

Marketing and Outreach via Meetup.com

by Turiya Moore, Torrance, CA

Note from Gyandev: Turiya graduated from Ananda YTT in 2001, and immediately opened a yoga studio in Torrance, CA, in the southern part of Greater Los Angeles. Since then, and through his untiring labors, the studio has blossomed into an Ananda meditation group, and is now an incorporated nonprofit organization and an Ananda center, with a number of teachers of Ananda Yoga and Raja Yoga. One of the most effective outreach tools he has found is meetup.com. At my request, he has graciously consented to write this article about it.

Turiya is a progressive and creative person, but not a “computer nerd,” so whatever he talks of doing in this article, you too can do. I asked him not only to provide you with general ideas for using Meetup to help market your yoga classes or do outreach for your meditation group, but also to give you the benefit of his considerable “in the trenches” experience. And he’s done it beautifully. This article is long—not because Meetup is complex, but because Turiya has learned a lot about what to do and what not to do. If your experience yields additional “meetup wisdom” that you can share with others, please write me: gyandev@expandinglight.org.

Our Ananda meditation group—Ananda Meditation Center in Torrance, CA (anandasouthbay.org)—has successfully used meetup.com to attract new people to our events. Although we have used it for meditation classes and other spiritual events, we believe it will also be effective for yoga classes, whether or not you have an Ananda meditation group. In fact, we will soon put our own yoga classes on meetup.com. So I’d like to share with you some information about Meetup and how it might be helpful for you, whatever classes or events you offer.

What is Meetup?

Meetup.com is a social networking website designed to help people find and meet—in person!—others with similar interests. It’s a great idea. The site is geared to help people connect with groups, classes, and social events that interest them. The meetings *take place locally, in person*. Both free events fee-based events are popular on the site.

Meetup has been much more effective for our Ananda Meditation Center than a calendar or event listing service, in large part because it allows people to connect with you in an environment where those who attend meetings can rate the meeting, discuss them, and even post photos from them—and potential attendees can see all that, too. Your conversations with people are also public (if you allow them to be), which gives others an idea of how you operate and treat people.

Each week this summer (2009), our center has attracted 3–5 new people who found us via Meetup; some weeks, we have actually met 8–10 new people because of Meetup. For us, the summer has always been our slowest time of year to meet new people (other than the Christmas/New Year’s holidays) so this really feels like a big deal to us! Tonight (August 24th) our group of 29 people had an overwhelming majority of people who found us on meetup.com.



Turiya Moore

Creating a meetup group home page is not difficult. It takes a little patience and time, but once you have it, it's done—and adding new events (classes, get-togethers, etc.) is a breeze. You'll spend a little time interacting with your meetup group members, and go back and make adjustments to your original setup when and if you feel it's needed. It's very user friendly. Say *Yes!* to Meetup.

So let's explore *how* to say *Yes!* to Meetup.


Get your bearings

Let's begin by visiting one of our center's most successful meetup home page. It will help you understand what I've written below. Go to:

<http://www.meetup.com/Ananda-Meditation-Center-Torrance/>

This (see below) is what meetup.com refers to as a “meetup group.” It's actually a home page for your meetings. In what follows, I'll refer to this as your “meetup group home page,” or simply “home page”.

Beneath our title, “Expanding our hearts and minds every Monday” you can see some black subheads: “Location”, “Members,” and “Meetup topics”.

 **Find**
a Meetup Group

Start
a Meetup Group

[Login](#) [Sign up](#) [New Features](#) [Help](#)

The Torrance Meditation Meetup @ Ananda Meditation Center

Home

- About
- Calendar
- Members
- Photos
- Mailing List
- Message Board
- Polls
- Files
- Promote!

Expanding our hearts and minds every Monday!

Location
Torrance, CA


Members
150 Meditators

Meetup topics
Meditation, Spirituality, Yoga, Spiritualism, Paramhansa Yogananda

Meetups
99 so far

Rating
★★★★★

Founded
February 12, 2008



Join The Torrance Meditation Meetup @ Ananda Meditation Center

You'll get invited to our Meetups as soon as they're scheduled!

Name:


Email:

Password:

I agree to the [Terms of Service](#)

Join us!


