

Mandala Yoga Ashram ~ Festival of Yoga

*The whole universe rests upon Her,
Rises out of Her and melts away into Her...
She is both the mother and the grave...
The gods themselves are merely constructs out of Her maternal substance...
(Hymn to the Goddess- Devi Bhagavata Purana)*

The Mandala Yoga Ashram is set in the beautiful Welsh hills and offers authentic yoga and meditation courses and retreats. The ashram has been running for over 30 years and was inaugurated and developed under the guidance of Swami Nishchalananda. Over the years the ashram has offered seekers a place of inspiration where they can temporarily retreat from their busy daily lives and reconnect with themselves in a deep and authentic way. Yoga offers us a way to experience a deeper happiness and contentment. The ashram offers a wide range of both esoteric and practical courses including on, for example, Chakras, Kriya Yoga, Meditation, Yoga Therapy, Mudra and Bandha. More recently the ashram has held an annual Festival of Yoga when yoga practitioners and seekers can come together to share and receive inspiration and replenishment.

The theme for the Ashram Festival of Yoga in August 2017 was **The Sacred Feminine**. At the heart of the festival was an acknowledgment that there is a need in our current society and evolutionary time for women to reconnect with and express their authentic selves, and for men to review and renew their relationship to the feminine. Both men and women experience a continuous barrage of ideas, beliefs and expectations regarding our gender from the moment they are born. Part of the journey within yoga is beginning to disentangle ourselves from these social, familial and collective expectations. When we are able to hear, see and sense what lies beneath all these beliefs and constructs, a different awareness of our self emerges.

When we live our lives according to expectations we find ourselves further and further from our truth. We become a cartoon version of the masculine and feminine. This not only makes it difficult to be in relationship with ourselves but also to find intimacy with others. This leads to a growing sense of isolation and disconnection. Our yearning for a meaningful union increases, both for our authentic selves and with Consciousness or God (the two ultimately being the same). We long for the unconditional love of the Universal Mother whose divine milk, or nourishment, is abundant and flows continuously.

Both men and women hold negative imprints about women, tracing back through our ancestral lines from mothers who were wounded emotionally, sexually and energetically. These imprints of course have an impact on how we relate to ourselves and each other and our children. By bringing awareness and enquiry to these historical thoughts we can begin to question and let go, releasing restrictive habitual thoughts and emotions. As we begin to clear our own debris we are able to be more present and available to life's plan for us. As we willingly own the whole of our emotional landscape, without repression or avoidance, we find our way back to sensual and embodied authenticity. From the shattered image of ourselves that gets reflected and reinforced by each other and the media, we begin to heal and spin and weave these parts back into wholeness.

Tantric philosophy gives us the dualistic paradigm of *Shiva* and *Shakti*. The feminine principle is Shakti, from which the whole of creation begins and dissolves into. Shiva is the masculine principle of Spirit and Consciousness. Shiva and Shakti are equally needed and arguably it is the imbalance of these principles both within us as individuals and collectively that causes our sense of dis-ease. It is clear that although we are in a time of great technological advancement and material wealth, most people struggle to feel a sense of joy or peace other than for fleeting moments.

The Sacred Feminine festival aimed to create a space for some of these themes to be explored. It was a huge success. We were blessed by the weather, allowing groups of festival goers to relax and share in the sunshine. The programme was diverse and included a workshop on women's menstrual moon cycle to bring a greater understanding, and in turn freedom, to relate to the world in synch with our cycle. Each morning there was chanting, which brought sweetness to our practice and a sharing. The rhythms and repetition of sacred sounds allowed the mind to settle and the heart to breath more easily. We chanted the names of the Universal Mother in different ways, including around the *havan* (sacred fire), chanting mantras to Her Forms as Goddess Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati. Other workshops explored the qualities of abundance associated with Lakshmi and the qualities of Kali, the fierce one who brings death in order for new growth, removing obstacles and illusion. There was also a discussion panel where women from different spiritual backgrounds shared some of their personal stories, including significant role models. The panel invited us to contemplate questions such as: How are women currently depicted in spirituality and in the wider society? How can the sacred feminine find expression in our current time of evolution and what impact would this have? What does it mean to us as yogic practitioners? How is the feminine path of spirituality different from the male path?

