

YOGA

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SPIRIT

Magazine

EXCLUSIVE

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IN THIS ISSUE
Fabulous
Yoga
Exercises
To Energise,
Refresh &
Beautify
Naturally

Uri Geller's
Charitable
Foundation

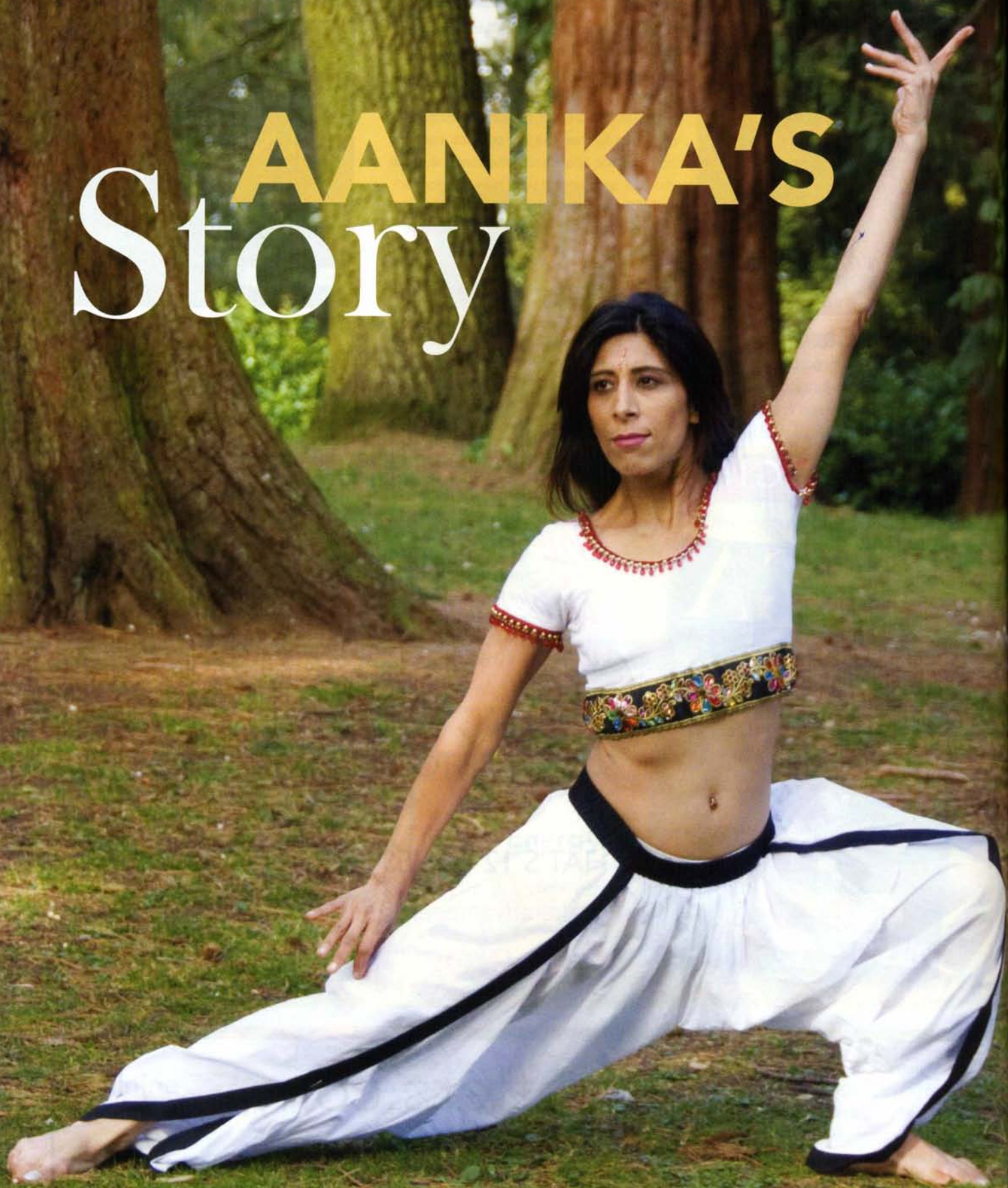
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78 REAL LIFE

AANIKA'S Story



I EXPLORED OM NAMAH SHIVAYA, SOUNDS OF OM, AND PHILOSOPHICAL TRUTHS FROM THE BHAGVAD GITA

Minoo was the name given to me by my late parents, but little did they know that their little girl had wings. Wings of imagination, of dreams, of movement – and rooted in her naivety, she would one day be called Aanika.

It all started when my mother first put *ghunghroos* (ankle bells) on me, I was excited but never thought much of it. Dance was just an extracurricular activity but I soon realised that dancing was second nature to me and this was the start of a powerful awakening which all began with dance.

