



connect
I'M A YOGI

Jawed Ashraf

Interview by YJSG Editor Kavita Chandran

Jawed Ashraf is an inherently calm gentleman who finds yoga rejuvenating, does regular pranayama and swears by his most favorite meditative space—the tennis court!

The High Commissioner of India in Singapore tells YJSG about the time when India's Prime Minister convinced the United Nations to declare June 21, the summer solstice, as International Day of Yoga.

Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, made his first address to the annual United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York on September 2014, just a few months after being sworn into office. In his speech, he outlined his vision for the world, based on democracy, inclusive and equitable growth, cooperation for peace and a sustainable future. In this context, he spoke about the benefits of yoga for a more centred, balanced and healthy life; and in creating a mindset for a peaceful world and higher consciousness for nature. He called on the UNGA to declare June 21 as International Day of Yoga (IDY).

There was huge spontaneous support for his proposal. A record 177 out of 193 member countries co-sponsored the resolution, which was adopted within a record time of less than 100 days. I was aware of this proposal from the beginning. It was entirely PM Modi's idea, and so was the framework in which he proposed it. I was then in the Prime Minister's Office handling external affairs, defence, etc., and was a part of his delegation to the UNGA.

The IDY was observed in hundreds of places across 192 countries in the very first year in 2015, and the level of participation grew in 2016. It is wonderful to see an event such as this take place on an unprecedented global scale. It is not because yoga is an ancient Indian tradition—we see this as an inheritance of the entire world—it is because the IDY shows that people around the world can come together in a collective endeavour for a common good.

It has generated a new level of global interest in yoga. It's interesting to observe how many world leaders discuss yoga in their meetings with PM Modi. We also witnessed extraordinary performances of yoga during his visits abroad, including most memorable ones in places like Ulaanbaatar and Tashkent.

Spiritualism is beyond form, rituals and practices. There are many paths to spiritual pursuits. Yoga is one of them. But, it has to be practiced in a comprehensive and holistic manner. It cannot be seen simply in its physical manifestation. In its physical form, yoga is beneficial for health, fitness, flexibility, strength and balance. Pranayama, or breathing exercises, also provides immense physical, psychological and emotional benefits. However yoga goes beyond these and is eventually a way of living and thinking. Spiritual journey has no well-defined beginning. I don't seek it. It is also hard to say whether I am on that journey at all. But, I think it is there for everyone. It is a question of becoming aware and conscious of it.

I have not had to try consciously to keep calm. Although I have worked in seemingly high stress jobs, including senior positions in the Prime Minister's Office, I didn't find myself feeling any stress or anxiety. Maybe, I enjoyed the work and felt at ease doing it. Besides, while I worked intensely and hard, setting high standards, I could also have a sense of disconnectedness. Moreover, I focus on what

is within my control. I switch off easily when I need to. Of course, we all have our moments—not so much of stress, but of anger, and it doesn't have to be work-related.

Yoga is rejuvenating. It also helps to focus and concentrate better. For me, sports, especially playing tennis, works really well for fitness and spirit. I started pranayama on my own—sort of self-taught—when I was posted in Nepal about a decade ago. It certainly helped me to trek better at higher altitudes in the Himalayas.

The most challenging thing about yoga is maintaining a schedule, sustaining interest up to a point where it becomes a natural habit, keeping your mind still, ensuring a good posture (if you are doing it on your own) and preventing injuries. Unfortunately, my yoga routine has become erratic. I do need to get back to a more regular schedule. IDY on June 18 this year will be an inspiration.

I am very impressed by the widespread following yoga enjoys in Singapore, and the large number of yoga centres in the city. We are excited that the third International Day of Yoga will be held in over 60 centres across the city between June 17 and 25. We are delighted that SG Active and Peoples Association are partnering with us in this venture. We are also deeply grateful to the large number of yoga centres and institutions that have come together to support us for this event.