

## E-MOTION: ENERGY IN MOTION AND YOGA

*An Interview with Donna Amrita Davidge*

*Amrita Davidge's great grandfather William Sewall was a well known nature guide who had a lifelong friendship with Theodore Roosevelt. The president-to-be was cured of his asthma by his visits with William Sewall at Sewall House. Donna, a student of Yogi Bhajan, carries on the family heritage and history of healing in the Yoga retreat she created at Sewall House.*

**Integral Yoga Magazine:** Before we talk about Kundalini Yoga's approach to working with the emotional body, would you tell us what drew you toward Yoga?

**Donna Amrita Davidge:** That question reminds me of a New York Teachers Association conference I went to some years ago, where Rod Stryker asked the same question. Most of the Yoga teachers said it was for physical reasons. I raised my hand and said, I got involved in Yoga for emotional reasons. I had done some Hatha Yoga in college, but when I was 30, I found Kundalini Yoga. I was at a crossroads in my emotional life. I had completed my Master's degree in nutrition, I was a trained dietician, but I was a bit lost emotionally. So, my journey with Yoga began as an emotional search.

**IYM:** Did Yogi Bhajan talk about the emotions in relation to spirituality?

**DAD:** I loved that Yogi Bhajan spoke very openly about the emotional body, about emotions as energy, and he gave us specific sets (a combination of poses, breathing practices, *mudras*, etc.) to release anger and other emotions. Eckhart Tolle, in his book *The Power of Now*, says emotion literally means disturbance, from the Latin *emovere*, to disturb. Yogi Bhajan said that Yoga is to take the commotion of emotion and transform it into devotion, calm and inner peace. So, through our Yoga practice, we learn to deal with our emotions in a healthy way. A woman was taking my class for the first time. During the class, I had everyone raise their arms and hold them up for three minutes. She told me later that just in doing that movement, she began feeling all this emotional release and she began crying. Emotions are energy in motion held inside us, and Kundalini Yoga helps it to move and that's a wonderful release.

**IYM:** Did Yogi Bhajan recommend particular practices for emotional issues?

**DAD:** In 1989, I wrote to him when I went to my first summer solstice program at the ashram in New Mexico. I said, "I appear happy outwardly, and always have, but, inside I don't feel happy." He gave me a meditation to release haunting thoughts and told me to do this practice for 90 days. Along the way, I've discovered the many tools Kundalini Yoga has to offer and I've practiced them. This includes connecting deep within to your emotions through

your breath. For me, part of my *sadhana* is practice and part is delving into Yogi Bhajan's teachings.

**IYM:** Would you give some examples of how you work with your students in relation to emotional issues?

**DAD:** As a woman, I especially appreciated the practices Yogi Bhajan gave that addressed low self-esteem issues. He said that women are the grace of God. When I first got involved in Kundalini Yoga, I was struck by how the women carried themselves so gracefully. I give a meditation that is very affirming to women at my retreats. You repeat again and again, meditating on the words: "I am the grace of God." Just to say those words is very powerful.

One summer a woman came to my retreat for three and a half weeks. She had recently gotten out of the hospital after having pneumonia. I like to look at illness from a holistic perspective, so I went to Louise Hay's book (*Heal Your Body*) to identify the emotional cause of this illness of the lungs and the breath. "Emotional wounds that are not allowed to heal," was her explanation. The affirmation given was: "I freely take in Divine ideas that are filled with the BREATH and intelligence of LIFE."

Many changes occurred for this woman during her stay with me. She had a lot of nervous energy but at the same time was very weak upon arrival. She was unable to be in baby pose and had to gradually restore herself with breath, good food and healing massages. Emotional issues around her upcoming retirement and challenges with aging and ill parents surfaced and finally, the tears came up as well. "My eyes are damp with the nectar of the Lord" is a line from one of the songs we play in Kundalini Yoga that I love and feel exemplifies the healing nature of tears. When she left, she had a 20 minute routine of asana and *pranayama* to take with her. Negative emotions had lifted, she was relaxed, had a renewed and more joyful outlook on life. She had learned to be still with that nervous energy and just breathe, to feel the sadness, hurt and the things she must accept and could not change.

**IYM:** Would you give us an overview of Kundalini Yoga *sadhana* and tell us about the roots of the tradition?

**DAD:** Kundalini Yoga has a serious Yoga tradition attached to it. When Yogi Bhajan came to America in 1969, he was surrounded by people zoned out on drugs who wanted to

learn from him. He said they were looking for God in all the wrong places, and so he got them high on breathing. In India, this form of Yoga was not shared with the general public but only those who were initiates. But Yogi Bhajan took the liberty of teaching people who weren't initiated. He gave them a practice that would have an accelerated effect on them because they were so sincere and so in need.