After finishing my *Prabhakar* (6-year course) in Kathak dance, I joined a renowned dance institute in Delhi. From there on it was a non-stop journey which led to numerous performances with well-known artists and the chance to represent India in the opening ceremony of the Asian games in 1982. As part of my training and practice in classical dance, I explored *Om namah shivaya*, sounds of OM, Sanskrit vedic shalokas and meaningful philosophical truths from the *Bhagvad Gita* (the theory of Karma Yoga). But at that the time I did not relate any of it to yoga, I was too caught up enjoying this new world of dance.

One morning at the age of 15, I woke up with a stiff neck. None of the massages, oil rubs or medication helped. My mum, not knowing what to do, took me to see the doctors. It felt like they were trying to strangle me, using brass rods on my back, twisting and turning and all sorts. In severe pain, resembling a crane's neck, I was taken to hospital where I was treated for cervical spondylitis and the treatment persisted for 4 years. However, it was later revealed to me by British specialists that I never had cervical spondylitis – but in fact I had a broken neck! But because it wasn't treated properly my skull bone fused with my top vertebrae and resulted in limited movement. Despite the restrictions of my body and warnings of the doctors I continued my passion for dance.





Then marriage brought me to the UK, where I represented the best of Indian culture through my dance and choreographed two dance pieces for Granada TV as well as performances at the Royal Northern College of Music and various workshops.

But in the meantime my personal life was dancing to its own rhythm and a sad tune at that. After a lot of contemplation, the *Tandava* (brave) aspect of my dance encouraged me to let go of a relationship that was hindering my evolu-

tionary process, and it was time to continue my journey alone; but despite our separation I still share a beautiful friendship with my ex-husband. At the same time I do acknowledge that divorce has a negative side. I had a very challenging couple of years where I had to fend for myself and I lost control of my emotional wellbeing.

This forced me to take a hard look at my situation. I was living back in Delhi so I was out of contact with the dance scene back in England, and making a

home and earning a decent living was becoming a pressing issue. I had to address the financial reality I was facing, so with a practical head on my shoulders I decided to join the police force. Why the police? Even I'm not sure of that, but I do know that I needed something that would give me a sense of belonging and encourage me to be strong again. It was these feelings that led me to join the London Metropolitan Police Force. But combining the creative dancer in me and my new role as a



tough Police Officer was going to be a struggle. Learning to use a steel baton and CS spray and put on handcuffs felt alien to me. Then there were the rules, regulations and weekly Friday exams, and it was all beginning to feel quite overwhelming.

Finally I had a wake-up call. I needed a new identity, so I left Minoo behind and changed my name to Aanika. I now see that all along life was pushing me to rediscover my source and my breath. "Aanika" in Hindi means "breath" and maybe this would help me continue the challenging role of being a Police Officer.

From then on I served the London streets of Camden and King's Cross for two long years, making countless arrests and doing plain-clothes operations. However, within this process I discovered an inherent, loving, humane space in each one of us – that essentially we are all the same; lonely, desirous, loving and alive. I could no longer stand the sight of prisoners being thrown in the cells and the violence and aggressive language involved in this line of work, and I realised that if I stayed, not only would I become a hardened person but I would lose the activist in me, the person who cared about change. So I resigned.

Just as I began to get in touch with my inner body again, another knock came and my father was diagnosed with cancer. The feeling of a loved one dying in front of your eyes is inexpressible in words but at the same time it is a necessary and important part of our evolutionary growth. This explains why situations such as this provoke such powerful feelings throughout our bodies on a physical, mental, emotional and spiritual level.

Surgeons had given him three months and wanting to spend every second of his life with him I flew over instantly. You know something, I had never known myself to be so alive until then.

It was at my parents' house that I met this wondrously agile old man, Pandit Narayan Dutt Ji, who was a yogi and a naturopath. He was helping my dad with





homeopathic therapies and asked me to attend one of his yoga classes. I remember my first class at his ashram vividly. His class was a wake-up call for me in more ways than one. It ended with meditation and I experienced a most beautiful rising feeling. My energy felt pure and calm and I cannot thank Pandit Ji enough for inviting me to this new world.

All the while I continued to look after my father, giving him mudpacks and making wheatgrass juice for him. As a result he is still alive and kicking at 78. From then on I went through a radical transformation. I decided that I

needed to pursue yoga; and the more I studied the philosophy, the better I understood that yoga is not just a physical culture but a holistic one.

I completed my first teacher-training at Sivananda Vedanta Institute of Yoga in Kerala and followed a multitude of classes at all levels. The student in me wanted to expand my knowledge, so I took a second intensive teacher-training in Mysore with Bharat Shetty. This amazing teacher had a peaceful aura that seemed to rub off on everyone, and I loved every minute of it. At the same time I got interested in Ayurveda, and last year I

had the opportunity to bring yoga and Ayurveda together in Iceland with my yoga retreats and I continue to go back there.

