

*Witness Everything*

# **Witness Everything:** **My Life with Swami Rama**

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August 15, 2014  
(Typographical errors corrected,  
and minor revisions made through August 25, 2014)

## **Preface to “Witness Everything”**

Early in 2013 I was asked by a representative of HIHT (Himalayan Institute Hospital Trust of India) to write and submit a manuscript of my experiences related to Swami Rama. I was told that this would be included as a chapter in Volume 5 of *At the Feet of a Himalayan Master: Remembering Swami Rama*. The requested date for submission was March 1, 2014. As requested, my manuscript—entitled “Witness Everything”—was submitted to the requested person by email on March 1, 2014.

Over three months later, another person from HIHT wrote to me with a contract attached. It was explained to me that the contributors to the first four volumes of the series were not required to sign this contract, but that for this fifth volume they were adding this requirement. I was asked to print out and sign two copies of the contract, and to mail these back to HIHT in India. This contract was totally unacceptable, including a stipulation that if I ever wanted to use any of this in some other way, I would have to request the prior written permission of HIHT. This contract would have instantly put me in breach of contract, as much of the story had already been told in other venues. Even one of the three representatives of HIHT who contacted me about this told me that this contract was unacceptable, and that he would not have signed it himself.

I reviewed the salient features of the request, rewrote it, and mailed another signed agreement giving HIHT permission to use the transcript, while not transferring ownership. I removed any reference to my needing their permission to use the material, and noted that I would continue to use it. I even included a statement that I had no intent to do so in any way which could be seen as competition to the commercial success of their new book. This agreement was not accepted by HIHT.

Further attempts to negotiate an agreement were unacceptable to them. The people of HIHT stood firmly on their ground of wanting virtually complete control, and on August 14, 2014 they notified me by email that they would not be using the manuscript in their forthcoming book.

In light of the fact that people who have reviewed the manuscript—including the HIHT people who rejected the manuscript for publication—have told me they found the story “inspiring,” I have chosen to circulate it in its original draft form in a PDF file. If you enjoy this, and also find it inspiring, please feel free to circulate it.

In loving service and remembrance of Swami Rama,



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# **Witness Everything: My Life with Swami Rama**

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Contribution to Volume 5 of “At the Feet of a Himalayan Master”  
By Swami Jnaneshvara Bharati

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Swami Rama has been the most important person in my life, without exception. The saying, “When the student is ready, the teacher will come,” means that during the preparation period one must venture on alone, doing the best he can, until the help finally comes in the external, physical way. Many of the earlier stories which follow are from that preparation period, awaiting the meeting with the yet unknown Swami Rama. I’ve come to see that he and the tradition of the Himalayan masters were actually there much earlier than our first meeting, probably having been there all along, and most likely from past incarnations.

As a result of the years with Swami Rama, many of the experiences and intuitions of childhood and earlier adult life came to make sense in the context of the new learning about the stages of Self-realization. The other stories which follow are about experiences with the embodied Swami Rama, as well as about life after he left his body and his physical presence in this world.

## Encountering yoga and the tradition

### *To whom do you go for help?*

In youth and early adulthood I would ponder from time to time the question, “To whom does one go for help with any particular problem?” For example, if one had a painful tooth she would go to a dentist. If there was mental or emotional suffering, he may go to a psychologist. If she was hungry, she may go to a cook. If he was feeling frustrated because his car was not working properly, he would go to a mechanic. However, the *problem* I was having had something to do with understanding what is this world, and what I am in the midst of it. I didn’t know where to turn.

Ideas such as the suggestion that somebody called God had made me the way I am, and that *He* put me here, planted me here for some *purpose* defined by *Him* were simply not comforting. It made no sense, but I had no words to describe what I was experiencing and trying to understand. The effect was that I was not able to look for help.

First, I had to figure out how to describe this elusive unnamed *something* that was pulling me. I explored philosophy, psychology, religion, chemistry, biology, mathematics, and sociology, all to no avail. I studied formal logic, and I was pretty good at it, but it didn’t lead where I wanted to go. I felt a draw to the arts, but nothing seemed to be a match. I could not find a *helper* without knowing what is the name of the pursuit for which I was looking for help.

### *The meaning of yoga*

One day I was sitting on the floor of the library at John F. Kennedy University in Orinda, California, where I had recently started a master’s degree program in Transpersonal Psychology, in the graduate school of consciousness studies. I was 37 years old. On this library shelf there were quite a few books by people with the first name “Swami” and a variety of different surnames. Finally, after many years of wondering who or what I am—having only the vaguest

memory trace from a previous life—I was about to discover that this is what I am as a person in the world—a swami.

Many of the books by this or that swami caught my attention, but one in particular stood out for me. That was *Lectures on Yoga* by Swami Rama. “What is this *yoga*?” I wondered, having never—to my knowledge—encountered this word before in this life. I opened the book and started scanning. This was fascinating, not like anything I had ever seen before. The first chapter was entitled, “What is *Yoga*?” Swami Rama explained:

*“The central teaching of yoga is that man’s true nature is divine, perfect, and infinite. He is unaware of this divinity, however, because he falsely identifies himself with his body, mind and objects of the external world.”*

This spoke to me. It sounded familiar. It seemed to possibly be that unnamed something, which I had been looking for, waiting for, for a very long time, since childhood. It was surely not the message of the churches of my youth that I am a “sinner.” In this book, Swami Rama went on to explain:

*“This false identification, in turn, makes him think he is imperfect and limited, subject to sorrow, decay and death because his mind and body are subject to the limitations of time, space, and causation. Through the meditative methods of yoga, however, man can cast off this ignorance and become aware of his own true Self which is pure and free from all imperfections.”*

I didn’t entirely understand what this meant, but it seemed to be going in the right direction. I had felt the sorrow of which he spoke, and this sure sounded familiar, matching much of my life experiences so far. This “*yoga*” had something called “meditative methods” and these would “cast off this ignorance.” Again, this intuitively sounded right on track. My heart and mind stirred passionately, like the gripping response to the crescendo of a symphony or a movie. Swami Rama went on:

*“The Sanskrit word ‘yoga’ comes from the root ‘yuj,’ meaning to join together; or unite and yoga represents the union of the individual self, or ‘atman,’ with the supreme universal Self, or ‘Paramatman.’ This is the union of man with absolute reality.”*

For many years, well back into my youth, I had been looking for something which seemed to have no name. I had a vague sense that this was going to take some considerable time to find, and that I needed to be patient. I needed to be patient, though I was feeling anything but patient; there was a sense of urgency.

Finally, in my late thirties I had now encountered *yoga*, the core principles at the heart of yoga, which had to do with the realization, the direct and personal experience of the long intuited unity of myself with the universe. Not only had I encountered yoga in the traditional meaning of the word, I had also encountered Swami Rama, the one who would guide and open the doors for me. Tears still come to the eyes as I think back about this moment.

These words of Swami Rama set the standard for me of what is the meaning of the word “*yoga*.” I had never heard of yoga before. I had no idea of any yoga that was a physical fitness

routine. There was no Yoga Alliance as a certifying or registering body for yoga teachers in the US; that was to come several years later. Because of the nature of my experience, it has seemed very odd to see yoga later become a fitness “industry” as it is now called. It has also lead to criticism from the promoters of the new yoga movement against the more traditional views of yoga, such as I and many others have been taught by Swami Rama, and share, in turn, with others.

### *Guru guides between lives*

Swami Rama explained how we are guided by the tradition beyond the barriers of birth and death of the physical body. What Swamiji told me personally matched what he wrote,

*“The truth is that the relationship of guru to disciple is indescribable. The relationship extends to the realm beyond the world, transcends death, and stretches far beyond the limited karmic bonds associated with family and friends. A mother and father help sustain the body of their child, and nurture and guide the child through the formative years of life to adulthood. Guru sustains, nurtures, and guides a soul through lifetimes to ultimate liberation.” (Guru and Divine Grace, from Sacred Journey)*

Once I started listening to Swami Rama’s descriptions of guru, I started to understand some of the earlier experiences of life. Previously unknown to me consciously, I had been guided for many years in this life, as well as during previous lives. I was not just beginning to follow the path; I was slowly learning to pick up where I had previously left off. Many of my experiences and insights in this life were a carryover from, or were strongly influenced by previous lives, just as we wake up today after a night of sleep, to pick up where we left off the day before when we went to our beds to rest. Now, as I write about this, it seems rather obvious, but it was new at the time I was learning this due to the influence and company of Swami Rama. Through my encounter with Swamiji, I had found both *names* to go with what I had been looking for, and a *helper* to show the way.

