



Yoga Stories from Guru Guptananda

How to
be Happy
and Healthy -
Yoga Wisdom
Explained

Tessa Hillman

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Wisdom Explained

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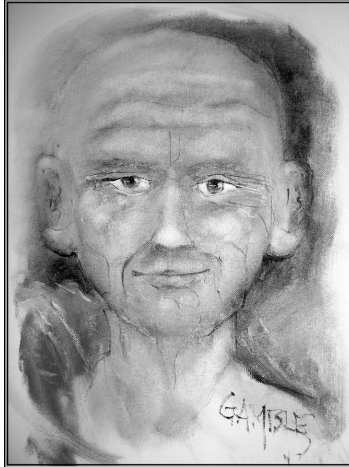
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Swami Ramesh Guptananda

Portrait by Patrick Gamble, psychic artist April 2002

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INTRODUCTION

FOR YOUNGER READERS

Greetings all young yogis out there! I've made this book for you. You are interested in yoga, you may even have a lovely athletic teacher, but they might never tell you what the ideas behind yoga are. That would be a pity because these ideas are actually the most important part of yoga.

The stories in this book are about the life of an Indian *swami* called Ramesh Guptananda. He was a teacher of yoga philosophy — that's what *swami* means. Many funny and interesting things happened throughout his colourful life and this book features real-life stories about Guptananda and his family, to help explain different aspects of yoga.

In **Chapter 1**, you can find out about Guptananda, and this will help you to understand how the stories fitted together during his lifetime.

As you read, try to imagine a kind, elderly man with a gentle Indian accent is speaking to you about his life, it will add to your enjoyment of the book.

Sometimes Guptananda talks as if he is telling the story about another person, almost as if he is embarrassed to admit to some of the things he did in the past. After all, even a guru (a spiritual teacher) may not be perfect. Guptananda always takes care to admit the truth.

All the sections *this font* are for people who would like a little more information about yoga philosophy. Information for teachers and

parents is at the back. If you just want to read the stories, read on.

In this book you will find the idea that there is more to life than what we can see, hear and feel. There are many religions in the world and they are all reaching out to a Higher Power, which some people call 'God', the 'Source', the 'Great Spirit' or the 'Universe' and other names too. This book has a Hindu background and the principles in it are very similar to the Ten Commandments of the Bible. However, this book is about spirituality rather than religion.

You don't have to be religious to enjoy and learn from Guptananda's stories. They are stories to make you smile and think.

CHAPTER 1

ABOUT GUPTANANDA

Guptananda always enjoyed helping others. Even as a small child he was deeply affected by other people's needs. He had a gentle sense of humour and a kindness about him that draws us into his stories. He didn't mind laughing at his own mistakes. This book is full of stories about his life from the age of four until his mid-twenties.

Ramesh Guptananda and his family lived very many years ago in Northern India in a comfortable house with grounds and servants' quarters. They were *Brahmins* (from the priestly class) and Guptananda's father was the chief scribe at the temple. His work was to write out and illustrate holy texts. His mother supervised the servants at home. Five servants looked after the house and grounds. Ramesh had a brother called Anil, who was born two years after him, and a sister Usha, who was four years younger than Ramesh. His family called him Ramu for short.

Ramesh was very proud to have a horse, Raja, whom he loved dearly and who features in some of the stories. At the age of sixteen, Ramesh decided to follow a spiritual path. He found a guru who was willing to take him on as a trainee monk, who he lived and travelled with for several years. In his twenties he thought that family life would suit him better. His uncle arranged a family gathering where he met a lovely girl, Meera, and they were married within a few short

months. Ramesh then worked alongside his father as a scribe in the temple. After ten years of a very happy, though childless marriage, sadly, Meera died. Ramesh then decided to return to the path of the holy man, living and travelling with his guru, helping and advising people on their spiritual growth.

These tales are about family, temple and village life, providing funny or touching incidents that show us how the 'values' or 'rules of life' apply to everyday living. In this book, Guptananda explains some of the more important aspects of yoga and shows how they fit into ordinary lives.