Being a dancer I have always known that the Indian classical dance postures come out of yoga and my next project revolves around this. I am also taking a yogic dance open workshop at this year's Yoga Show in London, where I will be crafting a new language blending Indian dance with yoga stretches. I had reached a point when I wanted to share my passion for yoga with lovers of this form worldwide, which encouraged me to pro-

duce my first yoga DVD, *The Flow Within*, and along with this emerged my own range of yoga wear, Yogamasti.

Excited at the prospects of a whole new path ahead of me I took the plunge to launch my range at the Yoga Show, and the concept aims to fill a gap in the industry and is therefore unique in its endeavours. I want the yogi to feel the origins of yoga and I hope to bring this through my clothing which have authentic Indian block prints, hand-painted Sanskrit Shalokas, tie-die, and a maze of Indian oriental artistry.

I grew up with the belief that your body is your temple and we each have a responsibility to look after it. I understood the concept of detoxing at an early age because growing up in India means a lot of raw food, sprouted grains, fresh juices, lots of water and good vegetarian food. Along with this I understood the mental detox process, but only at a much later stage when meditation became an integral part of my life. I also grew up watching my dad start his day with pranayam and used to be amazed when he would stand on his head and smile at me.

Despite the powerful presence of my father in my life there was a stage when he was struggling with life. As a result it seemed that wherever I went spiritual writings and books kept leaping out at me. *The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle is my saviour. I have read it countless times, and each time I do it gives me renewed vitality. Eckhart's teachings about "living in the moment" always bring me back to inner calm whenever I go off course. Each soul has strong desires which we cannot ignore and if we do we only make ourselves ill and unhappy. Life is short and beautiful. Do what you really want to do. Let nothing come in the way of your spirit trying to go home.

Aanika and her Yogamasti range will be available at stand E-22 at the Yoga Show, in Earl's Court, London, from 30th October-1st November. For more information visit www.yogamasti.com

Images: Shahin Razzaq - Visual Soup
Clothes: Yogamasti

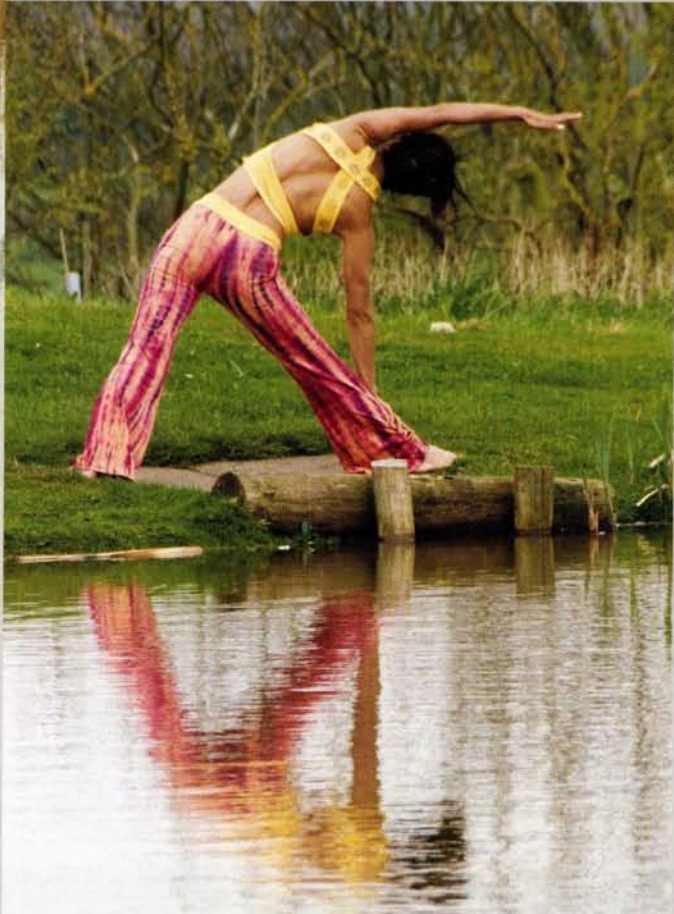




Trikonasana (Triangle)

This lateral stretch strengthens the legs and is an excellent hip opener. Building strength and stability while providing flexibility and length to the spine, it allows for deeper breathing in the chest area.

