

## [The Japanese Yen for Yoga](#)

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# The Japanese Yen for Yoga

Hundreds of Hatha Yoga Studios from Nagasaki To Sapporo Mix Body Culture with Vedic Esoterics

Kashinath lives in Kyoto - that dollhouse temple/city of blue-tiled roofs, cherry blossoms, gardens, monks and monasteries. He is 48, Hindu and married to Noboku, a Japanese professor at Kyoto University. He moved there from India 6 years ago, quickly mastered the language, gutted the walls out of a fourth floor flat in a mansion house, called it Om Yoga Ashram and began teaching yoga right where he left off as an instructor at Sivananda Ashram on the banks of the Ganges in Rishikesh.

And Kashinath is not alone - nor a fish out of water. Hundreds of Indian-style yoga schools speckle the length of Japan - and find welcome. It's not a new pattern. 1,500 years ago, the teachings of an Indian prince traversed China to imbed their distilled enlightened message - Buddhism - on these same tiny islands. Vivekananda visited Japan in 1893, was awed by the Japanese's devotion to beauty and left promising to return, remarking, "Don't you see? They are Asiatics as we."

And now, 1990, Kashinath too feels a kinship: "The Japanese like me and I love them. They really take an interest in the subtler aspects of yoga like mantra. They are religiously very cosmopolitan - no inter-religious conflict or ill-will."

He starts his two-hour, US \$10 classes showing arati to an Om symbol on a low altar. Then slowly he counts out, "ichi, ni, san, si..." as his students inhale and start a good lung-exerting pranayama session. The normal fare of body-twisting follows. "I teach Patanjali yoga," he told HINDUISM TODAY on the phone, "and when I use the word yoga, I mean it comes from India, from Hinduism. I talk to my students about the Hindu Gods and Goddesses, the Ramayana and Mahabharata." And

though he teaches mudras and mantras including Om Namasivaya and Om Namō Narayanayan, he qualifies, "Still, I am not running a Hindu ashram per se. If we tell them the deeper things about the religion in the beginning, they won't understand. But after some time, their curiosity increases. Bringing in the religion is done slowly, in time." There is no rush in his voice.

## Body Shops

Most of Japan's hatha yoga centers - often called "studios" or "ashrams" - have cropped up only since the 1960's, when Japan caught the side-draft of the West's "mind-expansion" era. Ninety percent of them today are cosmetic "slimming" shops. They run for a profit and fulfill a simple desire: to look good and feel good. Spurred on by a strong yen, many buy into this body-care culture. Instructors are usually Japanese, have studied from the master work, Hatha Yoga Pradipika, and are competent hatha yogis.

But it's impossible to cart up hatha yoga in India and ship it to Japan without getting a whole lot of Hindu metaphysical stuffing in the box, too. So even in the most hurly-burly Yokohama muscle club's yoga class, idle shower questions about kundalini energy, chakras or nadis haphazardly generate deeper Hindu discussion.

## Yoga Teacher and Mother of Two

Chikako Hiyashi is 40, married with two children, teacher English and runs the Prana Yoga Centre in a Tokyo suburb. She got interested in yoga when she was only 16, reading a book on yoga and meeting Swami Vignanananda at a Tokyo lecture. Her initiate name is now Prem Shakti Devi and Swamiji visits her centre often - en route to and from India. Chikako told HINDUISM TODAY, "I was not raised as a Buddhist or Shintoist, either. Like most Japanese, my parents didn't give me specific religious dogma except to observe Buddhist funeral ceremonies or traditional Shinto ancestor worship. So during the process of learning yoga, I didn't feel any contradiction or opposition within my mind. I found Hindu beliefs so practical, valuable and healthy, especially the Yamas and Niyamas. I don't have any special Hindu Deity. To tell the truth, I feel close to the Buddhist Goddess Kan-non. But then I know the Hindu Goddess [Saraswati] was transfigured into a

Japanese form as she travelled from India [through China as Kuan Yin] to here."

Chikako conducts three classes a week, a yoga show at the gain Shibuya department store and has over 100 registered students, mostly women. Her focus is the asanas but "I also talk about philosophy. For the older ones, I teach bandhas and mudras, explain about chakras and kundalini and during meditation we sometimes recite simple mantras and the Om sounds."

### Hindu Who's Who In Japan

But Kashinath and Chikako are not the only ones with Hindu lights on in Japan. In downtown Tokyo, the Hare Krishna movement runs a small Krishna Yoga Center and Kobe hosts two small Hindu shrines - one a Sai Baba temple.

The international Ramakrishnan Vedanta Society runs a strong center in Tokyo, begun in 1959 and helmed by revered octogenarian Swami Siddhartananada. He told HINDUISM TODAY, "About forty persons come regularly. I have been here [from Belur] four years. I teach all the Ramakrishna teachings with regular talks in English, translated into Japanese. They like these teachings very much. And yes, we are growing."

### Japanese Youth Yearn for Esoterics

"There is a spiritual movement among the youth in Japan, especially in the form of newly created religious groups called Shin-shinkou-shukyo," Chikako Hiyashi explained to HINDUISM TODAY. "Superconscious abilities, transparent powers, etc., are now very popular among youth. In yoga, they put stress on meditation and inner satisfaction more than the physical aspect. I feel the more orthodox forms of Hindu philosophy will surely be accepted by the young people more and more in the future in Japan."

Visitors to Japan report that the youth consider religion old-fashioned and

unnecessary. They find little appeal in the dusty dogma and frigid ceremonialism of the institutionalized Buddhist and Shinto religions. Still, many are shopping for something that touches their spiritual nature. And for those, Hindu yoga has a special appeal.

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