Historically the Tantric tradition offers us a plethora of Goddess' each embodying different qualities. These can help us identify with such qualities in ourselves. Linking to the Goddess energies can be a very practical way we can use in our lives to align to the abundance of Lakshmi, accept the wild chaos of Kali, and welcome the removal of our cherished habits by Durga.

We know that ancient spiritual traditions, such as Saiva Tantra and Yogini Tantra, placed the sacred feminine at the centre. Yet this was followed in time by the suppression of the sacred feminine by the patriarchal system, in which women have been often unable to have access to spiritual scriptures or buildings, have been considered to have more obstacles to face in attaining enlightenment, and are even considered unclean and dangerous. These perceptions are far away from the ancient traditions mentioned above where our ancestors honoured the feminine, knowing that we owe everything to the Divine Mother. We need to rediscover that *all* aspects of woman; the seductive, the shy, the angry, the tearful, the silent and the joyful, are all sacred.

One of the loudest and most destructive messages that men and women have believed is that a women's menstrual blood is shameful. This has meant that women have had to deny the menstrual time even though in the past communities knew that this was a sacred time where women received messages and guidance for all. Now there is more research into the regenerative qualities of the womb including the moon blood containing stem cells. Spirituality from a feminine perspective is arguably body based. The cycles and processes of the feminine such as menstruation, pregnancy, lactation, childbirth, miscarriage and menopause by some are regarded by some as Siddhis

(transcendental, magical experiences) and are physical transitions that can be profound spiritual gateways.

Yoga offers a spiritual system to support us in the process of remembering and re-awakening. Our ancestors knew that the Great Mother was a creative womb space that would create, re-generate and renew. How can we learn to suckle once more to find the nourishment that we need? How can we begin to identify with the Divine Feminine when we feel empty, spent and depleted? How do we find our way forward from an era where the feminine has in many ways been degraded and sanitised?

Our reconnection with our bodies and our wombs was encouraged in the festival through free ecstatic dance and a variety of asana classes. Practices were also shared from early mystery schools of the Priestess, teaching us to listen once more to our wombs and release the stories and traumas that have been accumulated, and often suppressed, both individually and collectively.

One of the wonderful features of the festival was a Womb pod, woven from hazel branches and covered in red and gold saris. It provided a space for women and men to reconnect with, and be held by the 'Mother', and to simply Be. Our daily lives are constantly about doing and being busy so the womb pod was a rare opportunity to just be with however we are; to accept and witness our emotions and thoughts without trying to change, avoid or deny them.

The Ashram offers a womb like space where we can be silent enough to begin to hear Her voice. In the Ashram we can spend time in nature walking and being on Her body and feeling Her holding us. In the ashram we are in community with other seekers who support us in our genuine growth. Each morning we share through chanting and meditation. Karma Yoga allows a sense of service in the present moment without expectation of reward, simply doing what needs to be done and not just following our personal preferences. All these practices support us in beginning to feel less fractured and more whole so that we can flow with life more easefully. Through the practices of yoga we reconnect with our own creative intelligence: the Guru within. She guides us to be more connected to our own inner rhythms and harmony, in relationship to the earth, our own selves and each other.

If this theme touches you, you will be pleased to know that the ashram is offering a course on the Sacred Feminine in September 2018. In August 2018 there will also be another Festival of Yoga on the theme of Sound and Mantra which promises to be a pleasure for the senses and a refreshing balm for the mind.

Reva is currently a resident at Mandala Yoga Ashram and is a Yoga teacher. She has been following the path of Siddha Yoga for over 10 years. She trained as a yoga teacher on the Ashram's 2-year Yoga Teacher Training Course, accredited by the British Wheel of Yoga.