Real Yoga was Brought to the West by People who Sat at the Feet of Great Indian Sages: Jozef Kiekens

Aparna Sridhar April 19, 2020



Jozef Kiekens or Narayan as he was named by his gurus, tells us the amazing story of how he became a champion for Yoga in Europe. A letter to Swami Shivananda created a chain of events which led to Yoga in Europe being lovingly shaped by gurus from

Rishikesh. In that letter, Jozef Kiekens was told by the Swami that it was clearly evident that he had been a Yogi for a long time, perhaps over lifetimes.

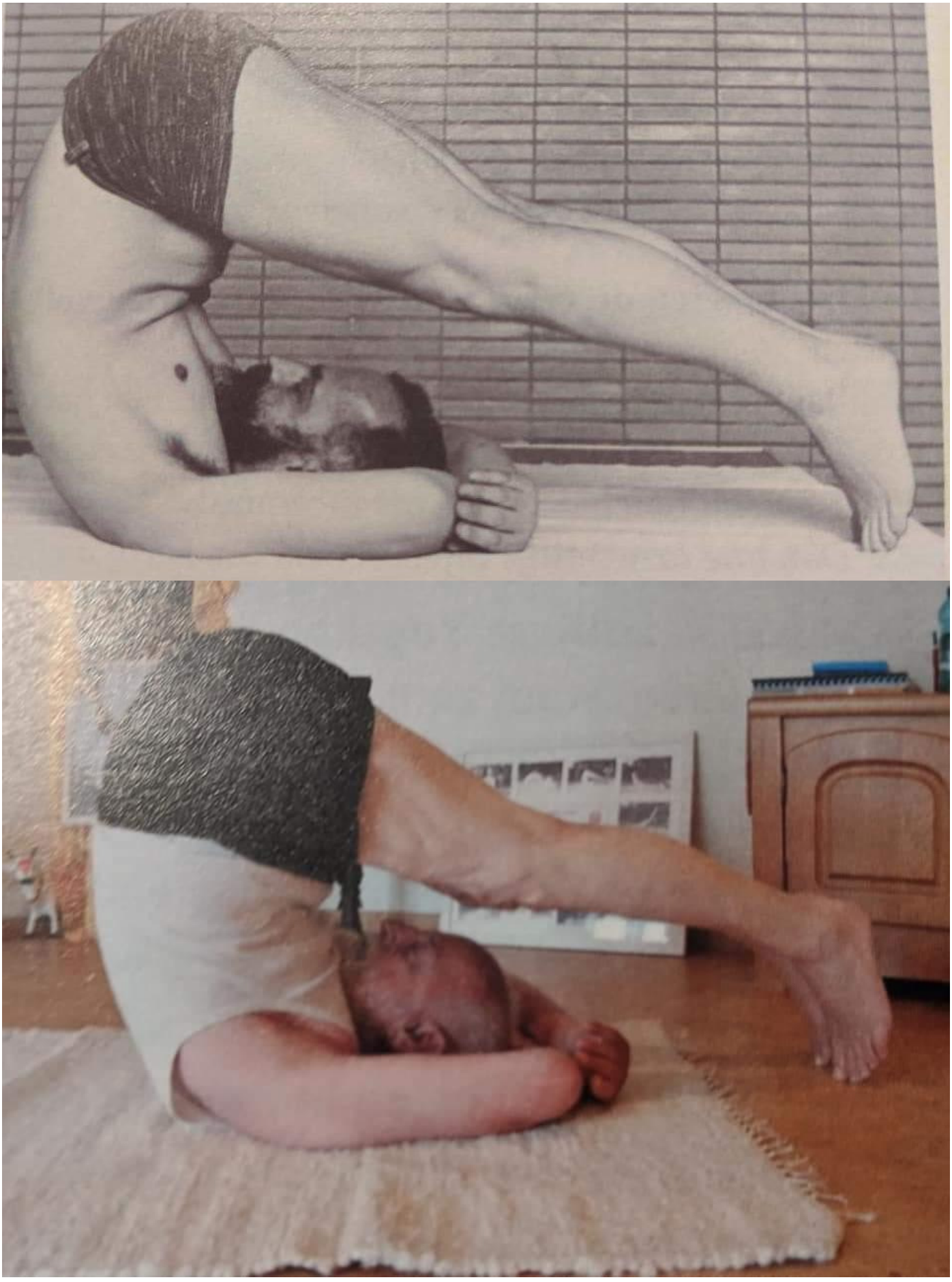
Jozef Kiekens or Narayan, as he is called now was born just a few years before the start of World War II at Aalst in Belgium. Those were hard years and his father had to flee to the South of France on a bicycle with other men to escape the pain of the German occupation.

