

BHAVNA VASNANI

HE IS the CEO of Systems on Silicon Manufacturing Company (SSMC), a successful semiconductor fabrication company. But ask anyone who attends yoga lessons at OnePeople.sg at Toa Payoh on Sunday mornings who their instructor is, and they will give you a variety of responses.

"Some of them think I am an engineer from India, some think I teach yoga for a living, and some think I do something else and teach yoga for free," explained Mr Jagadish C.V., adding that he never corrects them. "I never tell them who I am because otherwise it influences their thoughts. This way, it is easier for me to contribute in the best way that I can."

Originally from Mysore, Mr Jagadish came to Singapore in 1981 – just a couple of months after Changi Airport's Terminal 1 had opened – to work for National Semiconductors.

In 1994, he started his own business. It did well until the 1997 Asian currency crisis, but the impact of the crisis started to be felt only in 1998.

Throughout this time, Mr Jagadish had been going to the Ramakrishna Mission. The swami at the time was from Bangalore and Mr Jagadish saw him as a sort of father figure, often going to him for advice. The swami told him that he did not understand business and instead suggested that he join a free 12-week yoga course that was being conducted at the mission by a young engineer.

At the end of his 12th lesson, the engineer, Mr Atul Deshpande, asked him if he wanted to join him in conducting the classes. Mr Jagadish readily agreed and told him that he would write a business plan and convert it into a viable business. Mr Deshpande's next words were a wake-up call for him.

"He said, 'No, I learnt to teach for free in the society that we live in. Are you interested?'" Mr Jagadish said. "It was as if someone had slapped me in the face and told me that there is something beyond money in life."

Since that day, Mr Jagadish has been conducting yoga classes. He has taught at the Ramakrishna Mission, the Temple of Fine Arts, a grassroots club in Yio Chu Kang, Telok Blangah Community Centre and, for the last 12 years, he has been teaching at OnePeople.sg in Toa Payoh.

In 2007, he and Mr Deshpande incorporated Nikam Guruji Yoga Kutir, a society that conducts free yoga classes at various venues around Singapore.

Starting these classes was not an easy task, though. When he was going around Singapore trying to set up the classes, his motives were questioned. "I had people asking me if I was trying to spread my religion," he said, "but I explained that yoga has nothing to do with religion."

Instead, yoga teaches cleansing, breathing and relaxation techniques. Mr Jagadish explained that there are scientific reasons for why they do each exercise.

For example, when he teaches his classes, he starts the postures from the left side rather than the right.

"Left-handers make up only about 5 per cent of the world's population. We start on the left side and then move to the right side so that the mind can focus and pay more attention," he explained, adding, "Of course, we have some cheeky fellows who say that they are left-handed and ask if they can start from the right. I tell them that they can do that at home, but to keep the harmony in the class, I request that they start from the left side."

His yoga classes are interactive sessions, never mind that a majority of those who attend his classes are Chinese.

With the demographics of his students being mostly elderly folk, Mr Jagadish naturally faces language barriers. "They mostly cannot speak English, and I can't speak Chinese, but through demonstration, explanations, hand gestures and sign language, they pick up the sequence of the exercises. By the



CEO on weekdays, yoga teacher on Sundays

He gives back by conducting yoga classes for the community



Double role... Mr Jagadish is CEO of Systems on Silicon Manufacturing Company (left) as well as yoga teacher (top).

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time it's the eighth or ninth week, all these elderly folk who can't speak English are doing the exercises perfectly and following the English instructions," said Mr Jagadish, who became a Singapore citizen in 2012.

Although he would rather not charge anything for his classes, he feels that a little fee ensures commitment, while also paying for rental of the facilities, though he adds that if there are not enough students to pay the rent, the society tops up the extra amount.

The classes are run entirely on a voluntary basis. Participants who have completed the intermediate course are asked if they would like to become volunteers, but he emphasises that there is no obligation to do so.

"I believe that everyone wants to give back to the community in some way, but sometimes we don't know where to start. Everyone wants to take the easy path and just give some money, but it's hard for people to spare the time," he explained. By encouraging these students to join them as volunteers, Mr Jagadish gives them a platform to give back.

"Sometimes they hesitate, wondering how they can teach yoga when they are not yoga masters," he said. But he feels that when someone like him teaches yoga, it encourages others to do so.

For Mr Jagadish, yoga has not just physiological benefits, but also psychological ones. It has made him more resilient and better able to handle the challenges that come with the job of CEO of a multi-million-dollar company.

He explained that, during the 1997 financial crisis, he noticed that his wife was not sleeping well – she was worried about how he was going to handle the business while also taking care of the family. He told her not to worry, because although it was challenging, he knew how to manage it. He credits his frame of mind to yoga, and says that it helped him to stop and think about what steps he should take.

SSMC was affected by the 2008 economic crisis, but with his experience from the 1997 crisis, Mr Jagadish recognised the signs early on and immediately took corrective action. He calls that period a "transformation phase" in the company: "Everyone hesitated at the bold approach I wanted to take, but after that experience, the team is more powerful and today, they create miracles in the company," he said.

Despite his success in business, teaching yoga is Mr Jagadish's way of leaving a legacy to society. "That is the real driving factor," he said. "That is what is probably at the back of every volunteer's mind. Some of them are doctors, some are lawyers, some are specialists in their own field, but all of them are sparing time to come and do this, to give something back to the community that is beyond money."

➔ bhavnav@sph.com.sg

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