## Early seeds

### *The inner blue sky*

During spontaneous meditations in childhood I would often see an incredible, indescribably beautiful field of light blue, a little like the rich blue of a clear winter sky. It was very peaceful. This was happening by age eight, though it started to shift around age ten. Gradually, over about two years, up to age twelve, the blue sky shifted in color, moving ever further away from the joy-filled soft blue it had been. It became a progressively deeper brown, and it eventually faded to such a deep brown that it was virtually black.

I felt a sense of loss over this; I had become rather attached to my blue field. In retrospect, it has felt like I was in a transition into living in this very earthly world, leaving the subtle and causal levels behind. Much later I also learned that as meditation progresses, the inner experience moves not only beyond familiar objects such as people and possessions, but also



beyond subtle experiences such as my adored blue field. It is part of the process of the seer, the Self resting in its own nature; the objects—both gross and subtle—are allowed to let go.

### *Glasses and contemplation*

I looked out at this world in awe and longed to know, “What *is* this? How is this possible that this is *here*?” There was a story around, including in our churches, schools and the Boy Scouts group that there was a guy in the sky called God who made all of this, and made me the way I am. That was not satisfying to me. I found it scary that all the adults seemed to talk like this, but nobody explained anything. It just didn’t make sense. Over and over it went through my mind, “What is this?” referring to everything I saw or otherwise experienced around me in the external world. The “me” which my finger would point to in the center of my chest was also a part of this “this” that I asked about when I said, “What is this?” All of “this” seemed so amazing, yet so confusing.

When I was about ten years old and in the fifth grade of school, I was tested for my vision. The optometrist gave a horrible diagnosis. He said my eyes were very bad and that by the time I was thirty years of age I would be wearing “coke bottle bottoms” for glasses. The thing that was so hard about this was that I did not know that I could not see. I thought I could see normally. I never had any conscious experience of not being able to see something. I wondered what others were seeing that I could not.

I was given a pair of glasses and told that I must wear them most of the time, except when I was outdoors doing activities such as play or work that did not require seeing closer objects. I was told that I was “far sighted.” It became quite a problem in our household. I was strongly scolded if I did not wear the glasses when reading a book, doing homework from school, or watching television. Still, I did not know what it was that I could not see, which others apparently could see.

An interesting thing happened. The truth was that my vision was actually okay; I could see everything just fine. However, this became a contemplation, like a koan or a mantra. “What is it that I cannot see?” It caused me to search and search, to pay attention to myself and the world around me, trying to discover something that others could see that I could not. I could not discover a single object that others were seeing and talking about, but that I could not see. Little did I know that decades later a great sage of the Himalayas—Swami Rama—would give me an instruction to “witness everything.”

At about twelve, I was taken to an eye doctor (ophthalmologist) in a different city, rather than the local optometrist. The doctor tested my eyes and said that I was telling the truth, that I could see okay. He explained how the eye works, and that if I kept wearing these glasses my eye muscles would, in fact, become weak and that would lead to significant problems at thirty. He took the glasses and threw them in the trash can, right in front of my mother. The child in me had a victory, but I had also learned something about the process of contemplation; that was the hidden value of this experience.

### *Spontaneous practices*

By the time I was about eight to ten years old, I was spontaneously doing yoga practices, including hand mudras, asanas, and locks such as uddiyana bandha. I could do breath retention

for as much as three or more minutes. I had no idea what these were, as I had never heard of yoga or any of these practices in this life. They just came to me and felt good when I did them. I was also spontaneously and consciously doing *trataka* (gazing on a point) and meditation, though I had no external training in these either. I had never heard of or been taught any such things. I always felt like I was breaking some unwritten rules in doing these things, so I kept it to myself, not telling anybody about any of this. It was only decades later that I made any connection between these and yoga practices, and our tradition.

While I did not know about these practices, I sensed that they had some significance, thinking that one day in the far future (about thirty years of age, I guessed when I was ten) I would look back at this time and these experiences and reflect on what great meaning they had. It's interesting that there seemed to be something about age thirty, even in this early age. One side said I would not be able to see at thirty, and the other side intuited an expansion of sorts at thirty. The latter was the one that emerged when thirty finally came. It was when I started to strongly pursue this elusive desire which had been indescribable in my youth.

*What do you want to be when you grow up?*

During adolescence, adults would ask, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I found this confusing, sometimes painfully so. "What do I want to *be*?" It seemed to be the wrong question. It sounded like the question was what job I wanted to have, but that felt incomplete, shallow. It was not what stirred me inside. What would have made more sense would be, "Now that you're here, what do you want to *do* when you grow up?" I wondered how I could *be* anything other than what I *am*. But I didn't know what I *am*.

"What *am* I?" is the question that kept ringing through my mind. This was not the same as being a young person asking "*Who* am I?" as if I would come to understand my personality traits and my job in this world corporation. The question driving me had more to do with the apparent fact that I have come from somewhere, and here I am in this world. I neither knew *what I am*, nor do I know *what this place is*. Much later, I learned from Swami Rama the philosophy that we are on a journey, that we have come from somewhere, and that we would go somewhere. In the middle we are in a camp, and that our time here in this camp should be enjoyable. Swamiji had a great way of making things simple.

*The magnificent obsession*

When I was in my early teen years, I encountered a poem that touched me deeply. It said in part:

*"I wish for you a magnificent obsession that will give you a reason for living and purpose and direction in life."*

This touched something in me, and I thought and thought and thought some more about what this might mean. I tried to think of what I might do in the world to fulfill this desire. The longing for this was intense, though I was young and didn't yet have the language to describe what was going on internally. However, it became obvious in later years that this drive was not about worldly attainment; it was not about making money or having power, or climbing a ladder in a job. It was not about name and fame. It was something deeper, something internal. It turns

out that my magnificent obsession is the largest obsession known to humanity. There is the old saying, “Be careful what you ask for.” I asked for a magnificent obsession, and boy, did I ever get one! Self-realization, the granddaddy of them all.

*No one should have to go through this alone*

As questions about life and reality went through my young mind, I felt quite alone. Nobody was talking about these subjects. At least, no people in my world were talking about it; not parents, not school teachers, not churches, not anyone on television, not friends. I felt that nobody should have to go through this alone, yet I was alone. It was when I found the aid of Swami Rama many years later that I finally had someone in my life who knew about such things. This was validating for me. As a child I thought to myself, “If I ever understand this, I will be there for others. Nobody should have to go through this alone.” That became a seed for trying to serve others in this later phase of life, a task that Swami Rama literally asked me to do.

*Lost Horizon*

There is a book entitled *Lost Horizon* which I read in my early teens. It is a story about a plane crashing in the Himalayas, and of the passengers then meeting the monks of a very special monastery in a place called Shangrila. This book strongly caught my attention and seemed to hold clues of what I was looking for in life.

Swami Rama has explained that the inspiration for this book and Shangrila was our tradition and the cave monasteries of the Himalayas. The book left me with a desire to go to the Himalayas, but I had nowhere specific to go there, and never pursued it. It has felt like the Himalayas came to me in the form of Swami Rama many years later, and that he then literally *invited* me to come there to live in his Rishikesh ashram, showing me the way to the Himalayas.

*Mind over matter*

When about thirteen years old, I was playing with mind and got an electrical testing meter for a Christmas present because I was dabbling with radios. Somehow the idea came to tape the leads of the testing meter to the skin of my arms or fingers and see if I could cause the needle of the ohm meter to move by using my mind. One time, after a few minutes it suddenly moved significantly and it scared me. I quickly pulled off the wires and felt a wave of anxiety (fear) go through me. It was years later that I found this was called galvanic skin response or electrodermograph, and was a part of biofeedback training, though biofeedback was not to be popularized for several more years.

I was also playing with trying to move physical objects with my mind. I had a metal ball, a large ball bearing which I tried to move across a table top. One time it did seem to move, though I never have known if I had actually done this. Because there was no consistency and it did not seem to be repeatable, I’ve always thought it was just luck coming from something like an uneven table surface. Playfully I ponder, wondering if Swami Rama moved it for me.

