

# Breathe Your Way to Health and Illumination

## A Workshop with Rama Jyoti Vernon

By Sharon Steffensen

Rama Jyoti Vernon, a yoga teacher since the 1960s, led her first workshop in Chicago April 13–15 at the Chicago Yoga Center. Rama had studied with teachers and swamis from many disciplines who came to San Francisco where she lived, many of whom stayed in her home. She traveled several times to India over a period of eight years to learn from B.K.S. Iyengar, but has drawn her inspiration from many other renowned teachers, including the innovative and creative Angela Farmer, and has developed her own unique approach to teaching yoga and philosophy.

The title of Rama's workshop was "Applied Anatomy, Physiology, and Philosophy in Yoga." Rama comes from a background of healers (her mother was a naturopathic practitioner/reflexologist; her father was a chiropractor/iridologist). In her workshop, she shared her vast knowledge of anatomy, physiology, the endocrine system and its connection to the chakras, and the central and autonomic nervous systems and their relationship to Hatha yoga sequencing. Most important in Rama's practice is focus of the breath in each movement of the yoga postures. Rama believes that by directing the breath to bring the *prana* (life force) to areas of the body where it's needed, we can achieve illumination as well as health.

After an introduction about the polarities within each of us (solar/lunar, left brain/right brain, masculine/feminine,



*Extend the back leg in ardha chandrasana (half moon pose). "The back leg is like a forgotten child, dangling back there."—Rama Jyoti Vernon*

thinking/feeling, matter/spirit), Rama led a discussion of the chakras and their relationships to the elements, glands, organs, and the five *vayus* (winds, or breaths). When the *vayus* are balanced, our bodies are healthy and vital, said Rama.

From a discussion of the breath, Rama segued into a demonstration of cat pose, emphasizing the breath. Rather than inhaling while arching the back and exhaling while rounding the back, Rama rounded her back as she inhaled deeply into the ribs and the back. As she exhaled, she began to move her spine, neck, and hips slowly in many directions and ways—right, left, arching, rounding, and twisting—all the while exhaling further and further, then audibly exhaling some more, for what seemed like minutes.

Next we tried it. Rama suggested we stretch the mat between our knees (without moving the knees) to create space

in the hips. We inhaled deeply into our backs as we rounded our shoulders to create more space between the shoulder blades and between the ribs. As we exhaled slowly, we began moving in various ways, directing the *prana* to areas in our torso that needed opening.

We then easily transitioned into downward dog, still inhaling deeply into the middle back and exhaling into the lower back, taking the breath into tight areas, lifting the tailbone, bringing the pubic bone back and up, arching the back, making the pose a backbend, as Rama suggested, even

though we were doing a forward bend. By breathing, moving, and shifting our weight within the pose in this way, there was no feeling of fatigue; our minds were focused only on breathing and directing the *prana*. When Rama directed us into child's pose, I found I could bring both my head to the floor and my hips to my heels easily for the first time in a few years. And this was after two poses: cat and downward facing dog.

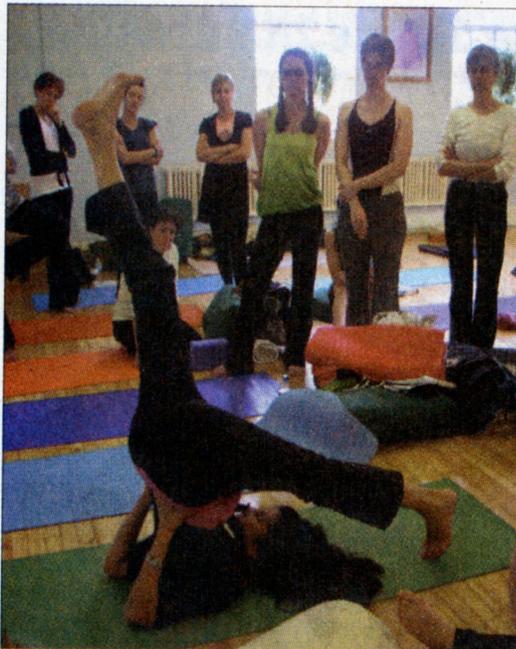
Rama returned to this way of breathing in every pose. In triangle, we rounded our backs slightly to inhale deeply; on the exhalation we opened the chest upward to the sky.

