

THE NEPALI YOGA WOMEN'S PROJECT

At the invitation of Emma Despres, October 2007 found Devika Gurung, a Nepali Hatha yoga teacher, visiting Guernsey in the Channel Islands to teach a traditional Hatha yoga intensive and raise awareness and funds for the Nepali Yoga Women's Project.

This Project, established by Devika during the summer of 2007, is dedicated to addressing the socio-economic problems and discriminations facing many of the women in Pokhara, Nepal. The Project targets destitute women who have often been abused by their husbands, family or others, or have been thrown out of their homes, harassed by employers, raped, sold into prostitution and victimised by society.

On a broad scale, the Project intends to alleviate these problems by increasing public awareness, providing opportunities for economic and social self-empowerment and by fostering self-reliance in developing holistic and handicraft skills. It also seeks to provide initial shelter and food, practical education, skill training, self-healing (physical, mental, emotional and spiritual), self-empowerment and, where necessary, access to medical assistance. In short the Project will not catch fish for the women; it will teach them how to fish.

Born in Jomson, a rural village situated in the mountainous Annapurna Region of Nepal, Devika was introduced to yoga at the age of eighteen by two Australian yoga teachers. They were staying at a Buddhist Meditation Centre in Pokhara where Devika was working and they taught her Hatha yoga twice a day, every day for three months. Experiencing for herself the benefits of a daily Hatha yoga practise, Devika then spent the next four months studying Hatha yoga at The Natural Health & Yoga Centre in Kathmandu before establishing her own humble yoga centre at Lakeside Pokhara, called "The Nepali Yoga Centre".

For the past twelve years Devika has spent the high tourist season teaching twice daily Hatha yoga classes and residential courses at her Centre to visiting Western tourists. During the low seasons, and as a practising Tibetan Buddhist, Devika spends her time in McLeod Ganj in northern India, home to the Tibetan Government in Exile, undertaking further yoga training. The Centre is now a member of the Yoga, Nature Cure and Alternative Medical Council in Nepal and receives a recommendation in the Lonely Planet Guide to Nepal.

Emma initially met Devika in May 2007 when she attended a few of Devika's classes during a weekend break in Pokhara – Emma was on a two-month voluntary trip to Nepal at the time. As an alternative and popular tourist town there are many yoga centres and teachers in Pokhara, but for Emma the entry for Devika's Centre stood out in the Lonely Planet Guide and the Centre is located only a short walk from the hotel where she was staying – quite a coincidence as there are also many hotels in Pokhara too.

On that occasion while the two girls did not exchange more than the usual civilities a seed was sown and Emma felt drawn to return to the humble Centre on her second visit to Pokhara a few weeks later. This time, however, Devika was away from town visiting Kathmandu so Emma attended classes taught by Devika's friend, Krishna.

Krishna and Emma chatted about yoga after class each day and at the end of her trip, they exchanged email addresses.

A few weeks later and while heading up to Macleod Ganj in North India with friends, Emma received an email from Devika – Krishna had given her Emma's email address – to say that she was also heading up to Macleod Ganj and did Emma want to meet her. Emma was delighted to hear that Devika would be in town at the same time and she arranged for Devika to teach yoga to her and one of her friend's in their hotel room each morning - they both loved Devika's style of teaching and it would provide Devika with a source of daily income.

Over breakfast on that first morning Devika and Emma discovered that they share a mutual passion for teaching and practising yoga, Reiki, massage, ayurveda, travel and Tibetan Buddhism. Furthermore they realised that they both share a mutual vision for helping to empower destitute women in Pokhara, Nepal - and while Devika had been looking for someone to help support a Nepali women's project, Emma had been looking for a Nepali women's project to support - the seed was well and truly sown with this coincidental East and West union.

One thing quickly led to another and after exchanging and discussing ideas about the proposed Project, Emma invited Devika to visit her in Guernsey to hold a traditional Hatha yoga intensive to raise awareness and funds for the Nepali Women's Yoga Project. Devika gladly accepted and there began the laborious process of applying for Devika's UK visa, no easy feat, as it is unusual for Nepalis to be granted a tourist visa to visit the UK as there is always the worry that they will not want to return to Nepal at the end of the visa period.

Furthermore Devika was taking a huge risk - if her application was rejected this would hamper any future applications to visit other Western countries and limit her travel and overseas teaching options. Both girls had to provide extensive documentation to substantiate the nature of the application and Emma had to assure not only financial sponsorship but also the conditions of the room where Devika would be staying for human rights purposes. However both girls persevered and the trip was clearly meant to be – with much relief Devika's application was accepted and within weeks she was flying to visit Emma and her family in Guernsey, Channel Islands.