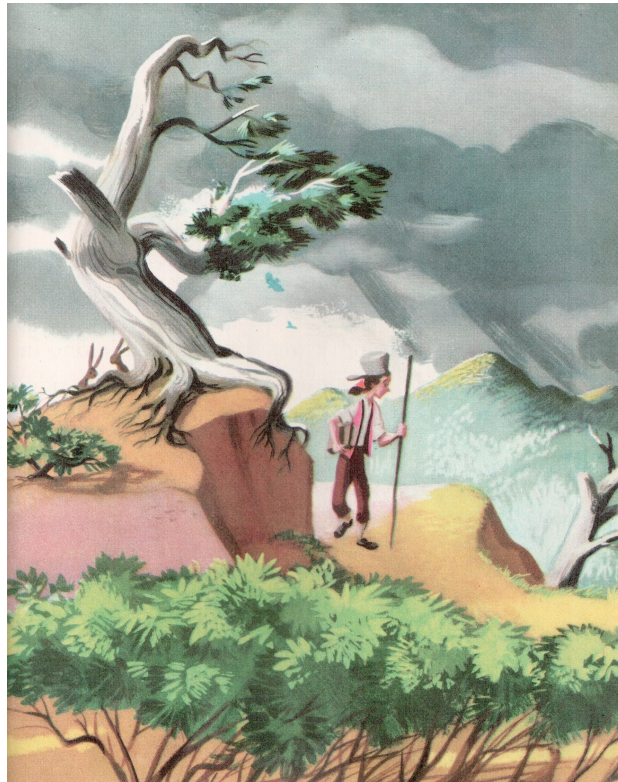
These little experiments were in the early 1960s, just a few years before Swami Rama’s world-changing demonstrations to the medical and scientific communities of his control over his autonomic nervous system. Surely my little experiments were nothing compared to what Swamiji was doing, but many years later when I learned about his demonstrations to the

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scientists I felt a special affinity with him. It left no wonder at how fitting it was that he was the one who showed up in my life to guide me. It was he I got as a guide, not some religious person promoting rituals and worship of fantasized deities.

### *Johnny Appleseed*

Most of us see images—pictures, books, or movies—which draw our attention, which capture the essence of the answer to the question, “What do you want to do when you grow up?” One of the primary images for me was a children’s book that I had when I was four years old, entitled *Johnny Appleseed*. It was about a boy who wandered around, here and there, planting apple seeds to grow apple trees. It was me; it captured the spirit of what I wanted to do, only it did not seem to be literally about apple trees. My attention was drawn to the stick, the staff that the boy carried with him. I found myself looking for my stick, as if I had one, but had misplaced it. In childhood I had fishing poles, and they were not it. I shot some rifles, and they were not it. I carried a flag in front of a homecoming parade in college, and that was not it. It was not until my late thirties when I first saw a painting of Adi Shankaracharya holding a danda (staff) that I recognized what I was looking for. It gave the insight that what I am (or was previously) is/was a swami carrying a danda. Over thirty years later, I would be given initiation as a dandi swami.



### *Searching in the universities*

During the last year of high school, the school had a “career night” for all of the seniors to come and talk with representatives from various colleges and universities, training programs, and employers. I went there hoping to find some clues of what I was looking for. I didn’t find it.

I felt sad and confused walking around from table to table, not finding any offering that really drew my attention. Surely there were no tables about meditation, and nobody offered any swami training programs (though I did not know about meditation and swamis at the time). I was envious of friends and others who seemed to be finding so many choices of what they might study or do in their working lives. From time to time I later wondered what life might have looked like if I had met Swami Rama much earlier. But, it's all worked out well, and the timing with Swamiji has probably been absolutely perfect.

During adolescence I asked what is the difference between a college and a university. Somebody (I don't recall who) explained to me that a college focused on a single subject and that university was a place that had many colleges within it. It was explained to me that a university is a place where "everything" is available. My mind latched onto the word "everything" and I thought that surely this unknown something that I was looking for must be available there. So, I set off for university with that in mind. I never found what I was looking for in that university, although it was in another university that I discovered Swami Rama nearly twenty years later.

*Think of one thing and then forget it*

I had been dabbling with meditation—without any external guidance—for many years, back into preteens childhood. At 21 years of age I was working in downtown Jacksonville, Florida. One day I had an intuition come from within that I should go to the downtown library, and that there was a book there for me. I had never been to this library and had to look up the address in a phone book, and then find it on a map. I calculated that if I bought a sandwich at the shop next door to our office, I could eat on the way, walk to the library and back, and have a few minutes inside the library.

Briskly I strode down the street while hastily eating the sandwich. As I went in the door of the library, I threw the wrappings and paper bag into a trash barrel. Wide stairs were right in front of me. I went up and instinctively turned to the left, walked to the end, to the wall of the building, which was floor to ceiling windows. At the windows I turned left again, and walked down 5-10 stacks and stopped. I turned to the shelves and pulled a single book from the shelf and flipped open the pages. There was a paragraph which explained that the mind was in the habit of always having a thought in it. All we had to do is to think of only one thought, and then allow ourselves to forget that one thought. I do not know the name of the book or the name of the author. Having a sense that this is what I was looking for, I briskly returned to work.

That evening I sat quietly and tried to imagine what "one thought" I would think of. Lacking guidance or any other suggestion, I thought of an internal image of a number "1," like a big candle that goes on a birthday cake. I imagined this in my field of inner vision, only that number "1." After a while there was a tingling in my fingers and toes. For a while I was able to ignore this and be only aware of the "1." But, then, somewhere along the way I became aware of this tingling and the fact that I was aware of it; immediately the whole practice stopped. The tingling was gone, along with the awareness of the "1."

The next night I went home from work and ran the same experiment again. The tingling returned, and this time started moving up my arms and legs. For a while I naturally ignored this, and remained only aware of the "1." As happened the night before, once I became fully aware of

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this, the whole thing went away, both the tingling and the “1,” and I was just sitting there, aware of my external surroundings again.

A third night came and the same thing happened again. This time the tingling rose up my arms to my shoulders, and up my legs to around my lower abdomen. I noticed that the distance from the feet to the abdomen was a little further than up the hands to the shoulders, but that the movement took the same amount of time, not knowing if that was significant. As I once again lost awareness of all of this, I wondered where this was going. It seemed to be moving upward and I wondered what would happen if it entered into my head.

On the fourth or fifth night of these experiments the tingling moved all the way up my arms and legs, to the neck, and into the head. There was a flash of sorts and the whole thing disappeared, both the tingling and the “1.” I was not conscious in the waking state sense for four hours or more. I did not know where I went, if “went” was even the right word. I did not understand what had happened, and it was nearly twenty years later before I started to learn about these states of consciousness. I was left with a sense of fear and backed off for a considerable length of time. I meditated from time to time, but did not have this kind of experience again. Years later, my impression was that this was a gift of the tradition in the sense that, “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.” My impression of this is that when we are hungry, very hungry, and sincere, help will come in one form or another, even if it is in the form of guiding one to the library.

### *Glowing feet*

Who was that man with the brilliantly glowing white feet? A couple years before I was to physically encounter the tradition of the Himalayan Masters and Swami Rama, a friend with a big house asked me if I would house sit for him while he and his family were traveling for a couple weeks. He wanted to feel that his house was secure. Interestingly, it didn't seem to matter that my small apartment would not be secure during that time, as I would not be there.

While I was staying there, I was sitting alone one evening meditating. I was sitting on a chair in their den, library, and television room. There was a large squishy couch across from where I was sitting. It was very quiet and the meditation was exceptionally still and internal. I forgot that I was in that room. Then something drew my attention ever so slightly. It felt like somebody was in the room with me. The draw of my attention was so slight that I could easily, naturally ignore it. But it faintly came again, and then went away. A couple times that slight distraction came into my awareness and then went away. Finally, from a deep stillness I opened the slit of my eyes just to confirm that there was nobody there. When the eyelids slowly opened, the view was revealed from the bottom to the top. First the floor just in front was visible; then a little further, and then still further. My eyes opened only a little. There they were—right in front of me—two glowing feet. They were brilliant white, like the white light from a fluorescent light. I only opened my eyelids enough to see up to the ankles; not beyond. Slowly my eyelids closed; there was an ever so slight wave of fear. Mind really was quite quiet at the moment, and inner focused. Once again, the eyelids opened, thinking the feet would not be there. They were still there. This time the wave of fear was a little stronger, though still slight. The third time the eyelids opened, the feet were gone and the meditation was over.

