

The Growing Yoga Community in Istanbul

Ayca Gurelman

YOGA IS A RELATIVELY NEW SUBJECT for Turkey. Other than a couple of yoga instructors giving classes to closed groups, it became known to the public only by the beginning of the new millennium. Unfortunately the pioneering yoga instructors introduced yoga either as a sort of physical sport like contortionism or as a mystical path which gives the practitioners some special powers. Therefore since the very beginning we at Istanbul Yoga Center, wanted to spread the authentic knowledge of yoga for the physical, mental, and spiritual health of the Turkish and also to popularise the scientific basis of the yogic practices. To reach our goal, we organise various classes on a daily basis in our yoga centre, publish books on yoga philosophy and practice, and organise certificate and diploma programs of Swami Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana (S-VYASA) Yoga University.

I am the founder of *Istanbul Yoga Merkezi*, Istanbul Yoga Center, which was founded in August 2010. In 2011 I also started a publishing house, named *Purnam Yayinlari*, Purnam Publishing. This is the only yoga centre in Turkey that organises daily *yogasanas*, *pranayama*, meditation, *pratyahara*, and classes on philosophy. It is also the only yoga centre representing S-VYASA programs in Turkey. Our publishing wing Purnam is the only publishing house that is printing yoga philosophy and practice books in Turkey. I conducted the first Turkish yoga instructor course in Turkey in 2004 and started the first Turkish postgraduate diploma program in yoga in 2014. I also prepared and hosted Turkey's first

yoga philosophy talk show in a radio station for a season in 2012.

Early Beginnings

I was born on 12 January 1974 in Istanbul; the same date on which Swami Vivekananda was born, albeit in a different year. I am a Muslim by birth and always had a special interest in religion. I never practised my religion fully, but I read Koran at the age of eighteen and was deeply impressed by its message. However my family was never into religion so I never went deep into religious practices.

I was fortunate enough to have a good education and life was relatively easy. Everything was coming to me without much effort. I had a good job and life seemed to have endless options by the time I was twenty-five. That brought some level of dissatisfaction and boredom in life. I was asking myself if that was all what life was about. I had almost no interest to settle down and build a family, which was expected from me at that time. I knew from the bottom of my heart that I wanted something more, though I could not put my finger on what I wanted!

Though yoga was unknown to the Turkish community in 1999, I had an inner call for practising yoga that year. I do not remember where I heard about it or what attracted me to yoga, as at that time I did not know what it was, where this knowledge was coming from, or had seen anyone practising yoga. Fortunately, when I travelled to London for a brief business meeting I found a book on *yogasanas* published by the Divine Life

Society founded by Swami Sivananda. This is how my journey started.

Unaware of the depths of yoga, I believed that I had found the one and only book on yoga and that whatever it said was all one needed to know about yoga. By divine grace, I took the book seriously enough to practise the *yogasanas* given in the book every day.

Turkey, famous worldwide for its cuisine, mainly promotes non-vegetarian dishes and vegetarian meals are accepted only as side dishes. Being Turkish, my diet was naturally non-vegetarian, but after reading that book on yoga, I decided to become a vegetarian. Vegetarianism was unknown in Turkey in 2000. Even doctors were not knowledgeable about it and my parents were scared that I would die soon due to protein deficiency! There was tension in the family about my newly-chosen path. They started getting ideas that I entered into a wrong path.

A couple of months later, I came to know of a free meditation workshop by the newly opened centre of the Brahma Kumaris Raja Yoga Meditation Foundation. I did not know that meditation was part of yoga, but the name ‘yoga’ caught my attention, and so I attended the workshop out of curiosity. It was a sort of *trataka* meditation supported by some visual suggestions and I was deeply impressed by my first experience. At the end of the workshop, the volunteers of the foundation invited the participants to their meditation courses. I did not need much convincing, so I enrolled for the classes and never missed it for the next three months. Each session involved forty-five minutes of talk on philosophy followed by fifteen minutes of guided meditation. In these talks, I heard about karma, reincarnation, the purpose of life, and similar topics for the first time. I was stunned by these ideas.

I was a bookworm and wanted to extend

my knowledge by reading. I started digging the books that were sold in their sales counter and read them all in a couple of months but my thirst for knowing more was not satisfied, so I turned to the Internet. In 2000, book sales on the Internet were not as widespread as now, so my only chance was to search for yoga books through www.amazon.com. As I thought that yoga is the common name for *asana* and raja yoga the name for philosophy, and as I believed that the meditation technique I had learnt so far was ‘the only meditation technique available,’ I searched the words ‘raja yoga’ in Amazon and saw that there was only one book available, that of Swami Vivekananda! I was very happy to find at least one book and happily ordered it. I did not know then that this book would change my life completely!

