Tara's Yoga for Kids
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EDUCATION

Tara's Yoga for Kids

One noble soul takes on the public school system and wins a Vedic victory

If you think the art of yoga is only for trendy health enthusiasts or reclusive sages and no one in between Tara Guber would like to have a word with you about Yoga Ed., her program for training schoolteachers to bring yoga to toddlers and teens in US public schools.

Before Tara married Peter Guber, one of America's most successful movie producers, she taught grammar school in New York City. As a teacher, she was struck by the communication gap that existed between teachers and students. It bothered her. "Wouldn't it be nice, "she mulled, "if the education system could be improved?" Little did she know then that yoga would eventually present her with a way to do just that.

Tara first attended yoga classes back in the 1970s with her husband, who had been advised that hatha yoga might help him with a back problem. It did. At first, Tara was just tagging along for moral support. Soon, however, she became infatuated with the ancient Hindu practice and embraced it fully. In fact, she was so inspired by it, she decided to revisit the domain of child education with some new ideas about teaching. The rest is history.

In addition to founding Yoga Ed., Tara has established Yoga House, a teaching center that regularly features some of the country's finest yoga instructors. She also participated in setting up The Accelerated School (TAS) in South Central Los Angeles where Yoga Ed. is a featured system of training. She now serves on the board of directors at TAS and has co-founded a nonprofit organization called Education First.

For years she has been highly praised and profiled in a number of publications including The Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, Time magazine and Yoga Journal. When she visited the offices of Hinduism Today at Kauai's Hindu Monastery in Hawaii in September of 2003, she shared a little of her dynamism and inspiration with our editorial staff.

You are so dynamic in your work with Yoga Ed. What drives you? First of all, I really love this work. I feel it is in line with my destiny. The great thing about being in line with destiny is that passion fuels the fire. There is great inspiration. I feel that, in the bigger picture, what I really came here to do is to help solve the nation's education crisis.

How can this be accomplished through teaching yoga? Yoga is a big part of my life, personally. I've learned from my own experience what a powerful tool it is. I have learned from yoga that we can go within, shift consciousness and alter beliefs. If we can get even a little of this kind of teaching into the minds of our young people, all kinds of other problems will be also solved in the process. It's all about consciousness, which is fundamental to everything. I am very familiar with the weaknesses of public education. Believe me, yoga is just the thing that is needed.

When did you catch the idea that yoga could be such a panacea? When I started teaching in Brooklyn, I was a much different sort of person. New York was different then, too. There was a different consciousness. Back then I would tell the students, "Listen! You sit down and be quiet." Now I have more compassion. I realize that there could be so many problems that are not readily apparent like Attention Deficit Disorder. Usually, kids don't want to do and say the things they do. They just can't help it. They can't concentrate, they can't focus and they can't sit still. Compassion is needed. The first lesson I learned from yoga was about compassion. Through compassion, we can see that each child is unique and has to be treated differently. Back then, when I was teaching, I did not see this. Now I do. The difference between then and now is yoga.

So far you have talked about teaching the students. What about teaching the teachers? The teachers have to be taught first, before the students. So my first commitment is to teaching the teachers the principles and ideals of yoga for the eventual benefit of the students. I got inspired about this because of what yoga did for me. That's how this commitment to putting yoga into the school system got established in the back of mind years ago--because of my own experience. We

teach our teachers to practice yoga so that they can find a place inside themselves from which they can convey the full impact of yoga through experience.

Give us some examples of the "tools " the teachers learn to use in class. Color is a great tool. We have a song we sing about color. The lyrics go from red to orange to yellow to green, singing the meanings of the colors along the way. "Blue. I tell the truth. Indigo-intelligent. Violet. I understand." And on it goes like that.

Also during class, when negative situations occasionally come up, we take the opportunity to teach yoga in action. For example, one kid will come to school in a bad mood and say or do something negative. We will ask him, "What's happening, Eric?" He won't say anything, but we will ask him again. Finally he says, "Well, there was so much going on in my house last night I could not sleep." So the whole class learns that Eric didn't come to school to cause trouble just for the fun of it. He was just exhausted and did not feel good. The class learns that there is always a "bigger picture." Isn't wisdom a wonderful thing?

We also have something called "time in." If a child is disruptive, we allow him to practice "time in." During this practice, he goes into a separate room and sits in silence. He can return to class and join the group when he feels he is ready. We make it his choice, not ours. He decides to create a problem, and he decides to solve it.

