

# From Sydney physiotherapist to Indian guru

Associate Editor, Sue Jackson spoke with Swami Jasraj Puri about his journey, when he visited Australia late last year.

*Photography Nicky Pullen*

He started life in the south of Sydney, as a long-haired, skateboarding, Sutherland Shire kid. Son of two school teachers, he started out training to be a physiotherapist. Now, at 38 years of age, he lives in India and is a highly respected, poised, and inspiring head of a monastic order, all in the space of 12 years.

**AYL:** A lot has happened in your life over the past 12 years. How did your journey begin?

**SJ:** The spiritual journey started in school, in English class, with the romantic poets such as Keats, Wordsworth, and Coleridge. I spent much of my free time in the NSW Royal National Park, which was close to where I lived. I did all my study in the national park, by a waterfall. There, I experienced an energy – of God in nature, and in everything. Then, I started enquiring about practices like yoga, Buddhism, Zen. When I was 22, I went to a Yoga in Daily Life course in Cronulla, on my skateboard, with a bunch of mates. That's where I started to really practise yoga. I had done a few classes previously, but this was a course, and the key thing for me was that there was a self-enquiry meditation practice. After practising in Sydney for about nine months, I decided to go to India, to have an experience of ashram life. I had met my guru, Paramhans Swami Maheshwarananda, during a visit he made to Sydney, and I went to his ashram in India.

**AYL:** What did you do in the ashram?

**SJ:** In the ashram, you are practising yoga, but it is basically all about lifestyle. A large amount of time is spent doing karma yoga, or selfless service. There was one year when I was just in the service of my guru's Guriji, Paramhans Swami Madhavanandaji. For that year, I spent 24 hours a day with him, doing his cooking, cleaning, taking care of

his guests, and sitting with him while he was doing his meditation. It was an experience that changed my life. It is very hard to sit with someone like that – it is very hard to do 'nothing', for a long period of time. He was about 77 years old at that time, and basically, his life was totally immersed in meditation and teaching. He would just sit all day. If he was sitting, I was sitting. So, I did a lot of sitting. That is very challenging spiritually, because you are just there with yourself and your internal issues. You are not going out doing other things so you cannot escape. The world slows down and you become very aware of every thought and emotion. I learnt a lot, and quickly, about meditation.

**AYL:** For how long did you do that?

**SJ:** One year; one year and a couple of days. I was counting! It was difficult, but something special. Because of the need to slow down, you go through a lot of different processes. At the time, it was hard to see or understand what was happening and only years later did I really start to appreciate that. I was blessed to be in the divine, peaceful presence of a master of meditation. It is a treasure that one then has forever.

**AYL:** This past year has been a special one for you, being accorded one of the highest spiritual titles in India, Mahamandaleshwar. At what point did you envisage being in the role you are now?

**SJ:** The day it happened! . . . it was never in my mind. I am by nature a loner; it is not for me to be on the

stage, I am not a person who searches for that. During the ceremony, in the Kumbha Mela festival last year, I could look back and see a chain of events, changes in myself, which led to everything that was happening. But it was such a slow change over a long period of time. When it happened, I wasn't really surprised, but I never really thought about being in the role before it occurred.

**AYL:** Where do you see your life going from here?

**SJ:** Spending most of my time in India, although I can honestly say that I have no special wish to be anywhere. I would be completely happy here, and I would be completely happy there. At present, I feel that where I can best serve is in India. To bring people to yoga, back to themselves, and to serve the needy. People in India know the theory of yoga well, but they're not necessarily practitioners. Here, in Australia, people practise intently, which is wonderful, but that knowledge about the concepts of yoga is not as strong. In India, that knowledge is there from childhood and through many generations. In order to stimulate people to practise yoga, something interesting must happen. Being a foreigner in India can sometimes attract that initial interest, which then translates into practice. And I just feel completely at home in Rajasthan. I enjoy interacting with the people, being with my Guruji, being a part of the community; it is just like a beautiful dance.





Swami Jasraj at the Kumbha Mela parade.

