

The Art of Living Foundation

From the Streets of Lenz to Shifting a Continent (1998–2025)

In 1998, a quiet yet powerful transformation began in the heart of Lenasia, one that would go on to inspire a continent and change millions of lives. That year, Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, the visionary spiritual teacher and humanitarian, sent a team of his most dedicated teachers from India to share the timeless practices of yoga, meditation and breathwork across Southern Africa. With their arrival, the Art of Living Foundation began its African journey.

Humble Beginnings: Lenasia, 1998

At a time when ancient wisdom was not yet widely embraced in modern urban Africa, the first Art of Living course was held in June 1998 at the Protea Recreation Centre in Lenasia. This historic session was led by Indian faculty members, Vinod Menon and the late Rishi Nityapragya, alongside Vikram Hazra, Tanuja Limaye and Swami Bramhatej - five pioneers tasked with planting the seeds of a movement rooted in peace, joy and inner strength.



The early days were marked by grassroots efforts and unwavering commitment. After those initial courses, the teachers travelled extensively through South Africa, Botswana, Kenya and Mauritius, conducting foundational Art of Living programmes. These included the signature

Sudarshan Kriya-based Basic Course, the Silence (Advanced) Programme, DSN (Dynamism for Self and Nation), and ultimately, the Teachers' Training Programme, which would empower locals to carry the work forward.

The Streets of Lenz

In the years following their departure back to India, the legacy of those first teachers endured. With limited resources but deep dedication to Gurudev's vision, local volunteers continued spreading the message. In a time before social media or smartphones, awareness was built through sheer legwork - flyers, word-of-mouth and community networks.

Despite early misconceptions surrounding meditation and breathwork, a steady stream of participants began to experience the benefits. Weekly kriya sessions, follow-ups, and satsangs became part of the local rhythm. Without formal centres, schools and community spaces generously opened their doors, and for over a decade, even private homes became sanctuaries for spiritual practice.

Expansion Through Community and Seva

Between 1998 and 2008, the Art of Living movement in Lenasia witnessed exponential growth. Participants came from surrounding areas such as Soweto, Glenvista, Bassonia and Vereeniging - drawn not only by the practices but by a sense of connection, community and upliftment.

But the vision extended beyond individual transformation. Humanitarian service - or seva (service) - became a central pillar. Local volunteers initiated projects aligned with the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, including Mission Green Earth, township workshops, food hamper drives and medical camps. Even homes were donated to families in need in areas like Orange Farm.

One of the standout initiatives was the Youth Leadership Training Programme, which empowered young people through self-awareness, practical life skills and leadership tools. Free workshops such as Breath Water Sound brought wellness to underserved communities, fostering dignity, resilience and peace.

A Global Family Touches Down in Lenasia

Over the years, Lenasia hosted visiting Art of Living teachers from across the globe, including Germany, the USA, India and Canada. Their presence offered inspiration, mentorship and a living

example of the Foundation's global reach. These international exchanges enriched the local community and strengthened the bonds of a global spiritual family.

In 2002, the South African chapter of the International Association for Human Values (IAHV) - the Foundation's sister organisation - was formally launched. Based initially in Lenasia, IAHV South Africa has spent over two decades running community upliftment projects across the country. From trauma relief and youth empowerment to skills development and social cohesion, IAHV remains a vital force for positive change.

Innovation Through Music, Youth and Culture

Reaching younger audiences requires creativity, and the Foundation embraced innovation through spiritual music events and community gatherings. Programmes such as Yoga Rave and Mantra Café brought together hundreds in vibrant, alcohol- and drug-free celebrations centred around mantra, meditation and conscious living.

Youth programmes reached townships like Thembelihle, Orange Farm and Soweto. As early as 2000, free sessions were being conducted in local schools, empowering students with breathing techniques to handle stress, improving concentration and cultivating inner peace.

I Meditate Africa: A Continental Call for Peace

A significant milestone came in 2013 with the launch of I Meditate Africa – the continent's largest peace campaign centred around collective meditation. Held annually during Africa Month and culminating on Africa Day, this initiative has united over 13 million participants across 23 African nations. A celebration of unity, silence and resilience, I Meditate Africa embodies Gurudev's message that peace begins within, and that inner stillness can transform outer reality.

A Movement Rooted in Service and Stillness

By the mid-2000s, a new wave of locally trained teachers emerged, expanding the Foundation's reach across South Africa. Weekly kriya sessions, community satsangs and public programmes continued to grow, nurtured by dedicated volunteers and anchored in the spirit of "seva".

The Lenasia School of Music became a spiritual home for many, offering a regular space for breathwork, meditation and community gathering. Here, Gurudev's teachings found expression in practice, transforming lives one breath at a time.

Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar: The Visionary Behind the Mission

Since founding the Art of Living in 1981, Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar has inspired over 800 million people in more than 180 countries. His vision: a stress-free, violence-free world. From rural India to global capitals, his work encompasses not only personal transformation, but large-scale humanitarian initiatives in education, disaster relief, conflict resolution and environmental stewardship.

Gurudev is also the founder of the World Culture Festival - an extraordinary celebration of unity in diversity, held in global cities such as Washington, Berlin, New Delhi and Bangalore. These gatherings attract millions and symbolise the dream of One World Family (Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam).

A Legacy of Peace, A Future of Possibility

From the humble streets of Lenasia to villages, townships and cities across Africa, the Art of Living Foundation continues its mission with dedication, joy and profound love. What began as a small course in 1998 has evolved into a continent-wide movement - one that uplifts the individual, empowers the community and transforms the collective.

Rooted in breath, carried by service and guided by Gurudev's wisdom, the journey continues. In every course, every meditation and every act of kindness, the vision lives on: **To make life a celebration - and to bring humanity together as one world family. Sri Sri**