A medical emergency at the age of 14, from food poisoning, resulted in a week long struggle and almost certain death. “My peritoneum was ripped and my intestines stuck to my stomach muscles. As a result I suffered a chronic inflammation of the intestines,” he says. Before joining full time his job at a bank, Narayan worked with the marines, a physically demanding job which made him forget his inflammation for a while.

The world was changing rapidly. In 1958, the World Exposition in Brussels, led to work becoming easier with the introduction of vacuum cleaners, washing machines, cooking stoves etc, all of which could be bought on credit for the first time. Industries were booming and trade burgeoning with raw materials coming from poorer countries in Africa.

Surprisingly, Narayan’s inflammation got aggravated after his marriage, and with more regular eating habits. “In October 1959, a well-known Socialist newspaper published articles in their weekend supplement on the benefits of Yoga postures. Attached to the articles was a registration voucher. Without my knowledge my wife filled it in. After a few weeks the first part of the printed course arrived. It described two Yoga postures: *Paadahastaasana* and *Pashchimotanaasana*, forward bending standing and sitting. It said: bend forward as far as you can without bending the knees, relax as much as possible and try to be here and now. Then count till 15. Do the same sitting. It had to

be done on an empty stomach. The next day, count till 30. So go on until you reach at 180 counts. The next day bow a little bit deeper and start again with 15 counts. Day after day I felt better and within three months the inflammation got cured without ever returning," he narrates.



Narayan at 35 and now at 85

He says the course explained that if one bends forward, one pulls apart the vertebrae and extra blood flows to the spinal cord. The nerves implanted there become strong and give good messages to the hypophysis gland in the brain. "The endocrine glands work as an orchestra. The hypophysis is the conductor. It will give clear messages to the other glands and your health will improve by the day. Do it for one year on a daily basis and you will have become at the end of that year one year younger."

His brother also subscribed to the course. The lessons came regularly and in a short time the family became 'very dexterous" in the aasana practice. After a year the course stopped as the author was killed in a car accident. Searching for an alternative source, they found the book *Yoga*, authored by medical doctor Rama Polderman, whose parents were theosophists and disciples of J Krishnamurti.

As the family poured over the book, they found in the bibliography among other names that of Swami Sivananda, India. A letter was dashed off to India by his brother, with no more details than that: Swami Sivananda, India.

"Within two weeks we got an answer, dated 6.12.1962. Swamiji wrote: '*I see at the signs of your letter you were a Yogi in your former birth*. Now you are on the path again. I will guide you with books and letters. Kindly start a branch of the Divine Life Society (DLS). Come together with friends on Sundays. Gradually your work will grow.' He ended his letter with 'Your own Self, Sivananda.'"



While Narayan was very reluctant to start a branch of the DLS, his brother was very keen, but being very shy, couldn't do it on his own. "He didn't ask: Do you want to be the president? He said: You must be president. I couldn't refuse as I loved my little brother."

Narayan says he has always seen Yoga as a spiritual path and taken it very seriously. "I was dragged into it by my brother against my will. But in a short time it grabbed me completely. If you ask me now "What is Yoga?" the only reply I can think of is: Yoga is a state of grace."

Narayan says Yoga came to the West in waves. "Swami Vivekananda did a great job. It came in the form of Theosophy with Madame Blavatsky, Colonel Olcott and others. They disappeared, but they did wonderful work publishing many Hindu scriptures. Then it came in the form of Hatha Yoga, making knots with the body. The real Yoga was

brought to the West by people who sat at the feet of the great sages of India: Swami Sivananda, Ramana Maharshi, Papa Ramdas, Ananda Mayi Ma (I sat one hour at her feet in 1973), Shri Aurobindo, Neem Karoli Baba and so on."

Narayan's days since then have started at 4.30 in the morning with Mantra Japa, meditation and sadhana till about 8 am. With no TV, everyone went to bed at 9 pm in those days. Swami Sivananda sent them a number of books to read. The very first one was the *Essence of Yoga*. The picture of the Swami on the book was familiar to the brothers.

