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### **A Workshop with Dharma Mittra: The Road to Self-Realization**

By Cara Jepsen

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I was delighted when I learned that Dharma Mittra was giving a May workshop at Moksha Yoga Riverwest. I had taken a class with the 66-year-old master six years ago at his New York City studio and clearly remembered how he had led us through a challenging sequence of poses that led up to several I'd never tried before, let alone thought I could do. The practice had included chanting and ended with the most intense savasana of my life. As a student of ashtanga vinyasa yoga, which is "99 percent practice, one percent theory," I was eager to hear one of the country's most senior yogis talk about the latter--and was not disappointed.

Wearing baggy white gauze pants and with his gray hair tied back in a ponytail, Dharma was in a headstand when I arrived at the Moksha weekend workshop. "I will be happy to share some of the secrets that bring me some peace," he humbly told our group.

It was a rare opportunity for Midwesterners to study with the teacher of classical raja yoga, who is best known for his 1984 Master Yoga Chart of 908 postures and his recent book, *Asanas: 608 Yoga Poses*.

Dharma was raised Catholic in southeast Brazil and discovered yoga in the 1950s through his younger brother's books on the topic. Dharma, a former gymnast and bodybuilder, injured his knee in the Brazilian Air Force in 1961. During recuperation he began to practice deep relaxation. Three years later he followed his brother to New York City to join the ashram of Sri Swami Kailashananda (aka Yogi Gupta, who brought hatha yoga to the US in the 1950s and



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wrote *Yoga and Yogic Powers* and *Yoga and Long Life*). In 1967 his guru told him to begin teaching, and in 1975 Dharma left his ashram and founded the Yoga Asana Center (now called the Dharma Yoga Center).

He decided to make the well-known chart as a gift to his teacher and spent the next several years collecting poses (some of which he found in unillustrated texts) and shot the photos and did the layout himself.

This workshop's four sessions began with chanting and pranayama and concluded with asana and meditation. Dharma, whose style is straightforward and compassionate, also 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.

Dharma reminded us that the purpose of yoga is self- or God-realization--"to bring the consciousness up" and see God everywhere. He said it also is used to activate the sixth sense--that of divine perception--and "be able to see who you are."

The first step, he said, was ahimsa, or nonviolence. "Respect everything and divine love will flow through you very fast."

He also advised us to meditate each day--even if it's just for five minutes. He said we should meditate not to feel good but to study and separate the mind from the self--"to find the 'I am.'"

Then he told us a story about a man who came to him for advice. He had meditated for 30 years but could find no spiritual peace. "It turned out he was eating too much meat," said Dharma. "He was a butcher. I told him to change his profession immediately."



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“Without the first step--ahimsa (nonviolence)--you gain nothing with meditation,” he reiterated. You get stuck in your chakras “when deep in your heart you know that as a real yogi you should be able to put yourself into someone else’s place. You should be able to put yourself in the place of a cow. Would you like for people to bring you to the slaughterhouse and take meat from you?”

He said that eating meat turns the stomach into a graveyard. “If there’s a nice house with a carcass in it, it turns into a morgue. If Rama and Jesus came and saw this house, they would not go in. They would wait outside.”

“So if you’re not a vegetarian yet, reduce the amount of meat intake,” Dharma encouraged.

As for dealing with unsavory people, he said, “You should love even the bad man. But keep your distance. If you start despising them it bounces back. If you send the negative thoughts out, it flows back to you.”

He described the chakras from the bottom up, comparing the lower ones to AM radio, then moving up through FM, black-and-white TV, color TV and finally to high-definition TV and divine perception.

“Once it gets to the top chakra, the prana (life force) never goes down. Then you can see from here the reality. You do not have to put your legs behind your head.”

He said that when he started doing yoga he had knee issues and did most of his meditating in “Egyptian pose--sitting on a chair with my hands on my knees.”

We also did several breathing exercises. “In yoga we believe that everyone is born with a certain amount of breaths. Breathing fast causes the senses to go faster. If it's slow, craving and desires



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stop. Meditation, good diet, pranayama and slow breathing extend life. If you are content and have no doubts, you use less energy and expand your span of life.”

We did a mood-improving, positive breathing exercise, which consisted of an eight-count inhale and eight-count exhale through the right nostril. It’s good to do if the body is cold, if food is not digesting properly, if the mind is fearful or “if you are not positive” (which made me think I should do this every single day). Dharma said that it should be practiced for at least five minutes, but ideally 10 to 15 minutes to make the mind feel positive. “Then you are calm. You can face any situation if you are calm. If you do this for three hours, you can face a firing squad.”

