

## All we need is the air we breathe

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Can we change our lives one breath at a time? Can the power of meditation help bring peace and harmony to the world? BINA GOVEAS travels to one of India's most famous retreats to find out more about a way of life followed by millions across the world.

Love, peace and harmony... it all comes down to how we breathe and master the art of living. Or so say millions of people from all over the world who swear their lives have been transformed by this simple philosophy from Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, one of India's most famous spiritual gurus.



Sri Sri launched his Art of Living Foundation back in 1981 to help distressed people change their lives for the better through yoga, meditation, rhythmic breathing and exercise.

Indeed, Sri Sri's trademark rhythmic breathing, called 'sudarshan kriya' is an integral part of his cure. The breathing cycles are said to set the mind and body in harmony and eliminate stress, fatigue, negative emotions and depression, leaving one calm, focused and reinvigorated.

The guru perfected this art as a young man while meditating in silence for 10 days on the banks of a river and since then, his inspired technique is said to have helped millions of people find relief from stress and discover inner energy and peace.

But it's not just the highly-stressed but also the highly-successful who swear by Sri Sri's way of life. From managers and musicians to bankers and businesswomen, they all testify how his courses have helped them become better people.

Today the Art of Living Foundation boasts one of the largest volunteer bases in the world and has spread its wings from Canada to Costa Rica and from Sweden to South Africa. It also has a chapter in Bahrain, located in Zinj.

In addition to its 'Art of Living' courses, the non-profit private foundation focuses on education, humanitarian aid and the empowerment of women as part of its vision of a society free of violence and stress.

Interestingly enough, the foundation is not bound by religion or political dogma.

Over the last eight years, the foundation has hosted high-profile conferences for women, and this year's event, held at its headquarters in Bangalore, gave me a chance to hop on a plane along with 13 other women from Bahrain to get up close and personal with the venerable guru and his foundation.

The Art of Living's 'ashram' is called the Art of Living International Centre and lies nestled amidst the Panchagiri Hills, 36km southwest of the city.

The retreat spreads over 65 acres and its focal point is an iconic lotus-shaped meditation hall. There is also a rock-cut amphitheatre that seats 20,000, an ayurvedic spa, and a landscaped area for evening walks.

The ashram is just the thing for those who want a taste of the simple life or to just get away from it all.

Like all retreats, it eschews all forms of luxury. Rooms are spartan, shared by two or three guests, hot showers run for just a couple of hours every morning, while television is taboo.

Your only contact with the outside world is through limited internet access, and if the Third World War were to break out, you possibly wouldn't know it.

You cannot smoke or drink. And you will have to be a vegetarian while you are there. Grains, legumes and vegetables are mostly organic and grown in the ashram's gardens.

Volunteers, who work at the ashram, cook, sweep, clean and basically run the retreat, finding great fulfilment in these acts of selfless service.

During the sixth edition of its annual International Women's Conference held earlier this month, the ashram was a beehive of activity, with the guru's sister Bhanumathi Narasimhan acting as the chairperson of the event.

The event attracted as many as 800 delegates, primarily women from all walks of life, who sought ways to build global harmony and bridge political, cultural and religious divides.

It was both enriching and humbling to listen to celebrities such as Sri Lanka's former president Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, India's biopharmaceutical giant Biocon chairwoman Kiran Mazumdar Shaw and India's most famous policewoman Dr Kiran Bedi, reveal how they rose to the top of the ladder despite the hurdles they faced.

Other speakers included fashion designers Shaikha Hend Faisal Al Qasimi and Vineet Bahl, and Israeli singer and actress Rita Jahan Foruz, who released her first album in Farsi harking back to her roots in Iran.

Indian singing legend Asha Bhosle was also an inspiration: accepting a lifetime achievement award, she confessed she was not fluent in English but went on to speak with the fluency of a native English-language speaker before bringing the house down with some of her hits.

Speaking to some of the delegates, I found that many had been profoundly influenced by the soft-spoken guru while others swore by the foundation's courses.

Indian badminton player and businesswoman Vasundha Jhunjhunwala recalls how she stepped out of her comfort zone despite being beset by bad health to work with the foundation. "As a volunteer, I saw the constant transformation in people's lives," she recalled.

Then there was Vandana Daftari who quit her managerial job with an IT giant to help victims of the floods and landslides that wreaked havoc in north India last year. She says that Sri Sri empowered her to have 'clarity of mind' in critical situations.

Fashion designer Malini Ramani swears the Art of Living's Happiness Programme - which includes warm-up exercises, sudarshan kriya, yoga, meditation and 'satsang', a cathartic exercise - has boosted her creativity no end.

No less amazing were other tales of transformation, including a Bahrain resident who had lost her son in a senseless tragedy but found a new purpose in life with the foundation and a young Indian volunteer whose family initially opposed her joining the Art of Living but have since become part of the foundation.

On my part, I decided to test the waters and learn some rhythmic breathing and despite an initial bout of nerves, came out feeling totally relaxed and refreshed.

Other programmes offered include the Sri Sri Yoga, Art of Silence, DSN (Do Something Now), the Art of Meditation, Art Excell and Yes (Youth Empowerment Seminar) for children, and Apex Programme for corporates.

The ashram also runs an ayurvedic hospital and 404 schools for 40,000 underprivileged children across 19 Indian states. As Sri Sri said: "Education is the greatest leveller. It has the power to empower the weakest of the weak, bring peace to the world and alleviate poverty."

The Ved Vignan Maha Vidya Peeth School at the ashram has 2,000 students and is run by headmaster Gandadar Beedanal, who left a career in journalism some 30 years ago to pursue his dream of educating the underprivileged.

The 100-bed Sri Sri Ayurvedic Hospital, meanwhile, combines modern diagnostic facilities with traditional Ayurveda treatments and offers treatments at prices that won't break the bank. These include ways to correct one's eyesight without surgery, and an intriguing tooth extraction technique that involves 'no anaesthetic and minimal pain'.

As with any successful organisation, the Art of Living has its share of detractors, as a quick Google search will reveal. However, 370 million followers around the world are united in their belief that Gurudev, as Sri Sri is affectionately called, has taught them that life can be beautiful one breath at a time, and that the way to world peace starts within oneself.