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## **A Yogic Passage from Punjab India to West Chicago**

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### **Yog Sadhan Ashram in West Chicago, IL**

When I first heard about Yog Sadhan Ashram in West Chicago, I could not believe that a yogic sanctuary of this kind existed within such close proximity to downtown Chicago. My disbelief turned into amazement during my first visit. Nested in the outskirts of the town of West Chicago, the property is vast and houses several buildings, including a gigantic gymnasium that the former owner used as a helicopter hangar. Over 75 elks grazed idly and bugled loudly on the neighboring land. Surrounded by many acres of green land and tall trees, on a clear and crisp Sunday morning, I saw many aspiring yogis from all races and walks of life practicing asanas, chanting mantras and learning cleansing techniques. It was easy to forget that this little-known and even less publicized yogic haven was only 45-minutes drive away from the hustle-and-bustle of the one of the largest cities in the country. The distant sound of the highway 355 remained my only point of connection to the real world.

The satwic air that permeates the pastoral property roots from the yogic hearts of Mike and Hersh Kheterpal who run the only ashram in the Chicagoland area. Beautiful both inside and out, Hersh Kheterpal's face lights up when she talks about her father Shri Chaman Lal Kapur of Horshiarpur, India whom she refers to as "Guruji". She nostalgically reminisces the days when her father, now 90-years young, sat her on his lap and introduced her to the teachings of Bhagavat Gita. As a little girl, Hersh had two

knights in white satin to dream about: The protagonists of the world's oldest epic tale, Sri Krishna, the God incarnate, and Arjuna the enlightened warrior. Hersh started meditating and practicing cleansing techniques at the age of six and hasn't stopped since. After many decades of studying, her father bestowed upon her the title of "Acharya", allowing her to spread the yogic teachings of the lineage. An expert of scriptures, including Upanishads, Bhagavat Gita and the Yoga Sutras, Hersh still consults with Guruji on fine points of the yogic philosophy during their weekly phone conversations on Thursdays. Although thousands of miles apart, Hersh credits Guruji's blessings for her success in reaching out to many Chicagoland area residents from all walks of life. She summarizes her vision of teaching yoga as spreading the feeling of peace that she feels all the time to all.

Sunday mornings at the Ashram start with a guided morning meditation and a hatha yoga practice. After the chai service adults take the Bhagavat Gita class with Hersh while children practice yoga asanas with another instructor. Lovingly prepared vegetarian lunch follow Satsang and spiritual discussion. The Ashram has recently added Hindi and Sanskrit classes to their list of offerings. The rest of the days of the week have a plethora of learning and yogic experience opportunities from Havan Ceremony (fire ritual) to Yoga Sutra discussions. Weekend workshops allow yogis to listening to the sound of chirping birds and yogis chanting mantras. Hersh and Mike stress that Hersh's father, Guruji, kept the doors of ashram open for everyone without charging fees and by accepting donations. They are committed to continue this tradition.

I remember the awestruck state of mind I found myself in after I attended Hersh's Bhagavat Gita discourse for the first time. Never in my life, a holy scripture became so

accessible and comprehensible to me. Hersh aims to connect the ancient teachings to our day-to-day lives and elaborates each schlock as it relates to the lives of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Westerners. A discussion between the enlightened warrior Arjuna and the God Incarnate Sri Krishna suddenly becomes a manifestation of the debates that take place in the mind of an everyday modern person, bringing us closer to understanding ourselves and becoming enlightened warriors in heart. Hersh's melodic voice wiped away my fears about wasting away the practices I had done in this lifetime and starting from scratch next time around, in case I cannot reach enlightenment before my physical body disintegrates. Quoting Sri Krishna from the 6<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Bhagavat Gita, Hersh assured us that we will take birth in a yogic environment conducive to continue our practices where we have left off. This explanation lifted a heavy weight off my heart.

While fully participating in life as a wife, a mother and a professional in the corporate world, Hersh maintained her yogic practices and dreams of bringing the teachings of her father's lineage to the US. Her dream came true in 1992 when she started Yog Sadhan Ashram with the goal of teaching all aspects of yoga from asana and pranayama to meditation and scriptures to anyone who is interested. As the attendance to the Ashram grew exponentially over the years, the need to find to a larger place became imperative. In 2005, Mike and Hersh came across the grand estate in the town of West Chicago which now houses Yog Sadhan Ashram. Surrounded by security cameras and embellished with ostentatious trimmings, this magnificent property seemed like a far cry from the modest life style the yogi couple advocated. Nevertheless, it had the capacity to accommodate many yogis and provide them with the opportunity to immerse in the nature. Using their savings they made the biggest investment of their lives, taking out a

large mortgage as they put their trust in the hands of the universe to guide them on their path to help others. Amidst tears of their daughter who was worried about their monthly payments and the flabbergasted yoga students who were awestruck by the splendor of the new Ashram, Mike and Hersh stood unshaken, free from all attachments as it is taught in the 12<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Bhagavat Gita.