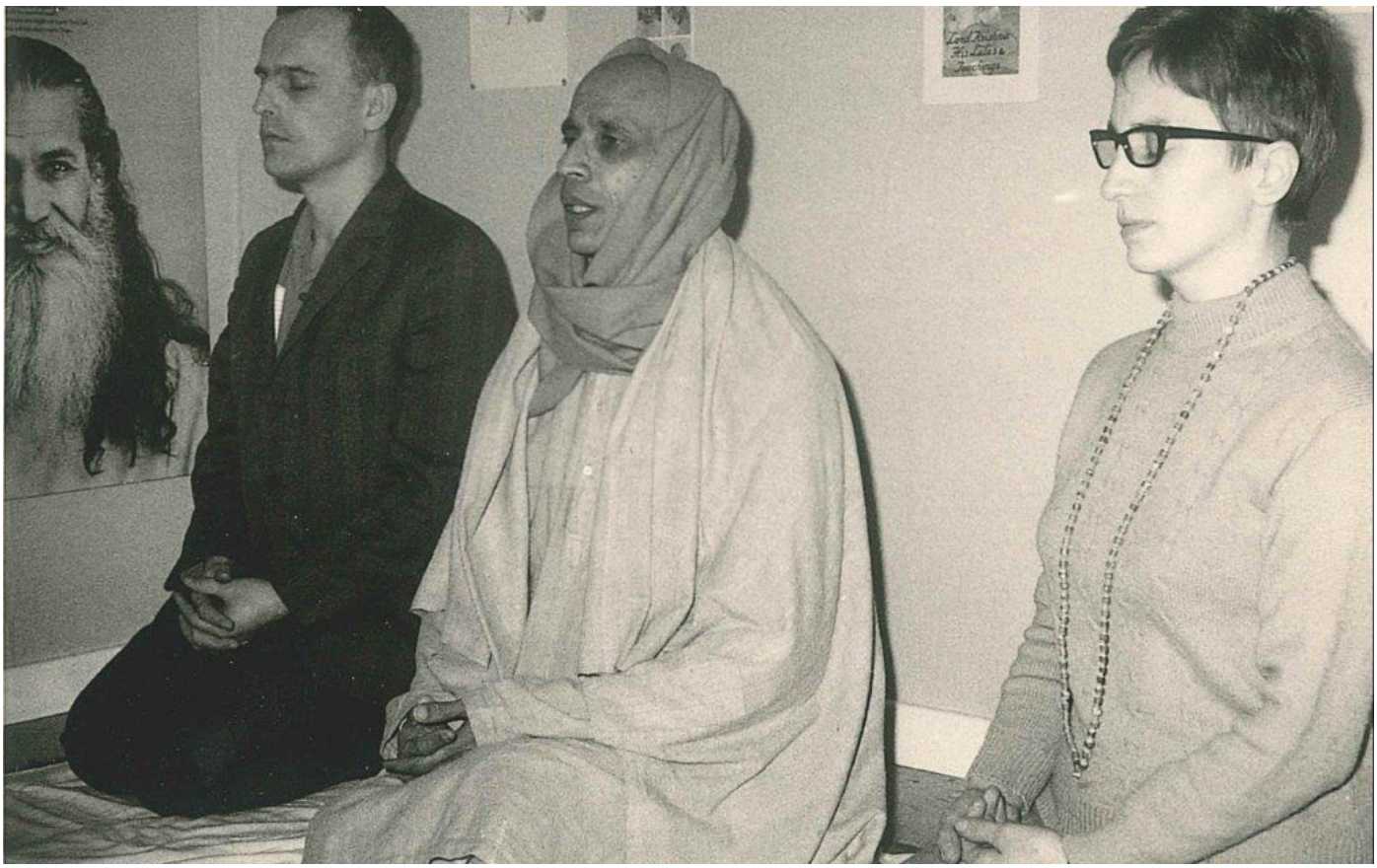


Narayan with Swami Chidananda at Frankrijk

In September 1950, as teenagers, they were at the local cinema on a Sunday afternoon. Before the film began, the screen showed Belgavox, International News. “We saw a tall man on the screen with a bald head amidst a huge crowd. Then we saw him in a sitting posture in a temple in meditation. This image made quite an impression on the audience. It was a report of Swamiji’s all India and Ceylon Tour. People swarmed him wherever he went, making international headlines. He spoke to the crowds, sang his bhajans and kirtans. And Yoga conquered the world in no time with many westerners visiting India thirsting for more.”

