



RAMA JYOTI VERNON has been instrumental in creating a number of organizations, including the International Yoga College and the California Yoga Teachers Association (CYTA). She was one of the original publishers of the CYTA newsletter, which gave birth to the magazine *Yoga Journal*. Rama founded the B.K.S. Iyengar Yoga Association of Northern California and established a two-year curriculum for the first state-certified Yoga teachers' training program. This training program became the California Institute for Yoga Teacher Training (YTT), now known as the B.K.S. Iyengar YTT Institute. She started Unity In Yoga, an international organization that sponsored seven national and three international conferences, and provided the non-profit status for the Yoga Alliance. Rama is active in peace movements and has met with heads of state around the world. In this essay, Rama shares how she came to this path of Yoga and global healing.

HEALING WITH YOGA: FROM THE INDIVIDUAL TO GLOBAL PATH

"The mother is the baby's first Guru"
—Swami Satchidananda

I was fortunate to come into this world through parents who were my first teachers in natural healing methodologies. They were chiropractors, physical therapists, naturopaths, iridologists, colon therapists, zone therapists, and reflexologists who believed in the healing powers of the mind. My father was one of the major pioneers of chiropractic licensing in the state of California. "Your body is the temple of the living spirit," my father taught me. "It must be healthy and strong to withstand the intensity of the light of Divine illumination." My mother, who studied with the originators of reflexology, was what we would call today a medical clairvoyant. She could diagnose a condition by looking at a patient, hearing the person's name, or by using reflexology as a diagnostic tool.

One day, I asked my mother why I only knew what it was like to be me. "Why can't I see me through your eyes, or my brother's eyes? Why can't I know what it's like to be you looking at me? Why can't I know what it's like to be everyone?" A faraway look came into her eyes, and her voice dropped to a whisper. "If you knew what it is like to be everyone, then you would know God."

Her words penetrated my heart, not like a knife, but like a gentle flower unfolding into a memory of something I already knew but could not quite touch. Her words that day created a longing and a searching through many labyrinths of religious and theosophical studies, new thought, ancient philosophies, and eventually Yoga. I watched my mother heal herself of cancer without drugs or surgery. I marveled at the miraculous healings my parents and their colleagues were able to facilitate in patients. The relationship of body and mind was evident, and I began to observe the body as a receptacle of what had already occurred on a mental and emotional level.

My mother had met and attended talks and meditations with Paramahansa Yogananda and was inspired to learn more about Yoga. When I was a teenager, she insisted that I attend a Yoga class with her. It was a time when Yoga in this country was rare and unknown. The class, taught by an 84-year-old Sikh Master named Bhagat Singh Thind, was for elders who had suffered heart attacks and strokes. As a 15-year-old, I did not feel this was for me, but I marveled at his abilities to demonstrate a headstand and other Yoga poses—all while describing the therapeutic benefits of *asana* and Yoga philosophy like a poet. "Be like the bird that, pausing in its flight, while on bough to light, feels it give way beneath, yet sings knowing it has wings." He spoke of Yoga and the world, encouraging us not to withdraw but to transform the world through the transformation of self.

The Master then began to demonstrate alternate nostril breathing, to balance the hemispheres of the brain and the autonomic nervous system. As he brought his hand to his nose, the movement was slow and intentional, as if every fiber of the mind and the universe was in that one action. It was as if time stood still. The master did not seem to disturb even a molecule of air. A peace I had never known descended upon my teenage turbulence and awakened my soul: "I want that!"

This revelation has led to a lifetime steeped in all aspects of Yoga. The experience brought the realization that Yoga was not a religion, but the essence of all religions. I began to see that illness does not begin with the

body, but with energetic (*pranic*) imbalances of mind and emotions that eventually manifest in dis-ease.

The essence of Yoga, according to Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, is to quiet or still the waves and turbulence of the mind. Through the *Sutras*, I discovered how the mind can create peace or how it can create destructive patterns—not only for oneself, but for the world. Through the *Sutras*, I discovered the correlation between personal, interpersonal, and international conflicts, and how wars are embedded in the dense recesses of the human consciousness. If we are to change the outer conditions of our world, we must simultaneously change the violent thoughts of resentment, criticism, and negative projections towards others.

"If the world is an illusion, why bother to change it?" I asked one of my teachers in the Integral philosophy of Sr. Aurobindo.

"Because," he answered patiently, "this world is as important as the illusion of the next. We are part of the collective psyche of the race mind. Even in this dimension, it is believed we can uplift souls who have forgotten and together create a heaven on earth."

Even though I knew our planet was in need of healing, I thought the greatest gift I could offer the world was my own inner peace by continuing with meditation, *asana*, and *pranayama*, living the *Sutra* philosophy, and teaching Yoga teachers. However, when destiny calls us out of our comfort zone, it is difficult to shut an opening door.