In shoulderstand, we placed our fingers high on our backs, bringing the vertebrae inward, creating the feeling of an arch in our backs. We were able to lift higher with less effort. The neck stayed neutral; we maintained a slight arch in the back of the

neck as we avoided the tendency to tuck the chin. "It's a shoulderstand, not a neckstand," said Rama. The triceps were tucked under, with the biceps facing outward. Rama told us to press down on the outer edges of our elbows. Afterward, many of the participants said that they felt comfortable in shoulderstand for the first time.

Rama said the shoulderstand has a positive effect on the organs and endocrine system, especially the thyroid gland, and is one of the best poses for a weak heart—if practiced correctly. She cautions against putting a folded blanket under the shoulders. Doing so, said Rama, causes the "back of the head and the back of the eyes to harden." Another benefit of the shoulderstand, as we age, is "we keep our hearing, and our eyes get stronger," said Rama. She disputed the controversial dangers of shoulderstand that William Broad purported in his book *The Science of Yoga: The Risks and the Rewards* and excerpt from it that appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* last winter and said, "If you do one pose a day, do shoulderstand."

Throughout the workshop Rama made connections, using metaphors, between the poses and our habits and lifestyles. In half moon, she told us, "The back leg is like a forgotten child, dangling back there, while the whole front of the body rushes forward." Instead, she told us to lift the extended leg high and "extend the



Rama demonstrates half plough pose

lumbar [region of the spine] into the higher co-creative centers, up from the procreative centers [lower chakras] ... and release the nectar of immortality."

Rama often used phrases like "releasing the nectar of immortality," "being one with the eternal cosmic vibration," and "opening up to the whole universe" when describing the feeling in a pose. By doing the pose correctly, in combination with the breath and awareness, we can heal organs, balance the hormones, calm the nervous system, and enter into *samadhi*, or enlightenment, said Rama.

Rama is a Sanskrit scholar. Throughout the weekend, she related the teachings back to the *Yoga Sutras*, translating some of them word for word to give us a sense of their true, complete meaning. She linked the five abstentions (*yamas*) and observances (*niyamas*) to the five painful and five non-painful mind waves. As the workshop continued, we got a

sense that the *Yoga Sutras* are a complete, profound psychology of the soul and a handbook for our lives. Unfortunately, said Rama, the human mind has not evolved in the 5,000 years since Patanjali wrote the *Yoga Sutras*. But the information is right there.

Yoga, according to the second sutra, is about calming the *vrittis* (waves) of the mind. Rama explained that the *vrittis* lead to desire, desire produces action, action leads to experience, and experience leads to karma and *samskaras* (deep

impressions that remain in our subconscious mind). The strength of our desires, actions, and experiences determines how deeply the *samskaras* become embedded in our psyche and stored in our tissues. By sitting and observing the breath, said Rama, we start sweeping through the body and allow all these memories to bubble up to the surface where we can address and release them.

As we practiced abdominal strengthening movements, which help us achieve inner strength as well, Rama told us inner strength allows us to be "soft on the outside and gracious to other people. We don't need an armor of defensiveness around us." Rama, who had been active in conflict resolution during the Cold War, said that in the former Soviet Union, the KGB referred to her as "the woman with an iron fist and a velvet glove."

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kundalini



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Rest assured, I did grieve, but not to the degree I had in the past. There is a surprising healing that takes place over time for most of us, especially with a strong support system of family and friends and/or professional counselors.

### Job transition

In the case of job loss, however, the longer one is without a job, the more likely one's liminal period can include depression and loss of self-esteem. Anger, grief, and a plummeting sense of self-worth can be paralyzing.

