



# OM meets... Yogi Ashokananda

With a passion for horse riding, Yogi Ashokananda - yoga's Easy Rider - is not your average Indian guru

Yoga and meditation master Yogi Ashokananda has been in high demand since moving to London from India about eight years ago. He is now teaching at some of the capital's top yoga centres including Triyoga in Primrose Hill, Camden's Alchemy and the Special Yoga Centre, as well as putting together a debut DVD. During his time here, he's also worked personally with top celebrities and high-flying business folk, though you'd never guess: at least, there are no visible signs of work stress on his face.

In many ways the antithesis of your stereotype Indian guru, Ashokananda is young for a start, or at least youthful in appearance. Nobody - including the great man himself - is really sure quite how old he is, with births in India not recorded with the same attention to accuracy years ago as they were in the UK. The best guess (from the

man himself) is around 35-40. What he does know for sure is that it was just after the rainy season.

He's smiley, chatty and great fun to hang out with. He's also a horse riding fan, not a pursuit commonly associated with the calming ways of the ancient discipline that is yoga. Plus he has a fondness for some ageing BBC TV sitcoms (Last of the Summer Wine, Ronnie Barker's Open All Hours) dating back to when he first arrived in the UK.

Now, in true yogic style, he doesn't even possess a TV set, but his passion for all things life, love and laughter - nurtured in his early childhood by his grandfather back in India who first introduced him to yoga - clearly survives and thrives.



"If you have those things, then people can also give them to you," he says. "If you don't have them, then nobody can give them to you." He pulls out an analogy: in hope of drinking mango juice, you're always squeezing lemons - the upshot is that life will always taste bitter.

### Keeping it light

But don't think that means you'll get too much overt philosophy in his classes, with Ashokananda keen to maintain the light touch. "I don't preach in my classes and I don't teach philosophy. What I do give people is the possibility to laugh out loud, or to cry, or to scream, whatever they are feeling." He says his idea of yoga is all about freedom, self-awareness and expression, in helping students to understand themselves a little better. "It should be celebrated: celebrate your body, celebrate your mind."

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What you will get in his classes are Himalayan Hatha Yoga, Power Yoga and Kriya Yoga, all based on traditional principles. These are themes that are explored in his recent DVD, with a particular emphasis on Kriya, or anti-ageing, a topic never far from people's minds here in the West. The dynamic yoga flow DVD is arranged in three 20-minute segments to be played as a complete workout or as individual sessions.

Ashokananda says the DVD programme is designed to work together to build strength, inner confidence and revitalise the body. "The Power and Strengthening sessions are based on building inner and outer strength: the Strengthening Practice helps cleanse and revitalise mind and body, while the Power Within Practice is aimed at building your physical stamina whilst accepting and working with your body's current state."

Then there is the Anti Ageing Practice, a style that may have huge potential in the UK, given our general obsession with growing old but staying youthful and still looking great. "Kriya Yoga has long been highly regarded among many great masters and yogis to hold the key to slowing down the ageing process," says Ashokananda. "This programme unites the flow of physical movement with its energetic and healing powers."

### Change your life

While Kriya Yoga - or any yoga for that matter - is no guarantee you'll lose your wrinkles overnight, it's an easy-to-access route to greater vitality, the constant movement and breathing creating a strong cardiovascular workout for practitioners. Ashokananda says the practice helps stimulate greater awareness of the body, and boosts energy levels inside.

Equally important though is how students approach the practice. And keeping things light certainly ensures a more accessible class for newcomers. Despite being a lifelong practitioner himself, Ashokananda is always keen to see more people get into yoga for its life-changing benefits, whether that's anti-ageing, stress reduction, or total transformation.

Though he warns yoga's results are neither immediate nor at all predictable. It's a process that can unfold in strange and mysterious ways. "Yoga is not about to change whatever is around you," he says. "You bring yoga into your life and things change you slowly, when your mind is ready to accept these changes."

Once a student has found their way into yoga, it's effects can be enormous, influencing one another across all levels. "Take yoga into your life; take life into your yoga," he says. But he also believes far too many people - including yoga teachers - are still over-thinking things, both on the mat and in their lives. This ultimately means more de-programming is required, not more programming.

Most of all, yoga should be treated simply and lightly. "I just live and do whatever I have to do. I connect with people; I love them. I don't grasp with people to make a connection."

It's a work and life ethic that has served him well and allowed him to support others in the process. In 2008, he founded the Seta Devi School, his own charity to support education among the poor and under-privileged back in his native India.

And there's a whole lot more to come from this dynamic, horse riding, yoga guru. Next year, there are plans to publish a book on meditation. There are also retreats lined up in exotic locales such as India, Sri Lanka and, closer to home, Italy, as well as organised talks for more people to tap into this easy-riding spiritual wisdom.

Ashokananda offers a simple but universal appeal: don't get caught up in all the intricacies, the complexities, "just live, love life," he says.

