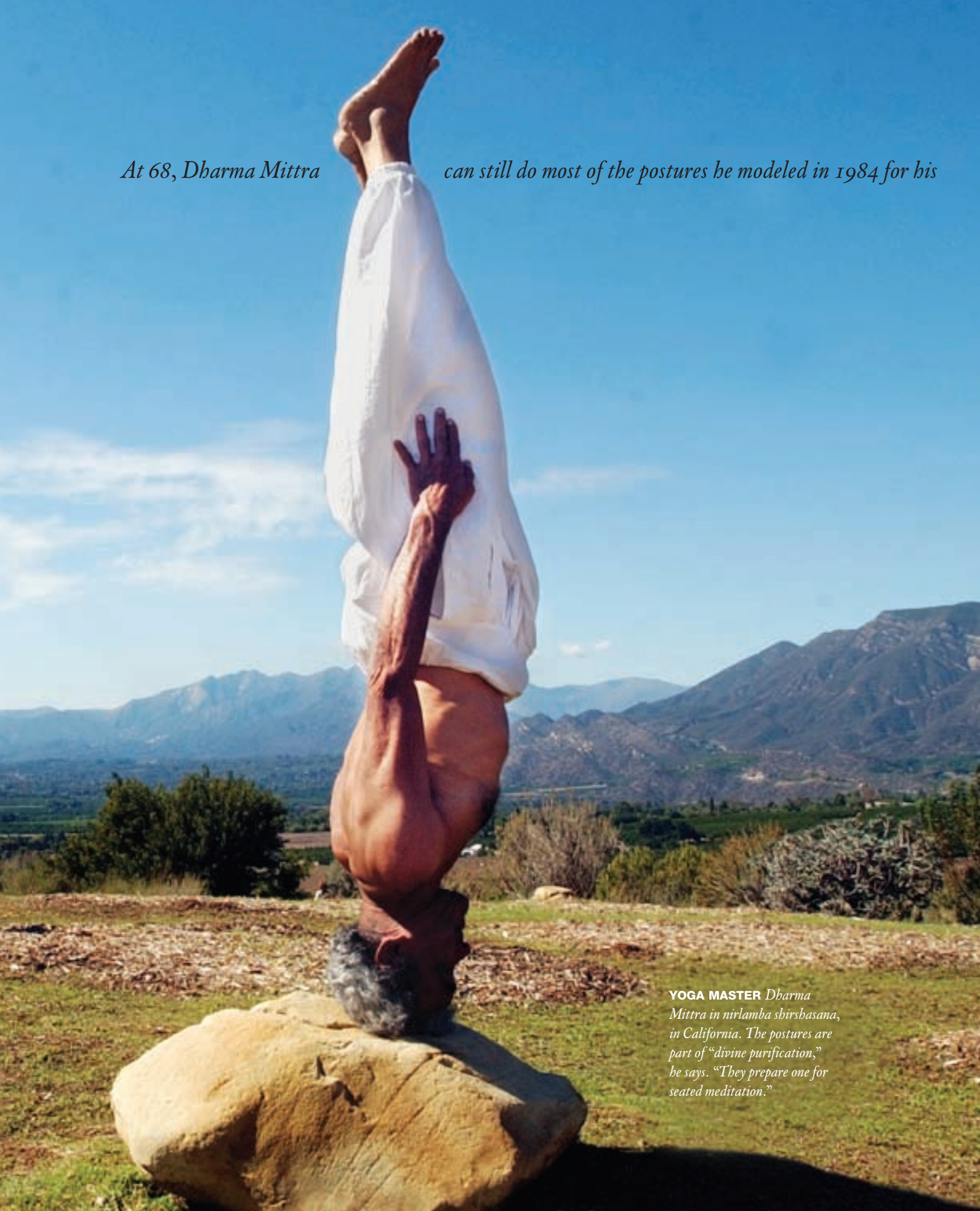


*At 68, Dharma Mittra*

*can still do most of the postures he modeled in 1984 for his*



**YOGA MASTER** *Dharma Mittra in nirlamba shirshasana, in California. The postures are part of "divine purification," he says. "They prepare one for seated meditation."*

# No Yama, No Yoga

*famous poster. But he insists that “fancy poses” miss the point if students ignore yoga’s ethical rules.*

By ANNA DUBROVSKY

**Dharma Mittra’s Master Yoga Chart** of 908 Postures has inspired students for almost 25 years. It hangs in homes and studios all over the world. The poster doesn’t picture one of Dharma’s favorite postures: seated in front of a computer. “I love computers,” Dharma says. “If I could, I would just be in front of the computer all day, working with Photoshop.”