Names of the main characters:

Ramesh Guptananda — often called **Ramu** by his family

Anil — Ramesh's brother

Usha — Ramesh's sister

Meera — Ramesh's wife

Rajendra — Ramesh's father

Mother — Ramesh's mother

Uncle Sanjay

Arun — the gardener

CHAPTER 2

THE EIGHT LIMBS OF YOGA

Younger readers might want to just skip on to the [first story](#), but teachers, parents and yoga students need to read this section.

THE EIGHT LIMBS OF YOGA EXPLAINED

The Eight Limbs of Yoga are different practices or skills that people can learn, in order to work towards reaching 'enlightenment'. Some say yoga is the 'Quest of the Soul'. Enlightenment could be described as a deep understanding of the meaning of life and our place in the world.

Patanjali, an ancient sage or wise man, described the eight limbs of yoga as follows:

1. Yamas

Controls or things we should avoid doing.

2. Niyamas

Self-disciplines or things we should do to be healthy and happy.

3. Asana

Postures and physical exercises to keep the body healthy.

4. Pranayama

Breath control.

5. Pratyahara

Withdrawal of the senses.

6. Dharana

Concentration.

7. Dhyana

Meditation.

8. *Samadhi*

Blissfulness, ecstasy.

First, we need to be living in harmony with ourselves and other people. This is where the moral code and code of conduct come in — the *Yamas* and *Niyamas* that make up the first two limbs of yoga. The *Yamas* are sometimes called controls or restraints*, because they are things we **should not** do. The *Niyamas* are self-disciplines, or ‘positive duties’; they are things we **should** do.

Then we need to improve our health and energy levels by practising physical exercises, the *asanas*, and breath control, known as *pranayama*. These are the third and fourth limbs.

If we are doing our best to follow the *Yamas* and *Niyamas*, and our health is good enough for us to be able to work on our minds without the distraction of pain, we may be ready to move on. The next limb will lead to the ability to meditate. Some people who are in pain a lot actually train themselves to meditate to relieve pain.

In order to begin to meditate, first of all we have to learn to withdraw the senses from all the distractions of daily life. All the sights, sounds, smells and feelings that constantly attract our minds can be shut out temporarily when we learn *pratyahara* or sense withdrawal — the fifth limb. We don’t try permanently to withdraw ourselves from what life has to offer. It is something we learn to do in order to meditate for short periods of time.

For those who have decided they want to follow the path of the monk or nun, and to devote themselves to the spiritual life, then a great deal of withdrawal from life’s normal activities is involved. This book is for ordinary people living in the world in a normal way.

When external things do not distract us then we can practise *dharana* or concentration — the sixth limb.

When we can concentrate on a chosen subject like a beautiful flower or a candle flame for a certain length of time, perhaps five minutes, we find we can start to meditate. The seventh limb, *dhyana*, or meditation, can lead to a wonderful sense of being at peace. The

eighth limb of yoga is a state of peacefulness or bliss known as *samadhi*.

We may consider how these eight limbs of yoga can be included in everyday life. When we follow the code of conduct we feel calm and at ease. We enjoy the company of others and they appreciate us too. This gives us confidence in ourselves. Physical exercise keeps bodies healthy and breathing exercises draw more energy into the body, so now we are healthy and energetic as well as calm and confident. The last four limbs relate to spiritual practices, which put us more in touch with our 'Higher Selves' or the 'God Force'. This brings a much deeper meaning to life and helps us through life's difficulties. Yoga is a way of living, as you will see on your journey through this book.

The eight limbs are explained in more detail in the stories that follow.

