

From: "Working Together"
Date: Wednesday, 26 March 2014 8:53:17 PM Australian Eastern Daylight Time
To: workingtogethertf@gmail.com
Cc:
Bcc: webmaster@syta.org.au, REDACTED
Subject: Message from Satyananda Yoga in response to recent defamatory emails

Hari Om,

This message is being sent to those who recently received emails from Bhakti Manning and Mary Smith. Understandably these emails were a shock and have caused some soul searching and confusion amongst many of us. You may or may not have been aware that they were sent in the context of the efforts being made by the Mangrove administration towards reconciliation with those who suffered, and suffer still, due to abuses perpetrated under the leadership of Swami Akhandananda more than 30 years ago.

It needs to be understood that the use of your email addresses for that purpose was illegal and the claims expressed were defamatory. You should not have been subjected to these messages and please be assured that Satyananda Yoga is taking appropriate action to prevent any escalation or repetition of this behavior.

In order to manage and resolve this and related matters, a task force has been formed in cooperation with Mangrove Ashram but separate to it. Under the title, Working Together, this task force has a sankalpa to:

- protect the work of Satyananda Yoga from the destabilising effects of past acts of abuse and their continuing effect;
- ensure that all possible policies and precautions are in place to prevent sexual, psychological and physical abuse on our properties and in Satyananda Yoga classes around Australia;
- help and support those who suffered under the leadership of Swami Akhandananda, including developing a trust-based relationship with the current organisation.

Members of Working Together are:

Swami Atmamuktananda, senior acharya and director of Rocklyn Ashram

Swami Poornamurti, senior sannyasin and past resident of Mangrove Ashram

Swami Haribodhananda, senior sannyasin and past resident of Mangrove Ashram

Swami Ahimsadhara, former manager of Hobart Yoga & Meditation Centre

Swami Suryamitra, Mangrove Management Committee

Bert Franzen, electAssociates, HR consulting specialists

Within this group there is a great depth of experience and expertise, an understanding of the past and present, and a longterm commitment to Satyananda Yoga.

As yoga teachers you are the frontline of the Satyananda Yoga movement and the role you play in disseminating the teachings of yoga for the benefit of all is recognized and highly valued by all arms of the global organization. As such, Working Together is concerned that you have correct information and understanding of this situation. We are writing to assure you that a proactive approach is being taken in working towards reconciliation and healing, and that this is being done via consultation with agencies experienced in these matters, including

following the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sex Abuse and communication with them, taking appropriate legal advice and working closely with an HR consulting firm.

In relation to the malicious unsolicited emails that you received, it is essential to remember that the disturbing allegations and suggestions are hearsay only and have not been raised by those who have come forward as victims of abuse. It is also important to remember that the child sexual abuse issues of thirty years ago were tried in the NSW courts, Swami Akhandananda was jailed and the matters were aired in the media. As a consequence, the Satyananda Yoga movement introduced significant safeguards to ensure that it can't happen again and also underwent a huge contraction around Australia. Under the guidance of Swami Niranjana it was later rebuilt on new foundations to become the trusted educational organization we know today.

It is helpful to remember that our path towards finding our own truth is always valid for us, regardless of what others may or may not do. A yogic approach is to take from these times the things that will make our understanding of ourselves clearer, whether it be the reactions we are having or the different choices we think we need to make.

Our experience has been of the healing effects of yoga and it is that gift which, as yoga teachers, we seek to share with others. We have experienced that healing because we have been open to it, and so our faith has developed. This can be a very innocent state, which leaves us unprepared for abuse of our openness and faith. The email from Mary Smith has been very damaging in that respect – it includes both fact and innuendo in the same breath, possibly blurring our ability to be discriminating and triggering an emotional reaction which must be a. accepted b. witnessed c. resolved. How each of us resolves our own reaction will be individual. Some have sought counsel from those they respect within Satyananda Yoga; some networks are holding their own havans or gatherings to guide the process; others do not feel strongly influenced, while yet others may be feeling isolated.

Remembering the positives

We do not even know the real identity of Mary Smith, yet her anger has disturbed and upset the peace of many dedicated teachers. Her message is clear on only one aspect: that what she says is based on stories from another person and is not from her experience. It is essentially a bubble of negativity. It should not counteract our own positive experience of yoga.

Confused approaches to spirituality and sexuality have caused an enormous amount of pain in many organisations. Recently Swami Haribodhananda was asked to give a talk on this subject at Mangrove as part of the process of understanding how such things can get muddled and what we can do in our own lives to prevent this confusion from happening. This is one example of the actions that have been and are being put in place to address the concerns that are in our minds.

Best practice initiatives

We would also like you to know that Mangrove has, for several years, been further formalizing its HR systems and processes to be in line with accepted best practice for the prevention of any similar occurrences. The process that has been put in place by Bert Franzen of elect Associates is described here in brief:

1. Complete audit and review of all compliance issues. Amongst other things, the audit revealed that the organisation was fully compliant with all statutory child protection protocols.
2. Creation of new employment/volunteer agreements to ensure everyone is properly designated. This has now been fully implemented.
3. Creation of Ashram Policy & Procedure Guide outlining the policies regarding workplace behaviour, bullying, harassment, grievance management, discipline etc. including Social Media. This has been fully implemented and operational for the last 12 months.
4. Creation of Work Health and Safety guidelines. First stage is operational and will be fully operational from the end of May, including resident induction via e-learning portal.

5. E-learning Portal induction programs will be available for all new residents from the end of May.
6. A review of all child protection systems, and compliance with new systems introduced in 2012, are fully compliant (and exceed) the NSW Commission requirements. This means that everyone who lives in the ashram as a resident has been cleared to work with children.
7. It is also worth noting that the ashram has a matrix management mechanism in place that ensures there is no longer a concentration of power in any one individual.

This means that the ashram is continuing with its longterm application of Best Practice systems. Accordingly, someone who feels they have been subject to inappropriate conduct has a confidential mechanism available to them to escalate and resolve. There is also a discipline policy available to properly deal with the “offender”.

We will shortly be letting you know more about another important initiative that will support reconciliation. An Apology Day will be held at Mangrove on Easter Sunday: we hope that you can join us.

Contacting us

We do hope that this information has been helpful and that it strengthens you in your life and work. If you wish to talk to a member of Working Together, or write to us, please do so, using this email address. If you provide your phone number we can call you back. If you wish to call us, Swamis Atmamuktananda and Ahimsadhara are both available at Rocklyn ashram on: 03 5345 7434

Hari Om Tat Sat, with blessings for peace.

Working Together Task Force