**AYL:** From the Sydney beaches, to an Indian ashram, that's quite a contrast in life?

**SJ:** I honestly don't think about it any more. It is a nice place to live. You know, you can be in the most beautiful place to do meditation, the sun can be rising over the water; but then, when you meditate, you close your eyes, so you can be anywhere. Once you close your eyes, it only matters if the air is clean or not. I'd rather see the beauty in the place you are, than to think about what is missing. There is beauty everywhere. Australia is no doubt beautiful, unique. But India also is beautiful; it is different, and the desert area where we are can be extreme. But extremes always have their vibration about them. One thing that is startling there is how much the seasons change, and how those seasons affect your mood, work, and practice. Being in India, and in an ashram, the vibrations are special.

**AYL:** How important are these vibrations? You mentioned experiencing the vibrations in the place you are living now. How does one become aware of the vibrations?

**SJ:** You feel it in your heart. Some places you feel comfortable, where you feel you belong. Since the first day in Rajasthan, I have felt at home. It is the same with yoga classes and practices. At some classes, you feel completely at home, but not at another one. And for someone else, it will be completely different. Every instrument has its pitch, and only certain notes will resonate with that pitch, others not, not in that scale. No right or wrong, just different for different people.

**AYL:** What has yoga brought to your life?

**SJ:** Peace, love, and contentment, in everything. I have already got so much more out of yoga than I conceived I could, and what awaits is beyond the scope of my imagination. We have a saying in one of our spiritual songs: through the practice, you make yourself into the stone that can turn the lead into gold. Not physically, but everything becomes an opportunity; everything is gold. When you are really working spiritually, if someone gives you trouble, it is a blessing. You see how you react, how your emotions are;

whether you are in balance or not in balance. And if someone is being nice to you, it is just gold, because it is great to be with someone who is nice and to share their joy. When you are too busy, it is gold because you have a chance to see how fast your vehicle can go. And when you have nothing to do, it is gold because you can practise. It makes everything joy. That is for me what yoga is about. Through immersion in yoga (asana, pranayama, etc), you centre yourself, give yourself that love, that self-esteem, and then those external things are not important to your inner happiness. Your happiness is not like a flag, flapping around according to the wind that is blowing; rather, it is the pole on which the flag moves.

**AYL:** It sounds like a personal journey?

**SJ:** Yoga is a complete personal journey. A grand experiment, which plays out in your daily practice. In your practice, you do something, and then you observe results. And then you make your conclusion. The next day, you again experiment with yourself. You ask yourself questions such as: how is it affecting your state, what does it bring to you, what benefit is there for you? When you have experience of practising over a longer time, you learn how to balance yourself in any situation. You can observe, and say, for example, today my mind is wobbling because of this; tomorrow I will just bring it down by doing this or that practice. That is the experiment. The experiment to experience.

**AYL:** So, it sounds as though it is all about that awareness; if you don't have that awareness, none of that is going to happen. Where does that awareness come from?

**SJ:** Awareness is fostered in yoga through systematic practice. You begin with the awareness of the physical body through the asanas; then, as it says in Patanjali's sutras, it slowly brings your focus inwards; there is no boundary between asana and pranayama. When you are doing asana with awareness, you are already doing pranayama. And when you are doing pranayama with

AD IN HERE

AD IN HERE

AD IN HERE

AD IN HERE



Swami Jasraj and Swamiji - prayers on the Ganga.

awareness, you are already going into pratyahara, because all you are thinking about is your breath. It is hard to say where one begins and another ends; it is a gradual process. That is the process of yoga, it brings you in, it brings you in to yourself. It grounds you, and then it allows you to fly.

**AYL:** Being centred in the present moment – how can people come to experience that?

**SJ:** In India, you get a lot of practice, because there is nowhere that is quiet! Emotionally, it is a matter of accepting what is there, and then going into yourself. As an example, we had a very hot summer this year, 44 average in May and June. Never went below 40 for two months. I was lying there one night, it wasn't cooling down, and I thought, 'How am I to get to sleep?' Then I thought, well I don't really have any choice here, so I am going to start thinking that I love sleeping in the heat. And I was asleep in half a minute. As long as I was going to fight with that heat, I wasn't going to get to sleep. And it wasn't going to go away.