Meanwhile I stopped going to the meditation classes of the Brahma Kumaris Raja Yoga Meditation Center, when they revealed that they were preparing themselves for the end of the world in 2012 and a new ‘kingdom’ would be formed then. I felt lost again, as I never identified myself with any kind of ‘kingdom,’ once again the question ‘is that all?’ arose in my mind.

When the book by Swamiji arrived by post, I was surprised by his ideas and how they were different from what I was introduced to before. I did not know about Swamiji then, but his ideas



were convincing. I was confused about whom to believe. Therefore I decided to do some research on the Internet and found the website of The Divine Life Society founded by Swami Sivananda. This website was created by one of his devotees, Pannirselvam. I started reading the many books that had been uploaded there and tried to understand more about yoga. Studying the books of Swami Sivananda for one year changed my perspective on yoga for good and I realised that it is a knowledge far deeper than I had ever imagined.

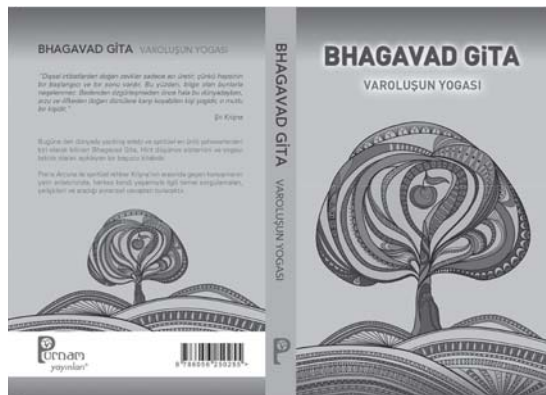
I adopted the principle of simple living and high thinking taught by Swami Sivananda and stopped spending for pleasure and started living a very simple but organised daily routine. Following that routine immediately isolated me from social life and changed my friend circles. My family found these lifestyle changes alarming and assumed that I had joined some cult. Though they never appreciated my previous lifestyle, they were now insisting that I go back to that! So friction in my family started and continued to create fierce pressure. With all my determination and stubbornness I resisted it.

In 2001, I quit my dream job to intensify my yoga practices as I felt that my work was hindering my spiritual growth. I found a small yoga center in Istanbul and started going there to intensify my practices. This yoga center was focusing on *asanas* with concentration on chakras, so

this is how I was introduced to the mystical path of yoga. I was drawn more and more to the practices, strongly believing that I was helping the world with my practice! I was getting more and more isolated from my friend circles. Little did I realise that I was getting depressed by rejecting the world and accepting a new and unknown one with almost no guidance.

In 2001 I started instructing yoga, when the yoga center owner was not in town and students were impressed even with my little knowledge of yoga and were asking where I learnt all these. Inspired by the work of Pannirselvam of distributing the ideas of Swami Sivananda through a website, I decided to start a Turkish website, with the same mission, to spread the word of yoga in Turkey. I started writing on practising yoga at home in my website, started translating yoga texts like the Bhagavadgita, Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*, *Gheranda Samhita*, and *Narada Bhakti Sutra*. I published them free of charge on the website. I contacted Swami Krishnananda of the Divine Life Society and got his permission to translate and distribute his books freely on the Internet. I was getting acknowledged by people visiting the website, so I formed a mail group which immediately reached a size of 1,500 members and started sending weekly discourses on yoga. I did not know that this website and this member group would help me to start a yoga center in a decade.

Since my wish was to stay a student forever, I never thought of getting a formal education on the subject. It was a personal path for me and I was sharing my learning with the interested few. But then in 2001 I met N V Raghuram—a professor from S-VYASA, at that time known as Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana Research Center—during his short visit to Istanbul. I was impressed by his depth of knowledge and during his visit we discussed the Gita



in detail and he invited me to join the yoga instructor course in Bangalore, India. It took me two years to digest the idea and register for the program. Meanwhile I accepted a low-profile marketing job in a local consulting house, afraid that I would miss my yoga practice if I accepted a multinational company job instead. As I realised my isolation and mild depression, I stopped going to the yoga center and continued my daily practices sans chakra-concentration at home. In 2003, at Raghuram's insistence, I visited India for the first time to get my yoga instructor certificate.