[STORY 1](#)

First Limb of Yoga

The Controls — *Yamas*

The following are the five main *Yamas*:

Non-violence — *Ahimsa*

Non-stealing — *Asteya*

Non-greed — *Aparigraha*

Truthfulness — *Satya*

Chastity or Sexual self-control — *Bramacharya*

MY AUNT'S CHAOTIC HOUSEHOLD

When I was about twelve years old I spent some time with my Aunt Savitri and her large family. My sister Usha and I stayed with them for about a month as my mother was ill and could not look after us children. We came from a family where everything was very well regulated. My mother and father watched over us carefully. They taught us what was right and wrong. They trained us kindly but firmly. We knew where we stood.

If we disobeyed the family rules we were expected to make amends in some suitable way. For example, if we were unkind to each other we would have to do kind and helpful things and tell our parents exactly what we had done, until they thought we had done enough to make up for our unkindness.

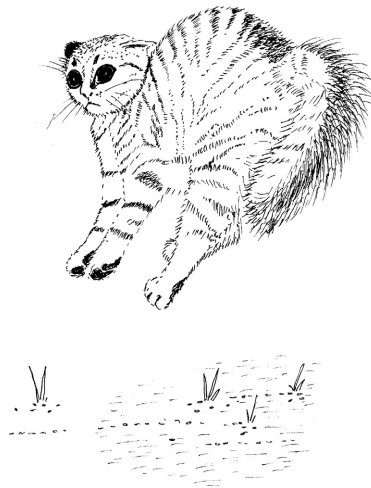
If we shouted too loudly, or too often, we had to spend a certain amount of time being quiet. If we were very greedy, we were given what my mother called 'second best' food to teach us a lesson. 'Second best' food was not popular in our house! It meant we would be served last of all and the food would be cold and sometimes burnt. It was the food that ordinarily would have been scraped out of the pan and used to feed the animals.

If we told lies we had to sit in a corner at mealtimes. It was very embarrassing and we were not allowed to join the family until we had felt the shame of our dishonesty.

If we ever fought or hit each other, we had to walk to the furthest well on our grounds and carry water back to the house for the servants to use. It was thought that hitting other people showed that we were too full of 'damaging energy', and that energy needed to be used up by our doing useful things.

In general, my brother and sister and I were well behaved. My parents always explained to us why we should not do this or that. The punishments I mentioned were used very few times, but just enough to remind us what was expected of us when we disobeyed our parents.

However, when we stayed at my aunt's house, things were different. She had a large family. There were eight children and seven servants to look after them; some of the servants were children themselves. That's how it was in those days. Aunt's family was noisy, mischievous and did things that I would never have dreamed of doing.



One day, three of the boys caught a cat and tied it to a tree, then started to use it for target practice. They had made peashooters and they were aiming at the cat.

When it yowled and leapt in the air, they roared with laughter. I told them that I thought they were being cruel to the cat, so they fired at me instead. When their father appeared he just laughed and said that the cat would not stay around if they treated it like that. He pointed at me and said, "As for Ramesh, he has no choice about staying here, so unless you want him to shoot at *you* with peas, you had better stop!"

I put on my fiercest face to show them that I agreed, but I started to wonder what my father would have done in the circumstances. The fact is that he would have been so shocked at such cruelty that

his disapproving face would have been punishment enough. I expect he would have had us carrying water from the well for at least a week, and double the normal quantity, for being cruel to dumb animals.

My aunt and uncle's family went in for chaotic behaviour. They would shout and scream and beat each other one day and the following day all would be peace and calm, until the next incident arose.

We were having a calm day, I remember, when one of the young girls, Gopika, came and screamed at Usha and started tugging at her clothes.

"That's mine!" she shrieked. "It's my favourite dress and you've stolen it!"

This was not true at all. I recognised Usha's dress. Mother had given it to her just before we had celebrated *Divali* — the Festival of Light.

Usha burst into tears and, defending her, I said, "You are making a mistake, Gopika. This really is Usha's dress."

But Gopika would not agree. She stamped her feet and pummelled Usha with her hands. My sister flung herself at me, crying, "Ramu, she's hurting me and she's going to tear my dress!"

I looked at the others. They were all laughing harshly.