I didn't tell anybody about this; no surprise, I suppose. A couple years, thinking about the phrase "when the student is ready, the teacher will come," a wave of sadness went through me, and a sense of fear. Had the teacher come, and I sent him away by ignoring him? The fear was intense, and stayed with me. For a while, I couldn't shake the fear of the possibility that after years of longing for the thing which I had no words to describe, someone had come to help and I sent him away because of my cowardice.

The longing was still there, though. What was I to do? Give up? That would be like a hungry man suddenly saying he's no longer hungry just because he showed up at the restaurant after it had already closed. Still he is hungry; still, like the hungry man, I was longing. To this day I do not know for sure who it was. Was it Swami Rama? Was it one of his buddies? I don't know for sure, though I have a suspicion. We all seem to be stuck with the fact that the masters work in these mysterious ways. It is a great sign of love that they quietly guide from the silence, sometimes invisibly.

## Meeting the tradition

### *The first class*

In 1985, I moved from Texas to California to start a master's degree program in Transpersonal Psychology. After registering for the first semester of classes, a computer print out came in the mail. It listed class numbers and names, locations, and the names of the instructors. I found it slightly odd to notice that the name of one of the instructors had been lined through and another name entered in hand-written pen. Apparently it was a very last minute change, since it would seem easier to reprint the forms than to change them by hand.

Later, I found that the new instructor was a student of Swami Rama, and that he would be instrumental to my connecting with the tradition. This meeting seemed to have been what I later came to know as that special touch of Swami Rama. Who knows? Maybe it was just a coincidence. But, it's fun to think of it as guided, not just a matter of chance.

### *Learning about satsang*

It was here in California that I first started meeting people of the tradition. There was a weekly meditation in the ashram of Sant Keshavadas, who I was told was a friend of Swami Rama. There was a monthly meeting in Napa, in the home of a student of the tradition. These gatherings were quite enjoyable and helped my early practices of the tradition. Swami Rama's presence was there in spirit, though not in the physical form.

### *Swamis in the library*

I sat on the floor between the stacks in the John F. Kennedy University library. This was a section which included many books by Swami "This-or-that." It seemed that every book I pulled out of the shelf that was by a swami spoke to me. I don't remember all of them now, but of great significance were the books by Swami Vivekananda, a disciple of Ramakrishna. I was later to learn that Swami Vivekananda had a great impact in America after speaking at the World

Congress of Religions in 1893 and subsequently traveling and lecturing throughout the United States. I have read most of his writings and found them very useful in those early years.

Most striking of the swami books were the few by Swami Rama, and in particular, his book *Lectures on Yoga*, which I mentioned in the beginning of this story.

I don't think I had ever heard the word "swami" before, or if I had, did not know what it meant. A flash popped into my mind that, "This is what I am; I am a swami." For decades I would think from time to time things like, "The goal of a doctor is to treat people. The goal of a plumber is to fix the pipes. Who is it that has the goal of treating people with medicine? A doctor. Who is it that has the goal of fixing leaking pipes? A plumber. Who is it that has the goal of setting aside all false identities?" There seemed to be no word for that, at least no word in the vocabulary I had been taught. However, there you have it, the real identity I was looking for, "swami."

While it took decades to discover, I finally I had an answer to this. Such a person is called a swami, in that this is what a swami does. He renounces all identities at all levels, so as to realize the True identity, beyond all the relative, worldly identities. Or, alternatively, he could be called a *yogi* in the sense of being one who has realized yoga or *union* with the whole of reality.

This was the missing identity that I had been looking for since early childhood. It felt more like a memory than the fulfillment of a desire to become a certain something, as would have been the case if, for example, I had discovered I wanted to become a doctor or a taxi driver or a school teacher. Rather, it was a recognition of what I already *was*, not that this is what I wanted to *become*. It didn't mean that I knew what were the next steps on that journey or what I needed to do to reclaim the identity; it was just a feeling, a very strong one.

Several years later Swami Rama confirmed that this was the case, that I had been doing this before—that I was a swami in a past life. His validation was comforting. I had felt a little crazy before, and his reassurances were settling to the mind.

### *Six months of crying*

I was beginning to develop real discipline in meditation. I made a commitment to myself that I would sit for an hour every day. This was beyond my capacity at the time, but I didn't really know that. I was just doing what I thought I should be doing. It wasn't a pleasant experience initially; it was a painful period as yucky old emotions surfaced and moved through. I was working on a master's degree in transpersonal psychology during that period, so I had a context in which to see it as a purifying practice. I purchased a cooking timer to help me discipline myself, setting it for one hour each day. I promised myself that I would not move during that hour, so there I sat with tears streaming down my face. Mostly, there were no particular memories coming; rather, it was like formless old pains coming forward and washing away. A hand would almost move to wipe away the tears, but I would say inside to myself, "No, let them go." Sometimes the tears would run down my side all the way to my hips as I sat bare chested on hot summer days without air conditioning. It was a beautiful experience, and very important as I look back on it.



*How about you, Swami Rama?*

One evening as I was going to bed, there was a full moon out the window as I tossed my pants and my shirt over onto a chair. The lights were off, but the room was still lit due to the moonlight. I was feeling rather melancholy after the recent move to California. I wasn't really sure where life was going for me even though I had trusted my intuition to make this move. The study of transpersonal psychology felt right for me, though I was only beginning to discover what that was about.

Through my mind went the question, "Are you going to help me, God?" It wasn't meant as an active prayer to a deity; it was more like a muttering to an unknown "God" that came up because of cultural conditioning. I wasn't really seeking, nor did I expect an answer. I had never been a faithful believer in a god as a being. No answer came.

As my body came to horizontal on the bed, and my head was just about to touch the pillow, another thought went through the mind, "How about you, Swami Rama?" Instantly the room disappeared. My body disappeared, except for the sensation of the thinnest sheath of soft white light around the surface of my now disappeared physical body. It felt as if my whole body would have weighed only a few ounces if it were to be placed on a scale. There was an incredible peace, and my mind was clear and calm. It was only months later, when I finally told someone about this, that it was suggested to me that, "It sounds like you got your answer." It hadn't occurred to me until then that this experience was, itself, a direct answer from Swami Rama and the tradition.

Over time, I have heard many such stories from people about the mysterious nature of Swami Rama and the tradition. I've come to see that, of course, this was an answer to my request. Swami Rama later validated that this was real, and that I had not just dreamed it, though experiences such as this are occurring in and from the same plane of reality from which dreams occur. I made note of the date, the significance of which would not be known for many years.

This is the date which I hold as the date of diksha/initiation in our tradition in this incarnation. It was November 13, 1986, ten years to the day before Swami Rama left the body on November 13, 1996. I was living in Swami Rama's Rishikesh ashram on the day he left the body. Maybe it was totally coincidence, but things like this don't seem to be mere coincidence when Swami Rama is involved. It remains a pleasant mystery, and makes me smile with a little tear in the eye.

*Is that something of interest?*

One morning, about four months after the full moon experience of November, my phone rang. On the other end was an acquaintance from a class at the university. The friend on the phone said in a slightly nervous voice something like, "This is going to be a strange phone call. I'm just going to tell you what happened. I just got a phone call from Dr. Arya (Pandit Usharbudh Arya; now Swami Veda Bharati)." He (my friend) said that Pandit Arya told him that he had gotten a message from Swami Rama that he was to give mantra diksha (initiation) to two people tonight. Then Pandit Arya asked my friend to tell him their names. My friend went on to say to me, "You immediately came to mind. Is this something you think you would be interested in doing?" I didn't know what it meant to have mantra initiation, but I intuitively recognized that

## *Witness Everything*

this was a question that needed to be immediately answered. There was no time for thinking about it or for researching the meaning. I had to just answer from inside, from my heart. Out of my mouth came, “Yes.”

