Wisdom of the Himalayas Gains Western Popularity
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Swami Rama's Thriving Institute Takes Scientific Approach to Yoga

"Try your best," Swami Rama's master told him. "But whenever you feed your ego or try to do anything selfish, you will not succeed. This is my blessing to you - that whenever you want to become selfless, loving and without ego, you will find a great force behind you, and you will never fail to achieve some good."

Swami Rama's work must indeed be selfless for it is unquestionably successful. His Himalayan International Institute (HII) has to turn away people applying for its broad-ranged, yoga-based residence program. There's just not enough room to put everybody up on the 422-acre campus nestled in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania (Sec side bar: The Abode). And the extensive work of his high-tech, high-calibre research team of scientists, doctors and psychologists is gaming a worldwide reputation for its trailblazing work in the field of "holistic health."

Swami Rama is a tall, handsome, big-boned man whose powerful presence and personality is further enhanced by a radiant glow of physical health and spiritual confidence. At the age of 64, he has accomplished a lot, but it didn't happen overnight. His long training began almost at birth in the Himalayas. As he writes in his book, Living with the Himalayan Masters, an autobiographical account of his early spiritual training, it was a colorful - nearly mythological - development, almost too incredible to be true. It makes great reading. He tells of hobnobbing with such spiritual notables as Neem Karoli Baba, Mahatma Gandhi, Ramana Maharishi, Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore and even the legendary Himalayan rishi/siddhar, Harikhan Baba. And his personal experiences? They're fascinating, almost parabolic.

The Himalayan Caves

Swami Rama's students and well-wishers characterize their teacher as "selfless." Swami Rama says selflessness is simply the result of successful yoga practice. For him this was accomplished in the legendary caves of the Himalayas.

"Those who are really committed to a life of yoga can live conveniently in certain parts of the Himalayas, where there are small caves that can accommodate four to five people," recounts Swami Rama. "There are also a few cave monasteries in the Himalayas in which the traditions are unbroken. The monastery in which I grew up is one of these. In our cave monastery the tradition goes back thousands of years."

Swami Rama's cave experiences culminated in one particularly significant eleven-month sojourn of unbroken confinement, void of light and all but the barest necessities of food and water. This was his all-out (and successful) siege upon the final goal of Nirvikalpa Samadhi.

Swami Rama does not openly acknowledge Hinduism as the source of his esoteric knowledge. In fact, he claims that all religions are "short-sighted" and that Truth is the only valid spiritual goal.

"All the great religions of the world have come out of one Truth," he asserts. "If we follow religion without practicing the Truth, it is like the blind leading the blind. Those who belong to God love all. Love is the universal religion."

Swami Rama was initiated into the Order of Shankarachariya and is therefore of the Smarta Sampradaya, a popular non-sectarian tradition of Hinduism that follows the Advaita Vedanta of the ninth century sannyasin, Adi Sankara. According to Swami Rama, "Truth is the end" and experience (primarily through the practice of yoga) is "the means." By "Truth" he means that wisdom which is the natural by-product of deep meditation (ultimately, Nirvikalpa Samadhi). He asserts that this Truth may be sought by all men and women regardless of temperament, background or previous religious commitment. Drawing from his own vast reservoir of personal spiritual adventures, his method of teaching is frequently anecdotal. With his stories he supplements theory with life, humor and a human touch. Whether he is telling of a Himalayan rishi purposely dropping off the physical body in a conscious death or sharing a cerebral encounter with the famous Indian mathematician, Chakravarti, he inspires serious students as well as casual readers

and the curious to seek the experience behind his words. When HINDUISM TODAY'S traveling corespondent. Dr. Devananda Tandavan, paid Swami Rama a visit in his Pennsylvania institute, he was deeply impressed by his charismatic presence.

"Swami is a real charmer," says Dr. Tandavan. "He has a very special fondness for children and immediately puts everyone at ease. Each person feels assured that swami is deeply concerned about [his or her] health and spiritual welfare."

Perhaps one of the swami's most revealing accounts details his last meeting with his own Himalayan master (who is curiously never mentioned by name throughout Swami Rama's many verbal and written teachings.) At that meeting the master gave Swami Rama some advice before sending him off to America on a spiritual mission. "Though these cultures live in the same world with the same purpose, they are each extreme," his master proclaimed. "Both East and West are still doing experiments on the right ways of living. The message of the Himalayan masters is timeless and has nothing to do with the primitive concepts of the East and West. Extremes will not help humanity to attain the higher step of civilization. Inner strength, cheerfulness and selfless service are the basic principles of life."

The Westward Mission

When Swami Rama came to the USA, his yogic feats caught the eye of the scientific community almost immediately. Elmer Green of the respected Menninger Foundation was deeply impressed by Swami Rama and introduced him to a broad range of notable scientists and physicians. During laboratory controlled testing, the swami proved the potency of his yogic training even to this group of professionals specifically trained to be skeptical. Wired to record alterations in brain waves, heart behavior, muscle tension and body temperature, he demonstrated - among other things - that he could consciously raise the temperature of a spot on the left side of his hand 10 degrees, slow his heart rate from 74 beats per minute to 52 in just 50 seconds, produce specific brain wave patterns on demand, consciously move a physical object half way across the room and even stop his heart altogether. In explaining how he accomplished these feats, Swami Rama simply said that "all of the body is in the mind."

