

Rama Jyoti Vernon, Yogi, International Peace Builder, And Co-founder of Yoga Journal

By Sharon Steffensen

In 1967, when she was teaching yoga in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco, Rama Jyoti Vernon dreamed of a day when yoga might become a household word. Back then it was confused with yogurt. One woman told Rama that she especially liked yoga with fruit on it.

Thanks partly to Rama, it wasn't long before yoga did become a household word. In the late 1960s, more and more swamis, gurus, and notable teachers of yoga and Indian philosophy were traveling from India to the U.S. When they came to San Francisco, Rama would invite them to stay in her home. Her husband would come home from his law office to find the living room filled with devotees sitting at the feet of a visiting swami who was giving discourses or chanting mantras. Rama's husband was very supportive of the movement.

Forty-six years later, having organized yoga conferences, founded international yoga organizations, led peacekeeping missions around the world (more about that later), and raised five children, Rama is leading yoga workshops and has been a regular keynote speaker at the International Association of Yoga Therapists conferences. With poise, grace, and an aura of peacefulness, Rama regales her audiences with stories about the early days of yoga, traveling to Russia and leading the Politburo in chanting "Om," drinking tea with the Taliban during a peacekeeping trip, and experiences with ordinary people around the world.

Rama will be teaching for the first time in Chicago April 13–15 at the Chicago Yoga Center. We spoke by phone in mid-January about Rama's upcoming workshop. She draws from many traditions of yoga, but her intention in teaching and in her own practice is to combine the breath, awareness, and the *asana* (postures) to "find the kernel of meditation within the pose," she explains.

She gives an example: "In

paschimottanasana [seated forward bend], you are breathing, and you are offering your upper body to your lower body. Then you offer up yourself.... It brings you to a state of concentration—the sixth limb [of



Rama Jyoti Vernon

the eight limbs of yoga]. When that is sustained for 12 breaths or 12 seconds, it leads to the seventh stage of yoga, which is meditation. If you can sustain that uninterrupted flow, you fuse into the oneness, the first stage of *samadhi* ... and the light of illumination shines through us. It can enter in through any of the *asanas*. It comes when the time is right and we begin to find the universe within."

Can this stage be reached while practicing a style of yoga where the body is constantly in motion? Rama replied, "Whenever we move the body fast, the mind speeds up. When we slow the breath down, the mind slows down. The breath and mind are interrelated. The breath is the invisible link between the mind and body.

When we are using the breath, it opens the channels within that can receive the divine, the spirit that is all around us and within us. But we have contracted and compressed and closed the channels. Working with the breath opens the channels to receive the light of illumination."

"But," she acknowledged, "not everybody would be interested in that. They are more interested in tight abs and steel buns. Everybody has a different reason for coming to yoga. And that's why some people hear one thing, and that will be important to them. Another may take away something totally different. Our whole objective of doing the practice is not to have a goal in mind but to do the practice for the sake of the practice, not to get something from it."

Rama's mother took her to her first yoga class when she was 15. The teacher was a Sikh master. Rama says, "As I saw him do the simple act of slowly bringing his thumb and forefinger to his nose [to do a breathing technique], I saw such peace emanating from him. I thought to myself, 'I want that.'" Apparently Rama has achieved it because as she speaks, you can feel the peace coming from her and flowing over you—even over the phone.

In the early 1970s, Rama arranged meetings with other yoga teachers, eventually founding the California Yoga Teachers Association. They started a newsletter that Rama typed on her kitchen table, which later became *Yoga Journal*. Rama also opened the International Yoga College (formerly American Yoga College) and founded Unity in Yoga International, which sponsored seven national and three international conferences.

From various teachers, Rama learned *Bhakti* (the yoga of devotion), *Jnana* (the path of knowledge or wisdom), *Raja* (emphasis on meditation), as well as *Hatha* yoga (focusing on yoga postures). Some of her early teachers include BKS Iyengar,

Magana and Walt Baptiste (parents of Baron and Sherri), Sant Keshavadas, Swami Jyoti Mayananda, and Kripal Singh. Rama hosted BKS Iyengar when he came to California to teach for the first time in 1973, but she traveled to India several times over ten years to study with him.

