



Swami Durgananda's Search for Spirituality *By Penny Rankin*

It is no wonder Swami Durgananda, Principal of Samata Yoga worldwide, comes across as one of the most content and positive women I have ever met. She has achieved her childhood dream of fulfilling her destiny. She has reached a point whereby, she says, "If I die today, I would have no regrets".

Samata Yoga, or "Samata Samashti Dharma" as it is traditionally called in India, is a very old yoga, dating back thousands of years. The teachings of Samata Yoga are older than Hinduism, Christianity and Buddhism. One of its aims is to encourage people to achieve personal satisfaction with their lives; to learn to love oneself and all of creation as one. Swami Durgananda stresses that Samata Yoga is not affiliated with any religion. Instead, it sees the Universal Truth in all religions. Samata Yoga also teaches "healthy body, healthy mind" whereby food is just as important as exercise and mental wellbeing.

From a very early age, Swami Durgananda began her search for God. During the 60s and 70s Swami began to hear of a form of Yoga called Raj Yoga. In those days, it was extremely difficult to find a teacher qualified to lead her further into this little-known form of yoga. She thought that this must be the way to know God so searched for a spiritual teacher in the USA, England and Europe. At this stage, she was already a Hatha and Meditation Yoga teacher in Melbourne but that was not enough. "I was simply after some sort of spiritual teacher", she says. "Someone who would teach me more about metaphysics and that kind of thing, in those days yoga was just exercise". After a fruitless search for a teacher across England and Europe, Swami travelled to India in 1974 with her then husband and three children. It soon became obvious to Swami that she was part way towards reaching her destiny. In describing how she felt when she arrived in Delhi, Swami says "I felt familiar here despite never before having visited the country".

It was a special night at a Cocktail Party in Delhi that an acquaintance suggested Swami visit her uncle who was Guru and Master of Samata Yoga, H.H. Neelkanthaji Maharaj. Swami wisely followed up this recommendation, arranging a meeting with Maharaj in his home town of Barsana, 145km south of Delhi. Swami describes Barsana as a village that lacked adequate services and transportation and where disease was prevalent. Smallpox had broken out just shortly before her arrival! "It was in those days the most God-forsaken place", she says. "I believe I was the first Westerner to go there. There was not one toilet in the whole place".

Upon meeting Maharaj and having been invited into his home or ashram, Swami's first impression was that he was a "very kind man" but "not a very good teacher". During their initial time together, it was common for Maharaj to teach Swami in silence. Maharaj taught according to the traditional way. This was the way of Sufism where knowledge is passed on through thought-transference. "I would be with my teacher for a whole month and he would not say one word ... then he would tell me to leave and I'd just sit there and say no." This is just one of the difficulties Swami faced in the small village and she attributes this, in part, to the fact, she was a white, western female. Not only did Maharaj initially express a reluctance to teach her because she was a woman but fellow male colleagues ignored her. "When I first became a Swami, all the men used to sit with their backs to me", she says. "Our lineage was never for women". Swami admits that to do what she did at the time was difficult and required a strong

mind. “There’s certain mental austerities that you go through that if you don’t have a very strong mind, you won’t be able to get there”.

She finally gained approval from Maharaj and was initiated as Principal and Master of Samata Yoga worldwide. Swami recalls the moment he told her. “You will be the one who takes over this role”, her teacher said. And she reacted with reluctance, she recalls jokingly. “I said, can’t you get somebody else?” But the Indian Master had enormous faith in Swami to carry on the tradition of Samata Yoga, telling her that the Masters of the Lineage of Samata Yoga had watched and waited for (her) birth”.

Swami was thereafter guided by Maharaj and said she felt very inspired by him. He too, seemed to care greatly for her. Infected with malaria at one stage of her life in India, Swami came close to death. But Maharaj cared for her. “My teacher actually had to carry me to the toilet and carry me back”. “He massaged my feet and my legs ... he peeled mandarin and peeled the skin off the mandarin ... and squeezed it into my mouth”. She says she “hung on” for 4-5 days and when close to death saw a vision of her eldest son. She recited the vision to Maharaj, who then said, “You are about to die but I won’t allow it ... now you will come well”. During the time of her illness, all of the power failed in Barsana. There was no electricity. Now, suddenly the lights came on. Swami slowly recovered. When asked why Maharaj had put her through such a horrific ordeal, she explained her experience was one that all Masters have to face in order to reach their destiny. Smiling, Swami admits Samata Yoga Masters “have a lot of powers they don’t tell you about”.

After spending an initial two years training for her Mastership in India, Swami was instructed by her teacher to return to Australia for seven years. Returning to Australia without her mentor by her side “was very difficult”, Swami admits. She thought she was returning to Australia for a short holiday. Instead, her husband abandoned her and their three children with no money, no passport and no home - Swami’s life changed dramatically. She travelled back and forth between Melbourne and India for a period of 15 years. So that she could devote more time to teaching Samata Yoga in Australia she agreed to her Master’s request that she marry again. She was married happily for 18 years until her husband’s recent death.

40 years on, Swami has fulfilled her destiny. She has bought an ashram in Ballarat where she says she will spend her days in retirement reflecting on her fortunate life. Swami, a healer of remarkable ability recites stories of the people she has helped during her time, most of whom take up Samata Yoga during a low point in their life and who want to change in order to rediscover themselves. The lives of the majority of these people, she says, have changed for the better because of practicing Samata Yoga.

For now, Swami will embark on her search for a successor Master, hoping that at the same time Samata Yoga continues to grow in Australia. In the meantime, Swami pays tribute to Maharaj, explaining how lucky she feels to have met him. Her meeting with Maharaj changed the course of her life for the better and allowed her to finally fulfill her destiny.

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