There was no Photoshop in 1984, when Dharma photographed himself in about 1,300 postures. He cut the photos by hand, arranged them with pins, and affixed them with glue. Now the 68-year-old yogi is working on an updated version of the poster, which remains the preeminent inventory of postures. He’s scanning the original photos and posing for new ones. It’s click and drag instead of pins and glue. Dharma isn’t certain when the new poster—and a CD companion—will be available because teaching duties keep drawing him away from his computer.

Dharma has joined the coterie of globe-trotting yoga headliners. As yoga bled from the fringe to the mainstream, practitioners discovered that the yogi in the famous poster isn’t a long-dead Indian but rather a Brazilian-born Manhattanite who’s alive and kicking—into arm balances that challenge teachers half his age. In the past year he’s traveled to Israel, Japan, and Germany, among other places. A *Vanity Fair* spread on “the world’s greatest yoga masters” featured Dharma in *nirlamba shirshasana*, a hands-free headstand, on a New York City street. At an Omega Institute yoga conference with a Who’s Who list of faculty, Dharma took the stage on opening night to lead chants and demonstrate his signature series of postures. It’s recognition that Dharma didn’t court, but he’s using it to spread his message.

“I don’t encourage people to do fancy poses. They are not that important,” he told *Yoga+*. “The goal of yoga is Self-realization: to find out who you are, why you’re here, who God is. God



**DHARMA MITTRA** *Abimsa vegetarian.*

and the Self are the same—exactly the same.”

Such words from a man who’s mastered the most stunning of postures can be jarring for legions of Westerners who equate complex asana with yogic accomplishment. Even more jarring is Dharma’s prescription for “Self-realization,” which includes giving up meat, trusting in reincarnation, and making every action an offering to God.

Dharma uses the word “God” with the frequency of a televangelist. It’s his way of reminding students that yoga isn’t gymnastics. Where other teachers urge students to “rotate the thighs inward” or “engage the quadriceps,” Dharma offers this instruction for refining postures: “Now think of God.”

*Asana*—the physical limb of yoga—is part of a process Dharma calls “divine purification.”

The postures tone the body and prepare one for seated meditation. Dharma enjoins students to reflect daily on questions such as these: Who am I? Why does everything die? Is anything eternal? Why do some people suffer? Why are some born into privilege and others into poverty? Is there reincarnation? Is there karma? When body and mind have been purified, the answers will reveal themselves, he says.

Breathing exercises and mantra recitation are also part of the purification process, according to Dharma. So is study of ancient texts, particularly the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Yoga Sutra*, and *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*. (“Yoga without these three is like spaghetti without the sauce,” he says.) Dharma is especially emphatic about another building block: proper diet. He advocates a live-

food vegetarian diet and occasional fasting. Stimulants, heavy foods, and foods that foster cravings inhibit deep concentration, he warns.

Seasonal fruits and vegetables, nuts, and sprouts are staples of Dharma's diet. He's fond of avocados and fresh coconut. In the 1970s he enticed new students with flyers that promised free sprouts along with a free introductory lesson. "If you eat fried food, dead food, cooked food, you will feel fried, dead, and cooked," he says.

Dharma eschews animal products save for an occasional bite of fresh mozzarella. He's unequivocal about vegetarianism, citing the first *yama*, or ethical precept of yoga: *ahimsa*. Often translated as "non-violence," *ahimsa* calls on us to treat all beings with compassion. Dharma, whose dogs Pado and Pepper are also vegetarians, maintains that eating meat is participation in violence and that it puts spiritual bliss out of reach. He frequently quotes Swami Bua, a yogi who lives in midtown

Manhattan and is said to be 118 years old: "If you put animals in your stomach, you make your stomach a graveyard."

Without adherence to the *yamas* and *niyamas*, the social and personal ethics laid out in the *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali, "there will be no success in meditation," Dharma warns. "If you don't follow the ethical rules, there'll be no kingdom of God."

#### BRAD PITT WANNABE?

At Omega's November yoga conference in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., more than 120 students spread their mats under a white tent for a class with Dharma. "He's like the Jack LaLanne of yoga," one first-timer whispered to another. A technician affixed a microphone to Dharma's tunic and signaled for a sound check. "*Om Nama Shivaya*," Dharma chanted. "*Om Nama Shivaya*."

