

# "Richard Simmons of yoga" brings his philosophy of healing to Houston

By KATE SHELLNUTT Copyright 2010 Houston Chronicle

July 1, 2010, 3:27PM



Michael Paulsen Chronicle

Ramdev is bringing his teachings to the U.S., where he hopes to address the country's struggles with disease and stress through controlled breathing, called pranayam, and yoga.

Swami Ramdev has been called the Richard Simmons of yoga, the Oprah Winfrey of Indian television and the Hindu Joel Osteen.

The guru smiles a bit of a half-smile beneath his long beard at an early-morning retreat this week for 350 of his devotees in the Sugar Land area. He cracks jokes in Hindi in between chanting from Vedic scriptures, leading breathing exercises and demonstrating yoga postures.

Ramdev is one of India's most popular spiritual leaders, known for his well-known television program, which has made yoga accessible to tens of millions of viewers.

"I didn't change people, yoga changed people," said the swami. "If you want a good life, a better life, you have no choice but to do yoga."

Now, Ramdev is bringing his teachings to the U.S., where he hopes to address the country's struggles with disease and stress through controlled breathing, called pranayam, and yoga.

He has visited Houston three times in the past three years. His local followers, through the Pantanjani Yogpeeth Trust, plan to establish a permanent place for Americans to find spiritual and physical healing through yoga, a \$20 million retreat center in Rosenberg.

The planning department recently proposed changes to the design of the 94-acre compound, so "now we are looking for the blessing of the city, and then we'll gear up in a big way," said Shekhar Agrawal, president of the trust. Construction of the center — first announced two years ago — may still be months away.

The organization plans to include a space for yoga workshops, housing for seniors, educational programs and an herb garden to go along with Swami Ramdev's line of supplements and alternative medicines.

The center may also partner with researchers and hospitals to use yoga techniques as therapy. Ramdev teaches that it can cure a range of diseases — obesity, cardiovascular conditions, hypertension, cancer — by increasing oxygen in the body and calming the mind. He designates different hand positions, called mudras, to send energy to address specific ailments.

To Ramdev, yoga is a comprehensive solution to just about everything. It doesn't just have the power to transform an individual; it can also bring peace and prosperity to a whole society.

"We are going to attempt to make better lives for everyone who comes to the center. Children, youth and everybody will be affected physically, spiritually, mentally, emotionally," he said.

Ramdev has launched a political party in India based on the holistic yoga lifestyle.

"We want to save the world from disease, from the hospital, from wars and conflicts," the swami said. "This is our mission."

While Americans tend to restrict yoga to the fitness realm, he and his followers believe it's much more powerful than that. The practice has its origins in Hindu scriptures, the Upanishads, dating back thousands of years.

"The science of yoga has evolved from India. It is a little more ingrained in the people," said Agrawal. "It's a spiritual practice, whether your way of worship is Hindu or Christian or Muslim... It's a spiritual journey from the physical body, deeper into the mind, the heart."

Ramdev has practiced yoga since his childhood in Haridwar, a city in northern India. Now in his 50s, he's a fit, seasoned yogi, with just a few gray hairs in his beard and barely a wrinkle on his face. He commits hours every day to his practice and sticks to a strict diet of fruits, vegetables and dairy.

The swami can move through the postures quickly, balancing on his hands and gracefully swinging his feet from behind him to in front of him. During this week's session, Ramdev also demonstrated his ability to control his breath, sucking in his stomach so it wiggles beneath his ribcage and turns concave.

Dr. Sushma Mahajan, seated on one of hundreds of orange yoga mats across the floor of the hall, follows along, exhaling deeply.

"Yoga gives you energy, and you should use that energy to serve others," she said.

During a series of chanting long, drawn-out "oohhhmmms," the whole room vibrates, with a sound Ramdev calls "a divine voice."

"The word om is original, and it is part of the very nature of the world. It never leaves," he said. It's the sound that reminds us "the universal divine powers are in ourselves."

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