**IYM:** What is the significance of the white clothing and turbans that Kundalini Yoga teachers wear?

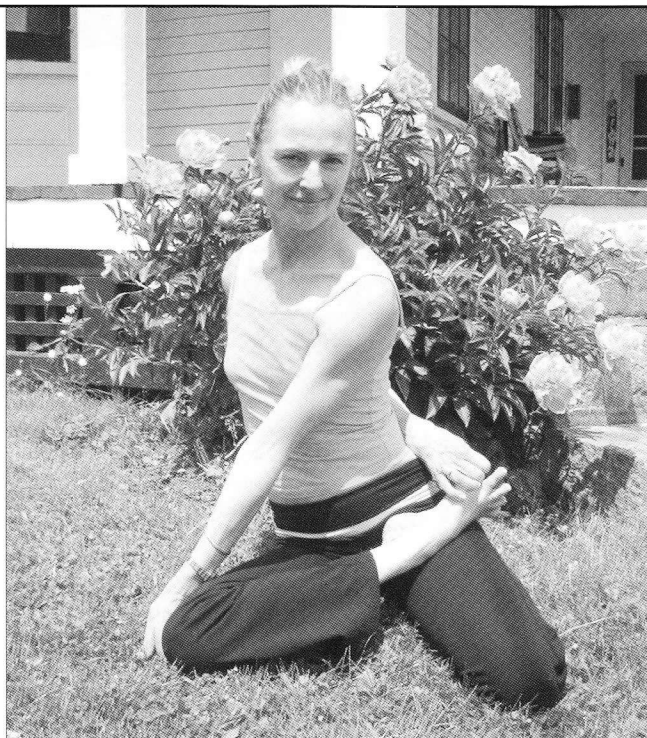
**DAD:** Those who wear that have chosen to adopt Yogi Bhajan's religion of Sikhism. That is not required if you want to learn Kundalini Yoga or even to teach it. I'm not Sikh and don't wear this garb, though I appreciate what it stands for. I think those who do are amazing, wonderful yogis. Yogi Bhajan said that if you are walking around like that, you better walk your walk. One reason for wearing white clothes and turban is to neutralize your identity, which, as a teacher, is a good thing. It enables you to hold the space for your students to be in a healing space, with a neutral being. It's suggested that we cover our heads when we teach in order to contain the energy at our crown because Kundalini Yoga works with the *chakra* (energy center) system. We also wear white because it expands the aura, the energy field, and I do wear white when teaching Kundalini Yoga.

**IYM:** Do you teach other forms of Yoga too?

**DAD:** I was teaching Kundalini Yoga exclusively until 1999. Then, I had a session with one of the healers in our organization that changed my life. He said to me, "Your consciousness is wide open from all the years of Kundalini Yoga practice and teaching, but you need to be more physically integrated. Because of this guidance and because I am essentially a seeker, I began to explore various Hatha Yoga approaches. I studied with Dharma Mittra, Rod Stryker, Anna Forest and extensively with Eddie Stern (Ashtanga Yoga). I delved into the physical as a way to integrate my whole Yoga experience. Gradually, people started asking me to teach them Hatha Yoga, so I do that also.

**IYM:** Are your retreats a combination of Yogas?

**DAD:** I don't mix Yogas, meaning, if I am teaching a Kundalini Yoga set, I won't introduce an asana or breath work that I learned elsewhere. As a Kundalini Yoga teacher, I feel it is important to practice it in its pure form. If I am teaching Hatha Yoga, I may mix styles of Hatha that I learned from my various teachers. For the retreats, we do Hatha Yoga and breath work in the morning. In the afternoon we do Kundalini Yoga which incorporates chanting, mantra and live music (my husband Kent Bonham is the musician and chef). We offer vegetarian meals which is new for some and contributes to them becoming more aware. We are near lakes and hikes in a beautiful and unpopulated part of northern Maine.



*Donna Amrita Davidge in front of Sewall House.*

I purchased my great-grandfather's home—talk about emotional life and healing—it's been quite a unique journey. I feel there's been a strong healing component in my family home. This retreat has been a wonderful opportunity for me to grow and to see people be transformed in this intimate environment. We have two to six people at each retreat and the setting is more like a Bed & Breakfast than a dormitory. People feel very safe in this environment.

**IYM:** It has been said that 90% of illness is stress related. What can Yoga teachers share with students to help prevent or heal these illnesses—whether physical or emotional?

**DAD:** In the last five years, Yoga has exploded into a fitness movement with people flocking to classes for their workout and to sweat and to sometimes injure themselves. How can you learn the tools Yoga offers, in a class that does not present stillness, meditation and mindfulness as part of the teachings? What aspects of Yoga are these workout classes missing that could help people deal with their emotions and stress? As Georg Feuerstein said, perhaps we can get back to using Yoga to remember the philosophical, spiritual and emotional aspects of our being and in so doing help heal ourselves and our planet. This will enable us to create a more peaceful, loving space for all in our fast-paced, anxiety-ridden, often emotionally confusing world.

*Donna Amrita Davidge has been teaching Kundalini Yoga, in New York since 1985. Sewall House has been listed as a "Top Ten Yoga Retreat" by Travel & Leisure. Donna has been featured in numerous national magazines, as well as on radio and television. For more information please visit: [www.sewallhouse.com](http://www.sewallhouse.com).*