Organized by




Ashleigh
email me

Asst. Organizers:
Randy, turiya

Other nearby Meetup Groups



SHERMAN OAKS MEDITATION GROUP



Past Lives, Dreams and Soul Travel of Marina del Rey

Our next Meetup

Swami Kriyananda in LA: My Life with Paramhansa Yogananda

Sep 25
Fri 7:30 PM

Where?
Ford Amphitheatre
2580 E Cahuenga Blvd
Los Angeles, CA 90068
323 461-3673

Who's coming?
35 Yes / 1 Maybe

Want to attend?
Join us!

Our Sponsors

We're looking for Sponsors!

Support a Meetup group while getting exposure to active, local members.

Sponsor Our Meetup Group

What's new?

Below “Meetup topics” you’ll find the words that we have specified to describe what our meetup is about. People searching within meetup.com often will find you based on these keywords. If you pause your cursor over each of the keywords, you’ll see statistics about each of them. (By giving you an idea of “what’s out there,” it makes you better able to choose the keyword for your meetup group.) Meetup calls these “topics,” but I’m calling them “keywords” in this article because I’ll use the word “topic” below to refer to the subject matter that we focus on in our in-person meetings.

As you scroll down the page, the next thing you’ll see is a general description of what our meetings are all about.

A bit farther down is a box labeled in the upper left hand corner as “Our next Meetup.” This is an actual meeting with a date and a specific *topic*. (I’m going to use the words “meeting” and “event” interchangeably; they both refer to an in-person get-together.) If you click this event’s “date badge”—or click on “More details about this meetup” near the bottom of the box—you’ll go to this event’s own page, where you can see in the right side-bar who has already RSVP’d (“Yes, I’m coming.”) and what they are saying about this event (if they are posting comments), as well as the full event description in the center of the page.

Assuming you’ve been following my instructions to this event page, now please click your browser’s “back” button to return to our meetup home page where we began (or use the link above).

Scroll a down toward the bottom of the page and you’ll see smaller boxes for past and future events (if we have indeed posted something for the future by the time you read this.). The green text in these boxes is linked to each event’s own page.

Here’s how it works

Okay, now that you’ve seen some of it firsthand, let’s get into some more details.

One Meetup account allows you to host up to three separate Meetup Groups; each of these has its own home-page, which serves as an area for general information and a description of what your group is about. It also lists your past, present, and future events (events are called “meetups”)

When setting up your home-page, you’ll choose up to seven keywords. When people search meetup.com for an event or a group, your home page and all of its meetups are categorized mostly by your keywords and location, not so much by the text on your pages. I say *mostly* because there are actually several ways people can find you within meetup.com, and some of the search methods work exclusively with the keywords and ignore all other information except your location. For example, you could have one Yoga Meetup Page, and from this page list any yoga class or related event to which you want to invite people via meetup.com. If you also have, say, art classes, you might opt to have a separate meetup group home-page for those, because you’ll want to choose different keywords and description for the art topic. You can change your keywords at any time.

I think this kind of diversity is good because it exposes your offerings to a wider audience. For example, an Ananda meditation group might have a meditation meetup, a yoga meetup, and a book study meetup. (It might be okay to list yoga and meditation meetings together on one page, but I would definitely suggest a new page for a book study or art class.) Each of these meetups will have its own members.

Note: People are also finding our meetup pages via Google searches, and Google searches don’t work the same way that some of the Meetup searches do. Your meetup pages will show up in Google searches based on *all* the text in your pages—as well as on lots of other factors that are beyond my understanding—not just the Meetup keywords I mentioned above.

Once people find your home page, they can browse your past meetings and find out who attended, how the attendees rated the meetings, what the attendees look like, and what they had to say about the

meeting. They can also view pictures that the organizer or members have posted, read member profiles, etc. (Note: You'll see input only from those who took the trouble to RSVP—"Yes, I'm coming"—through your meetup page; there might be others who just showed up at your meeting but didn't RSVP.) All this—plus your own clear, accurate descriptions of what you are doing—helps people who find your meetup page to make informed choices about what they attend. So remember that Meetup is an outreach tool; think of how to make it as easy as possible for the widest range of people to find you.

After each in-person meeting, meetup.com sends an email to those who RSVP'd, asking them to rate the meeting. It's a good idea to encourage attendees to comment on and rate your meeting as soon as they go home, or else they will never do it. It's an easy and effective way to support your service. It's important to encourage your "regulars" to join meetup so they can rate each event that they attend, too.

