

CITIZEN DIPLOMACY

Yogi Rama Jyoti Vernon Teaches Conflict Resolution

by Felicia Tomasko

I looked into the face of the enemy and found only the face of a friend," said Rama Jyoti Vernon, describing her work as a participant in citizen diplomacy trips into the former Soviet Union during the 1980s. For the past 20 years, Vernon has been traveling around the world, teaching yoga and conflict resolution as part of organized collaborative projects in areas including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Israel, Palestine, China, Cuba, Central America, Kosovo, South Africa, and Afghanistan.

Vernon began her career not as an activist or international peacekeeper, but as a yoga teacher, wife, and mother. "I was never political," she said. "I came from a metaphysical family." But her life involved organizing, initially in the yoga community; teachers, swamis, Tibetan lamas, and their students and devotees gathered together around her kitchen table. Later, she began hosting meetings for yoga teachers, which evolved to become the first U.S. yoga conferences. This led to an invitation to the former Soviet Union in 1983, from the Earth Stewards Foundation to participate in a peace mission to bring yoga behind the Iron Curtain. "I did not know that the trip would change my life."

While in a Moscow marketplace, upon discovering that Vernon was an American, a Russian grandmother sank to her knees and begged for peace. "They saw us as the enemy as much as we saw them [that way]," Vernon said. "My thought was that if we could transform the enemy image, could we transform our world?"

Vernon began leading groups to the Soviet Union to establish friendships with the people there and to learn about one another's cultures in an attempt to debunk stereotypes. Vernon said that former President Gorbachev and the Russian Embassy emphasized that it was the cultural and personal exchanges of these groups that brought about the end of the Cold War, more so than the political leaders.

Vernon feels that her lifelong practice of yoga has informed and inspired her work, and has



Yogi Rama Jyoti Vernon combined her experience as a yoga teacher with her natural instinct for organization, to help resolve conflicts and break down barriers in Cold War Russia and modern-day Afghanistan.

provided her with both the stamina and the tools for compassionate and successful listening, negotiating, and problem solving. In fact, the philosophy of yoga provides lessons in psychology and teaches how to uncover the root cause of an issue or conflict. These instructions are described in a book known as *Patanjali's Yoga Sutras*, one of the earliest written texts on yoga, thought to be 2,000 years old. *Patanjali* describes methods for obtaining inner peace and facing inner fears, and Vernon feels that the same conflicts that interfere with peace within ourselves also create conflict on an international level.

Vernon recently went to Afghanistan, where she worked with women and children, many of whom were widows and orphans, respectively. While there she embarked on an 80-mile journey into the countryside that took 10 hours and was like traveling back 2,000 years in time. In the villages she visited on her trek, Vernon found that through telling their stories and being heard, people's lives changed. Vernon also felt that her presence could shift stereotypes about the American people. Citizen diplomacy is a powerful force, according to Vernon, and a way for those of us who disagree with our government's actions to be a positive force for worldwide transformation.

Vernon's peacekeeping work inspired the formation of the Center for International Dialogue, which has developed a curriculum for teaching conflict resolution based on the *Yoga Sutras*. The center is currently studying the roots of terrorism in an effort to abolish this global disease at its root.

Rama Jyoti Vernon is giving a free talk and leading a satsang, or gathering, for world peace at Golden Tree Yoga on Monday, September 6. For more information, call Golden Tree Yoga at 568-5309.