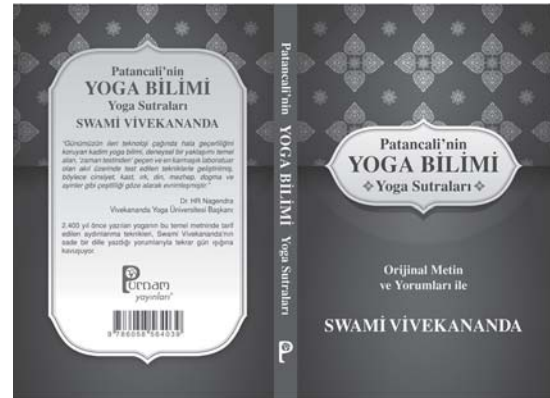
Soul Searching and Finding a Balance

In December 2003, I was visiting India and also an ashrama for the first time in my life, but my first impression was a huge disappointment! I had only read about India and the ashrama life and I was so overwhelmed by what I had read that I was assuming that all Indians would be floating in the air instead of walking and that the residents of all ashramas would be always in a meditative state. Once again I was totally wrong. India was hectic, with the high-pitch noise of vehicle horns, shouting people, and the turmoil of moneymaking. And in ashramas, everybody seemed to be interested only on the therapy version of yoga. I could not see a swami with ochre robes and everybody was looking quite busy working, doing the 'mundane' daily work to save the physical and mental bodies of sick people! I did not understand their point. How could they, knowing the words of Sri Krishna in the Gita, still give their time to save the 'physical body', which is perishable and temporary? I had so much to learn!

Feeling desperate and out of place, I went back to Istanbul. I decided to invite Raghuram to Istanbul for yoga *satsangas*. In 2004, he visited Istanbul for two weeks and I organised

open seminars for public. I introduced him as a 'yoga guru' from India and the reservations for the seminars were full, weeks before the events. However to my surprise the profile of the participants were totally different than expected. I thought that the main focus of the meetings would be about the ultimate truth and the soul. However, the visitors were asking for immediate healing of their common health problems! They obviously misunderstood the word 'guru' and thought of yoga as a new kind of reiki, which was a popular healing method in Turkey at that time. I was surprised but still accepted the fact that yoga was unknown to public. There were a handful of yoga instructors in Turkey at that time and they were more or less acting like healers, if not exotic contortionists. That brought the idea of organising a qualified yoga instructor certificate course in Turkey. I shared my idea with Raghuram and he happily accepted my offer. While planning the details, I got a job offer from a multinational company and believing that this job would not have a negative impact on my spiritual practices, I accepted the offer and started working as an executive.

Obtaining a job with a better salary gave me the opportunity to move into an apartment of my own, as the tension within the family was getting unbearable. Coming from a traditional Turkish family where a woman is expected to



leave her family only after marriage, here I was, the first in my family to move out by myself! Once again I was condemned for my decision but I did not turn back.

Meanwhile, I voluntarily organised the first yoga instructor course in the Turkish language in 2004, with a small group of participants. I did not know that the manual I prepared for the course would supply the basic material I would be using for the bestselling book of Purnam Publishing years later. In the following six years, while I continued working in various marketing posts in the same multinational company, I continued visiting various places of pilgrimage in India, understanding and admiring the mission of S-VYASA, increasing my knowledge of yoga by reading scriptures which were available in English, organising yoga instructor courses in Turkey, hosting the faculty of S-VYASA in Turkey, and organising yoga tours to S-VYASA campus.

In the last three years of my assignment in the multinational company, I went through a major bullying incident from the management team and I found out that there was only one way to keep my mental health, that is to hold on to my daily meditation, japa, and scriptural studies, which is what I did. Being a woman, to love and being loved was my natural instinct, but this harsh bullying experience taught me that I would be fine even when rejected and love does not always have to be mutual. This experience changed my personality altogether in a good way. However I did not have so much time to spend on yoga, so I stopped physical yoga practices which were keeping my body fit and supple and the immediate result of my decision was weight gain!

In the summer of 2009 I suffered another setback when I lost my job one day without any notice. I was devastated but surprisingly also felt

relieved. Only then I realised that I had been a victim of severe bullying and was shocked that I was bearing the negativity of the work environment for such a long time for no reason. It was as if I was a frog being slowly heated in a pot! I collected myself and started searching for another job the following year, but had a bitter realisation that bullying has no limits and the previous company management used their influence and prevented me from getting another marketing job.

