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Sunday, Jan. 09, 2005

Learning the Yoga Way of Laughter

By Alex Perry/ New Delhi

Six in the morning is way too early for the kind of raucous guffaws that are echoing around a sports ground in central Bombay. Walkers and joggers are frowning at a group of 40 people hooting and slapping their thighs, eyeing them with the jealous disapproval that hardworking commuters reserve for all-night partyers on weekdays. But this is no carousers' dawn chorus. There are no drinks and very little talking, and most of the group will shortly be on their merry way to work. What there is, nonstop for 45 minutes, is hysterical, weeping laughter. So what's the big joke?

Actually, there's none. Dr. Madan Kataria, 45, explains that when he started his first laughter club in 1995 after reading about the medical benefits of a good giggle, he ran out of funny stories in a week. So, throwing in a few yoga stretches, he tried encouraging people to laugh for no reason. His formula for laughing yoga clubs proved infectious. There are 1,800 such clubs in India alone, and an additional 700 around the world from Finland to the Philippines. Every year on a Kataria-inspired holiday called World Laughter Day, celebrated on the first Sunday in May, 10,000 Danes gather in Copenhagen for the world's biggest mass chortle. One of the world's funniest men, British actor John Cleese, was so overwhelmed by the good humor he felt for his fellow man after a session at Kataria's club in Bombay, he called it a "force for democracy."

The physical and psychological benefits of laughter are the subject of serious scientific study, but Dr. Kataria, who practiced general medicine before taking up his laughter mission, prefers intuitive explanations: "We don't need doctors to tell us it's good for us. We know it is."

One of Kataria's students, Alka Bhatia, who volunteers her time to teach at his clubs, says laughter pulled her out of depression. "There's a lot of pressure in my job," says Bhatia, 35, a middle manager at an import-export firm. "But now if I get stressed, I just have a little laugh at my desk and forget everything."

What if you just don't feel like laughing? Kataria says there's no problem with faking it: "Your body doesn't know the difference." At his clubs, which charge no fees, instructors get the yuks rolling with a "Ho, ho, ha-ha-ha" chant or perhaps the "lion laugh," which involves sticking out your tongue and flapping your hands by your ears. "Laughter can't solve your problems," says the laughing yogi. "But it can dissolve them." It's not that great a pun. But Kataria, like a man without a care in the world, nearly laughs his big, smiley head off. --By Alex Perry/ New Delhi

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