



Rural America Awakens to Yoga

BY CATHY WOODS

As you walk through city and suburban streets it is “common place” to see yoga studios, people wearing yoga clothes or yogis with a mat in tow. Most of us don’t think twice about it. It’s different, however, in rural America. There you’ll likely see a hunter wearing camouflage with a rifle slung over his shoulder. You may find this hard to believe, but there are still residents here that have never heard of yoga. Because of this fact, I feel compelled to share my story as a “Rural Yogini/Yoga Teacher” and tell the story of yoga in the remote parts of our country.

I’m named Cathy Woods and have been teaching and practicing yoga for 23 years. My roots of yoga began at the Kripalu Center with Yogi Desai. From there I continued steadfast on this wonderful journey of self-realization, sharing it with others as my “right livelihood.”

My teaching formally began in Florida, where yoga was quite accepted in 1990. In 1996 I felt guided to move to the North Carolina Smoky Mountains to an area that is barely on the map. Living in the Appalachians has been a 17-year delight and I have come to love the richness of the local culture and community. Yoga has never been a part of this culture and is actually quite foreign to the folks that reside in these mountains and remote hollows.

When first moving to the Smokies, I kept my practice pretty quiet and dove deep into my personal practice/Sadhana. After becoming more and more accepted as part of the community, I gradually started mentioning my yoga teaching. Finally a woman said, “Why don’t you teach a yoga class here at our community center?” I didn’t immediately jump on this opportunity as I heard rumors and stories about the first person to teach yoga

here in the 80s, a local, progressive physician who served the community's medical needs. I *heard* things like, "the locals think its witchcraft or devil work." The residents, I heard, were praying for her in church services and some even reconsidered going to her as their doctor. For various reasons, she eventually discontinued the classes. Keep in mind, Southern Appalachia is very much part of the Bible belt and still replete with some very "primitive" churches.

After talking with my husband about being asked to teach, he suggested I lay low and half jokingly made the comment, "we don't want someone burning down our barn." I fudged a bit and told the community center I would offer a "stretch class" and not call it yoga. But my local contact (who was born and raised here) exclaimed, "I believe we are ready for yoga." With that I embarked on my first rural yoga class. About fifteen people attended and in these parts that's considered a "good turn-out." I think half came to see if I was doing any sort of hocus-pocus, but a good majority really enjoyed the class and continue practicing yoga to this day, experiencing its many benefits.

Soon after classes started I noticed many students were naturally changing: more exercise, healthier diets, more positive attitudes, and openness to the teachings and philosophy of yoga. I believe these positive life-changes helped the practice of yoga blossom in this rural area. That, along with my dedication and non-threatening style of introducing yoga, and the gaining popularity of yoga in our culture, has made yoga an accepted and valuable part of our community.

I guess you could say I helped pioneer yoga into these mountain towns and hamlets. I began teaching in the village over the mountain as well. Eventually I offered some of my classes through the regional community college, which by institutionalizing it a bit, made people feel more comfortable. Gaining the trust of my students has been a delicate and gentle process. For instance, to promote ease and safety, I initially used English rather than the Sanskrit names for the asanas. In my initial classes we did not do any chanting. Once the students became more comfortable, I would gradually interweave the practice of sound while carefully explaining any new concepts or language. I have found it an art to choose the language used to teach and promote the classes, *yet still maintain the essence and integrity of the tradition that is very important to me.* I feel that it is important for a *good yoga* teacher to be able to "read their class," gear the class to the comfort level of the students, and to teach to a wide variety of participants.

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and essence of yoga. It is much like the theory of mantra—the student that gets the words wrong but wholeheartedly repeats the chant will often attain the same benefits of the mantra. An adamant ego can insist upon calling it yoga; but a rose by any other name smells as sweet. To me the most important thing is that students are benefiting from this practice in a way they can understand it.

This is not to say that on occasion I don't hear a comment like, "if you participate in yoga you will go to hell," not to mention the occasional "Jesus Saves" stickers adhered to one of my flyers. I take it in stride. On the whole it's no longer unusual to see yoga flyers posted around town or spot a press release in the paper as the residents have embraced yoga as part of the community offerings.

I happily believe the new openness to yoga in this rural area continues to expand; it also supports other wellness practices such as acupuncture, massage, Qigong, guest teachers, and workshops. Even some small studios are popping up. It has been wonderful to watch the consciousness rise about self-care, wellness, and soul enrichment practices.

I have participated in a meaningful journey to introduce this beautiful practice to Southern Appalachia where I continue to watch its transformative effects. So the next time you visit a small mountain town, you may just hear about a little yoga class that meets in the community center—come join us!

Cathy Woods teaches Yoga, Life-Skills & Enrichment Programs Internationally at varied venues. For more information visit www.cathywoodsyo.com