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## Fitness means learning the ropes

RussaYog yoga instructors use different kind of exercises

Tuesday, September 28, 2004

BY ANNE RUETER  
News Staff Reporter

Upstairs above Kaleidoscope Books and Collectibles on South State Street, signs in the windows proclaim "yoga and chai."

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That's different, you think: Tea time after yoga class isn't the

usual fare at Ann Arbor's many yoga studios. Peer closely, and you may glimpse marigold-yellow walls and exposed beams. Go upstairs, and it's plain that Jasprit and Teresa Singh's RussaYog studio takes a different tack on the ancient and multifaceted practice of yoga. It's a tack that engages you powerfully and seamlessly with a big fat rope.

"Ann Arbor needs to be exposed to something so simple," says Jasprit Singh. He grasps one of the ropes suspended from ceiling beams, and with no apparent effort pulls his straightened legs up and parallel to the floor. For his students, the rope becomes almost an extension of the body, he says. "You can think of the rope as a muscle."

Jasprit Singh is a University of Michigan professor in electrical engineering and computer science and applied physics. Working out at campus gyms, he was turned off seeing people grind out repetitions on the expensive exercise machines that came into vogue in the 1990s.

"Buy a rope, use a branch," he would tell people intrigued by his own nontraditional exercises. So earlier this year, he and Teresa, his wife and a longtime practitioner of yoga, opened their own studio to teach their rope-based yoga. "Russa" is Punjabi, Jasprit Singh's native language, for rope.

The Singhs have attracted several U-M and high school athletes, as well as fitness-minded people in their 50s and 60s, to their studio, where about 60 students currently choose among 15 classes a week. Participants get a sweaty workout pulling themselves into various seated and standing positions using the ropes. Jasprit Singh developed a sequence of yoga postures, or asans, which emphasize lifting your body weight to increase core body strength, from ideas his soldier father in India taught him.

Barbara Brookens-Harvey, a yoga instructor at Inward Bound Yoga, is happy to have this new yoga option in town.

"It's not just another yoga studio," she says. "It's exciting to be part of the birth of another type of yoga practice."

She tries to get to classes at RussaYog twice a week, feeling that the more aerobic, dynamic sessions nicely complement her own more slow-paced traditional yoga work. "I was especially drawn to this program because it emphasizes upper-body strengthening," she says. And the chai and nutritious snacks the Singhs serve after class? That's just icing on the healthy "cake" the studio offers, she feels.

"Jasprit saw me sitting in my chair and saw me slouch a bit, and he said something very kind," says Jeff Pickell, who owns Kaleidoscope Books & Collectibles downstairs.

"He said, 'Come with me, I want to show you something.'" Upstairs, Pickell got a free lesson. He'd always thought of yoga as "wimpy and feminine."

"I did the stretches," says Pickell, who used to be active in sports. A bad knee and a back injury had made him put exercise aside in his 50s. "They were pretty intense, but I was able to do them. ... (Jasprit Singh's) attitude was so easygoing and so nonthreatening and nonjudgmental. I managed to feel tested, strained and strangely calm."

Now Pickell goes upstairs for classes, taught by Teresa Singh, two mornings a week. He's not worried his old injuries will stir up trouble. "Teresa is very, very gentle, very organized. Every explanation is so thorough. If you can't hold a position, she changes it."

Pickell sees other benefits besides strength and improved posture. He sings in a couple of choirs. "I'm finding my ability to hold notes is significantly improved," he says, because he finally knows how to control his breathing. Slow, measured breathing is an essential part of the Singhs' routine.

The Huron High School crew team has a special session at the studio. The team's coach, Dave Morrison, and his wife, Lynn Morrison, attend regular classes. "It's very invigorating," she says.

Working with the rope after a stressful day as any operating room nurse at St. Joseph Mercy Hospital "just kind of washes it all away," she says. She thinks the breathing techniques have improved her golf swing.

Some U-M crew members attend classes; Jasprit Singh hopes the whole team will. "I'd like to see them come and kind of suffer together," he says.

People of all levels of strength and fitness do the same sequence of postures. But each adjusts the level of difficulty to suit what feels doable that day. A more advanced person might hold a position in a precise manner for five to six long slow breaths, Jasprit Singh explains.

Singh calls the postures a means of "putting yourself in a crisis, and then learning to decouple from the crisis." Sounds far from the serene moments many traditional yoga fans seek.

"You're putting the body in a position that puts you on the edge of your physical ability," he explains. "And the ropes allow you to go to that edge for four or five breaths." Long slow breaths, while you feel your muscles tremble with effort. But participants, even ones who have an injury or have been advised to avoid really strenuous activity, won't injure themselves in rope yoga, he insists. "People in the asans don't go beyond their limits because it's done in a very slow manner."

## **Lessons from father**

The idea of pushing yourself to your limit is part of Jasprit

Singh's heritage. He grew up in New Delhi. His view of yoga as a means to physically work through crisis stems from the Sikh traditions of his northern Indian parents.

"The Sikh tradition is very much life-engaging," he says, and different from other traditions in India that emphasize seeking detachment. "In the Sikh tradition, being in a society, being involved, is the highest state."

Jasprit bases his yoga postures on his knowledge of physics and the exercises he did with his father daily, from about age 6 till he went to college. His father, who had spent time in prison while in the British Army in Iraq, developed a series of strengthening movements when he got home, based on practices that had helped him through his prison ordeal.

The one-hour class starts with stretches, then some practice in breathing very slowly. Next comes a much more vigorous 10-minute workout the Singhs call "the drama of childhood," moves with the ropes that are a bit like child's play. These warm the muscles for what's to come: a 40-minute "warrior phase" of postures. Participants grasp the ropes in various bends "designed to bring you to the edge" in all muscle groups, Jasprit Singh says. "The harder the asan, the slower the breathing."

In a recent class, most members had reached their limits before a U-M crew member drew in and let out about six long, slow breaths for the final, most demanding asan. But the Singhs emphasize a noncompetitive atmosphere, so even a neophyte visitor doesn't feel inadequate.

Teresa Singh, who teaches most of the daytime classes, gently suggests adaptations. Muscles may be entering "crisis" around the room, but her measured, reassuring manner seems to empty the room of mental stress.

Singh knows all about larger crises: Her grounding in yoga served her well during a bout with cancer eight years ago. She says that yoga became even more important to her to help maintain the calm she needed to get through the experience.

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