Yoga guru touts peace, not religion

Indian guru in America to teach inner peace

By Jay Hamburger

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Yoga master and guru Jaggi Vasudev is visiting Nashville as part of his first trip to America. He is teaching students how to achieve freedom and inner peace through a combination of meditation and yoga. It's not about dogma or renouncing any religious beliefs, he says.

Volunteer Kothai Shekar listens to Jaggi Vasudev during a yoga course at Gower Elementary School Monday night.

"There's no dogma. It is a way of self-inquiring," said Vasudev, who was schooled in English literature and civil engineering before he had a life-changing, metaphysical experience about 15 years ago.

That made him understand that external rewards are not as great as the inner peace that comes with true meditation.

"Probably 100 years ago, only kings and queens could have what the average person has today," he said, "but still man is in the same mess in terms of happiness."

The guru's first visit to the United States comes at the invitation of some former students who helped set up small classes in Centralia, Ill.; Bloomington, Ind.; Columbus, Ind.; and Dayton, Ohio.

Although more than 100,000 people in India have sought his teaching — including the Indian national

Guru emphasizes meditation

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hockey team — Vasudev has not lived the life of a celebrity on tour.

While in Nashville, he is staying in the simple apartment of one of his former students. And he has been satisfied to have 10 students who attend three-hour sessions for 13 days in a row in Nashville. The students, who are about halfway through their course, were asked to pay $175 to defray their travel costs. But only a small number actually did.

Those practicing yoga say their discipline — which includes techniques for breathing, positioning the body and meditating — is not a religion. It is, they say, a way to mental and physical health. As such, they aren't followers or religious devotees. They are meditators.

"We do not worship him as a god. He is our spiritual master. He is an enlightened person," said Maya Prabhakar, who learned yoga from Vasudev in India and decided to invite the guru to the United States after she moved to Nashville with her husband, a computer programmer.

Those seeing the guru for the first time were impressed by his teaching.

"It's very powerful," said Margie Mercer, who teaches yoga classes in Nashville. "It has a very calming effect."

Jim Pescock, a public relations consultant who helped spread the word of the guru's coming to Nashville, was skeptical. But he found the techniques helped him clear his mind.

"I know that sounds weird, but I'm as straight down the road a Southern Methodist as there is." In India as many as 60,000 non-paid volunteers help spread the message of Vasudev and his achirm — or yoga learning center — Coimbatore in Southern India.

It was near there that Vasudev had his blissful experience that caused him to give up his lucrative civil engineering business and delve into spiritual pursuits.

He was sitting on a rock when he was suddenly overwhelmed with a feeling that "left me drenched in a totally different kind of bliss."

He has spent much of the rest of his life trying to show others that they may find inner peace that helps bring them closer to their god and satisfies them without seeking financial or personal power.

"I am in no way antagonistic to anyone. I am not asking for anything. I am only asking people to look inward."