Dharma's physical prowess and self-discipline are intimidating only until he begins talking. He's as genial as he is

limber. Senior disciples describe him as shy, but Dharma knows how to warm up a crowd. Within minutes of the opening chant, laughter rippled through the tent as Dharma demonstrated how the less experienced students could "pretend." Another demonstration inspired applause, prompting Dharma to quip: "You can throw quarters." The two-hour class included a vigorous asana sequence, breathing exercises, deep relaxation, and discourses on vegetarianism, chakras, and reincarnation. It ended with a Dharma ritual that recalls the break-dancing era. As *kirtan* king Krishna Das blared through the speakers, bolder students took turns striking poses for the clapping crowd. It was a testament to spirituality's party side.

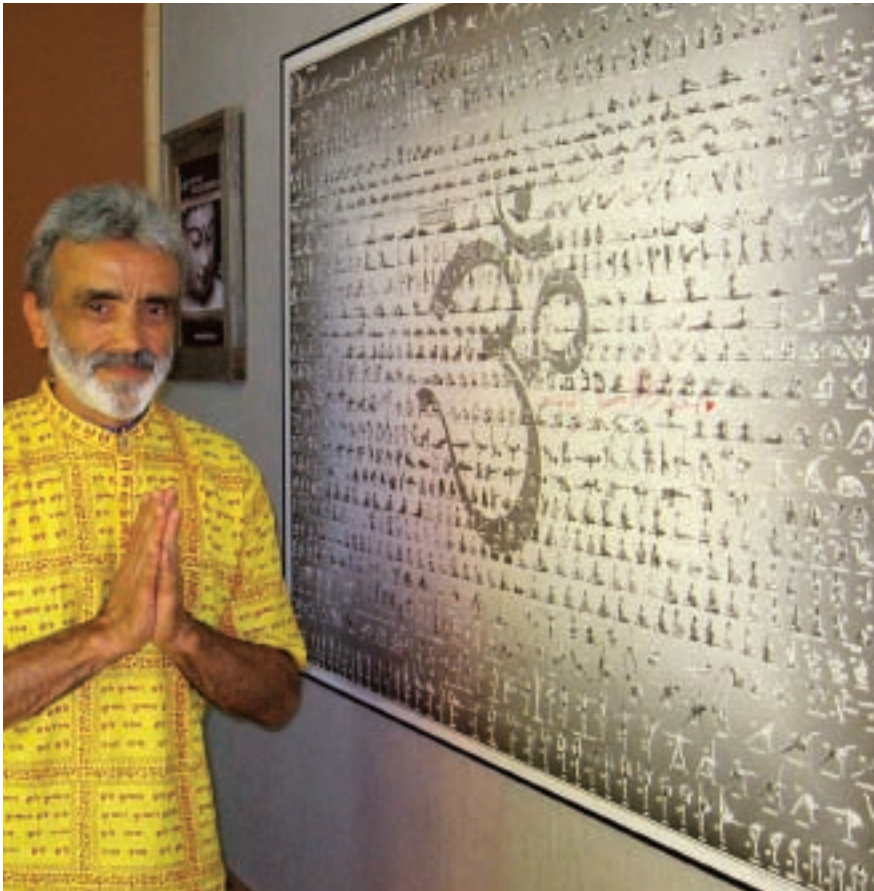
If he had his way, Dharma says, he would reincarnate as the pope or a celebrity. As the head of the Catholic Church or a Brad Pitt-style star, he could speak to millions instead of hundreds. He could urge people "to become vegetarian, to keep the ethical rules, to surrender to the Lord, to not be attached to happiness from material things."

Pope would be a far cry from horse thief. Dharma has owned more than a dozen bicycles, and one by one they've been stolen. His hunch is that's because he was a horse-napper in a past life. "Everything is due to deeds from previous lives," he says. "It's like paying your bills."

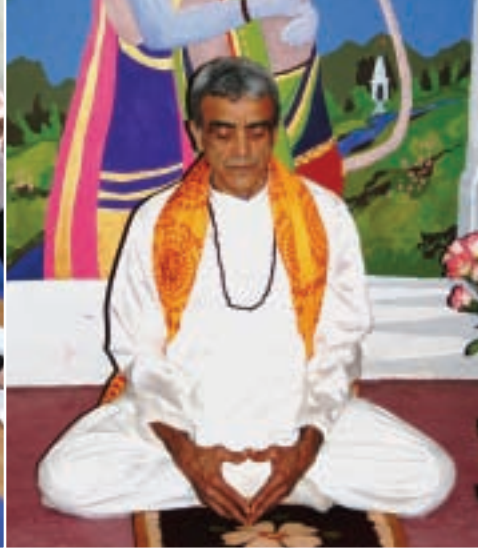
These days, Dharma commutes from his home to his yoga center, several blocks away, on a Segway scooter. He's learned how to negotiate icy patches after a few falls. It's his second Segway; the first was stolen.