He told me that he would call back a little later to give me more detailed instructions. When he called back, he gave driving instructions to a woman’s condominium that was about thirty miles away. I was to go there at a certain time that evening, and was told to also bring a check with me, payable to Swami Rama. I flinched over this, as it did not seem right that there would be a fee for such a thing. It wasn’t a large amount (\$54) so I kept silent and just showed up with the check.

Dr. Arya was sitting in a bedroom with the lights off and only a dim light shining in from another room, from under the door. He asked me to sit in front of him, which I did very awkwardly; my meditation posture was very far from proper at that time. He explained that he was a messenger of Swami Rama and then spoke a mantra into my right ear. There were no flashing lights, fireworks, or sounds. It was just a sound which, though pleasant sounding, did not bring anything fantastic. He gave me instructions in how to use the mantra, which I attempted to faithfully practice. A couple years later Swami Rama replaced the mantra with one he gave me directly, and, I am happy to say, he did not ask for a payment. That remains the guru mantra that I still use, remembering the instruction that it is for life and is a transition guide at the end of this life.

I have always appreciated Dr. Arya for being an emissary of Swami Rama on that very special evening. It was a most significant turning point in this life and signaled one of several rites of passage in a beautiful, though sometimes exasperating journey of fire and light, as Swami Rama has called it. Reflecting once again on the saying that, “When the student is ready, the teacher will come,” I playfully restated this truth as, “sometimes when the student is ready, the phone may ring.”

## Minnesota

### *Roaming*

My time in California was coming to an end. I had finished the master’s degree program that I moved there to study. There was nothing to keep me there, and I felt the draw to find out more about Swami Rama and his tradition. I packed the car and started traveling, visiting both Minneapolis and Honesdale, the two places I had heard about where it seemed most likely I could take next steps. After that trip, I decided to accept an invitation to stay in the Minneapolis Meditation Center for a while. I was there for a little over a year and there were many lessons learned during that time, some very gentle and loving, and other lessons of a more difficult kind. Both kinds of lessons seem to be needed in the sadhana of our tradition.

### *Time to go*

Human personalities sometimes bump against one another. I had seen this often in corporations where I had worked, but now apparently needed to learn the lesson that this also happens in what are often called “spiritual” organizations. There were people problems in the

Minneapolis Meditation Center and one of the offshoots of this was that Swami Rama ended his active involvement with the center; he wrote to their board that he “irrevocably” withdrew his support. This action by Swami Rama understandably led to some shifts in orientation.

People not closely aligned with the new organization naturally left and moved on with their lives. Others, including me, were asked to leave. I was visiting there only as a temporary guest, and was never involved in any aspect of management or faculty. Nonetheless, I had instinctively already started to make contacts with leaders of the Himalayan Institute at Honesdale, Pennsylvania to see about living there. Literally the day after learning that I would be leaving Minnesota, the phone rang and I was invited to come live in residence at the Himalayan Institute. Finally, I would be living where Swami Rama spent most of his time when in the US.

## Honesdale

### *You need that (food)*

It was my first time at Honesdale, at the Himalayan Institute. Swami Rama walked in the front door of the dining room, and walked to his right all the way along the wall, across the back and then along the tables back toward the door. He didn’t speak to anybody—just walked through quietly—until he got right behind me. He gave me a slap on the back with his left hand as he pointed to the watermelon in front of me with the finger of his right hand. With a boisterous laugh he said, “You need that!” He was right. I was very early in my process of improving my food habits. Eating properly was one of the greatest down-to-earth benefits I got from my several years of living at the Pennsylvania institute, in addition, of course, to the many other lessons from Swamiji, and those inspiring slaps on the back.

### *What do you want?*

I heard from others that Swami Rama would ask people from time to time, “What do you want?” He had never asked me this, but I thought one of these days he may corner me on this question too, and that I needed to have an answer. How could I answer this, I wondered? This is the heart of what I had been looking for since as long as age four. Like trying on shoes in a shoe store, I tried on for size words or phrases I had heard or read, such as “enlightenment” or “to know God,” but none of the shoes seemed to fit. I would test the words in conversations with others, but none of them fit the feet of my desire.

I had started to encounter the description of the Upanishads that our current state of consciousness was not one of being awake, but of being asleep. It was becoming clear that the rishis—and Swami Rama—were saying that the dreaming and sleeping states are closer to Truth or Reality than our waking state of consciousness. “Spiritual awakening” or simply “awakening” were terms I had heard, but they didn’t fit either. Finally, it came to me—I don’t remember how or due to what trigger—what I wanted was to “Wake up!” That had power to it.

Before long Swamiji started asking me, “What do you want?” I said, with an initially trembling voice that became ever stronger with repetition, “I want to wake up.” After all those years, I finally had words to describe what I had been longing for since early childhood, simply to “wake up.” We would cross paths in a hallway or walking outside and he would say, “How are

you doing?" I replied, "Still asleep." As confidence grew, along with frustration over not having what I wanted, I started saying to him things like, "I'm still asleep because you won't wake me up." I think he actually quite liked this, seeing me become ever more clear about what I really wanted in the depths of my heart. It happened quite a few times that when Swamiji asked me how I was doing, I would reply by asking him a question, "I don't know; you haven't told me lately. How am I doing?" He would often answer with something like, "I have been watching you. You're doing *great*. Keep doing exactly what you're doing. Don't change anything."

One morning I was struck by the humorous side of these words. It was early morning and I was walking from the toilet back to my room on the men's wing at Honesdale when here came Swamiji walking down the hall toward me. He said in that booming voice of his, "How are you doing?" I replied, "Still asleep," just as we were walking past each other. Suddenly I realized it may have sounded like I was just sleepy and wanted to go back to bed, which is not what I meant. Some surge came up wanting to explain what I had actually meant, but the moment was gone, and Swamiji had walked on down the hall. I reminded myself that he seemed to never miss anything, and it was safe to presume he understood my meaning. I don't now recall whether I went back to my room to sit for meditation or to lie down for some more sleep.

#### *The only other thing I asked for*

Swami Rama helped people get what they wanted. Hearing stories about him helping people in this way, I became careful what to ask for. I didn't want to ask for anything that was not truly useful. I asked to wake up, meaning Self-realization, and I only made one exception to this, and it too was a lesson of how he and the tradition worked. We were walking by the Ganga, as we often did, and this day I was remembering family and some of the difficult life my father had had in his youth. I asked Swamiji, "Baba, my father suffers greatly. Would you please do for him whatever it is that you do for people?" I didn't want to try to put words to what I was asking for. I didn't actually have words, so I said it this way to keep it open. Swamiji surprised me when he said, "I already am." I felt a softening in me, knowing that he meant what he said. Ever since then I have felt that my family was in good hands.

#### *Asking for what you offer*

One morning Swamiji was giving a lecture in the main lecture hall at Honesdale. He commented to all of us that none of us understood what he was teaching us, none of us was doing what he was teaching us, and that none of us wanted what he was teaching us. It was a strong comment and struck deep. The comments sat with me until, finally, I felt compelled to write a note to Swami Rama. I wrote a note and left it for him at the reception desk. I said, "Perhaps I have not made myself clear to you. I both want and am asking for that which you offer." I was careful to not put words to what he was offering, so that he could not slip out of it by telling me something like, "I didn't say that." I thought I might get in trouble for this note. It wouldn't have surprised me if somebody came to my room and told me that I was to leave the institute.

I think Swamiji liked the note. The next day, he quietly snuck in the rear door of the dining room, and approached from behind. I didn't see or hear him coming. Suddenly his left arm was over my shoulder and his face was immediately to my right sight. He said softly,

lovingly, “I was not talking to *you*.” It left me rather speechless, and all I could get out was something like, “Hmmm.”

### *Gayatri Mantra*

One of the traditional practices done by those who are most dedicated to the path is mahapurascharna of Gayatri mantra. While there are shorter purascharnas (such as 125,000 repetitions), the mahapurascharna of Gayatri is 2.4 million rounds of the mantra, or 24,000 malas. It was given as a preparatory practice on the path of sannyasa (renunciation) to become a swami. Most of the practice was done while I was living at the Himalayan Institute at Honesdale.