Soon after, the brothers got permission to give classes at the local swimming pool at Aalst, their home town, during non-swimming hours. They would begin classes at 5 am and they were quite successful.

In 1966, American filmmaker Conrad Rooks was shooting for his film *Siddhartha*. He met Swami Satchidananda, who was sent to Kandy, Ceylon, by Gurudev to lead the local DLS branch. “Rooks became so impressed by the Swami that he invited him to the West. Swamiji asked the addresses of the people who were affiliated to the DLS in Rishikesh. He wrote them a letter, saying he could visit them while Rooks was touring Europe.



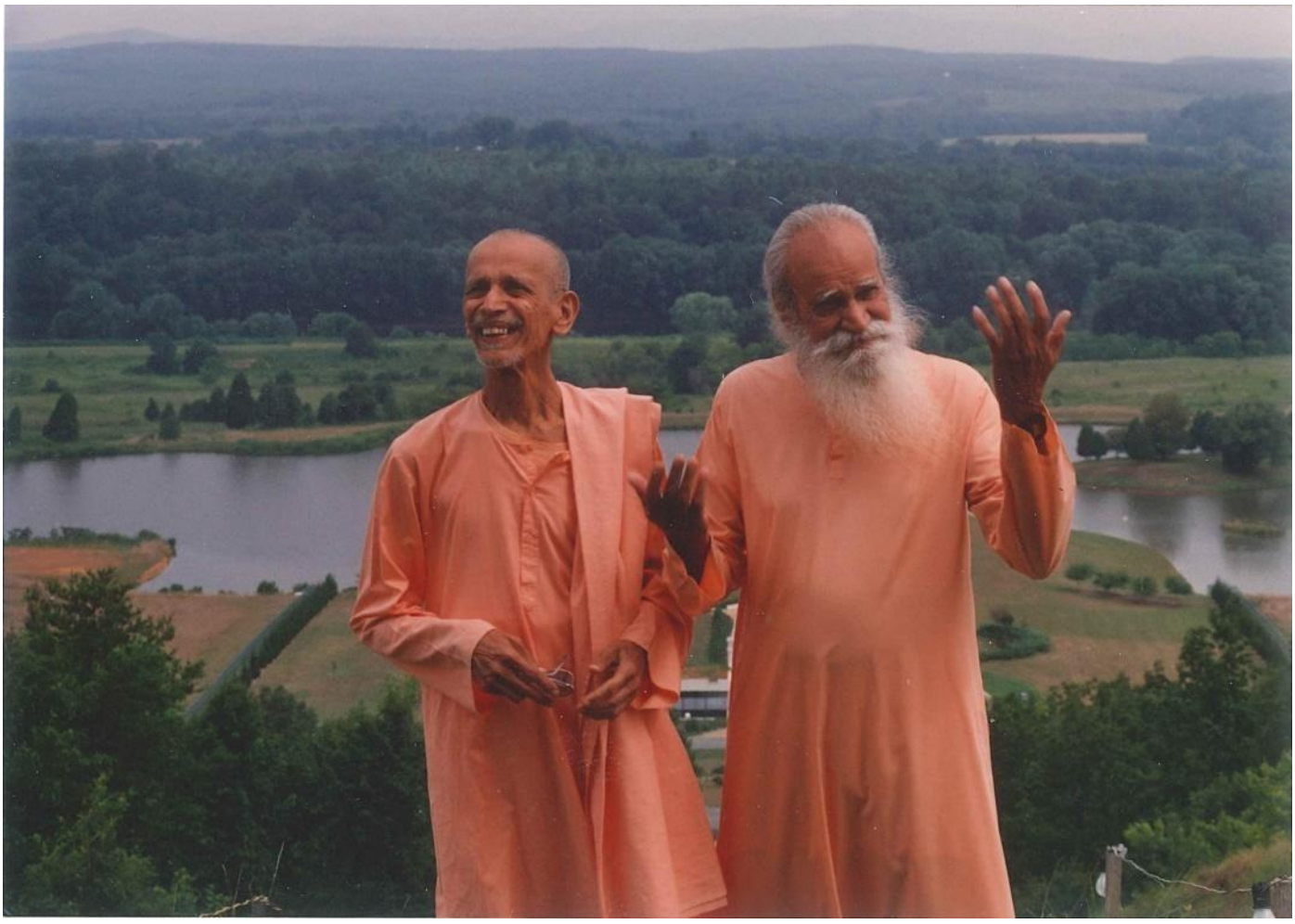
He was to be the first yoga teacher the brothers and Narayan's wife Lakshmi met. "We sent him a train ticket to Paris where he stayed in Hotel Napoleon. The first contact was via telephone. He stayed two weeks in our place. We organised lectures in town hall, Satsangs and Yoga classes. He was very much impressed by our work and knowledge."