Yogis have long believed that physical processes originate in subtle inner realms

of mind and can thus be controlled mentally. Swami Rama asserts that this "mind over matter" is developed by "control of consciousness," that by simply learning to be aware of our bodily processes, we can control them. By proving that he could exert some purposeful control over the autonomic nervous system, Swami Rama deeply impressed many Western scientists who had been taught that autonomic functions were exclusively involuntary.

Today, the work of Swami Rama is strongly influencing medical techniques used to fight high blood pressure, heart attack, headache and other ills. As this new thinking under the heading of "holistic health" gains well-deserved credibility, the latest biomedical machinery is now utilizing thousands of years of yogic wisdom. Some of the first publications regarding this holistic approach to medicine were written by Swami Rama and Dr. Ballentine, president of HII. Swami's institute was one of the first yoga organizations to research, study and use biofeedback (a scientific system utilizing high-tech instruments to register and feed back emotionally triggered physiological excitement).

Swami Rama's work is diversified. As his assorted research and educational programs continue at his USA institute, he's busy building a large charitable hospital half way around the world in Dehra Dun, India. Yet, as far as he is concerned, it's all selfless service - which is most assuredly why, as his Guru promised, he's enjoying such effortless success.

The Rama Vita

Swami Rama was born in 1925 in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh to a Brahmin family, but he was raised from early childhood in the Himalayas by a swami from Bengal who initiated him into sannyas during his early teens. This same swami also sent him away for his higher education in Prayaga, Varanasi and at Oxford University, England.

At the age of 24 he became the Shankarachariya of Karvirpitham in South India but renounced this position in 1952. According to tradition in India around Bombay, this Karvirpitham Mutt was the fifth center established by Adi Sankara. (The Kanchi Kamakoti Mutt in Tamil Nadu has also been identified as the fifth Mutt.) The mutt has had no leader since Swami Rama's departure.

Swami Rama continued his education studying Western psychology and philosophy in Germany, Holland, England and other parts of Europe, before coming to the United Stales in 1969 to follow the instruction of his master to teach yoga to the West. In 1971 he founded the Himalayan International Institute of Yoga Science and Philosophy which he now directs from his national headquarters in Honesdale, Pennsylvania. The Institute, including dozens of its branch and affiliate centers, works to "synthesize Western and Eastern teachings and disciplines."

Swami Rama is known and respected as a monk, scientist, philosopher, philanthropist and teacher. The villagers of the Himalayas still refer to him by his nickname. Bhole Baba, which means "gentle sage." He now writes about four books a year. Some of his most notable publications include: Living with the Himalayan Masters, Yoga and Psychotherapy, Science of Breath, Lectures on Yoga. A Practical Guide to Holistic Health, Book of Wisdom, Freedom from the Bondage of Karma, Emotion to Enlightenment, and Life Here and Hereafter.

Reports of this work have been documented in the World book Science Annual, 1974, the 1973 Encyclopedia Britannica Yearbook of Science, the Time-Life 1973 Nature Science Annual.

Candid Thoughts

HINDUISM TODAY'S correspondent. Dr. Tandavan, visited Swami Rama in Honesdale. The following dialogue was excerpted from their several conversations.

HT: You were initiated into sannyas but do not usually wear the orange robes. Why is this?

Swami: I do wear the orange robes, but I see millions wearing the robes, and that doesn't have any value. I want to express my inner feelings through my deeds. Also, it is difficult to wear these robes and travel. It is not convenient, especially in the Western Hemisphere.

HT: From your own experience do you feel that "developing siddhis" is meaningful?

Swami: If somebody knows the subject well, practices it and has attained something because of it, then it has some validity. Without Self Realization or some attainment, it has no value at all. It cannot be taught to the masses. It can be taught only to a fortunate few individuals.

HT: Is there any particular reason why you never mention Hinduism in your teachings?

Swami: I do! I do mention Hinduism, but the people in the Western Hemisphere to not understand what Hinduism means. Hinduism is not a religion. It's a philosophy. That's why I do not stress the word "Hindu." But I teach the very principles of Hinduism.

HT: Do you teach any of the bhakti practices?

Swami: Oh, yes, we do kirtan, but rituals-I don't. Because if we started teaching rituals here, the scientific community would leave us, and that's the whole point.

HT: Did your Guru give you a definite mission which involves what you are doing now?

Swami: Yes, I've been doing my best. I started doing experiments with the Menninger Foundation. After the scientific community started knowing of my work in the voluntary control of internal states, I started establishing my own institutes. I do not have any position in any of these institutes. I just help and guide them. I have given all of the legal titles to others.

HT: When you left the post of Shankarachariya. were there repercussions from the Brahmins?

Swami: Oh yes! They were against me, and they did not like me. They started saying I was a monster and destroyed the tradition. But our leader was very modem. His name was Dr. Kurtkoti. The brahmins were also against him during that time.

HT: Do you believe that Americans can be converted to Hinduism?

Swami: Of course. Of course.