Rama also spent eight years in master's study at the California Institute of Integral Studies, under the mentorship of Dr. Haridas Chaudry, a disciple of Sri Aurobindo. Sri Aurobindo was an Indian nationalist, freedom fighter, philosopher, yogi, guru, and poet who synthesized Eastern and Western philosophy, religion, literature, and psychology in writings. As a result of her training, Rama became inspired to apply the teachings of yoga to a whole new realm: international peacekeeping. She co-designed an extensive curriculum for conflict resolution and peace studies using East-West psychology, spiritual principles of Integral yoga, and Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* as a basis for international nonviolence training. "I thought of yoga as a vehicle for peace between countries," says Rama. "There is a universality to yoga."

In 1984, during the height of the Cold War, when our president referred to the USSR as "the Evil Empire," Rama founded the Center for Soviet-American Dialogue (now renamed the Center for International Dialog [CID]) based on the idea that people can join together to initiate solutions for political, economic, ecological, humanitarian, and cultural conflicts. As a citizen diplomat, she traveled to the Soviet Union 47 times between 1984 and 1991, organizing over 200 Soviet-American conferences. More than 10,000 ordinary Soviets and Americans participated in these conferences, which resulted in changing the Cold War stereotype, CID-sponsored programs that produced more than 700 joint projects, and policy changes between the two countries.

Rama says that when she first got to the USSR, she found that the Soviet people were just as afraid of the Americans as the Americans were of them but quickly discovered that they were more alike than different with the same hopes, fears, and dreams. Rama says, "One of Gorbachev's advisors (after Gorbachev was ousted) said it was people like us who helped end the

Cold War. We reached them on a heart-filled level."

Rama's successes in the USSR led to invitations for CID to work in the Middle East, Ethiopia, Central America, Ireland, Yugoslavia, and inner cities of the US. During the 1990 Gulf War in Kuwait, Rama initiated a series of Arab-American roundtable dialogues that brought together people from countries all over the Middle East. She has won numerous awards for her peacekeeping achievements.

Now Rama is focusing on inner peace. Comparing it to the flutter of a butterfly wing that creates a ripple effect on the other side of the planet, Rama says, "Our own peacefulness is the greatest gift we can give to the world."

Rama acknowledges that the focus of yoga in the US has moved from the realm of the spiritual to physical fitness, which is far different from how she experienced it in the 1960s. On the other hand, she knows there are many approaches to yoga and that each person will glean from it what they are ready for. She says, "I am trying

to bring in the spiritual to it. There are so many facets of yoga. It's like a diamond. Let's be integrative and explore it all and bring it into asana.... We want it to be revered. It is very sacred to do these practices."

Rama Jyoti Vernon will lead a workshop at Chicago Yoga Center April 13-15. For more information or to register, call 773.327.3650 or visit yogamind.com. Rama's new CD, *River of Sound: Chants for Awakening and Balancing the Chakras*, was released last November. Her website is ramajyotivernon.com.

Subscribe to YOGAChicago!

Only \$20 for one year (6 issues)

Send check to: YOGAChicago

P.O. Box 607447, Chicago, IL 60660


Shanti
Yoga Center

(773)774.8444

7646 West Touhy
Chicago

1 mile east of Park Ridge in Edison Park

www.shanti4yoga.com

Discounts for teachers, police & fire personnel

City-style Yoga Without the City Commute

Candlelight Vinyasa

Advance purchase online or drop-in
Saturday 3/10, 7pm with Mary Lou Cerami

Yoga to Balance Your Dosha:

FREE class 3/22, Thursdays at 5:30pm
with Gosia Ryzewska

'Twins Yoga for 12-16yr olds:

Check our website for start dates
with Kim Weber

NEW SERIES STARTING IN MARCH:

Yoga Bootcamp

Starts 3/19 4 week series
Sign up today!

Kettlebell Yoga

Starts 3/19 4 week series
Build strength to your practice.

Visit us online at

Shanti4Yoga.com
for these events and more.



Now offering a Quarterly Pass ... classes as low as \$8!