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Feeling guru-vy



Suma Shewale is not the guru. She's Suma Shewale of Flint Township, of what has become the hand position called Sahaja Sthithi, a meditation and breathing yoga.

By Rhonda Sanders

JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

Suma Shewale believes she has found the key to happiness. To demonstrate, she kicks off her shoes and kneels on the floor of her elegant Flint Township home.

Resting her hands on her knees while holding her fingers a certain way, she closes her eyes. She is demonstrating the simple posture she takes while practicing Sahaja Sthithi, a life-transforming yoga she learned last year in a class taught by a master guru visiting from India.

It is hard to believe that something so seemingly simple gets the credit for dramatic changes in Shewale's mental and physical health. But she and many others who have taken the training claim it has fueled myriad life-changes.

A shy teenager became popular, an overweight middle-aged woman lost weight, a

New type of yoga uses ancient methods to ease stress of modern life

smoker quit, a single woman attracted Mr. Right and hardened prisoners became calm and peaceful. It's also credited with alleviating stress and heart palpitations, resisting peer pressure, increasing productivity and relieving asthma.

A seemingly all-purpose magic formula, Sahaja Sthithi (sa-HA-ja STEE-tee), which means natural state, differs from other forms of yoga in that it focuses only on the mind. Specific breathing techniques and meditation are featured but no contortionist poses or physical exertion is involved.

Living happily ever after isn't just a fairy tale to Sahaja Sthithi practitioners. After the initial training, a commitment of one hour a day is all it takes to maintain a state of bliss and vigor.

Shewale was ill and unhappy when a flier in the mail alerted her to a Sahaja Sthithi training

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course to be taught in Flint by its creator, Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev. After attending a free introductory session with Vasudev and getting a lot of skeptical questions answered, she decided to sign up for the seven-day \$200 course.

"I felt as if I'd taken a seven-day vacation," Shewale said. "That's the best ever week spent in my life."

Vasudev is scheduled to return to Michigan next month to teach another seven-day session at the Fokol Cultural Center in Dearborn Heights. The free introductory session will be 2-4 p.m. April 7 and the training session, April 25 through May 1. For further information, call (248) 478-4786, (313) 882-5683 or (734) 975-8910 or access the Web Site at www.ishafoundation.org.

Before the training, Shewale had been experiencing heart palpitations and chest pains. But as a result of a healing component of her training, she canceled an appointment she had made to see a heart specialist. Also knee pain that doctor friends had told her was due to aging went away.

Her daughter Sudnya, 16, who also took the training, reported another dramatic story of physical triumph.

A junior varsity cheerleader at Carman-Ainsworth High, Sudnya was in the middle of their performance at the Bobcat Classic competition in Grand Blanc, when she went into a split and tore a ligament in her knee. Her kneecap wobbled sideways. Unable to get up, she calmly reached over and popped her displaced knee cap back into place. Then she got up and finished the routine, which included dancing and shouldering one of her teammates in a mount. They won first place.

Afterward, Sudnya had to go to the emergency room and was on crutches three days, although

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—Suma Shewale of Flint Township

doctors had said she would need them for two weeks. She credits her fast recovery to the self-healing exercises she learned in Sahaja Sthithi.

The knee only bothers her now if she does a lot of jumping compared to a friend who tore a knee ligament last year that still hurts.

"I'm a wuss," Sudnya said. "Before, I'd get a paper cut and bawl. I think (the attitude change) is pretty dramatic."

She's seen other dramatic changes too.

"You don't get affected by peer pressure as much," she said. "(Nothing matters) as long as you're happy with yourself."

She also finds it easier to study.

"I think it helps me focus better. I don't feel resistance to studying. Now I just do it," she said.

Her energy level is so improved she was able to stay up half the night studying for a chemistry test, get up at 5 a.m. and was still going strong the following evening.

Her mother is on the same plane.

"It energizes you so much, you finish other work faster," Shewale said. "I handle everything pretty easily now."

That makes it easier to find the hour to do her exercises, she said. She's a full-time writer and does not work outside the home.

In fact, she credits Sahaja Sthithi with giving her the energy to write a book she'd been wanting to write for 15 years. She has completed the manuscript for

"Women? We-Men" which she describes it as a wild and wacky fictional examination of male-female relationships.

Maintaining her weight is no longer a struggle for her. Everyone in her family is fat, she said, but she no longer struggles to stay slim. Her appetite has diminished.

She recalled watching an episode of Oprah in which resident therapist Dr. Phil counseled overweight women to be strong to overcome the desire to eat.

Shewale disdained that advice, asking: "How could they be strong when they had no energy?"

"The breathing exercises provide you with inner strength," she said. "No one has to tell you to be strong. It comes naturally. That's the magic."

Exactly how it works remains a mystery but other practitioners report similar results.

"It is a really powerful tool to balance out your psyche," said Susan McCarthy of Ann Arbor, who took the training last year in Farmington Hills.

Every day since, she'd done the breathing and meditating exercise she learned.

"It freed a lot of blocks in my mind. I find that after doing the daily routines, I don't have as much stress," said McCarthy, who is pricing manager at a chemical company.

She's sleeping better and less, getting up earlier and has increased her daily runs from four painful miles to an easy eight. Now she's thinking about entering a marathon.

Overall, McCarthy has become more health-conscious.

"This got me deeper into thinking about how I should treat my body and the things I do to it that may not be good," she said.

It's also awakened her spirituality.

"I found after going through this process, I was interested more in spirituality and in connecting with other people," she said. "I was more of a loner before. Now I'm more interested in helping other people."

But Sahaja Sthithi is not a religious regimen.

"This has nothing to do with religion at all," said McCarthy, who was initially leery of that aspect.

"I didn't want to have anything to do with anything religious. (But) it does not require you to change any of your beliefs. They were not interested in converting me to any religion."

Rather, she was introduced to "universal truth" and teachings on how to make her life better, she said.

Sahaja Sthithi is Indian in origin but not for Indians only. McCarthy, who is not Indian, said about 40 percent of the people who took the class with her weren't either.

"I plan on continuing this the rest of my life. It had such a deep impact on me emotionally," McCarthy said.

She tells other people about Sahaja Sthithi but cannot teach it to them, she said.

Vasudev's teachings are based on the same ancient knowledge used in other forms of yoga, Shewale noted, but it is his creative work.

"He has creatively used the ancient knowledge and designed it for modern living" she said.

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