Dharma said he suspected many of us half-believed in some things such as reincarnation and karma. “How many of you believe you came here with just a one-way ticket?” he asked. “What if you don’t accomplish what you want in this life, and you’re just a one-way incarnation?”

He said that bad karma does indeed follow one into the next life, and that the aforementioned butcher would face violence in his next incarnation. His guru said that when people help you, they are from your past. “If you died with money in the bank, it’ll be there in your next life--with interest. Everything has reasons from the past.”

After one morning session, some students were talking about Dharma’s hard-line take on vegetarianism. “I understand what he’s saying, but I can’t give up fish,” said one. “I mean, I’ve been a vegetarian for ten years because of yoga, but I just love fish.” That afternoon, after chanting the Govinda mantra, Dharma began his talk by explaining that animals are like children, without hate. Then he discussed how many fish suffer so those humans can eat them. “It takes how many minutes for them to die without water? Animals are made to be loved, not to be eaten.

“If you have to eat meat, wait for one of the great saints to die and feast on his flesh. Then the vibrations will be positive.”



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Before each asana practice he gave us a few pointers. “We must move together. If it is too much for you, pretend and keep moving together.” Then he showed us how to properly stretch the shoulders in downward-facing dog and how to hold our heels in uttanasana (standing forward bend): rest the chest on the thighs before trying to straighten the legs. He showed us a variation on monkey pose (a deep lunge), in which we could try to bend the knee and grab the foot. He also showed us the parallels between various poses and was amazingly flexible.

Each time we got on our mats for asana practice, he reminded us--with his characteristic gentleness--of why we were there. “When you do asanas you renounce the fruits. Every pose is for the Lord.”

Expectation of the results of your actions makes the mind restless, he said. “When you offer it up to the Lord, you get all the benefits.”

He also said, “If you see someone [in a yoga pose] with a leg behind [his/her] head, don’t think it’s someone else. Think, ‘It’s me.’”

We started with his challenging Shiva Namaskar (salutation to Lord Shiva) sequence, which included many repetitions of one-legged downward dog, warrior I, parvritta parsvakonasana (revolved side-flank pose), and vasistasana (side plank pose) and ended with an optional drop back from standing into backbend, which Dharma demonstrated with ease. A few people followed his example.

The sequences that followed were both challenging and fun. Some poses were only for the most flexible students. “Try this if you are under 60,” he would say, and some people would give it a shot. It was especially amusing to see him demonstrate different variations of natarajasana (dancing warrior pose) that concluded with him in standing splits (see photo). Again I found myself doing some poses I’d never seen before, let alone tried.



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At one point he explained in a very serious tone our next asana. The next thing we knew we were doing jumping jacks with kapalabhati breathing (breath of fire). Doing it made me feel like I was five years old, and I actually laughed out loud (very unusual during a yoga practice) .

In another sweaty practice, we went from bakasana (crow) to sirasana (headstand) to chaturanga dandasana (plank pose). We also tried baddha hasta sirasana (bound headstand), with the hands on the back, which is far more difficult than it looks.

We also did a kurmasana (tortoise) sequence that included a variation of pasasana (noose), bakasana (crow) and nakrasana (hopping crocodile, which--who knew? --can be done with bent knees if necessary). He also had us hopping up and down in firefly pose. We also did yoganidrasana (sleeping yogi pose) at one point.

The final sequence included a toe-crushing backbend I'd never seen before, called couch pose (and which I'd rather not see again for some time). That was followed by a deep, 27-minute guided relaxation that was out of this world.

The other sessions ended with a 20-minute guided savasana. Afterwards, feeling very relaxed, we either chanted or meditated or heard a dharma talk (or all three). After the last session we did a walking meditation, which was incredibly calming.

Throughout the workshop, he kept reiterating the importance of one's thoughts and actions, and he said we should read the Yoga Sutras and the Bhagavad Gita (he also admitted that those were the only two books he's read from start to finish). "All yogis must have the yoga sutras. Without them, you go nowhere. It is like spaghetti without the sauce."

Dharma Mittra does annual teacher trainings and regular retreats in upstate New York. You can find his poster at the Dharma Yoga Center, 297 Third Avenue (at 23rd Street) in New York City, or call 212.889.8160 or go to [dharmayogacenter.com](http://dharmayogacenter.com).



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