Yet, unemployment can be a real opportunity to reevaluate your life. Examine your gifts and talents. Uncover your true passions, what moves and inspires you, what you care about. It's a perfect time to determine how you want to live the next chapter of your life. I have led many people in transition through this process.

There was a time in my life when circumstances suddenly changed and I walked away from a job I'd had for many years. Moving through the liminal period, I emerged to find an opportunity that changed the course of my life for the better.

### Transformation

The liminal period can be life-transforming—for better or worse. It may be short- or long-lived; in some cases people don't emerge from it. They may drop out of society and live on the fringe as hermits, gypsies, or monastics. Some vow never to be in a relationship again and live the rest of their lives with anger, guilt, and resentment. Some accept jobs at less pay or status, or do volunteer work. Others heal, seek new relationships, start businesses, and re-enter the social system in a new form.

A liminal period can be an opportunity to step back and review your creative foundation and reason for being in the world. Here you can listen, understand, and ultimately respond.

I move into liminality every time I begin to write these articles. I may think I know what I want to say. Sometimes I just have an idea. Then, through research, introspection, and extemporaneous writing, new ideas emerge and flow onto the page. One thought that surfaced in the writing of this article is that I was born into a liminal environment since my parents divorced when I was an infant. In

spite of that fragmented beginning, I have embraced change and innovation with curiosity and flexibility through much of my life.

### Inside job

"If we walk far enough," says Dorothy, "we shall sometime come to someplace."

— *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*  
by L. Frank Baum

"From the moment I fell down that rabbit hole I've been told where I must go and who I must be . . . but this is *my* dream. I'll decide where it goes from here."

— *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

Our lives are constantly in flux. We're absorbing new information, reflecting on the past, aspiring towards the future. Discomfort with transition can cloud our perspective. Liminality can provide the foundation of rich soil to grow creative ideas and even a new identity or discover a new road to travel. Though fear, loneliness, and anxiety may try to interfere, know this is just the fragile, threatened ego trying to block you.

Meditation is useful in periods of liminality. Watch your mind, your thoughts, and your feelings. See problems as objects floating inside your head based on your perceptions, not as who you really are. Invite the ego, with all its cohorts, to sit in your guesthouse of awareness while you openly explore the vast possibilities that could be open to you. Explore the liminal space between thoughts, between breaths. This clears the pathway to commune with your Source, where truth, peace, and love reside, and brings you to a place of wholeness where you can re-assimilate in the world.

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### Rama Jyoti Vernon

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Rama shared many stories of the peacekeeping missions she organized during the 1980s that involved dozens of trips to the USSR. In 1984, during the height of the Cold War era, she founded the Center for International Dialogue, based on the idea that people can initiate solutions to political, economic, ecological, humanitarian, and cultural conflicts by coming together to explore their commonalities as well as their differences. Rama told of one instance in which the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan came together at the peace table with her because they trusted that she would not be judgmental or show favoritism. Although antagonistic toward each other at first, within one day, they signed peace treaties and were eating and drinking tea together. Her successes led to invitations to expand the work to the Middle East, Ethiopia, Central America, Africa, and US inner cities.

All of Rama's peacekeeping efforts around the world were performed as a layperson who saw a need and wanted to be of service. Initially, her goal was to bring yoga to people everywhere. She founded Unity in Yoga, an international organization that sponsored seven national and three international conferences and served as the non-profit umbrella for the Yoga Alliance. Her eight years of master's study at the California Institute of Integral Studies (under the mentorship of Dr. Haridas Chaudry, who was a disciple of Sri Aurobindo, dedicated to bridging the East and West) prepared her for bringing together world leaders for peace talks. Rama is still teaching yoga to people everywhere, leading workshops and speaking at yoga conferences.

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**Rama Jyoti Vernon** founded the California Yoga Teachers Association, whose newsletter became Yoga Journal, and developed organizations such as Unity in Yoga to unite all lineages of yoga. To read more of Rama's story or to see her calendar of upcoming events, visit her website at [ramajyotivernon.com](http://ramajyotivernon.com).