything else you feel is important for being a political activist and taking your yoga practice to the next level in this day and age?

S: I think the most important thing is not to beat yourself up if or when you can't succeed. If everything in your life is political activism you can't eat chocolate because it is grown with slave labor or coffee is bad for you. You have to draw a line where it is a middle

path for you. I'm not saying that we should eat chocolate that slaves grow. What I mean is that we should be conscious of it, but not bring it to grandmother's for dinner. It's a delicate balance when you're using food as so-

going to be much healthier for you and for the cow. It's always a balance.

I've always been very extreme in how I feel about things, from cutting down trees, to how we eat and our physical practice of

It's a delicate balance when you're using food as social activism, but in the end, I think it's one of the main things we can use because organic growing is so much healthier for the growers and it is so much healthier for the planet

cial activism, but in the end, I think it's one of the main things we can use because organic growing is so much healthier for the growers and it is so much healthier for the planet. Even if you're eating meat, and that cow is a grass-fed cow in a pasture in Montana, it is

yoga. I feel very strongly about my practices, but it's hard to practice in America because we're such a consumption-based world. For instance, I was writing our letter for the foundation and one of the things I want to do is go green on our vehicles because we pick up



India Supera and Ranch manager Howard Levin on the Montana property.

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people at the airport and I've always justified Suburbans because eight people fit, so it's 98 passenger miles. Those kinds of justifications can get us in trouble in the end, because here it is 2007 and we're still using Suburbans. But if we had put our foot down maybe 10 years ago, when everybody who used Suburbans for transportation did the same thing, we might have had a green vehicle earlier.

FMT: In thinking about lots of ways to be an activist, I'd like to hear about some of the seva programs at the ranch.

S: I would love to talk about those because that is really why I started my work: to help people. My idea of the center is that it was going to be like an American ashram that people came to, it wouldn't matter what their finances were, and we would always provide a place for healing and well-being and we have this motto: Come to learn and leave to serve.



Chris is a Native American artist who has benefitted from residency opportunities at the Ranch, where he paints and shows his work.

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Our first social work in Helena had to do with children at risk because my sister took a job at what was called the Attention Home. We started bringing the kids out to the ranch and having them work for us. It turned out to be quite successful in that many kids (and not everyone was a child at risk) turned their lives around. We had people who worked at the ranch with very humble backgrounds be-

come professionals like doctors, naturopaths and editors of magazines and newspapers.

One of the biggest things that I think that the Foundation has done in the last 32 years is that we've created a form of employment where we pay well so kids can pay for college, but mostly that they had access to what was being taught at the ranch. People don't generally count employing people as social

activism, but I think that we can safely say it was activist work.

Good food and right livelihood are both important. So much of our life is spent in work, if we don't like what we eat or where we work, we're guaranteed not to have a happy life.

FM: You've been involved in other service activities as well.

S: One of the missions of our Foundation is to help indigenous cultures, so one of our other types of service is involvement in the Tibetan Children's Education Foundation (tibetanchildrenseducation.org). We've sponsored the education of thousands of Tibetan children, with far-reaching effects. Through that project, we've supported Tibetan cultural projects including tangkha painters and carpet weavers to keep those crafts alive. We've brought artists to Montana for receptions in Missou-

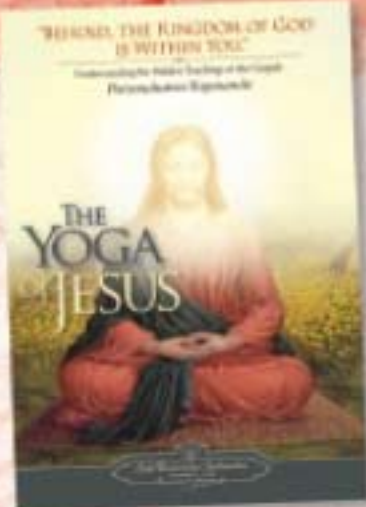
I believe the essence of human condition is impermanence. We have to decide what we want to do with it: our lives can be well spent we can use because organic growing is so much healthier for the growers and it is so much healthier for the planet

la, parties in Spokane, an exhibit at the Holtzer Museum in Helena and we've sold their work at the ranch. They were able to display their art, talk about Tibetan culture, sell their work and return home with savings.

FM: You've also worked with Native American indigenous traditions.

S: When I came to Montana from India, I realized I arrived in Indian country just by chance, I inherited land in the heart of ceremonial grounds. Pat Kennedy is a Cree elder whom we worked with who taught us the

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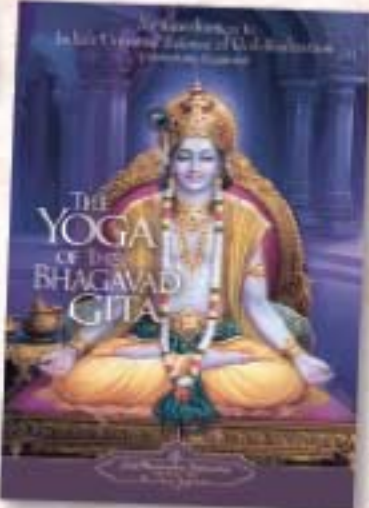


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sweat lodge ceremony, and through his grace and the grace of many, we hosted 10 international peace camps. We invited everybody from all races and cultures to learn ceremony. When Pat died three years ago, hundreds of people came to keep the dances alive, and

People are activists without even knowing it

keep the project alive that was started by the Foundation. We've brought shamanic leader Brent Segunda to the ranch and Huichol elder Don Jose; when he came, elders jumped at the opportunity to participate in ceremony.

We've also done a lot of work with Native American artists, offering residency programs at the Ranch, supporting arts boards, artists refuge and art markets.

FMT: You also have annual programs for people with HIV/AIDS.

S: I'm really proud of our work with the women and men with AIDS program. It started 17 years ago, when being HIV positive or having AIDS was a death penalty. Hundreds of women and men from rural areas have attended over the years. We work to educate them about AIDS; we bring in massage therapists, healers and researchers. Out of those retreat groups of activists have developed. People created newsletters and sponsored talks and conferences.

FMT: How do these different types of work come together for you?

S: There is a Navajo quote: the process of life is to become fully human. And I believe the essence of the human condition is impermanence. We have to decide what we want to do with it: our lives can be well-spent and people are activists without even knowing it. For instance, there are healthy ways of using less. And we especially benefit from being kind to one another.

We see the goodness in enlightened beings like Sai Baba or Mother Theresa, the magnitude of love and light that gathers. As we go towards our own light, we get rid of the things that keep us from being fully enlightened, fully human. Yoga can be something

that gets us still inside, and gives us a vision of where life can go.

FMT: Is there anything you would like to say in closing?

S: I feel that all of us should have gratitude for the work that we do, to have the chance, the luck to serve. There's this element in India of bhag, or luck, especially good luck. We could have been born in a place where we're work-

ing 15 hours a day. But we have the luxury to do service, to do our yoga practice. Serving is what feeds me, and I'm grateful everyday.

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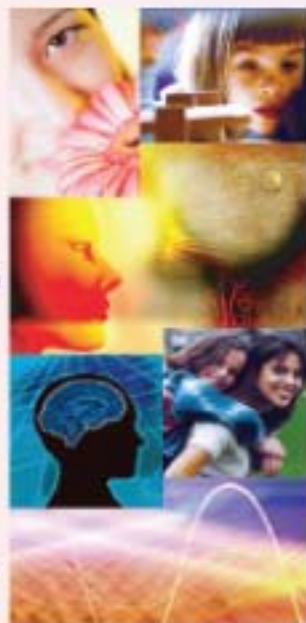
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