

A New Take on 12-steps

Recovering addicts discover Yoga and Ayurveda

By Susan Schnier
Moonshine Ink

Addicts often turn to drugs and alcohol to fill a spiritual or emotional void. Twelve step programs, like Alcoholics Anonymous, teach that material substances can't produce spiritual fulfillment and ask participants to turn to a higher power to keep them from using. But these programs intentionally do not specify what or who that higher power is; it's up to the individual to choose.

Durga (spiritual name), a local of this area, started her search five years ago when she was seeking a system of health to help her recover from addiction.

"My main drug of choice was alcohol, but I was also addicted to cigarettes and I would smoke pot and do cocaine occasionally," explains Durga. "I had a corporate career in London and I never knew what would happen when I started drinking. Sometimes I would have two and go home and sometimes I would have 20 and not go home until the morning." After making the decision to stop the destructive habits, she embarked upon the typical road of 12-step programs, but in time found she wanted more. She discovered that the Eastern principles of Yoga and Ayurveda were highly compatible with the 12-step process, eventually founding an addiction retreat program based upon these values.

"After I was sober for a while, I didn't like the 12-step programs anymore. I was living in Tahoe and I was hearing the same story over and over," says Durga. "Then my sponsor reminded me to carry the message, not the mess. 'I started reading and found the solution in this program.'"

"When you stop using, you're suddenly faced with your body," Durga explains. "I didn't have medical insurance, so I looked at nutrition. I took a yoga teacher training course, studied Ayurveda, and was eager to bring this to other people in recovery who were interested in a holistic approach to health." With the vision and the know-how, she then developed the series of retreats to help others like her.

Durga holds these retreats across the globe – in the Bahamas, India, New York, Canada and California. She held her fourth retreat in mid-August at the Yoga Farm in Grass Valley, a spiritual retreat center (see box at far right).

All ten of participants in the August program were well-versed in the 12-step process. Because of the intensity of the course, Durga asks that guests with substance/alcohol addictions have at least six months of sobriety before attending one of her retreats. The retreats are open to anyone who wants to recover from any addictive/compulsive behavior (gambling, sex, love, shopping, people, etc.) Though about half of the

students had never tried yoga before this week, they're all intimately familiar with each of the 12 steps.

I visited the group on day three of the retreat. Students in Durga's five-day program attend all of the mandatory Farm activities and participate in additional classes and workshops that are specific to addiction. These include Ayurveda instruction, yoga classes, daily 12-step meetings, and "Tools of Recovery" workshops that teach meditative 'tools' for peace of mind.

Ayurveda literally means "Knowledge of Life" and uses nutrition and lifestyle adjustments to stabilize emotional and physical imbalances and heal the root of disease. Durga believes that most recovering addicts need some guidance in health/self-care. "Those recovering from alcoholism often have undiagnosed hypoglycemia and they eat chocolate or drink coffee to cope with fatigue. They often gain weight, which leads to depression," she says. "Ayurveda helps understand health is a dynamic state, rather than something that is reached. In the same way that 12 step programs tell us that recovery is a daily reprieve contingent upon the maintenance of a spiritual condition – health

is a dynamic state based upon a balanced body and mind."

Ayurveda looks at people as being composed of three essential demeanors or doshas. Vata embodies movement, wind and change; Pitta is focused and introspective, always taking ideas apart and reconstructing them; Kapha embraces solidity and routine. Everyone usually has one predominant dosha, though the balance can shift from external factors, causing an imbalance.

One lecture in Durga's retreat, framed in Ayurvedic language, is called the Sadhana of Eating. Sadhana means seeing the spiritual in everyday/mundane events.

It looks at how becoming imbalanced toward one dosha or another can affect our digestion. Ayurveda recommends a balanced diet, and focuses on how you eat (taking the time to sit and digest without noise and distraction) and what you eat (fresh organic foods). Our Agni or digestive fire, determines how often and how much we should eat. Pittas have the fastest metabolism and need to eat the most, Kapha have the slowest and need to eat less often. The sister science of yoga, Ayurveda helps you understand your constitution so you are ready for yoga. The Yoga Asana classes of Durga's retreats teach the physical exercises of yoga along with Pranayama (control of breath to energize the body and calm the mind). This is essential for recovering addicts who have lived a long time in fight or flight mode and have exhausted their adrenals and immune systems.