A New Beginning

In the summer of 2010, after ten years of practising yoga, with my friend's encouragement, I decided to start a yoga centre. All these years I was scared that making money through yoga would degrade the value of my personal practices and so, I used to volunteer for different organisations. When I opened the yoga centre, I joked that normally it is the other way round: people would first make money then become volunteers in any service! Still I felt enough inner strength to take the decision and opened the yoga centre on a Sri Krishna Janmashthami day on 2 September 2010.

I realised that the field of yoga was very active with two to three popular yoga centres offering western-style *yogasana* classes. Also these centres were also organising yoga instructor courses and there were more yoga instructors than students. Other small independent yoga studios were having a hard time making a living due to low prices set by the major players and the small size of the students resulting in a fight between yoga studios. It seemed like though every yoga instructor was talking about personality development, the idea was to trash each other to get more students! The market was not ready to accept a new player in the scene!

When I opened the yoga centre, I was not

expecting a warm welcome. There was hostility in the air as I was changing the trend by representing a 'yoga university'. Keeping a very low profile I implemented the 'Integrated Approach of Yoga Therapy' suggested by Dr Nagendra, the founder of S-VYASA. According to this system, yoga was to be applied at all levels of *panchakosha*, so besides *yogasana* classes, I started offering weekly classes on *pranayama*, meditation, *pratyahara*, and philosophy every week. Not many students knew of anything about yoga apart from the *asanas* and so the attendance was low. However, I insisted that there be daily classes. I was confident that these classes would be appreciated some day.

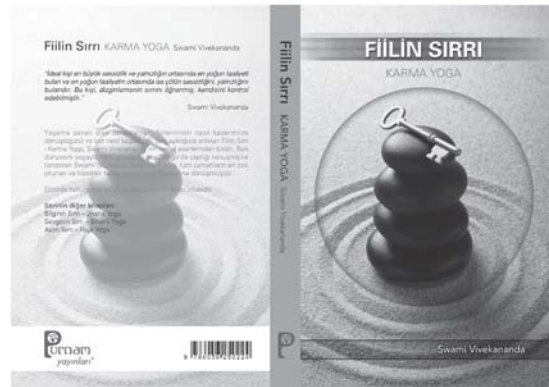
I gave a simple name for the centre: Istanbul Yoga Center. There were many yoga centres, including major players, who were already using district and town names. Being a marketer for many years, I registered the brand name immediately but little did I know that this brand name would create tension with other yoga centres. When to my surprise I found out that the name was being copied by other newly-opened yoga centres, we started sending notarised statements to prevent our trademark being used and I found myself under the attack of yoga centres claiming that we were trying to monopolise yoga! These unjust claims did not stop me from taking action and although we were boycotted by other yoga centres, till 2014 we had sent five notarised statements to different centres to protect our brand name. Interestingly the major players that were using other district names were never attacked like this.

In spring 2011, I suggested that I could give classes on the philosophy part of the yoga instructor certificate programs and after taking some serious tests, I could manage to obtain the trust of Dr Nagendra, the founder of S-VYASA and he authorised me to conduct the programs on their

behalf. We agreed on the exclusivity of Istanbul Yoga Center in Turkey to conduct their programs, so a new era started for our yoga centre.

Further Developments

In summer 2011, another friction was on the way. One of our students brought out a book written by a well-known yoga instructor, denouncing Swami Vivekananda and Sri Ramakrishna. This book was in circulation and was published by a major publishing house. The instructor claimed that Sri Ramakrishna was a lunatic and an epileptic, and that Swami Vivekananda was a leading Hindu missionary who had deceived people in the name of yoga. Our activities in Turkey were mentioned and the readers were warned about us being a cult but interestingly neither my name nor my centre's name was mentioned. I was devastated. I could not take a legal action to sue the instructor as my name was only implied but not expressly mentioned. I felt so sorry that these great personalities were slurred because of my small activity in Turkey. I spent the whole night thinking about what to do and in the morning I got an idea. If it were Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda who were insulted, then they could respond through their books. I immediately started working on starting a publishing house and that is how Purnam Publishing was born in August 2011.



I started learning the details of the workings of a publishing house: translation, editing, designing, printing, and distribution of books. It was a full-time job yet I was determined and motivated enough to do it. With my experience in marketing, I started managing everything by myself with minimum help, as I could not afford to hire many people. I contacted Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, India and Swami Atmajnananda, the erstwhile manager, was kind enough to permit me to translate and publish the books of Swami Vivekananda in Turkish.

