

Case Study 21: Satyananda Yoga Ashram Findings and Recommendations

Please Note

This statement is in response to concerns raised with Yoga Australia in relation to Satyananda Yoga in Case Study 21 of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. You may find the content within this statement and revisiting the events of the past to be distressing.

Help and support are available.

If, at any time, you would like to talk to a professional with experience in trauma, please contact one of the confidential support services listed at the end of this statement.

Acknowledgment

Yoga Australia wishes to acknowledge all the testimonies heard by the Royal Commission describing a history of systematic abuse at ashrams in both Australia and India over a sustained period of time.

Yoga Australia thanks Dr Josna Pankhania for raising her concerns through Yoga Australia's grievance process and for her assistance and commitment to healing, truth and justice in Satyananda Yoga.

Background

In 2014–15, Case Study 21 of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse examined and made findings regarding child sexual abuse by the leaders of Satyananda Yoga reported as occurring during the 1970s and 1980s at the Satyananda Yoga Ashram at Mangrove Mountain, New South Wales (NSW), Australia.

The Royal Commission's Public Hearing was held in Sydney from 2–10 December 2014 and on 29 April 2015, with information accessible from "[Case Study 21: Satyananda Yoga Ashram](#)". The Royal Commission heard testimonies about the following leaders of Satyananda Yoga:

1. Swami Akhandananda Saraswati: Swami Satyananda Saraswati's chief disciple in Australia and the 'spiritual leader' and 'director' of the Mangrove Mountain Ashram;
2. Swami Shishyananda Saraswati (or Shishy): second in charge at the Mangrove Mountain Ashram;
3. Swami Satyananda Saraswati, the founder of Satyananda Yoga;
4. Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati, Swami Satyananda Saraswati's successor and the current head of Satyananda Yoga; and
5. Swami Gorakhnath Saraswati, Acharya of Satyananda Yoga.

Royal Commission's Conclusions

Yoga Australia acknowledges the Royal Commission's conclusion that Swami Satyananda Saraswati, the founding guru of Satyananda Yoga, had overarching authority at the Mangrove Mountain Ashram (and its centres) in his role as head of Satyananda Yoga worldwide.

The Royal Commission found no evidence of any written child protection policies at the Mangrove Mountain Ashram between 1975 and 1987.

The Royal Commission concluded that when those responsible for the management of the Bihar School of Yoga (Satyananda Yoga's principal institution in India) first heard about the Royal Commission's investigation of the sexual abuse of children by Swami Akhandananda Saraswati, their primary concern was to minimise the risk of damaging the reputation of Satyananda Yoga.

Yoga Australia acknowledges the Royal Commission's finding that some practices and values associated with Satyananda Yoga may have served to foster and mask widespread abuse.

Satyananda Yoga's Response

The initial response of the international Satyananda Yoga movement was to distance the Bihar School of Yoga from its association with the Mangrove Mountain Ashram, including the removal of support for the use of the name 'Satyananda' and the renunciation of all ties. However, after the close of evidence, the Bihar School of Yoga revised its position and acknowledged its support for the Royal Commission's work. The Royal Commission noted that the Bihar School of Yoga "restricted its statement and subsequent closing submission to reference allegations made against Akhandananda and Shishy [second in charge at the ashram] and did not refer to [the] alleged conduct of Satyananda".

The international head of Satyananda Yoga, Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati, has offered little guidance or leadership in relation to the troubling conclusions of the Royal Commission. Disciples at Mangrove Mountain Ashram (now called the Academy of Yoga Science) wrote to the principal institution in India (the Bihar School of Yoga) regarding the testimonies heard by the Royal Commission, including the testimonies heard against both the founder and the current head of Satyananda Yoga himself. The response to their letter was an acknowledgment of receipt. No support or redress for victims was offered; no support or guidance was offered to the Mangrove Mountain Ashram; ties with this Australian Satyananda Yoga institution were severed; and the Academy of Yoga Science has been forbidden to use the name 'Satyananda' for teaching purposes.

Response of Mangrove Mountain Ashram (Academy of Yoga Science)

The Royal Commission's Case Study 21 provided a critical cultural analysis of the practices and values held by Satyananda Yoga that served to foster, as well as to mask, the abuse.

The Mangrove Mountain Ashram, the Academy of Yoga Science has begun to address these cultural issues. At its 2016 Annual General Meeting (AGM), it was agreed unanimously that no guru-disciple relationship or culture was to concentrate power in the hands of a few individuals at the Academy. Yoga Australia also appreciates, acknowledges and welcomes the compensation payments made by Mangrove Yoga to the survivors of abuse.

Yoga Australia's Response

In late 2014 and early 2015, Yoga Australia condemned the acts of sexual misconduct as presented in testimony in Case Study 21, in several public statements. These statements indicated that any act of sexual harassment or assault would not be tolerated by Yoga Australia.

Yoga Australia upholds high teaching standards and requires all registered teachers to abide by the Code of Professional Conduct and the clear ethical standards set out in

the Statement of Ethics. A cornerstone of these policies is the teacher–student relationship, including the responsibility of teachers to avoid any behaviour that could compromise the integrity of that relationship.

Yoga Australia is currently in the process of reviewing all its ethical standards and rules.

Yoga Australia’s Recommendation

Yoga Australia has clear ethical standards and a Code of Professional Conduct that outline appropriate behaviours. It is Yoga Australia’s intention to ensure that every yoga practitioner practicing with a Yoga Australia-registered teacher is in safe hands. Yoga Australia has a vigorous and thorough grievance policy and processes which allow the monitoring of non-compliance with these ethical standards and elevate the profession of yoga teaching.

Yoga Australia strongly recommends that all Yoga Australia training providers and registered teachers take the following actions:

1. **Be transparent about all the abuse that occurred within Satyananda Yoga; and**
2. **Acknowledge the multiple testimonies, findings and recommendations of the Royal Commission as they relate to Satyananda Yoga.**

Yoga Australia recommends that all teachers trained in Satyananda Yoga be mindful of the cultural and systemic issues identified by the Royal Commission as factors enabling the abuse to occur and that these issues be addressed in their practice.

Yoga Australia will continue to support all teachers trained in Satyananda Yoga and will continue to register teachers who meet its registration standards. Yoga Australia will support their teaching and keep alive the good and sound aspects of Satyananda Yoga within the ethically sound framework of Yoga Australia’s Statement of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct.

These standards are being reviewed to ensure that they continue to address professional misconduct in the industry.

Yoga Australia welcomes the guidance offered by the Australian Association for Professional and Applied Ethics (AAPAE) which, in 2017, in an editorial titled “Restoring ethical leadership in yoga”, urged yoga communities to observe the foundational precepts, *yamas* and *niyamas* in the delivery of yogic knowledge and practices.

Support is available

If you have concerns relating to your own safety or well-being or that of a colleague, yoga practitioner or student, please contact the relevant emergency support service:

www.mensline.org.au 1300 789 978

The National Redress Scheme also provides access to a list of redress support services through the following link: <https://www.nationalredress.gov.au/support>

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