

THE LURE OF ISHA

A new spiritual sanctuary, ISHA YOGA is drawing serious local and international following

By Namrata Zakaria

The drive seems never-ending. For a long hour, straight from the airport, the road that takes me to my destination is a single-lane stretch piping through the city of Coimbatore. The city is dotted with gift shops called 'Fancy' and Internet cafés called 'Browsing'. This could be Aurangabad or Kanpur or another similar city—the world is flatter in India than elsewhere.

The irony isn't to be missed. I am on my way to meet a fashion legend, a blue-chip New Yorker and an Indophile—Donna Karan. Her working woman's 7-essentials wardrobe has made her the Coco Chanel of our generation. She is also a famed yoga and holistic practitioner.

The road leads to what seems like an oasis. I have arrived at the Isha Yoga Centre (plainly the Isha Ashram), at the foothills of the Velliangiri Mountains. My jaw drops and my breath is stolen. It looks like a beautiful resort—like an expensive and beautiful resort.

Karan is here for the first time—she's a guest of Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev who she met for the first time in New York last year. "He is a rock star, the coolest guy I've ever met," she will tell me over our curd-rice lunch tomorrow.

Tonight is the big night of Mahashivratri, the holiest night in the Hindu calendar, and my first encounter with Sadhguru. He

is on stage for his 6:00 P.M. to 6:00 A.M. discourse. In his audience are six lakh followers—this is the largest congregation after the Maha Kumbh Mela. Most are ordinary folk, followers from near and far. At the front is Karan, in a south-silk sari, jasmine in her hair that's rolled into a neat bun. With her are advertising guru Prahlad Kakkar and his wife Mitali (their youngest son goes to the Isha Home School here.) There is also Bollywood songwriter Praseen Joshi and his wife, society bees Suresh and Deveika Bhowani, and Oscar-nominated filmmaker Shekhar Kapur.

If this reads like the guest list of a society party, the Sadhguru will be pleased. He speaks delightfully, engages the listeners on the benefits of meditation, likening it to contemporary science. He makes modern jokes, and speaks with a slight American accent. After every few lines, a translator repeats in Tamil. There is a concert too: Raghu Dixit performs here as does danseuse Anita Ratnam. The night is rocking alright. Not until Bhagwan Rajneesh and his Osho Ashram in Pune has an Indian mystic enjoyed such fanfare. The Rolls Royce-collecting Rajneesh had Vinod Khanna, the achingly handsome star of Hindi movies, give up his celebrity life and spend a few years at his ashram. The Beatles were fans too, as were several international celebrities.

Isha seems to take over from where Osho waned. It is the new black for those seeking Nirvana in a well-packaged bottle. The inner engineering seeking glamorous come here now. Like Rajneesh, Sadhguru speaks to a modern audience. His discourses are interspersed with jokes and delivered with rhetoric. Many from the Indian fashion crowd are drawn to Isha Yoga. Puneet Nanda, the former CEO of the Satya Paul label and a spiritual seeker, has been living at the Ashram as a teacher and volunteer for years now. The Isha Yoga Centre in Delhi is built on his uncle's land.

Designers Tarun Tahiliani, Payal Pratap, Aparna Chandra, Pankaj Ahuja (of Pankaj and Nidhi), Nandita Basu, sets designer Sumant Jayakrishnan, and choreographer Aparna Bahl Bedi are among firm believers of Isha Yoga.

Photographer Tarun Khiwal is another. He says, "If you count the millions of followers of Sadhguru, the fashion industry is a very small per cent. But when you find a guru who can really unlock you, there will surely be many believers. Because you cannot deny what you have experienced."

Sadhguru is one of the most modern practitioners of yoga, a universally accepted science of breathing, stretching, and meditating that leads to physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Sadhguru's yoga is profound and pragmatic, his excellent oratory skills have won him international renown—he has spoken at UNESCO and is a regular at the World Economic Forum.

Of his many courses, his inner-engineering is the most popular. It consists of 21 minutes of meditation-type breathing, and has courses all over India and the rest of the world.



From top: Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev with Donna Karan; with Shekhar Kapur; with industrialist Pratap Beddy; with GM Rao; with Anupam Kher; with Shankar Mahadevan and Hariharan.