"A book is also a Guru, says Narayan, "but the one thing a book doesn't do is it doesn't correct you. Swami Sivananda wrote a poem on that. A nurse had to take care of the sick for the first time one night. The doctor said: 'Girl, read the prescription attentively. The prescription said 'Shake before use.' She shook the patient and he died."

Based on what they read in the book *Japa Yoga*, they asked Swami Satchidananda for Mantra initiation. "That night my wife had a dream. She dreamt she had a small car. She had to attach it to the big car of Swamiji. He was driving at 100, 120, 150 km per hour. She honked all the time in the dream, and woke up bathed in sweat. She asked me:'What does this mean? He is your Guru, but what he asks of you is a bit too much.'"

Lakshmi ma, as she is fondly referred to by students, cooked for Swamiji, washed his clothes, took care of him and he would call her *Mataji,* making her very happy. Before eating he taught them to recite a verse of Shankara: "*Anna purne sadaapurne Shankarapraana vallabhe Gnyaanavairaagya siddhyarthan bikshaandehi cha Paarvati. Maataa cha Paarvati Devi Pita Devo Maheshvarah. Bandhavaa Shiva Bhaktah. Svadesho Bhuvanatrayam. Harih OM Tat Sat Brahmaarpanamasu*."

They continue to chant this today.



Meanwhile in America, Swami Satchidananda was changing society very rapidly. "He stayed in America with the hippies. He transformed them completely. He was a sworn enemy of drugs. He opened the famous Woodstock Festival in 1969 and built a Yoga Town in Virginia."

The next year he returned to Belgium when the Belgian Yoga Federation, of which Narayan was a member, organised a Yoga Congress in Brussels. “When he was back in America, after his tour in Europe, Swamiji gave us all a spiritual name: Lakshmi, Narayana, Shiva, Uma, Murugan, Valli, Rama, Ravi, Gopal etc. He came back to Aalst many times. Once I visited him in America together with my wife. In the evening Satsang, he stood between us and said: “These are my oldies.”

There were many conversations. Once they were partaking of their midday meal and Narayan remembers glancing at this watch. “Swami Satchidananda asked: “What are you doing? Food is God made, watch is manmade. When you are busy doing God’s work, forget man’s work.” The kind of conversation depended on who was sitting at the table and if was it before or after programmes. After programmes it was more relaxed, some small talk or some jokes.

He would praise their work when he lectured in Europe and America and so many swamis, disciples of Gurudev Swami Sivananda who were active in the West, came to Aalst. One of them was Swami Satyananda of the Bihar School of Yoga. He met Swami Chidananda in South Africa who told him he had discovered a wonderful Yoga center in Aalst, Belgium. He said, “When you close your eyes and when they do their kirtan, you can imagine you are in Rishikesh.”

This made Swami Chidananda curious about Aalst. He was president of the DLS in 1963 and on his world tour added them to his itinerary. On arrival at their ashram housed in an apartment, “he did *dandavat pranaam* before the altar we had built with a picture of Gurudev on it. Then he sat upright and sang Gurudev’s Song of Meditation. I was so impressed I thought to myself, I must learn this too” They introduced themselves afterwards and Narayan developed a deep spiritual love for him.


FUTBILLO

Swami Chidananda was a God-like figure for Narayan's wife Lakshmi and she had a deep affection for him. Once he ended his world tour in Aalst. There were many programmes including a Yoga Retreat in the Abbey of Drongen. There were many foreign guests as the branch was celebrating its anniversary and Lakshmi cooked for everyone. Swami Chidananda would receive many gifts and he said he would have to leave it with the couple or pay a lot for excess baggage.