What were some of the more rewarding moments during the implementation of this program? As we developed Yoga Ed. and used it more and more, we noticed how the kids were changing and how their relationships were greatly improving. They were becoming more aware of what they said and how they said it. They began to speak differently with each other. They were starting to understand consciousness. Also, they were starting to use yoga and meditation techniques in practical ways to prepare for making speeches or taking tests, or to become calm when they were nervous. They were learning that they had control over their lives and that yoga could bring security. This was all wonderful to see.

When you were faced with obstacles in getting yoga into the school system, did you ever feel like just giving up? There were difficulties, especially in the beginning. My friends kept telling me, "Boy, you are really sticking with this." It's true. I was. I may

have felt like giving up, but I never did. However, I must say that anything worthwhile--especially something like this that's out on the edge--takes time to accomplish, especially when it has to go through the school system. When The Accelerated School became Time magazine's School of the Year, we knew we were on the right track.

How did you sell such an innovative, yoga-based, teaching program to the notoriously conservative public school system. A lot of people have tried to do this and failed. I got into the Los Angeles Unified School District through friends. This is the real truth. Here is an example of how it would work. At Yoga House we feature famous people like Krishna Das and Sharon Salzburg. During their evening presentations before they would begin, I would mention Yoga Ed. and explain the concept of using yoga in teaching kids. One evening, this woman jumps up, runs over to me says, "I'm on the Board of Education, I'm going to help you put yoga and meditation into the Public Schools of L.A." Later, another man from the Board comes forward. He is the son of someone who worked with my husband. These two people are helping me tremendously, even now. And there are others. This is the way that it goes.

What would be an example of a problem you faced as you worked to get Yoga Ed. into the schools? I have a ranch in Aspen. So I am connected to that community. They asked me to put Yoga Ed. into the Aspen school system and I was so pleased. Yet before I knew it, I was face to face with fundamentalist Baptists and the Aspen Board of Education. I was just appalled. Basically, they told me they didn't want anybody else teaching their children anything pertaining to religion or meditation. They wanted to be the only ones to teach their children anything of this sort. They had already nit-picked our curriculum and produced a book about it which was two inches thick.

They wanted us to take out every single word that was even vaguely religious or spiritual. But we didn't take out the word yoga. They wanted us to name it "stretching and bending and pulling " or something like that. That was the last of it for me. I said, "No, the word yoga holds thousands of years of teachings." I told them I would be happy to take out any other word, but not yoga. So in three days, we did indeed take out every word but yoga. Samadhi was replaced with "oneness." Meditation was replaced with "time in." On it went like that. It was on the front page of the local newspapers. But you know, when we actually started implementing our program, we found that many people were desperate to find somebody who would teach their kids yoga.

What's the Program?

Yoga ed. is a 36-week, yoga study course created for the us public school system. Easily accessible to children from ages five through seventeen, it combines fundamental yoga techniques such as breath control, hatha yoga (physical postures) and meditation into simple 15-minute classroom-friendly sequences that just about anyone can do. The aim of the program is to help kids be better students in class. However, before students can learn these yoga practices, their teachers must be taught. For this, Tara has developed Yoga Ed. Tools for Teachers.

Tools for Teachers is a division of Yoga Ed. in which participating teachers are taught to follow a teacher's manual, developed by Tara and Leah Kalish, that provides all necessary instructions and information for creatively teaching yoga to children in a classroom environment. These teachers are also required to attend classes at local yoga studios (where they are offered special teacher's discounts). In developing this program, it was Tara's ambitious hope that by learning the actual practice of yoga, and not just the theory of it, teachers would undergo some degree of personal transformation that would enable them to convey, primarily through example, the deeper and more meaningful experience of yoga to their students in class. So far, her plan seems to be working. At The Accelerated School (TAS) where Yoga Ed. was first implemented, test scores have improved, aggression among students has greatly reduced, and kids are even meditating and practicing yoga on their own. Time magazine named TAS the 2001 Elementary School of the Year and said it was one of the nation's "most accomplished K-12 institutions " & for having "found the most promising approaches to the most pressing challenges in education."

Yoga Ed. and Tools for Teachers has been successfully implemented into the public school system primarily because it is uncomplicated and does not cost a lot of money. Those who have completed the Tools for Teachers program are certified yoga instructors who are qualified to establish yoga classes in public schools wherever they are in the country. For more information on Yoga Ed. and The Accelerated School go to http://www.accelerated.org/or http://www.yogaed.com/.