Sadhguru
Jaggi Vasudev



Payal Pratap Singh did the inner-engineering course with Sadhguru last year. A young mother and a new professional, the designer says Sadhguru's 21-minute kriyas are easy to do and maintain. "In a busy schedule, it doesn't demand too much time. Anyone can do it. It helps me focus and energises me throughout the day. I did it at a time when I had too much on my plate and it helped me stay calm and prioritise," she says.

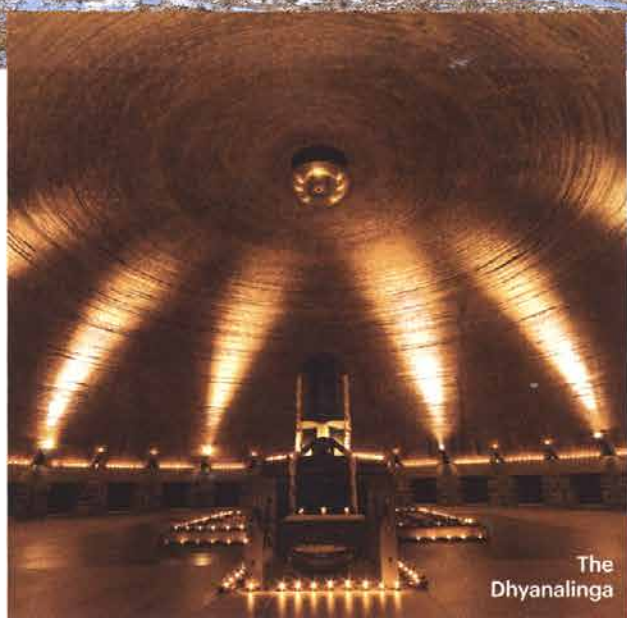
Scenographer Sumant Jayakrishnan says he was "a-religious and not into gurus at all", when Tarun Tabiliani dragged him to a session in New Delhi. "I felt like I had walked into a farmhouse party," he laughs. But he was proselytised quickly. "I never miss my 21-minutes today."

Moreover, Coimbatore's Isha Ashram looks like a giant Good earth store. It's an architectural marvel—Indian and modern at the same time. I'm told it's been designed by Sadhguru himself. The epicenter of this place is the Dhyanalinga, a yogic temple. It is a large dome structure within which lies a 13-ft long, 9-inch wide mercury-based lingam, the largest in the world. Worshippers here climb a stepladder behind the lingam to offer milk and flowers, before they sit down, face the lingam, feel the inescapable vibration of energy in this orotund space, and meditate. Speaking is not allowed. There is nothing to distract you from the sheer beauty of this edifice, its contemporary ziggurat is alluring.

"I came here to see the linga," says Rajesh Pratap Singh, who claims he "chases lingas all over the world." "What draws me to Isha is the amazing architecture of the place—it's so Zen-like."

The Theerthakhund is a consecrated pool of water that is energised by a smaller linga made of solidified mercury. The women's temple here is separate from the men's. This building is awesome too—it is embedded 35 ft under the ground, and its ceiling is painted with beautiful murals. You shower and change into a strapless petticoat, and take your holy dip. The women in the pool seem to love it, smiling at each others like swimming apsaras.

The Linga Bhairavi temple is an homage to the Divine Feminine, symbolically in the shape of an equilateral triangle. This Devi temple is what reached out to Bahl Bedi the most. "It completely transformed me, and I wasn't the spiritual sort at all," she says of her first visit here.



The
Dhyanalinga

Sadhguru is on stage for his 6:00 P.M to 6:00 A.M discourse. In his audience are six lakh followers—the largest congregation after the Maha Kumbh.

Bahl Bedi met the Sadhguru first at her friend Vivek Sahni's house, and was taken aback by his long beard. But eventually she began to learn how "regular" he was. "He plays golf, drives like a maniac, rides a bike...he's like any one of us," she says. Payal Pratap adds: "He's really well-read and with-it. He can talk about the cultures and politics of any country."

It is this very normalcy in life that attracts the young and the cynical to Isha. It is an open system, you don't have to believe in God or spirituality, but in your own inner strengths which can be developed and sustained through meditation. Sadhguru often says: "A humanity which has done nothing for its inner well-being—how can it create external well-being?"

For an industry reputed to be obsessed with the external, the inner journey offers new thrills. ■