

THE URBAN ASHRAM
IS A PLACE FOR KIN-
DRED SOULS TO MEET
AND EXPLORE THE
MANY DIMENSIONS
OF LIFE

by Sheetal Sanghvi

The urban ashram

The seed for the birthing of The Urban Ashram was born during my first Vipassana intensive. I was going through a rough period in my life where everything I was doing suddenly seemed empty and meaningless. A particular series of unanticipated events had somehow managed to bring my life to a standstill, leaving me in a sort of mental paralysis. It was around that time I started visiting two spaces near my university in Chicago. The first space was Transitions, a community centre with a café, a bookstore, studios for healing workshops, and other amenities. The other one was Moksha, a yoga studio that offered yoga classes, and workshops throughout the day.

These spaces helped me understand the

connection between the body-mind-spirit. I realised the importance of taking care of myself at the physical, mental, emotional, as well as spiritual levels. I visited these spaces whenever I found any free time between classes.

The joy of learning in such spaces was enhanced by the sense of celebration they emanated. It so happened that when I was in a Vipassana course, I was at a stage where I had to decide what I wanted to do in life. I was nearly at the end of my two-year MS in financial markets at the Stuart School of Business, Chicago. On offer was the chance to work in some of the best financial services firms in the world. On the other side was a deep inner conviction that my life was best

suited to understanding the nature of spirit, of exploration of the finer arts, of yoga and meditation, of the inner and the outer worlds.

At that time, I was also undergoing the need to create financial security for my future. The pressure of watching all my fellow students take on cushy jobs and having to explain why I was not doing the same to my family was intense.

I urgently began seeking work that would marry my passion to my need to cultivate a reasonable source of income and live independently. I had an insight to attempt the same model that I had seen working at Transitions and Moksha, by reconvertng my old bungalow into a community space for the promotion of yoga, meditation, arts, and related activities. In my mind's eye, I saw the blueprint for the ashram begin to take shape. Slowly but surely, I was guided to people and places that began to nurture this dream of mine.

I took a year off to travel around the world. My journeys took me to some of the most amazing places, and I met some incredibly inspiring people. Places on my itinerary included Bodh Gaya, Dharamshala, Rishikesh, Pondicherry in India, as well as Yogaville studios in New York, Chicago and San Francisco in the USA, where I spent a considerable amount of time meditating and interacting with like-minded people.

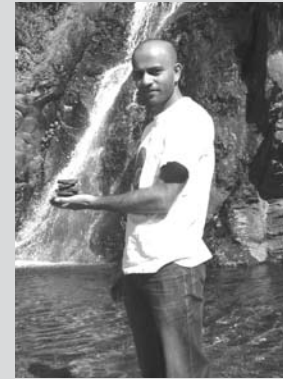
I was sure now that I wanted nothing more than to live my dream of creating such a space where people could come to explore life in its many dimensions. Coming back home, it took a lot of persuasion to get my family's permission to renovate our bungalow. I feel blessed that my family understood my soul's yearnings and heeded to my desires.

My favourite quote from *The Alchemist* says, "When you desire something, the whole Universe conspires to bring it to you." Sure enough, a chain of events serendipitously helped manifest The Urban Ashram.

Along with classes on yoga, meditation, arts and crafts, we also started hosting workshops on the healing arts like pranic healing, art of living, health awareness, dance and drama therapy, movie screenings, book

THE GIFT ECONOMY MODEL

I would like to say something about the emerging gift-economy model. Our forefathers planted the banyan trees whose shade we enjoy and the fruits we enjoy in our gardens today. Many of the things that we take for granted today are the fruit of the hard work and kindness of people who walked before us. For example, the free India that we breathe in took the sacrifice and hard work of millions of satyagrahis.



Inspired by that vision we've conceived of a gift-economy model – a pay-it-forward of sorts – where you do good to another without expecting anything back in return. The only request made is that the favour is paid forward. That way the well-intentioned act becomes a transforming power, not a transaction of give and take.

Some existing business models of the gift economy are:

- www.sevacafe.org
- www.smallsteps.in
- www.tsunamika.org
- Vipassana model

We gather to celebrate like a family, at the end of which you may drop in any amount that your heart desires. Therefore, instead of giving from your pocket, we encourage you to share from your heart!

clubs, and drumming circles.

We have recently started an in-house shop that supports the swadeshi movement, with khadi clothes, aroma candles from ashrams in India, locally produced handicrafts, and books. We will soon start a café and an art gallery that will help us take our initiative of 'a space to be' closer to completion!

What the future holds for us at The Urban Ashram is too early to say, having been in existence less than nine months now. It is only now that we are beginning to get a sense of the enormity of the vision that has been undertaken. All I can say is that we are never given a dream without being given the ability to live it. Go on, live your dreams! ☯

We welcome your comments and suggestions on this article.

Mail us at editor@lifepositive.net

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