"Come on Usha," I said. "You come with me. We'll go and tell Aunt so that she can sort it out."

My aunt was not very understanding. She just shouted at us. "Of course it's not Gopika's dress," she said. "I can't afford material like that. I expect she'd like it though. You'd better sleep on it, Usha, in case she tries to take it in the night!"

I could not believe my ears. It was as though my aunt let her children do whatever they wanted. It seemed like a very disorderly way to bring up a family. One day we heard that one of the servant girls had run off with the grain merchant's son and that she was going to have a baby. My aunt was furious.

"After all I've done for her, this is what she does. She's so ungrateful!"

In truth, my aunt treated the servants badly and it was no surprise to me that the girl had run away. I couldn't wait to leave either! It was a pity the girl was expecting a baby, because she had told me she didn't like the young man very much. Although I was only twelve, I could see that she was just exchanging one difficult life for another.

The final straw came when we were all gathered together for a family celebration, an unusual event in my aunt's family. There was much squabbling and arguing over who could wear what. The menu was a source of much anger and disagreement and finally, when the day came, the servant who was the main cook fell ill. My aunt was furious; she would have to cook the food herself. She screeched her way through the preparations, making everyone feel thoroughly uncomfortable. She was not a good cook and at the end of the day, most of the dishes were either burnt or underdone. She was in a thoroughly bad mood and, to cap it all, my father turned up!

My aunt and uncle were barely polite to him and he could sense the atmosphere, and smell the disgusting food.

"I have come to say that my wife is feeling better now and that Ramesh and Usha can return home," Father said. I am ashamed to say that I turned three cartwheels in a row, something that I have never managed to achieve before or since that day. Father whisked us away almost immediately. My sister and I could not stop grinning and holding on to Father as we walked away from that chaotic household.

"I won't ask you how it was," said Father, as soon as we were out of earshot. "I'm sorry you have had to stay so long, but it looks to me as if you have learnt a lot about how not to behave. I hope it wasn't too horrible for you. Your Aunt Savitri seems to have changed a lot since I last spent time with her. Perhaps her husband has something to do with it."

"I think you may be right, Father," I said, trying to be very grown up about it. "He's very unkind to her and to the children. In fact, they're all unkind to each other most of the time." Then I remembered a day when Aunt had sat Usha on her knee and stroked her hair when she was feeling homesick. "Aunt would be kind I think, if she didn't have so many people shouting at her."

“Everyone needs love and peace. That’s what we try to provide for you at home,” said Father.

“There wasn’t much peace in that house,” said Usha and she went on to describe what the boys had done to the cat.

My father looked shocked and then said, “So which one of you two tied the boys to a tree and shot peas at them?” We looked at him to see if he could possibly be serious. The corner of his mouth curled up, just a little, and he tousled our hair. “Neither of you? Good, I’m very glad to hear it!”



NEW WORDS

Controls, or restraints: things we should avoid, or hold back from, e.g. avoid being violent or stealing

Some questions to ask yourself:

- ? **Non-violence** Can you think of some examples where violence was used in the story? Remember that violence can come in different ways, through thoughts, words and actions.
- ? **Non-greed** There are two sorts of greed, one is for more food than we need and the other is greed for possessions, or things we want to own. What is the example in the story of the second sort of greed?
- ? **Non-stealing** Usha’s cousin wanted her dress, and was prepared to steal it. Think about stealing in as many ways as you can — there are a lot! Some sorts are worse than others. Sometimes people are forced to steal in order to survive. How should they be judged?
- ? **Truthfulness** What is the example of a person not telling the truth? How do you feel if you do not tell the truth, or if someone lies to you? Do you feel that people can still trust you, or that the person who lied is to be trusted?

? **Sexual self-control** — *Bramacharya* We don't know much about the servant girl who became pregnant, except that she didn't even like the father of her baby. Sometimes people make bad decisions or are persuaded to do dangerous things and have to live with the consequences. The girl would have had to bring up a child, although she was no more than a child herself. Think about it.