The first book that we published in October 2011 was the translation of *Jnana Yoga* of Swami Vivekananda. Our publishing house took many by surprise and there were doubts about its future as Turkey is not a big market for books and it was already full of publishing houses.

The major players in the publishing industry are well established and the market is fully dominated with books on fiction. The favourite pastime of Turkish citizens is not reading and the sale of books is low, though around nine hundred new titles are released every month. The publishing houses do not specialise in any particular field but publish books of all kinds in various subjects to maintain a stable cash flow. In spite of all these unfavourable conditions, by the grace of God, we

managed to find a good distributor and could enter into the biggest book chain with our very first book. Though our book sales were not high, the book touched the lives of many yoga enthusiasts and we got a good response from the readers.

When I went through the books published on yoga, I realised that most of them were about *asanas*, but the instructions given were hardly enough to help the reader practise at home. As I too had begun by practising at home, I decided to publish a book that would cover the practices that can be done without guidance. I could also use the book as a manual for our yoga certificate program. This is how the book *Yoga at Home* was published in January 2012. It was an immediate success and is still one of the bestselling books on yoga. With the idea of publishing a series, I registered the name *Yoga at Home* in the coming year. In spring 2012, I got an offer to create and host a talk show on yoga philosophy in a prestigious radio station, *Acik Radyo*. The program lasted for one season and we aired thirteen shows with a co-host, one of our students. In each session we talked about one philosophical topic like karma, reincarnation, life of Swami Vivekananda, and vegetarianism and we ended each show with a two-minute guided meditation.

Just a year after the publication of *Yoga at Home*, we went for a reprint and to my surprise I saw a DVD with the same name *Yoga at Home* by one of the leading yoga studios. The consumer could mistake it to be based on our bestselling book. Once again I sent a notarised notice to destroy the DVDs immediately and found myself under fire. The other yoga centres joined together to boycott our books and activities, which was a major and unexpected setback. They started trashing our certificate programs, books, and called us an 'unnamed cult'.



I accepted the challenge. Since then, I have kept a tight agenda of releasing a new item every couple of months. With the help of friends, I managed to build a yoga library of thirteen books and an audio CD. I published Turkish translations of Swami Vivekananda's books on the four yogas, Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* with Swamiji's commentary, sayings of Sri Ramakrishna, Gita, *Vivekachudamani* of Acharya Shankara, and some books by modern authors. I also published new releases of books on *Yoga at Home* on stress, pregnancy, and yoga and also an audio CD of the 'Pranic Energisation Technique' of S-VYASA. Within three years of starting our publishing house, a section dedicated to yoga with a range of our yoga books can be seen in the local bookstores.

In January 2014, I applied to University Grants Commission (UGC) in Turkey to recognise S-VYASA as an academic university in Turkey. The application was accepted and S-VYASA became the first yoga university to be recognised by the UGC in Turkey. After much preparation, I was ready to launch Turkey's first yoga diploma program in Turkish, in the summer of 2014. The program is the translation of nine textbooks for the postgraduate diploma program on yoga therapy of S-VYASA.

New Developments in Yoga

Government officials visited S-VYASA in summer 2014 and it was the first official visit of the Turkish government to India for yoga. The visit was successful and we got an opportunity to introduce yoga in all its facets to our visitors with the help of the S-VYASA team.

Meanwhile, an unfortunate development took place and the yoga instructor who denounced Swami Vivekananda and Sri Ramakrishna was charged with

embezzlement and sexual harassment by his own students. They claimed that he forced his students to indulge in sex for the opening of their chakras! He fell from grace and unfortunately the members of his group found themselves under fire by their own families, as they could hardly prove that they did not go through the same procedure. The name of yoga was tarnished, particularly in small towns.

Looking forward to the Future

Opening up the yoga centre and the publishing house was one of the best decisions of my life. I regained my physical and mental balance and I lost the weight that I had gained during my corporate years. Our mission of spreading the authentic knowledge of yoga is continuing after four years of active work in our yoga centre, training of more than four hundred yoga instructors, bringing out fourteen publications, and conducting two certificate programs and one diploma program. Our hands are full with future projects. A major project underway is the publication of the Turkish translation of the full text of *Yoga Vashishta*.

Though we face many setbacks and challenges every day, we are determined to go forward in our efforts. 