There was a woman student of Swamiji’s who was also doing this practice. Everybody at the Institute knew it, and she was given special arrangements with her work duties so that she would have time for this most special practice. But, nobody at the Institute other than Swami Rama knew that I was doing the practice. I got no special graces or time for the practice. I had to fit it in while doing my regular work duties and dishwashing shifts. I wrestled with this inequity and thought about complaining or asking for special arrangements, but I did not, and just quietly did the practice. During much of the practice period, I was working in the art department on the layout of the Yoga International magazine. Our hours were long when it came near deadline time, and I often had little or no sleep some days during those times. The practice was taking six to seven hours per day, and sometimes we worked more than twelve hour days, not including time for ablutions and meals.

For a couple years, I had almost no idea what happened in the Institute in the evening, as I was always in my room in the evening, except when I occasionally went to the tea lounge to get a cup of herbal tea to take back to my room. The only exception to the evening schedule was when Swamiji would be speaking. On those days, I would get up a little earlier in the morning and stay up a little later in the evening. I might even cheat a little on my work schedule, showing up a few minutes late in the morning or after lunch.

I usually took meals at the end of the meal period so that others had already gone through the line. Not having to wait in line might save enough time for half a mala before or after the meal. I ate in the family dining room across the hall from the main dining room, as this would allow me to more easily eat without losing time in conversations.

Some people thought I was being unfriendly, but they did not know about the practice. Others thought I was being uncooperative about not wanting to work so many hours, but they too did not know about the practice. It was often tempting to blurt out something about my practice, but I never did. It would have been a self-preservation defense mechanism, and somehow I was able to keep my mouth shut, not a task I had usually found easy to do.

From time to time, I would remember Swami Rama’s story of when he was doing this Gayatri practice and he got angry. His master sent word to him that he had failed in his practice, and would have to start over. Knowing that I was not free from anger, I was worried that one day somebody would come from Swamiji with a message that I had to start over. That message was never sent to me. It was not that it was not deserved, and I think that maybe in the subtle realm Swamiji was doing the purifying *for* me. If I were to have had to do the practice on my own with complete purity of mind and emotions, I think it would have never been completed. Swamiji had

told me that if I did the practices the obstacles would be removed. I think this is what was going on; I was doing my best, but the *help* was doing most of the work.

During the practice, the mantra would sometimes move as slow as wading through an ocean of thick honey. At other times, the mantra would move much faster than my mind was able to speak it. It would sometimes turn into a single burst or pulse, yet, somehow the whole mantra and all of its syllables was still there. It was an incredible education into the nature of consciousness. I came to realize that life was easy doing this practice, as it left room for nothing else; there was no time to get in trouble. I thought that if I started over again when the practice was complete, and that if I did that again and again for the remaining decades of this life, it would be an easy time. Intuition told me that this would probably not lead to Self-realization, however, so the thought gradually drifted away over time.

When the practice was finally finished, Swamiji said simply, “No need to do Gayatri anymore.” It had taken a total of about 32 months or approximately 5,000 hours. We went on with subtler practices.

### *You should do yoga nidra*

Short and sweet was this instruction. I was walking down one of the long halls when Swami Rama was walking the other direction, towards me. It was early in the morning, and there was nobody else in the hallway at the moment. In seeing each other so regularly, there is not always a need to speak much. I thought we would probably pass one another with a moment of eye contact and maybe a gesture. However, when Swamiji came to a point where our shoulders were immediately beside one another, he said, “You should do yoga nidra.” He just kept walking on. It slightly startled me. I responded with something very *bright* (meaning *un-bright*) like, “umm; umm huh.”

I had tried this yoga nidra business, along with the practice called 61-points, where you move your attention through 61 points in the body. It seemed pretty basic, preliminary to me. I thought of it as kind of stupid, and a waste of time. This didn't at all seem like *real* practice, whatever I thought that was supposed to be. But now there was a direct instruction to do this practice. It's a good thing he told me in that way; otherwise I'm not sure when I would have ever gotten around to this profound practice. I had already passed the point where he had finally offered to guide me, and I had accepted. I had said to myself that I would just *do* what he said (within reason, of course, and retaining the right to change my mind if I wanted).

I laid on my back on the floor with an open book face down on the carpet or on my chest. I'd try to remember where the points were, but couldn't. I'd have to pick up the book again to check the numbered points on the diagram of a body. Down would go the book, and I'd get through a couple more of the points. It sure seemed like 61 was a lot of points to memorize. Over and over, and then finally, I knew where they were.

It is with great compassion that I understand how people have trouble getting used to doing this practice. I understand because I struggled with it myself, training the mind to remember where the points are located and the sequence through them. However, it is an utterly profound practice, and is very well worth the effort. Understanding the difficulty, I later compassionately recorded a yoga nidra CD which still remains the most popular in the world after more than ten

years since publication. It uses the process taught by Swami Rama, but recorded with my voice. I often remember that it came from him, not me.

*You should do agnisara*

As with yoga nidra, Swamiji's instruction about agnisara started with a simple walking instruction, "You should do agni sara." I had been ignoring this practice as well, not seeing this to be of any use. However, by now I was listening to him, and I had agreed to do what he told me to do. Wow, was I wrong about this one.

A few times I heard Swamiji in the lecture hall telling us all we were doing agnisara wrong. He would describe his method of emphasizing only the lower abdomen, just above the pubic bone, but the commonly taught method of others was in three steps including uddiyana bandha, the abdominal lock, drawing the upper abdomen upwards, towards the chest cavity. He would clearly describe that this is *not* agnisara, but his instructions were typically ignored.

At one point I was working in the art department, doing layout on the computer. We were in the process of making a slick-paper brochure on agnisara during the same time period when Swamiji was in the lecture hall saying we were doing it wrong. Yet, here we were doing a step 1-2-3 layout of the practice that didn't match what the boss was teaching us. My voice that we were doing it differently than Swamiji was teaching was ignored, only stirring up the ire of the decision makers of the Institute's publications. Gradually, I learned to ignore all of these other methods and practices, and follow only what Swami Rama was teaching. His methods worked.

*Swamiji's serious difficulty*

In 1986 Swamiji wrote,

*"I have been facing a serious difficulty: either I meet material scientists or I meet religionists and philosophers, but not aspirants who are prepared to evaluate and verify the effects of these practices. I hope that one day this science will be popular and available for the true seekers in modern society."*

When I saw his comments about these four types of people I found it shocking, unbelievable. I told him that I wanted to be that fourth category, though I had no idea how to do that, and did not know if I was qualified. He said that he would guide me. Over quite a few years now, I have found his assessment to be painfully true. There are, indeed, very few who are hungry enough to "evaluate and verify" the practices. Most are interested in stress management and physical health treatments, or as Swamiji said, religion or philosophy. For the rare few of that fourth category, there is help available.

*When you do this, you are There!*

Swamiji said to me, "I'm going to give you a practice that—when you do it—you are There!" "And you will do it," he added. He said this to me when walking from the tennis court to his room at the Himalayan Institute in Honesdale. Tennis is a way that he would be with people for satsang in an informal way. Somebody told me that this was a way he could be with people, but not have to deal with silly questions and requests.

After the tennis satsang ended this day, about 25-30 of us were gathered around him for the short walk to the rear door where he would enter to go to his quarters. I was near the rear of the pack when, out of no effort on my part, there opened a big gap in the procession and everybody seemed to slow down a bit. Suddenly I was near the front, immediately beside Swamiji, when he turned to me and asked his familiar, “How are you doing?” It was amazing to note that I think nobody but him heard my response, “Still asleep.” He got a huge grin on his face and his index finger pointed to the sky, as he said, “I’m going to give you practice that—when you do it—you are *There!* ... And *you* will do it!” It was touching. He did what he said; I did as he instructed, and the resulting fruits were what he had promised previously, what I was looking for.

*You are on the path and I will lead you*

This was during one of those formal meetings with the teacher. He said, “You are on the path and I will lead you.” He explained that if I did the practices he gave me, the obstacles would be removed. He explained that he would lead me to the final abode of Shiva, the union of Shiva and Shakti, and that Shiva and Shakti are one and the same. He told me I would know the Self. It was music to my ears.

Instantly, inside, I thought to myself that this was a roll of the dice, and that I would roll the dice. This, I thought, was my best shot in my life to have what I wanted; I would take him up on his offer. This was the first and only time I touched his feet, knowing that he generally did not like such behavior, especially out of non-Indians who do not have this kind of cultural conditioning.