**AYL:** Is there a parallel here with meditating?

**SJ:** Regarding disturbances when you are meditating, it is a matter of the relation you have with the environment around. If you perceive external sounds as disturbing, then they will be disturbing. If you hear them for what they are – energy – then they are not going to disturb you. In practice, you aim to keep your awareness in the present. When you do lose your concentration, then you have processes to help restore focus – tools like mantra, breathing, visualisation. The "practice of meditation" is about making yourself stable, peaceful, and still – physically and mentally – so that meditation can unfold. It's making a stage that the performance can be on. It's not the performance itself, as that unfolds spontaneously when there is stillness. Therefore, the personal relationship with external disturbances is really important: are they annoying to you or not? As long as you perceive them as annoying, they will most definitely be so. If your attitude is, 'That noise is hammering my head',

then it is hammering your head. If your perspective is, 'That noise is irrelevant, it is not disturbing me', then it won't. We try to work on that when people are practising.

**AYL:** For a lot of people, it's not just the outside sounds, but is also the sounds inside the mind, that make it difficult to reach, or stay, in meditation. Do you recommend the same approach?

**SJ:** It's the same – the relation you take – whether you want to engage with those thoughts, or just let them fade away. When they're not engaged, they lose their power to disturb. Suzuki Roshi, the great Zen master, said, 'When the thoughts come in, they come in the front door. Leave the back door open so they can go out, and don't serve them tea.' That's great. Thoughts will come. Do you engage with them or not? Or, do you just let them fade and gently regain your focus? If they come again and again no problem, let them go again and again. Then gently, patiently, resume the processes that bring you into meditation.



**AYL:** In concluding, can you share with us a little about how you view yoga?

**SJ:** Yoga is a reunion. It is rediscovering your inner self and learning true love. Through yoga, we rekindle our inner love and light. When that occurs, then we can share that light with others. Mahatma Gandhi said, “Be the change you want to see”. We all want to be happy, peaceful, and contented. Those qualities are all hidden within us and yoga reveals them. If parents don’t have awareness, understanding, and love for themselves, what can they offer to their children? It’s a bit like taking care to put on your own oxygen mask in the plane before saving others. If parents are balanced, it helps their children to be balanced. They may not externalise it in the same way as the parent, but it will be inside them, it will be ingrained. For me, it is a duty of all people to find that inner balance, love, and understanding. It changes the world.

**AYL:** Do you have any suggestions for someone wanting to develop that balance, and pass that on to others around them?

**SJ:** Yoga cannot be forced upon people; rather, it attracts people through practical example. Whether you teach yoga to your kids or not, they observe your behaviour. If they see your inner happiness, they will surely end up searching for that quality themselves. As far as workplace and disturbances there, you can’t change the people you work with, but you can change your relation to what it is they are doing; you can change your perceptions. Some of the best teachers are those in daily life who give you hell, who push your buttons. But they can teach you something about yourself. If you can keep thinking like that, then it is not as disturbing, and over time perhaps, they will imbibe some of your peace.

In yoga practice, rather than saying actions are ‘right or wrong’, they are ‘better or worse’. Patanjali states that

there are actions and thoughts that take you toward your spiritual goal, and there are ones that take you away from it. They are not right or wrong; it’s just that it would be far better to do the positive action. It is important on the yoga path to accept that it is a long journey requiring patience and understanding. Some days practice is blissful; whilst on other days it’s like a bad joke! With great love, we need to accept ourselves as we are at the present moment and try to make sure the next step we take is towards the goal.

To learn more about the work Swami Jasraj is doing, go to [www.yogaindailylife.org.au](http://www.yogaindailylife.org.au). Details of an upcoming visit to Australia of Swami Jasraj’s guru, Swamiji, are available at this website. Sue Jackson can be contacted at [sue@bodyandmindflow.com](mailto:sue@bodyandmindflow.com), or for further information on Sue’s work, visit [www.bodyandmindflow.com](http://www.bodyandmindflow.com)

AD IN HERE