Interestingly enough, the property belonged to a stockbroker. The stark contrast of the two owners of the estate at the two opposite ends of the spectrum is yet another manifestation of the play of the universe. The former owner adorned the property with grandiose embellishments and luxurious features. As a leap of faith, this property fell into the hands of yogis, who moved in with few modest belongings and kept their doors open for everyone.

Following a grueling battle with the county zoning board, who took a lot of pressure from a neighboring religious establishment, the ashram finally gained its non-profit status and opened its doors to all who have a thirst for higher knowledge.

When Hersh extended an open invitation for all of us to join her on her annual trip to Hoshiarpur, Punjab to visit Guruji's ashram to experience a real yogic style life I knew I needed no further convincing. The plan was to be there on or before the end of March 2007 to celebrate Guruji's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday.

### **Yog Sadhan Ashram in Hoshiarpur Punjab**

On March 23, 2007 I set out to discover yoga as it is practiced in the country where it was originated. A group of 14 from eclectic backgrounds, from a poet to a school principle to a dentist, all affiliated with Yog Sadhan in Chicago Ashram in one

way or other, had arrived a day earlier than I did. After a 15 hour flight and a 10-hour car ride I stepped inside a true Indian ashram where no Westerner had ever visited.

Soon after my arrival, someone escorted me into a small room where artti was taking place. The members of my group were already settled in what would be their new home for the next three weeks, chanting along with the locals. Hersh's father, Satgurudev Shri Chaman Lal Kapur, called "Guruji" by his students was in deep meditation with his eyes closed.

Ashram devotees gladly and proudly shared with me the history of their lineage: The lineage started with Ram (Prabu Ram Lalji), who was born in 1888 in Amritsar. Before his teenage years, Ram Lalji set out to look for a Yogi Guru in his home town of Amritsar. Disappointed but not discouraged, his search took him to the hills of Nepal. One day, the God incarnate Lord Shiva, in the form of an old man appeared and woke him up from his sleep. Together they flew to Kailash Mountain at Tibet border. Lord Shiva stayed with Ram Lalji for 2.5 years. During that time, many miracles happened where Ram Lalji acquired super-human powers, called siddhis in Sanskrit. Shiva told him to go back to the cities and towns and bring yoga to the householders. Ram Lalji opened the first ashram in Amritsar, and then another one in Rishikesh. His disciple was Mulakh Raj, who stayed in Samadhi for 10 years upon finding his Guru. During that time, with eyes closed, from the outside he led the life of a householder and a professional, while remaining in deep meditation from the inside. So intense was his focus on his practice, once he opened his eyes his face maintained the stern expression that is depicted in his pictures.

The current perpetuator of the lineage, Shri Chaman Lal Kapur was a student in Lahore, Pakistan when he saw Ram Lalji in his dream. He knew he was on the right path when he went to the Ashram in Lahore where he saw the same picture of Ram Lalji as he had seen in his dream. He became a disciple of Ram Lalji's disciple Mr. Mulakh Raj and eventually opened the Ashram in Hoshiarpur in 1952. Adhering faithfully to the teachings of the scriptures, Guruji started spreading his yogic knowledge to Hoshiarpur and beyond while at the same time continuing his professional life as a school principle and a Sanskrit scholar.

Educating his own children who would later become renowned yoga teachers on their own, Guruji opened the doors of the Ashram to diverse group of followers from his region and beyond. During aarti, prominent businessmen sit by side with simple mountain people and share the same kind of devotion and oneness. I could not help but noticed the stunning beauty of people from the mountains. Regardless of their age, they all glowed with inner joy and peace. I was told that they owed their radiance to the fresh air of the Himalayas, their practice of Bhakti (devotional) yoga, and their simple life which is devoid of greed and stress. Happily smiling for the camera while outside, they were also the first ones to fall down to Guruji's feet in spiritual bliss during the ceremonies. Although this became a quiet common sight with more and more people going into trans and lying motionless on the floor, there were more mountain people, especially women going through this experience than anybody else. The reason, they explained me, was because these folks had even less attachments and material possessions than the most, hence it was easy for them to connect to their inner spirituality. I witnessed one woman hitting the floor head on, her glass bangles shattered

and scattered all over. Staying in trans at Guruji's feet for over an hour, she then got up, inexplicably unscathed from the impact of the fall.

The life at the Hoshiarpur Ashram starts no later than 4:30 AM. Devotees greet the new day as they faithfully practice "Shat-karmas", the six yogic cleansing techniques. To prevent asthma and clean their stomachs they swallow a long cloth (dhauti), to keep their nasal passage clean, they insert a rubber tube inside the nostril and pull it out through the mouth. Hence, every morning I continued with my personal meditation practice against the background sound effect of chorus of yogis disgorging and spewing. After awhile this sound became as familiar to me as the sound of flushing toilets early in the morning in American households. My friend Marina, who is also a yoga teacher succeeded in teaching me the rubber neti practice after several tries. At first trying to pass a rubber tube down my nasal passage and worst yet, grabbing the other end inside my throat and pulling it out sounded like an act fit for circus acts. Having learned that massaging and cleaning the mucus membrane inside the nose had a profound impact on your first and sixth chakras, muladhara and ajna respectively, I set my intention to remove all my preconceived notions and learn this technique. To my delight, this practice leaves you with a clearer mind and a feeling of calmness. In India, neti pot that is heralded in the West is spurned for not doing a thorough job.