He called Lakshmi and put a portable typewriter in her arms. When she said she couldn't type, he replied "You can learn." That same evening she started learning and from 1970 onwards till 1985, she typed their monthly magazine - *Yoga Vedanta*. Initially stencilled for 15 years, it has been printed since 1985.

Swami Chidananda named their Ashram - Swami Sivananda Yoga Ashram. Till 1985 they were conducting classes in halls hired from the local town management. With the oil crisis that year, the halls could no longer be heated and with Belgium's wet and cold climate, they were forced to move. They hired an old shoe factory and rebuilt it into a Yoga shaala. When this was told to Swami Satchidananda he said: "They are already taking care of the soles/souls of the people."

In 1970, they started a school for yoga teachers. The course was of four years duration, 500 hours a year. They taught the students the Yoga Sutra, the Bhagavad Gita, Vivekachudaamani, the Hatha Yoga scriptures, anatomy, Ayurveda, etc. "We teach them not to make their Yoga into an academic enterprise, but into an experiential search. People must discover that the source of the creative force is within," says Narayan.



He says for them the core teachings of the Guru are the *Mahaavaakyas* of the Vedas: *Pragnyaanam Brahma* - Everything is Consciousness, *Tat Tvam Asi* -Thou art That, *Ayam Aatmaa Brahma* -This Self is the Absolute, *Aham Brahmaasmi* - I am the Absolute. “The first and the second say: you are not different from it, it is you. Between the third and the fourth there is a gap: this is the domain of sadhana.”

Narayan has made translations in Dutch of the Gita, *Vivekachoedaamani, Yogasutra*and V*ishnu Sahasranama* and a few books by Swami Sivananda. Asked if an immersion in sacred Hindu scriptures is necessary to be able to realise the goals of Yoga, Narayan replies: “If one takes the instructions of a saint or a scripture seriously with full heartfelt faith this is enough to realise the goal of Yoga. In most schools, they know the names of the great scriptures, but only superficially the content. But I have

read the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Brahma Sutras, and studied quiet a large part of the Puraanas and find them a source of inspiration. Study of the scriptures is one of the Niyamas and one of the parts of Kriyaa Yoga."

Narayan came across the Bhagavad Gita for the first time in a novel by John Steinbeck where he questions his writing: "What can be written that was not written yet?" He found a copy edited by Annie Besant of The Theosophical Society with a word by word translation and an introduction to Sanskrit grammar. "I learned to read and write Devanaagari and in 1966 Swami Satchidananda taught me how to pronounce it. He recited the part of book II about the Shitapragnya: "Sthitapragnyasya kaa baashaa… I heard a Swami reciting once the Gitaadhyaanam and I knew it. I have often felt: How do I know this? I feel I remembered things."

It was about the same time that entrepreneur and Yoga practioner Gérard Blitz wanted to form the European Yoga Union as it was known then. Blitz visited Yoga federations in Europe and when presented with their magazine asked partially in Flemish (the kind of Dutch spoken in Belgium: "Who are the Swamis you are writing about? Do you think they would agree to participate in the Yoga week in Zinal?" Swami Satchidananda agreed, but on the condition that Narayan be included. And so he was to become one of the founding members of the EYU at Zinal.