The weekend intensive was a huge success with over forty local yoga practitioners signing up for the two intensive sessions and enjoying a combination of asana, pranayama, chanting, meditation and relaxation. In fact Devika's sessions were so well received that practitioners were keen to attend a further class and this was painlessly arranged and held a week later. By the end of her two week stay on the Island the girls had managed to raise a little over £1,700 (an enormous sum when converted to Nepalese rupees) to cover Devika's expenses and to move the project forward a little further.

Devika has now returned to the Centre in Pokhara where she has started training seven disadvantaged local women in massage, local handicrafts and conversational English. She is also looking for a suitable space to rent where the women can sell their products and offer massage to visitors, thereby earning money and slowly becoming self-sufficient. In time it is intended that these women will be in a position to pass on their skills and knowledge to other women living in the rural villages surrounding Pokhara and eventually they will be able to export their local products to Western yoga-related shops and centres.

Emma is in Guernsey running Beinspired and she is currently involved in a yoga-based postcard project to raise further funds for the Project. She intends to visit Pokhara with her family in April 2008 to join Devika and help to move the Project to the next stage in its development.

To follow the Project's development or to donate to the project, please see www.beinspiredby.co.uk or contact Emma on emma@beinspiredby.co.uk

Why Nepal?

- According to UNESCO reports Nepal is the 4th poorest country in the world.
- Nepal is half the world away from the UK in geographical terms, but a whole world away in terms of women's rights and progress.
- Nepal is a very hierarchical society with a similar caste system to India. Many groups are marginalised. Women and girls suffer a universally low status making gender discrimination the most serious form of discrimination in Nepal.
- Per the CIA 31% of the population live below the poverty line and 42% are unemployed.
- Most rural people are farmers barely existing on self-sufficiency.
- Education services are still very limited in the rural areas and there is a very high drop-out rate with only 37% of primary school children completing education up to 13 years. This is due to a variety of factors including the demand for children to do manual work, especially in the villages. Social attitudes include the view that it is not necessary to educate girls.
- According to the CIA records, of the total population over the age of 15 years, only 48.6% are able to read and write. Of this figure, 62.7% are male and only 34.9% are female.
- Women in rural areas have challenging lives, as they often have manual roles in the fields whilst accepting primary responsibility for the house and the family without assistance. Until very recently, women rarely attended school.
- As well as taking care of her children and husband, the women is often expected to take care of the husband's mother, brothers and sisters.
- In most rural areas electricity is scarce and clean running water is a luxury. Consequently women must collect fire wood and water from the central village tap to undertake their chores on a daily basis.
- Nepal is the only country in the world where women's life expectancy is shorter than the men's life expectancy (per the CIA statistics, estimated 2007, life expectancy for a man is 60.78 years and 60.33 years for a woman).
- The median age of marriage for women is 16.1 years for the urban women and 15 years for the rural village women.
- Many Nepali girls are the victims of early marriage, sometimes as early as 8 years old in the rural villages. This is so that parents do not have to take care of their daughter or spend any more money on her.
- The extreme poverty and lack of educational facilities make these poor Nepali girls easy prey for unscrupulous traffickers and many young girls are unwittingly sold into prostitution or bonded labour where they are exploited, beaten and abused both mentally and physically.
- Girls who survive this horrific experience of human trafficking are then stigmatised by society and are unable to return to a normal life of marriage and family.
- The median age at first birth is about 20 years old with one in five adolescent women aged between 15-19 years old being mothers or pregnant with their first child.

- Per UNICEF only 11% of women will have access to a skilled attendant at the delivery of their baby.
- Per UNICEF 1 in 24 women will die in childbirth in Nepal.
- If a woman becomes divorced, even through no fault of her own, she will end up with no home and no family and no means of support. There are no social services, NHS, child welfare, income support or free education.
- According to the existing Nepali law on rape, if a married woman is raped, her husband automatically becomes her ex-husband. Thus she loses any marital rights, such as access to property. In most instances the rape victim will suffer rejection from her family and community.
- In Nepal citizenship is not automatic at birth. Women do not have the right to transfer their citizenship to their children and thus, if a child is born to a foreign father, he/she cannot be granted Nepali citizenship. Without citizenship, a person cannot gain employment, cannot access medical aid and cannot own property. A child who is born to a rape victim will face a lengthy and complicated task in gaining citizenship, as their mother is not able to transfer her citizenship to them.