

Yogathon in park to benefit children

Valerie Fortney

Calgary Herald

Thursday, August 16, 2012

It consists of a flowing series of yoga poses, requiring some physical strength and flexibility.

Done usually in the morning and sometimes outside, the aptly named sun salutation also benefits from rain-free, sunny weather.

"It will be a beautiful day," says a confident Pooja Tolani of next Sunday, which so far is forecast to be the 28-Celsius icing on the cake of a spectacular late-summer weekend. "A perfect one for the sun salutation."

Not just one salutation, though, is on Tolani's mind.

At 10 a.m. at Calgary's Meadowlark Park (two blocks east of Elbow Drive at 61st Avenue S.W.), the 33-year-old will lead more than 100 fellow yoga enthusiasts in no less than 108 sun salutations.

The aim, though, isn't for local practitioners of the ancient discipline to merely show off their yoga mettle before a crowd of like-minded souls: it's also to come together for a good cause.

Staged by the Calgary chapter of the Art of Living Foundation (artofliving.org), an international organization that offers workshops and education on meditation, yoga and stress elimination as well as raise funds for a wide variety of charitable endeavours, the event entitled the Calgary Yogathon will benefit the foundation's Care for Children program. Montreal, Halifax, Toronto, Quebec and Ottawa will hold similar events on the same day.

"There are more than 185 schools in Africa, India and Indonesia today," says Tolani of the program that educates children from impoverished rural and tribal communities.

"Most of these children are the first of their families to receive a formal education."

Along with her husband Bhavesh, Tolani is the local face for the 30-year-old organization with more than 150 centres around the world, its mission to promote peace through yoga, proper breathing and meditation.

Its leader, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (no relation to the Indian sitar maestro) is considered one of the leading authorities on the Yogic science of breath, a 5,000-year-old system for creating good physical, emotional and spiritual health.

Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, the 56-year-old Shankar, along with overseeing his now internationally known organization, has over the years spoken out on everything



CREDIT: Ted Rhodes, Calgary Herald

Pooja Tolani does one of the 12 Asanas in the Sun Salutations in her home, where she is a yoga teacher.

from the Taliban regime in Afghanistan to corruption at the highest levels of society in his home country of India.

While Shankar's non-denominational organization has not been completely free of criticism - some have disputed its assertion that it is the largest volunteer-based, non-governmental organization in the world as well as claims of more than 300 million followers - its growing impact is widely recognized. In 2009, Forbes magazine listed Shankar, who has visited Calgary in the past, as one of the five most influential leaders in India.

It noted that his teaching "commands an enormous following both in India and around the world, cuts across religious lines and offers practitioners a tool to deal with urban angst."

Tolani says she herself was one of those doubters in the early days of her exposure to Shankar and his vision of promoting nonviolent solutions to the world's problems.

"My mother thought I was a spoiled brat, so when I was 19 she sent me to an Art of Living workshop," says the native of Mumbai.

"It was good but I didn't feel like it changed my life, until I met the founder and saw how he practised what he preached. He saw something in me and suggested I become a teacher."

Tolani soon found herself immersed in yoga, meditation and the foundation's teachings, a passion she shared with a fellow instructor who she would marry in 2006.

"We were sent to a tribal area of northeast India," says Bhavesh, 36. "We started out as friends but then fell in love."

The pair spent the next three years travelling around the world before settling in Calgary in 2009.

"We have been helping to start new centres and strengthen existing ones," says Tolani, who with her husband has worked in such Alberta cities as Edmonton and Fort McMurray.

It's not surprising that the organization that has already made it in to the Guinness World Record books by staging the largest choir (121,440 in India, 2011) and largest sitar ensemble (1,094 participants in India, 2008) would attempt a Canada-wide gathering of yogis.

Tolani says even those who've never done a downward dog are welcome.

"You don't need to know how to do a sun salutation," she says with a serene smile. "It will feel good to stretch, and to help others at the same time."

vfortney@calgaryherald.com

© Calgary Herald 2012

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2013 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.. All rights reserved.
CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.. All rights reserved.