



World Traveler, Yoga Master

Rama Jyoti Vernon
International Yoga College Retreat
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Laurel Springs Retreat Center

BY FELICIA M. TOMASKO

Even when Rama Jyoti Vernon is silent, her powerful presence fills a room. It is not a stretch of the imagination to see her mediating in the Middle-East, teaching yoga in Afghanistan to Muslim women, or meeting with Gorbachev; karma yoga activities that are integral to Rama's work.

Devotion is essential to Rama's teaching. Rama described all of her poses as sacrifices and offerings. These feelings of devotion spill out into her international work and the IYC (International Yoga College), which she founded. The mission of IYC is to open people to the vastness of all teachings. Rama incorporated lessons from her peacemaking work, telling tales of teaching yoga to burqua-clad Muslim women along with stories of ducking below the iron curtain during the Cold War, throughout the retreat.

But even though Rama spoke often about these experiences, the focus was on yoga practice. Rama and other IYC fac-

ulty taught *asana* (postures), and lectured on anatomy, the *chakras* (energy centers), subtle body and archetypes of the deities.

Rama has been practicing and teaching yoga worldwide for decades, and throughout this time she's been able to develop and experiment with her views on *asana*. Many of us may have heard that all standing poses are *tadasana*. Rama presented another aspect of this concept—all *asanas* are *savasana*; she emphasized the process of creating *savasana* in every pose. To create *savasana* in shoulderstand, we utilized the wall to gradually lift into the pose. With each breath, we extended the neck like a turtle reaching out from its shell as we let the spine drop into the floor. Throughout this process of breathing and lengthening, we created *savasana*, a complete sense of ease.

With IYC faculty member Dr. Hillary Anderson, we delved into the archetypal or symbolic images of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses and their relationships with our bodies' inner energy centers, the *chakras*. Even if we don't identify with the deities as separate beings, we can relate to them symbolically. The goddess Lakshmi represents abundance of body, mind and

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Photo: Felicia M. Tomasko

Rama Jyoti Vernon often incorporates elements of conflict resolution, based on the Yoga Sutras, into her teaching.



Photo: Felicia M. Tomasko

Adjusting a hip joint creates more space in the lower back, allowing the student to go more deeply into savasana.

spirit and Kali represents destruction of the ego.

In Rama's daily *asana* classes, we experientially investigated these relationships through our practice. *Ardha chandrasana*, or half-moon pose was not only *tadasana* but an exploration of the archetypal divine. The moon is celestial, and connected to both our subconscious and the god Shiva, the divine destroyer, closely linked with the moon. While we moved from *trikonasana* (triangle) to *ardha chandrasana*, (half-moon) on and off the wall, Rama regaled us with tales of Shiva, who saved the earth by drinking the poison a demon poured in the ocean. Shiva churned the ocean, the poison bubbled to the surface and Shiva consumed it, obtaining the gems of insight, wisdom and intuition. Yoga churns our own ocean, revealing our inner gems, the Gods within our heart.

Throughout the retreat, Rama led us to find the Gods within our own heart. Rama guided us into the depths of our

own practice and provided an inspirational example of someone who truly embodies the vastness of the yoga tradition. As we stayed at the hidden gem of the Laurel Springs Retreat Center in the mountains above Santa Barbara, we gazed at the vast expanse of the ocean beneath us and explored the vastness within.

LA YOGA

Rama Jyoti Vernon has been teaching yoga for more than 35 years. Information about the International Yoga College can be found at www.americanyogacollege.com. Details about the Center for International Dialogue, the peacemaking organization founded by Rama can be found at www.cifd.org.

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