I was invited on a Peace Mission to the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War era when our governments weren't speaking. There were no exchanges, and only a handful of Americans were travelling to the U.S.S.R. at that time. Americans were living in fear of a nuclear holocaust fueled by growing tension between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.

It was a huge leap out of my comfort zone to agree to travel behind what Winston Churchill called the "Iron Curtain" to come face-to-face with our "enemies." On the second day after arriving in Moscow, I found myself in Red Square. The guards marching in front of Lenin's tomb triggered memories of Hitler's armies of World War II. A wave of fear washed over me when I saw the red star on their armbands and boots, and on the Kremlin spires. However, in my travels throughout the Soviet Union, I found their children's laughter and tears sounded like my own children's. Their hopes and dreams were the same.

When the *babushka* (grandmother) in the market place learned I was an American, she dropped to her knees begging me for peace. I realized that Soviet people were as frightened of us as we were of them. I lifted her to her feet and held her as we cried together with tears streaming down our cheeks, merging until there was a river of oneness. I could not feel where my tears ended and hers began.

In the *Yoga Sutras*, the enemy concept comes from the first mind wave, perception. There are three parts of perception: direct, indirect, and inference from others. The further we get from our own direct experience, the more susceptible we are to taking on another's concept of "enemy." Even though I had a background in Yoga and metaphysics, I had bought into the conditioned stereotype of the "enemy." That day in Red Square, I realized that if enough Americans believed the Soviets were our enemy, we could create the very thing we feared. I had an urgent impulse to bring thousands of Americans to the U.S.S.R. to see the "enemy," to transform their conditioning through a direct experience and return home to tell their stories. From that impulse, I created an organization known then as the Center for Soviet American Dialogue (CSAD) and enlisted the help of many Americans, including dignitaries and



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celebrities, to take groups of citizen diplomats to the Soviet Union. Together we figuratively “took down the wall” between the United States and the Soviet Union.

After eight years of bringing thousands of Soviets and Americans together, the CSAD developed over a thousand joint projects between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. According to Mikhail Gorbachev, it was groups like ours, and not just the political leaders, that ended the Cold War. The success of our work in the Soviet Union brought invitations for my husband Max Lafser and me to create and teach dialogue and peace forums in the Middle East, Yugoslavia, Ethiopia, South America, China, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and more recently, Iraq. This led to changing the name of our organization to the Center for International Dialogue (CID), and to my developing a curriculum on the spiritual essence of Conflict Resolution using the *Yoga Sutras* as the basis.

I was criticized by some in the Yoga community who felt that one should only seek self-realization and not worry about the world, which is an illusion anyway. I appreciated their concern about my going “off track” from *dharma* or destiny, but I found it increasingly more difficult to find divisions between inner and outer peace, and between nations, states, and people. My consciousness was dissolving into a sea of humanity and the oneness of all beings. Was this not Yoga? How can one determine where Yoga is and where it is not?

We cannot separate the individual conflicts from interpersonal and international conflicts. We cannot separate our physical body from the social body. If one part of our physical body is in pain, it affects the whole. One part of the world in conflict radiates out in varying degrees to affect the whole. When the body is in pain, it is important to travel to its source, listen to its needs, make appropriate adjustments to transform rather than repress the symptoms. Years ago, when I was in Brazil working with the Legion of Good Will, I

met a Shamanic healer from the Amazon. This healer was asked by an American woman what she could do to heal her knee. I expected the answer to involve compresses of special herbs but instead he said, “Just love it.” What a revelation! When an organ, gland, or joint is crying out to us in pain, what is needed is our attention and love. Could it be the same with acts of terrorism?

Can we accept the polarities in our bodies and in our world with equanimity? Can we accept without attachment the changing patterns of individual and collective destiny that rise and fall like the waves of our breath? Patanjali gives a way in the *Yoga Sutras*: *ahimsa*, non-violence. To be truly non-violent, the *Yoga Sutras* say, we must cultivate nonjudgment and forgiveness. Nonviolence requires continual refinement and awareness of our own inner process, a process which reduces and eventually eliminates criticism and negative projections. It is a positive, dynamic quality of universal love and not a mere attitude of negating harm. Mahatma Gandhi once said, “Nonviolence is the finest quality of the soul. Almost anything you do will seem insignificant, but it is important that you do it.”

In these turbulent times on our planet, our Yoga community is being challenged. Can we integrate our practice into every moment of our life, into every thought we think, and every word we speak? Can we be the change we would like to see in our world? Can we bring our practice into our everyday life with vigilance and compassion over our thoughts and emotions? Can we transform negativity and separation into the remembrance of our Divine connection? Can we rise above the level of outer circumstances to hold our world and our own lives in the perfection of the Oneness that is Yoga? ☐

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