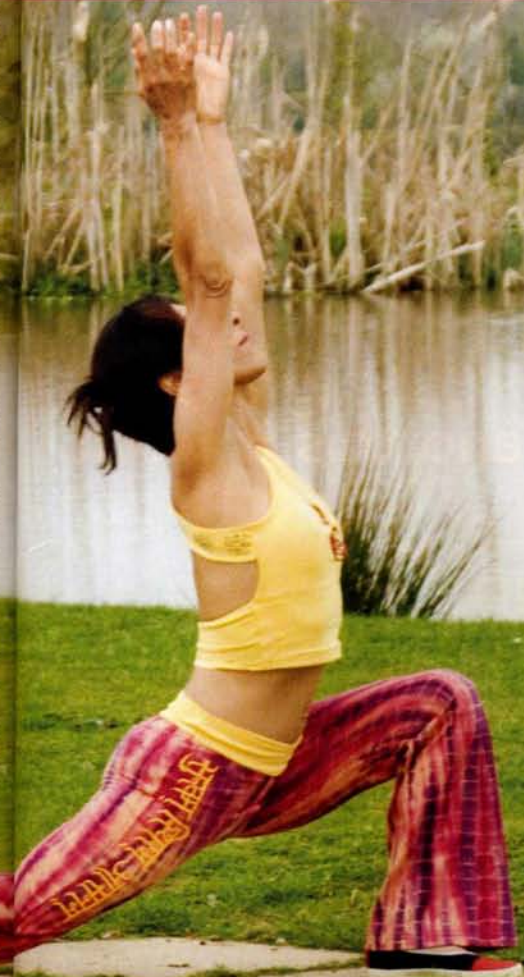
- 1 Stand with parallel feet wide apart, heels in one straight line.
- 2 Place the right foot at a right angle making sure that hips are in a square position facing front.
- 3 As you inhale, lengthen your spine and raise the arms up at a shoulder level.
- 4 And as you exhale, gently bend the upper body towards right with the hips still in square position.
- 5 As soon as you find that the hips have started to roll in, stop and get hold of the right leg but do not put any pressure on the leg.
- 6 Pressing the left foot into the floor, exhale and stretch the left arm all the way your left ear, palms facing down.
- 7 Hold the posture and take 3 long relaxed breaths, enjoy!
8. Repeat on the other side.



Parsvakonasana (Side Angle Stretch)

An ultimate lateral stretch. Along with increased flexibility in the sides, it strengthens the thigh muscles and expands the chest and the lungs. Extreme stretch with stability calls for building core muscle strength and stamina. See picture on page 79.

- 1 From Pasvahasta Padasana, come into Warrior 2 on the right hand side.
- 2 Inhale lengthen the spine and as you exhale gently bend over to the right. Placing the right palm by your right angled foot (on the outside or the inside to suit your flexibility).
- 3 Inhale and stretch the left arm over the head all the way by your left ear where your arm is parallel to the floor.
- 4 Hips should stay in a square position as much as possible and the back foot pressed into the floor to enable equal weight on both the sides.
- 5 Take 3 breaths and repeat on the other side.



Natarajasana (Dancer's Pose)

The most beautiful posture, this requires a lot of flexibility in the back and shoulders. A diagonal overall stretch, increases strength in the legs and arms and the spine retains its suppleness. See picture on previous page (page 83).

1 From Tadasana, keeping the left foot firmly on the floor, get hold of your right ankle with your right hand by folding the right leg in the back.

2 Extend your left arm parallel to the floor, palms facing down.

3 As you inhale, keeping the left leg strong and straight, bend forwards while opening the hips and the right knee out creating a curvature in the back.

4 Balance is the key. Keep your gaze steady in front of you and open up in the back as much as you comfortably can, keeping your head high feeling that stretch in the back.

5 Beginners can take the support of the wall in the front to get the maximum stretch.

6 Slowly release with control and repeat it on the other side.

Virabhadrasana (Warrior 3)

This posture strengthens the legs and abdominal muscles and you feel lightness in the body. A stabilising posture, helps in concentration and gives an excellent stretch to the spine and the entire back. Only attempt this if you are familiar with warrior 1 and 2.

1 From warrior 1 on the right, push the chest on to the right thigh and simultaneously raise the left heel, keeping the back leg straight.

2 Using your abdominal muscles, find the balance and lift open your right leg.

3 Keep the head in line with your spine; lock the right knee and lengthen your spine.

4 Keeping the gaze focused slightly in front of your right foot, find the balance and the lightness. Breathe with awareness.

5 To release exhale and come into warrior 1 again slowly.

6 Repeat on the other side.

Warrior With A Lunge

Warrior with hand variation and a lunge – this posture opens the inside muscles of the thighs and strengthens the legs and the arms as well as lengthening the spine. All standing postures are excellent for building strength in the arms and the legs.

1 From warrior 1, come into a lunge by turning the right foot in on the toes.

2 Lifting the arms on an inhale stretch them high by the side of your ears.

3 Keep the left thigh parallel to the floor; take a few lunges, keeping the length in the spine.

4 Release and repeat on the other side.