Tools of Recovery workshop focus on basic guidelines

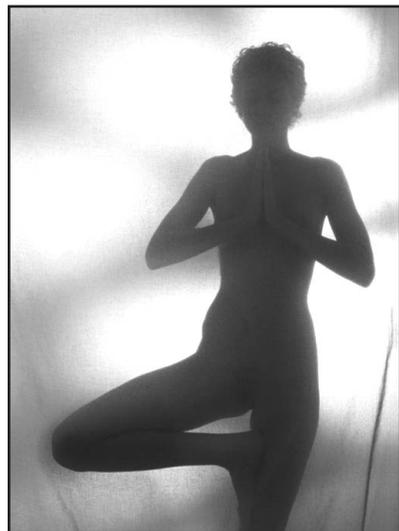
for meditation like how to improve concentration and think positively. One 'Tools of Recovery' workshop looks specifically at how different types of yoga compare to specific steps in 12-step programs.

For example, Bhakti yoga asks students to find an idea of God and then form a personal relationship with their personal concept of him/her/it. This equates to Step 2, which is to believe in a power greater than ourselves. And Karma yoga, the yoga of selfless service, is a reflection of the twelfth step – having had a spiritual awakening, we must carry the message to others.

Seated crossed-legged on the floor of the meditation room, surrounded by photos of the Yoga Farm's founding Swamis and a shrine with figures from a variety of religious traditions, Durga's students discuss the topic. One participant, a man whose addiction began when he was living on Haight Street in the 60s explains, "Every addict is searching for the ultimate high. In recovery, we're forced to find that high without mind-altering substances, and that is God."

Durga is one of the few teachers to have associated yoga and Ayurveda with 12-step recovery. Her students come from all over the world; most of them heard about her retreats through the internet. One participant received a grant from a Winston Churchill foundation to study the relationship between yoga and addiction recovery. She found Durga's program on the internet and traveled to California from England to attend the Nevada City retreat.

Durga hopes to expand on the link that she's uncovered and is currently working on a book to expound on the connection. The success of her retreats indicate that she's tapped into a valuable resource, helping bridge the gap between body, mind and spirit that mainstream culture continues to widen.

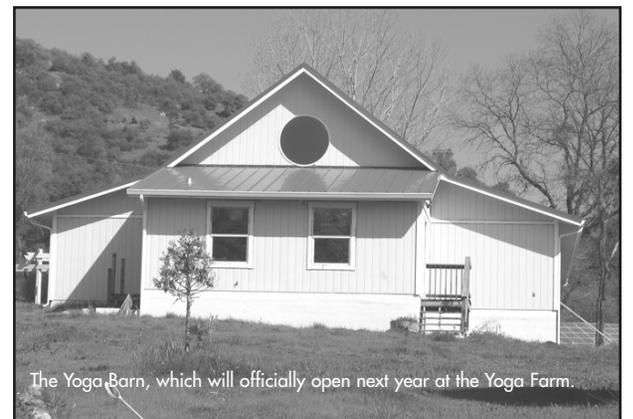


Upcoming Retreats in 2007

- Feb 14 to 20: Nassau, Bahamas
- March 14 to 23: Kerala, India
- June 24 to 30: Quebec, Canada
- July 8 to 13: New York
- August 12 to 17: Yoga Farm, Grass Valley

The cost of a five day "12 Step Recovery, Yoga and Ayurveda" retreat is \$250 plus accommodations and consultation/treatment fees (optional).

For more Info on the retreats, visit <http://ayurveda-ww.com/retreats.htm>
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The Yoga Barn, which will officially open next year at the Yoga Farm.

The Yoga Farm, Grass Valley

The Yoga Farm is staffed by volunteers and operates year round, with a firm schedule of meals, meditation, yoga and lectures, starting at 5:30 a.m. each day. Open to everyone, the Yoga Farm is a collection of cabins, temples, treatment rooms, and practice space. Peacefully situated on 40-acres of rolling hills, it's just an hour and a half drive from Truckee and well worth a visit. The cost is reasonable – \$70/night includes meals, accommodations, yoga and meditation. The Farm hosts a variety of specialty programs throughout the year, from Children's Yoga camps to Ayurvedic cooking. In its 35th year, it is one of many Sivananda Ashrams around the world. Ashrams are spiritual retreat centers and the Sivananda Ashrams are non-profit organizations based on the yogic philosophies of yoga masters, Swami Sivananda and Swami Vishnu-devananda.