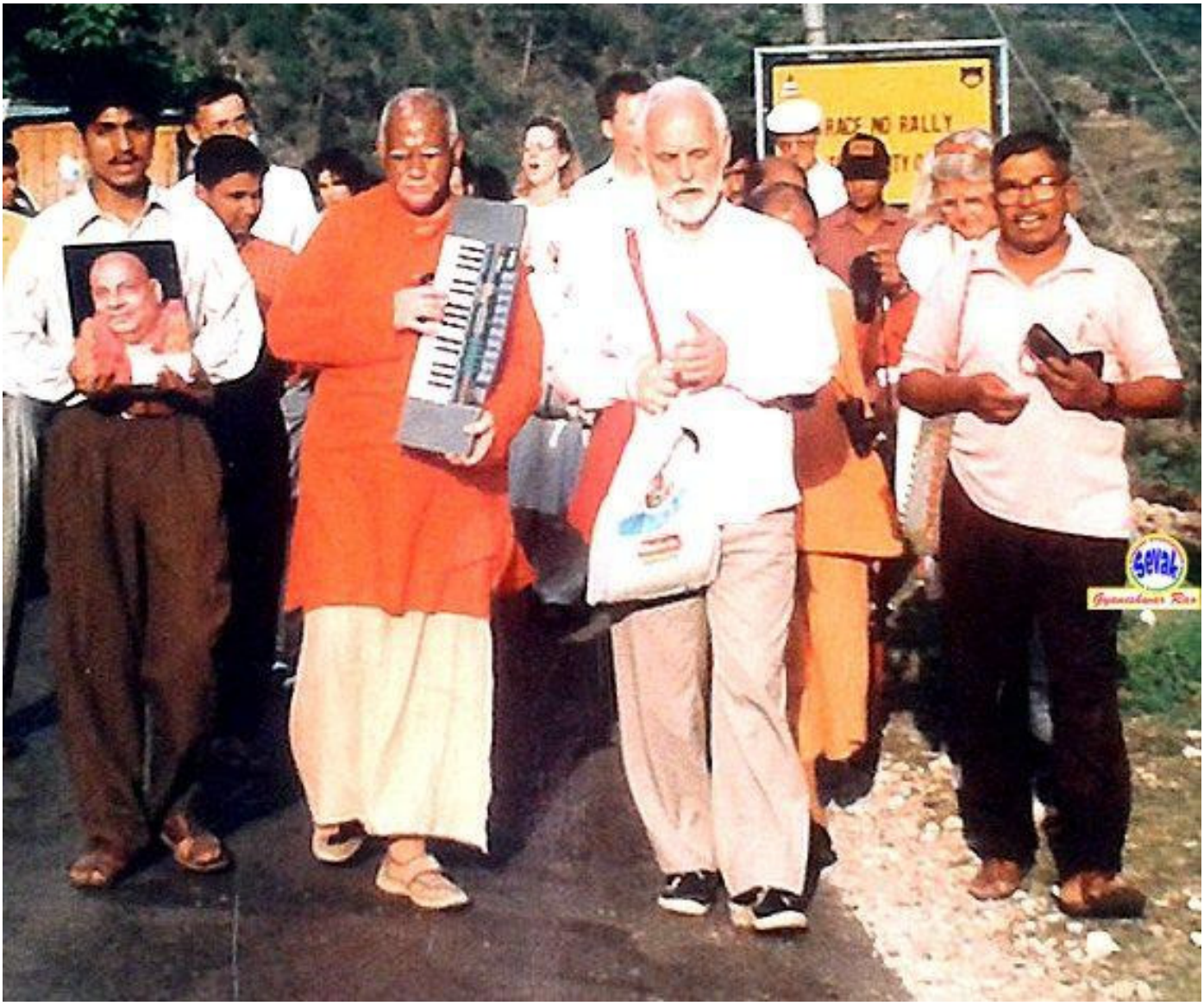


Director Indic Yoga Vinaychandra and Anuradha Choudhry with Narayan and Lakshmi

Coming Home to India

In August 1973, Narayan asked his permission to visit the Sivananda Aashram. He mentioned casually that he had a desire to visit Benares. Swami Chidananda sent his disciple Vimalananda to receive him in the airport and take him by train to Benaras. When they arrived at their hotel, Swami Chidananda received them. “He had come specially from Haridwar to Benares to receive me. He took me by a rikshaw to the main temples and I could participate in puja at the Golden Temple in the evening receive the mahaaprasaad.”

Narayan has visited India 15 times and Swami Vimalananda has shown him the whole of India from Cape Comorin to Badrinath, Kedarnath and Gangotri. So how did India feel to him, what did she look like on the outside and inside?



"I felt at home from the very first time. I remember in 1973 when I was introduced to people and when they heard I was practising Yoga, they asked: 'Do you get up at 4 am?' Now people have a tennis day, a swimming day, a sauna day etc. and a Yoga day. That is sadly very often the level of Yoga. It also became big business. But my philosophy is: "Revere the Lord, eat your daily bread and let the world be the world. *Haath me kaam mukh me Raam*."

Narayan's father passed away at the age of 57 and his grandfather at the age of 44 of thalassemia. At 85, the specialist tells Narayan "You kept the disease under control by your way of life. Go on like this."



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