

Tuesday, July 4th, 2006

## Breathing for balance

**The Art of Living teaches followers to find inner peace and then work for it in the world**

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The Good Life - Carolin Vesely

THE world John Lennon asked us to imagine materialized on an airfield outside the south-India city of Bangalore last February when 2.5 million people from around the globe -- including a dozen or so Winnipeggers -- gathered to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the world's largest volunteer-run non-governmental organization.

For three days there were no countries, no religions.

The Art of Living Foundation's silver jubilee -- dubbed the first "spiritual Olympics" -- saw kings, presidents and prime ministers mingle with corporate executives, backpackers and rural villagers.

Indians and Pakistanis, Chinese and Taiwanese, Bosnians and Serbians, and Iraqis and Americans sat together in the largest group meditation in history.

At the helm of this sea of humanity was a diminutive, long-haired Hindu guru whose approach to building a better world has attracted followers in 147 countries and earned him a 2006 Nobel Peace Prize nomination. (Anti-poverty activist/rock star Bono is also on the list.)

AOLF founder Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (not to be confused with Norah Jones' sitar-playing father) will visit Winnipeg in September to spread his simple message:

Think globally, learn to breathe locally.

Two million people have already gotten that message by taking the AOLF's yogic breathing and meditation courses, currently being taught in such diverse locales as New Delhi prisons,

European ashrams and downtown Winnipeg hotels. Around 200 locals have taken the course since it was introduced to the city in 2004.

The six-day, 23-hour workshops (\$250, \$125 for students) touch on Shankar's philosophy of mindfulness, compassion and community service, and include some basic yoga postures.

But the centrepiece is a powerful rhythmic breathing technique called the Sudarshan Kriya (Sanskrit for "right vision, purifying action"). The 90-minute process, developed by Shankar in 1982, is said to eliminate 80 per cent of toxins, release stored negative emotions, and restore the natural cycles of the body and mind. (Students learn a 25-minute version to practise at home.)

Shankar has likened it to "diving deep into your own being."

Louise Charette, a CBC Radio news reporter, says the kriya, as it's known in AOLFF circles, has allowed her to turn off the "alert" switch in her brain.

"My mind tends to go and go and go," says Charette, 46. "Sooner or later, you'll pay for it. I know I was paying physically."

While she admits her job's hectic pace and unpredictability are part of its draw, stress was taking its toll when she turned to the AOLFF last January.

"I tried yoga, but it ended up just being a workout. I tried Buddhist meditation, but I'd just sit there; I couldn't make it happen."

Now Charette simply sets her alarm clock early so she can breathe before heading off to work.

On Saturdays she joins a group of fellow practitioners in the penthouse of the Place Louis Riel hotel to do the full kriya, which is always followed by a meditation. (The sessions are free to anyone who has completed the course.)

Charette has only missed a day of her practice since January.

"It has enabled me to not spin," she says. "I feel like I just can't afford to do that anymore."

So what does all this deep breathing have to do with world peace?

Well, "Guruji," as Shankar's devotees refer to him, teaches that

the basis of a stable, successful civilization is a strong individual -- "disease-free body, quiver-free breath, stress-free mind, inhibition-free intellect, obsession-free memory, ego that includes all, and soul which is free from sorrow."

In other words, all the qualities that can get wiped off the human radar in a muscle-clenching moment of stress.

And since most people reportedly only use 30 per cent of their lung capacity, it can be difficult to attain the inner peace and groundedness that Shankar says are key to achieving global harmony.

Take it from a shallow breather who has taken the AOL course -- twice: learning to breathe, sudarshan-kriya style, is not an easy, or comfortable, process. It is, after all, a kind of controlled hyperventilation.

When the nasal breathing rhythm peaks (think runaway train), body temperature may drop and limbs may grow numb, cramp up or vibrate.

Some people cry, others laugh. Students are encouraged not to resist whatever emotions may arise.

It's all part of the "deep cleansing" necessary to open the mind and the heart, Swami Sukhchaitanya, one of Shankar's spiritual teachers and trainers, said during a recent visit from Toronto.

"You take a broom and you start sweeping, there will be dust all over."

The AOL has medical research centres in Asia, Europe and the United States where studies are being done on the kriya's health benefits for cancer, HIV, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental ailments.

In 2000, a study at India's National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences concluded that daily practice was as effective as a standard antidepressant in treating patients hospitalized with severe depression.

Ruchi Sud, a Toronto naturopath who moved here last winter to teach the AOL course, says she responded with disinterest when her mom introduced her to the concept in 2001.

"I already knew how to breathe, and I wasn't that stressed," says Sud, who attended the silver jubilee in Bangalore with her brother Abhimanyu, a Toronto medical student who is also teaching the course here this summer.

So what changed for Sud?

"Only my perspective on life," she says, laughing.

"I just started seeing the world differently, wanting to make a difference."

Sud says the breath is simply a tool with which people can connect with their own power, a prerequisite for building stronger relationships, families, communities and, ultimately, a better world.

"There's nothing in this world that comes close to experiencing your own being," she says. "Then, as that feeling grows inside of you, you can't help but want to share it with others."

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*"To be able to deal with our mind and negative emotions is an art:*

*the Art of Living."*

-- Sri Sri Ravi Shankar,

founder Art of Living Foundation

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## **Following your Art**

\* Art of Living Foundation: India-based, volunteer-run NGO offering programs on stress-relief and personal and community development in 147 countries ([www.artofliving.org](http://www.artofliving.org)).

\* Sri Sri Ravi Shankar: Hindu spiritual leader and two-time Nobel Peace Prize nominee founded the AOL in 1982. Will visit Winnipeg on Sept. 6 as first stop on his 2006 One World Family Canadian Tour.

\* AOLF course: Intensive six-day yoga and meditation workshops, taken by more than three million people, began in Winnipeg in 2004. Course fee is \$250. For more information, call 633-6084 or e-mail: [artoflivingwinnipeg@yahoo.ca](mailto:artoflivingwinnipeg@yahoo.ca).

\* Sudarshan kriya: Core of the Art of Living course; a rhythmic breathing technique that infuses the body with oxygen and is said to release stress and energize and harmonize the body, mind and emotions.