At Guruji's birthday celebration, we have feasted our eyes on the demonstrations by young yogis who drank ghee (clarified butter) through their nostrils and left it in there to be absorbed by their nasal passages. As a matter of fact, nourishing the inner organs with ghee is a common practice in ayurveda. Some ashram devotees swallowed six feet

of cloth, whereas others drank milk through their nose, displaying perfect yogic control of their physical bodies.

During our stay, we have visited several small towns where Guruji's students opened their hearts and homes to us. Committed to live according to the Scriptures, Guruji, at the fourth and last stage of his life according to the Vedas, no longer travels to the foothills of the Himalayas where he brought yoga to many in his earlier days. Instead, one of his children brings his blessings and represents him during the ceremonies that take place outside of the Ashram in Hoshiarpur.

During one such visit to the city of Chandigarh in honor of Guruji's birthday, Hersh reverted to English during her sermon and addressed us coming from the US. Insightfully quoting from Bhagavat Gita, she first acknowledged the difficulties we faced in an environment we were not used to, from sitting on the floor for long hours to being away from the conveniences we had at home. She then went on to describe sattvic bliss, manifesting itself as result of spiritual practices. Not related to the immediate experience of sense pleasures which dissipate as quickly as they arise, sattvic bliss, she added, is not an outcome of a physical stimulus, but is the work of the mind. It is the purity that is unpleasant in the stage of purification and that ends suffering once and for all. Her words provided comfort to a certain extent as we tried to relieve the pain in our hips due to sitting on the floor for many hours. The souvenir stalls outside the satsang hall had a very limited selection consisting of rubber neti tubes of various width, dhauti clothes and lapel pins of the Gurus of the lineage.

The lineage focuses on a formless universal power to the extent that the ashram is completely devoid of pictures and sculptures of deities that are common in any yogic

establishment. Vedas, Upanishads, Yoga Sutras and Bhagavat Gita are all for devotees to recite and follow. However, the first four chapters of Bhagavat Gita is the focal point of the teachings at both Ashrams at two ends of the world. Ashram devotees in Hoshiarpur chant a version that is summarized by Guruji everyday, reaffirming their commitment to follow their dharmas without any attachment to the fruits of their actions.

Almost all of Guruji's satsangs emphasized the importance of Hatha Yoga to keep the physical body healthy, strong and clean. My friend Marina and I ended up demonstrating many advanced asanas at the request of Guruji and Hersh, to encourage local practitioners, especially women, to take up a more serious physical practice. Our audiences displayed their appreciation by tossing rupees at us.

Long trips on the mountainous roads on the foothills of Himalayas brought us closer to our hosts. The devotees enthusiastically shared their individual accounts of why they chose Yog Sadhan Ashram over other facilities. The common denominator was the balanced approach to Bhakti, Raja and Hatha Yoga. Most of them also had stories about Guruji's healing powers: Following a regimen of asanas, pranayama, meditation and life style changes, infertile women gave birth to healthy babies, near-dead patients revived, and stomach ailments disappeared.

Speaking in English fluently and eloquently, Guruji eagerly answered our questions about Bhakti Yoga and Bhagavat Gita. We all received our signed copies of Bhagavat Gita in English with his comments. Advocating a life of simplicity, he discourages extravagant weddings that are ingrained in the Indian culture. Accordingly, Hersh performs simple ceremonies at the Ashram. The center part of the celebration is Havan, the fire ceremony. A carefully selected and mixed offerings are thrown into the

fire while chanting mantras. The spectacularly dressed groom and his equally adorned, demure young bride sat silently on the floor while the audience paid homage to each vayu, different manifestations of the life force in the individual body.

The generosity of devotees knows no boundaries. Individual homes double as guest houses in no time. Every Indian household is willing and able to feed a large number of guests within a moment's notice. They prepare and serve food skillfully, expeditiously and lovingly. My most memorable experience related to Indian hospitality is a prominent businessman from the area washing our feet to display humbleness and his respect to his Guru's American guests.

### **Reflections of the Trip and the Ashrams**

When I came back from the trip, it took me sometime to assimilate the experience. It was amazing to see how different, yet how similar the practices were. On one hand, the yoga in the Ashram in Horshiarpour is more devotional, whereas the yoga in West Chicago is more intellectual. On the other hand, both ashrams are non-denominational, free-of-charge and emphasize a balanced combination of Bhakti, Hatha and Raja yoga paths. The most prominent teaching from the scriptures that both Hersh, and her father Guru stress is about performing one's duties without any attachment to the outcome. Committed to bringing yoga to the ordinary people, Hersh and Shri Chaman Lal Kapur clearly discourage householders to leave everything to seek out an ascetic path in the solitude of a cave. Although more challenging, the philosophy that both ashrams teach to their students is about leading a yogic life and working towards enlightenment without changing anything from the outside, but changing plenty from the inside.

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