Faith in reincarnation and karma is essential to spiritual bliss, Dharma says. People who don't believe in reincarnation fear accidents, old age, and death. People who don't understand the laws of karma blame others or God for their problems. "If you don't understand the laws of karma, you are restless all the time," Dharma says. "If you realize karma, you become fearless, content. Only a content mind can meditate."

*Anna Dubrovsky, who is based in Pittsburgh, is a contributing editor of Yoga + Joyful Living.*



**DHARMA WITH HIS FAMOUS POSTER** For its 25th anniversary, he is working on an updated version.



**DAY TO DAY IN NEW YORK** (From left) Dharma teaching a class; meditating; on his Segway scooter, which he uses to commute between studio and home.

“I have many yoga teacher friends who are getting old now. Some come to me very depressed,” he says. They don’t look the way they used to, and they struggle in postures that once came easily. Their children are grown. Adoring students and spouses are gone. “I keep telling them: ‘Realize reincarnation! Get busy into Self-realization, Self-knowledge. Because you are not this that’s passing away.’”

**THE GROUNDBREAKING POSTER**

A few months ago, Dharma looked in the mirror and decided that his shoulders needed some work. He headed to the gym. “Sometimes I like to target specific muscles with modern gym equipment,” he

explains. Dharma knows a thing or two about building muscle. As a teenager in Minas Gerais, Brazil, he took up bodybuilding, wrestling, and Brazilian jiu-jitsu. In the early 1960s, while serving in the Brazilian Air Force, Dharma captured the Mr. Minas Gerais title and opened a bodybuilding school in that state’s capital. But his most recent trip to the gym did not go smoothly. “I ended up hurting my shoulder badly,” says Dharma. His muscles are less resilient than they used to be. And his interest in the physical practices of yoga has dwindled. But his classes are no less rigorous than they were four decades ago. In fact, he’s made them harder to satisfy new generations of practitioners. “He adjusts things accord-

ing to the people, to make people feel good,” says Ismrittee Devi Om, who has studied with Dharma since 1984 and is co-director of Dharma Mittra Yoga. “He didn’t need to change a thing, but he’s moving it forward. Years ago it was the hardest class in Manhattan, but now it’s really hard. I have to tell people. They think Dharma is old-fashioned, quiet yoga, but it’s not.” While waiting for his shoulder to heal, Dharma has taken to practicing postures like *urdhva dhanurasana* (upward bow) and *vrischikasana* (scorpion) with one arm. “I have to be able to do the poses because when you do it, it is easier to teach,” he says. “But other than for teach-

ing, I don’t waste too much of my time doing fancy poses anymore. I don’t see any need.” He estimates he can still do about 80 percent of the poses in his groundbreaking poster. For the updated version, he’ll replace about 20 with more popular variations. “There’s something mesmerizing about that poster. People are drawn to it,” says Chandra Om, Dharma’s senior disciple and founder of the North Carolina School of Yoga. “A little-known fact is the head-space that Dharma insisted he be in for 1,300 photographs. If his mind was not fully concentrated on God, he would redo the posture. He would never use any photos where his mind was distracted for even one moment. That is the

real practice of the postures. The postures mean absolutely nothing, no matter how adept one is at them, if they’re not done in a spirit of devotion.” Dharma dedicated the poster to his guru, Swami Kailashananda, also known as Yogi Gupta. Dharma lived at his guru’s New York City ashram for about a decade after arriving in the United States in 1964, practicing *karma yoga*, the path of selfless service. He cooked his guru’s meals and shaved his head, taught yoga classes to other disciples, and served as ashram handyman.

The mistake so many yoga students make is expecting benefits from yoga practices, Dharma says. “That is the nat-

*Dharma’s physical prowess and self-discipline are intimidating only until he begins talking. He’s as genial as he is limber. Senior disciples describe him as shy, but Dharma knows how to warm up a crowd.*

ural tendency. People are always expecting: If you do the meditation, you’re expecting to have some results. Even in your prayers, you’re always asking, asking, asking.” Expectations frequently give rise to disappointment. When selfishness is stripped from the practice, when ego recedes, the benefits will come, he says. “Keep the ethical rules, eat the right food, surrender to the Lord, and lose your ego. That’s all. You don’t have to put your legs behind your head, do all these fancy poses.

“But if you enjoy all this jumping,” he says with a chuckle, “go ahead.” +

For more information about Dharma Mittra, visit: [www.dbarmayogacenter.com](http://www.dbarmayogacenter.com).

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