As a personality, I’m not much of a guru worshipper. (Swamiji often said that a guide is like a boat to cross the river, and while you need a good boat you should not worship the boat.) This was not about guru worship. It was a most loving gift that was surely the most selfless gift that had ever been offered to me. I took him up on it. He has done his part, doing what he said he would do. I’ve done my part, not perfectly, but well enough that he has chosen to do his and remove the obstacles obscuring the Self, the Atman.

*If you’re not here, why am I here?*

Swamiji ended his affiliation with the Himalayan Institute of Honesdale in a letter dated December 1993. (He had physically left at the end of the summer.) After Swamiji left, the environment around the Institute changed significantly. People were leaving, either of their own volition or because they were asked to leave; I no longer fit there. A couple months after Swamiji wrote from India to the Himalayan Institute that he would not be returning to Honesdale, I wrote to him and asked, “If you’re not here, why am I here? What should I do?” He sent a message back telling me to wait three months and that he would send word to me. Three months came and went, and I contacted him again. He asked me to come to India.

A pattern was emerging. When I was in Minneapolis, Swamiji withdrew his support, and a little while later I was asked to leave; then Swamiji took me in, in Honesdale. When I was in Honesdale, Swamiji withdrew his support and left, and once again, a little while later I was asked to leave; Swamiji asked me to come to his ashram in India.



It was turning out that the only person who wanted me around was Swami Rama himself. Since the day he said that I was on the path and that he would lead me, I consistently made the decision to accept his offers and invitations. I have been very grateful to have had the wisdom to listen to him and to my own internal wisdom, and to accept his love, support, and invitations, which were all given so freely.

## Going home to the Himalayas

### *The Same Moon*

I had never been a world traveler, and coming to India was completely new for me. Everything was different, and a bit confusing, starting with the airport, then Delhi and then the road to Rishikesh.

I was in a taxi going from Delhi to Rishikesh when I stretched my tired neck backwards. My eyes looked upward through the rear window of the car, and there it was, the moon, high in the sky. The thought went through my mind, “Different world; same moon.” Finally, there was something familiar. Their moon looked just like our moon. It started to feel like home and has ever since.

### *It feels familiar*

“It feels familiar here, like I’ve been here before,” I said to Swamiji on one of our earlier walks along the Ganga. With a loving, and by now familiar slap on my back he said, “Of course you have.” He went on to explain that I was not just coming here, but that I was coming *back*. It made some sense, even though the familiarity is still a generalized feeling, not specific memories of people, places, or events. Sometimes I have felt that Rishikesh is the only place in the world that has ever felt completely like home. However, after being there so long and later visiting many times, it now feels natural that any place in the world feels like it could be home, and that I could stay in that new place forever.

### *One of these is for you*

My first trip to India was in 1994. Swamiji and I were standing on the ghat looking down into the ashram where a new residential building was being constructed; the workers were at the stage of laying the bricks of the walls. The building was to be eight apartments, each with a living room, a bathroom, and a separate room as a private meditation space. It was designed for eight people to be able to stay and do long-term practice. Swamiji pointed down from the ghat and said, “One of these is for you.” I just said, “Thank you.”

In the play out of karmas, things sometimes don’t work out the way they were planned. I never lived in one of those apartments. The apartments were not used the way Swamiji had intended. After he left the body, the rooms were redesigned so that each apartment was turned into two separate rooms, with two beds for each of those rooms. The effect was that the building—which was intended for eight long-term sadhakas—was now being used for as many as 32 short-term seminar attendees. I adjusted, but remembered the sweetness of Swamiji wanting one of those apartments to be there for me.

*Spend 100% of your time doing practice*

Walking, Swamiji said, “Spend 100% of your time doing the practices I gave you.” What a shock that was; how was I possibly to do that? Once again, like I often said, I said, “Hmmm?” A few days later we were walking again, and I asked about this, telling him that I had no idea how to do this. This time he told me to spend 90% of my time for practice, and take out 10% for toilet and eating. Once again I said something bright like, “Hmmm.” He was teaching me how to do sadhana all the time, to maintain constant awareness of the center of consciousness, of Atman, as he often said in his lectures and books. I have often felt like a slow learner, but gradually became the tortoise who eventually crossed the finish line ahead of the hare.

*And don't say anything*

Prem, the ashram manager, told me one day that Swamiji had told him to start giving me a monthly stipend for any miscellaneous expenses I might have. I told Prem that I didn't need the money, that Baba was already giving me food and shelter, and that I didn't need anything else. He said he had to give it to me because Swamiji had told him to do so.

Later that day, when Swamiji returned from his work day at the hospital I told him that Prem had told me of the stipend. I explained that I didn't need that money and that he was already giving me food and shelter.

Unaffected by my sales pitch, he instantly doubled the amount of the stipend and added, “And don't say anything.” I knew it was time to shut up, sensing that if I said anything more he would just double it again. I swallowed in silence, and just said, “Thank you, Baba.”

*Walking in the footsteps of the master*

There was a period where I was able to walk along the Ganga with Swamiji almost daily, late afternoon, just before sunset. When others would come I would step out of the way, thinking it was only appropriate that I share him with others. To the ego he seemed to be *mine*, but I, of course, knew better. Often during these times I would step behind Swamiji and, playing like a child—giggling inside—when he picked up his left foot, I would put my left foot on that spot. When his right foot went down and then lifted again, I would put my right foot on that spot. He never *caught* me doing this, or he was just being nice to this silly boy walking in his footsteps.

## The swami story

*Becoming a novice Swami*

One day when living in Minneapolis, I asked the head of the Meditation Center how one becomes a swami. I meant it as an information question, thinking he would explain it to me, give me an oral answer of the process by which this happened. He was not a swami himself, but I felt he would know the answer to my question. A few weeks later we had a private meeting in the basement of his house in Minnesota. He told me that Swami Rama wanted him to give me novice swami initiation. Mantras were shared and I was instructed that yellow is the color of a novice swami. Due to living in our American culture, not India where there were lots of swamis,

including novices, I was instructed to wear a yellow undergarment or carry a yellow handkerchief in my pocket as a reminder of this initiation. I was told that other people need not know about this. I bought some yellow clothes dye and recolored my underwear, both shorts and undershirts, as well as several handkerchiefs. I followed the instructions, and sometimes even wore a yellow t-shirt that was visible to everybody, although others did not know of its significance.

I have always found it intriguing that the way I became a novice swami was the same way Swami Rama initiated me as a swami several years later—privately, without any public ceremony or fanfare. I have felt a special affinity towards Paramahansa Yogananda, who writes that he too was given swami diksha in the non-ceremonious *bidwat* way.

This private, non-ritualistic way of giving me swami diksha has been bitter-sweet. On the one hand, it has led to rumors that I am not a swami initiate, accompanied by lots of quiet and not so quiet criticism. Sometimes, people were told that I am not even affiliated with Swami Rama. On the other hand, this has forced me to actually live the principles of sannyasa, renunciation, learning to be unaffected by the opinions of others. I have kept in mind and heart the very special private relationship with Swami Rama and the tradition, and have faithfully followed his instructions.

### *Swami initiation*

We were alone with no witnesses, no tape recorder or video camera, and he gave me no letter or certificate to confirm the initiation. (Later, some were told I was not a swami because of not having a certificate.) Swami Rama gave me diksha (initiation) in the old-fashioned way, in intimate relation between guru and disciple. Part of this was in a room at the Honesdale Himalayan Institute building, and part was along the stream below the pond that is on the grounds of the Institute.

The swami initiation was a little like the novice swami diksha in that there was no external evidence that would impress other people with my new initiation; I had to love it and live it in the depth and warmth of my heart. I thought this method of initiation was odd, a little confusing, but came to see that it forced me to actually live as a swami, a renunciate, not as a man claiming a new identity. I had understood that the act of renunciation, of being a swami, was one of letting go of identities, not one of taking on a new identity that would become just one more obstacle to Self-realization.