Meetup membership is free for everyone except those who are organizers of meetups. (Some meetup organizers charge their members a fee to cover their expenses; others don't.) Meetup is not expensive, and it offers three options for payment for an organizer's account:

- \$12 a month for six months (a single \$72 charge)
- \$15 a month for three months (a single \$45 charge)
- \$19 per month

Meetup.com is user friendly for those who organize meetups, as well as for those who are seeking them. Technical knowledge or experience is not needed. Here is a page where you can search for meetups in your area using a basic search tool. Try it and see what's happening in your town:

<http://www.meetup.com/topics/>

You'll see a big button on the top left of the page for starting your own meetup. But I would first do some reading here:

<http://www.meetup.com/help/newtomu/>

And then here:

<http://orc.meetup.com/>

Benefit from our experience

The guidance you'll receive via the links above is really good, so I'll not waste your time repeating a lot of it here. But our experience has taught us a few things that we think will be helpful for you right now:

- View meetup.com as a "living community," not an online calendar. At first, we used Meetup for many months mainly as a calendar, and we saw very little return on our energy. It wasn't until we started communicating with our members individually that people started to come to our center. The communication offers a way for people to "check us out" from the safety and comfort of their own home. People need to feel that we are friendly, kind, and respect them as they are, *before* they come in person.
- The organizer and/or greeter for your meetup should be chosen carefully. (If you're a solo yoga teacher, you might be both those people, but I also want to address those who are working as part of a group) The organizer is the one who is in charge of your meetup page. S/he and any "assistant organizers" are your representatives on Meetup. If people have questions, they'll usually send a message to the organizer. The greeter is the person who people will come to your meeting or class, looking to greet them in person. Think of what type of people you would like to attract to your group, and choose an organizer and a greeter who have this vibration. We have had three different meetup organizers over the past year, and each of them attracted a totally different group of people.

It seems to me that the person interacting on Meetup is as important as, or even more important than, anything we write to describe our meeting.

Important: Greeters and organizers should have nice, friendly profiles, and *must* have friendly headshots (portrait photos) on your meetup site.

- Greet and talk *publicly* in the Meetup environment, using the various message and greeting options. Correspond with everyone who joins your group, and take the time to look at his or her photo, meetup profile, and other meetup groups they have joined, so you can know a bit about the person you are talking with.
- Some people may join your meetup only for self-serving reasons—e.g., they might be “fishing” to try to get your members to join other meetups, or buy some product—and you’ll have to be alert for that. For example, let’s say someone joins your yoga meetup and writes in his greeting comment (for all to see) how he has been astral projecting to Mars for yoga classes. So you check his profile and you notice that he is an organizer or member of a “yoga on Mars” meetup. Since I don’t teach on Mars—yet—I consider this spam. But I don’t take any action against this sort of thing with the Meetup company unless they are harassing our members (which happened only one time in the past year).
- Focus on being a friend for people online. If you do this, they are going to come, as will others with whom you never correspond, but who are nevertheless watching your online meetup discussions with others. This is where the rubber meets the road in social networking. People are tired of ads, static websites, and sales pitches. They do not want to be pushed or talked into anything. By *friendship* I mean only sincere and heartfelt respect, kindness, and service. Listen to them. Sometimes people (especially those who are newer to meeting others through the internet) forget that these are real live people they are connecting with online—just as some people driving cars think they can say or do practically anything to other drivers, just because they feel anonymous. If you treat each person you greet, or message with, as if you are speaking face to face with a guest entering your own home for the first time, you and they will have much more fun—and they’ll be much more likely to come to your in-person gathering.
- Some people won’t join your meetup, but they’ll nevertheless find you through Meetup and come to your meeting.
- When we first began with Meetup, there were a limited number of what they refer to as “topics”(I’m still using “keyword” for that term) to choose from when creating our home page. Being an Ananda meditation group, we naturally wanted to use Paramhansa Yogananda as a keyword so people would see our page when they searched for his name. At that time there was no keyword available for Paramhansa Yogananda, and Meetup would not let us add one. Now, both “Paramhansa Yogananda” and “Paramahansa Yogananda” are listed as keywords. It seems they have changed their policy regarding the creation of new keywords! Of course, there are also keywords such as yoga, meditation, yoga & meditation, consciousness, self-improvement, spirituality, etc.
- We have found great benefit in creating a different topic, name, and description for each meeting. So far, all ours have focused on meditation, but each meeting also includes a talk on a topic. Having different topics makes our events interesting to a much wider range of people. It also gets our meetup event pages to show up in a wider range of Google searches, and provides us with a new topic that nearly every newspaper in our area will happily post for free in their weekly events calendars. If you have a meditation group, you might choose a weekly reading from something like *Affirmations for Self Healing* or *Rays of the One Light*.

- There are lots of “fancy” things you can do on Meetup; like have discussion boards, blog, sell classes via PayPal, people can even sponsor your meetup, etc. But you don’t need all that unless you want it. Keeping it simple has worked well for us.

Spreading the word about your meetup

Once you have created a meetup group home page, meetup.com will help people find you. For example, there are meetup members in your area who are looking for yoga and/or meditation, and they will be notified when you publish your home page—as well as each time you list a new meetup event—if, when creating your home page, you chose either of those topics as your keywords. In our case, every time we post a new event, hundreds of people in our area are notified *automatically* by Meetup through email. These are not even our group’s members; they are just people interested in meditation or spirituality! If you’re a yoga teacher wanting to spread the word about your classes, it might instead be those with an interest in yoga—and as you know, there are many such people these days.

Since Meetup sends out a notice each time we add a new event to our calendar, we post our specific meetup info for each upcoming event on a weekly basis. (For example: we have a Monday meetup page which acts as a home-page for our free Monday meditations. Each week has a different topic. Instead of filling in our calendar dates all at once, we add a new event each week about five or six days before it happens.) There are other ways to do this, including filling up your calendar ahead of time, then going back and sending notices, but adding the new meetup date each week works best for us at this point. It seems that Meetup sends a much nicer notice the first time we create any event, but when we go back into the system to send a notice out for an existing event, the notification is much plainer, hence less appealing. This could be because meetup.com doesn’t want to encourage spam, or it may be that we just don’t know how to send the notice we prefer yet.

You also have the option of searching for individuals in your area with common interests, browsing their profiles, and contacting them directly to invite them personally. We have done this with some success.

Meetup is integrated with Facebook, so you can list your events there very easily. I’m not as familiar with Facebook, but our meetup postings on Facebook have also attracted some attendees to our events.

More online highlights

To continue your familiarization with Meetup, here is another of our event pages:

<http://www.meetup.com/Ananda-Meditation-Center-Torrance/calendar/11002877/>

As on the page you visited earlier, you can see that there are many links. Almost any text that is not black is a link to another page. If you click where it says “Ananda Meditation Center” in green type under “Location” (by the date badge), you’ll go to a page with a map and other information about our center. It also shows how people rate our gatherings, and others can see what those people look like and read their profiles if they wish. Here it is:

<http://www.meetup.com/Ananda-Meditation-Center-Torrance/venue/511127/?offset=20&popup=true>

We have not tried using Meetup for an asana class in our center yet, but we are just about to do that, and we see no reason its results would be significantly different from those of our meditation meetings. We used to have a yoga/volleyball beach meetup, and that was very successful.

An easy way to check it out

An easy way to learn about Meetup is to get on the meetup.com site, create a free personal account, find some interesting groups, and join them. It’s free for you to join; Meetup has a cost only for the meetup

groups themselves (i.e., the group organizer pays the fee). Then you can see how it works from the user side of things.

A word of caution: When you join Meetup or Facebook—or anything else online—you are usually asked for all kinds of personal information as you set up your account. In my opinion, it's a good idea to give as little personal information as possible. After all, some of that info is publicly viewable. I *never* include more information than I absolutely have to.

Well, I hope this is will be helpful for you. I've tried to include enough details to get you going, but not so many that they overwhelm you. Meetup is really not a hard thing to do. In any case, feel free to contact Ashleigh Bayer or me with questions. Also, we are currently working with a friend who may become interested in helping people set up Meetup pages.

Check it out yourself, but if you need real help to get started, there is a chance we can give you some assistance. ◆

You can reach Turiya Moore at turiya@anandasouthbay.org and Ashleigh Bayer at ashleigh@anandasouthbay.org