### *People like to give swamis a hard time*

One day Swamiji told me in a matter of fact tone, “People like to give swamis a hard time.” Swamiji had experienced much of this in his life; there are many stories of people giving him a “hard time.” He told me that people would also give me a hard time. I had no idea how true his prophecy would be. He didn’t go into detail about how this would unfold, and the hard times would often—usually—come as a surprise. Swamiji also wrote of this phenomenon:

*“A swami’s life is a constant persecution.... A swami is put in such a difficult situation that it would drive an ordinary person crazy.”*

At one point two of my swami brothers—also swami initiates of Swami Rama—cosigned a formal letter to me in which they claimed that I was not part of their tradition. This was a couple years after Swami Rama had left the body. This cruelty has been one of my most painful experiences in life. Here were two people who should have been most supportive of me, my sadhana, and the work Swami Rama gave me to do, but instead they chose this cold-hearted stance. At the same time, I am extremely grateful for the love of Swami Rama to put me on notice about this. I didn't see it coming, but still, in the aftermath, the words of Swamiji have been consoling. The problem mostly drifted away over time, and my relationship with these two became cordial, though not as close as they could have been.

I regularly receive attacks of one kind or another—directly to my face, through rumors behind my back, or by email in our internet world. I try to follow the wisdom and example of Swami Rama to focus on love and service, and to stick with the positive while ignoring the negative. I also try to follow Swamiji's advice to listen to criticism, examine it, and adjust if needed. Otherwise, he advised, "Do not be affected by the praise and criticism of others."

*You are to be guru of gurus*

This is one of the most awkward instructions Swamiji ever gave me. I have been reluctant to tell anybody about it or to write about it. I'm still working out what he meant by it when he said, "You are to be guru of gurus." We were walking along the Ganges, and were on the dam at the time, not that the location is important. I find it fascinating how many of the memories of walking with Baba also include remembering the exact location.

He had told me he wanted me to teach, but this was a pretty strong comment, "to be guru of gurus." "What could that possibly mean?" I wondered. I am not a special person born in some special Himalayan circumstance. I am not a scholar. By contrast, I am a nobody, just a guy with no special qualifications. Still not being totally sure about his meaning, I try to stay focused on serving others, serving and sharing in the way that Swamiji told me to do, from direct experience. I presume that the rest will take care of itself with the help of Swamiji and the tradition.

I have never felt like a teacher, and certainly not a guru. All I wanted was to wake up to the True Self. That meant being a student, not a teacher. Yet, as I mentioned earlier, there was a desire in youth that if I ever figured out the puzzle of what I was looking for, I should share it with others. Swami Rama says that:

*"The teacher in the external world has a responsibility. That responsibility is over when he leads his student to the path of silence, from which everyone receives knowledge."*

This, I felt I could do. I could not bring myself to proclaim myself a guru, but I could assure others that the guru is within, as I had experienced this directly. Truly, in our tradition guru is a stream of knowledge. It is not any person. It can flow through any of us, even me, as I have come to learn. Not surprisingly, Swami Rama has told the truth one more time when he has spoken and written of this.

I remember this principle about guru when I am around other people who appear in the role of student. They, like me, are atman at their core, and their atman is also, like me, one with

brahman, the absolute Reality. This wisdom of guru can flow through them as well as me. I try to keep in mind the idea that the job is to guide a person to find the teacher within, and not fall into the trap of thinking I know very much. It allows me to be not only in the stance of coach with people I know well, but also allows us to be friends. Though I am no Krishna, I am often reminded and inspired by the story that Krishna told Arjuna that they could work together because Arjuna was not only a devotee, but also a friend.

### *Dandi swami initiation*

Swamiji told me he would “arrange” the dandi swami initiation, in which a danda or staff is bestowed. In his typical mysterious fashion, he did not tell me how, when, or where this would happen. After Swamiji had left the body I thought that it was too late, and that this was not now going to happen. However, a few years later I was in a cave in the high Himalayas. The sadhu who led me there told me that only dandi swamis and higher were permitted there. That seemed to exclude me, but there I was, anyway. A few weeks later a series of meetings with several swamis happened and the acharya (teacher, leader) of dandi swamis in Haridwar gave me dandi swami initiation on the banks of the Ganga in Haridwar in August 1999. This is one of the most honorific initiations in the swami orders.

My heart was strong and at great peace that day; it was the fulfillment of a lifelong desire, and felt like another part of the process of coming home. This initiation is not necessary on the path of Self-realization, but we all have some desires, samskaras that simply need to be fulfilled on our personal journey. Such was this for me. It saddened me that nobody from our family of Swami Rama students at the ashram or hospital accepted the printed invitations to come to this initiation and celebration. Interestingly, a couple people of our tradition later tried to claim that because of this initiation I was no longer a part of the lineage of Swami Rama. I ignored these claims and criticisms, and felt comfort in remembering that Swami Rama himself took dandi swami initiation in South India, but that he had of course not left his master or our Himalayan tradition. Although I am not one of the people who claims to be “the successor” of Swami Rama, I feel a great love and closeness to Swamiji in being allowed to follow in his footsteps in this way.



*The ancestral cave*

I asked Swamiji if he would be sending me to the ancestral cave of the tradition. He simply said, “Yes.” When I first saw it, I was across the glacier of the frozen ancient river. As the sun started to rise, the shadow of the mountain behind me started to slowly creep down the face of the mountain across the glacier. Ever further down the face of the mountain the shadow line moved, brightening more and more of the mountain. I saw the sunlight then enter the cave, just as Swamiji had described. It was probably a kilometer or more in front of me, maybe two to three; time and space seem to be somehow different here. As the sun moved down the face of the mountain, below the cave, I could see a thin green line of the vegetation growing along the stream which came out of the cave, again just as Swamiji described, though I did not yet know for sure that this was the stream.

I was not able to find a way of passage across the glacier to get to the cave. I thought I saw a small ochre spot around the cave, but it was so far and only a spot—like a single pixel in a digital photograph—that I could not be sure. I thought that I had made it so close to the cave, but still not there, and this led me to a little wave of sadness. But, I thought, this was probably better. Now I could honestly say that I had never been in the ancestral cave. If I had been there and told people, others would want to come. Some would try and some would die. It was not within my comfortable capacity to do this, to make this trek. I physically had no business even attempting this. I crossed areas of glacier where I could have easily died. This included one area crossed when coming down, which I had crossed going up, but had now completely caved in. Now it was a black hole about 10 meters wide and 40 meters long. I thought I would never return here, never come this way again. But here I was, staring into this black hole. It was terrifying, yet I felt somehow protected that I was okay, and was able to get around the hole.

A few days later I met a sadhu who said he knew this place that I was trying to find. He said he would take me there if I would come back the next year, in July. This was now

September and that was ten months away. I remembered that the scale of time moves more slowly at times for yogis, and ten months was not so long. I nodded my head in agreement, and said I would come back.

July came and we started the trek to the cave. As we made one turn up into the higher Himalayas, along a river, I remembered I had read somewhere that you do not get to go to these places without permission. I was along a narrow path with a drop off to my right of a couple hundred meters. I stopped instinctively, closed my eyes, and internally asked, "May I come?" I felt an inner response like a wave of prana, which felt like, "Yes, come."

He knew the way across the glacier. We turned into the glacier of the ancient frozen river several kilometers downstream from what had previously looked to me like the crossing point. This sadhu was the disciple of the sage who was living in the cave, and he went there from time to time to take provisions. He had left small stones on top of snow and ice protrusions to show him the way back. Some of these had either fallen down or been covered with fresh snow and ice. We were not lost, but did not so precisely know our way. We walked and walked following the sadhu's instinct. At one point my foot stepped forward and I had to stop. I was standing on the edge of an ice wall that went down to a small green pond of water, down probably about thirty meters or so. If I had made one more step I would have fallen into what was virtually freezing water. It would have meant certain death. The last couple hours of walking was very difficult for me; my knees were in great pain. The sadhu held my hand as we walked on, literally saving my life.

Once we got to the area of the cave, we had to walk up the face of the mountain, angling back and forth until we reached the cave, which was about a hundred meters or so above the prevailing elevation along the glacier. From the cave it was possible to look out across the glacier to the place I had been the previous year. It was possible to see about 4-5 kilometers of the glacier we had just crossed downstream, though the lower elevation part was now out of view due to our having rounded a curve. We were now over 15 kilometers away from the nearest humans and nearest light bulbs, at an elevation of around 14,000-15,000 feet.

The sage in the cave warmly greeted me. It was a good feeling; it felt like home. The sadhu guide was a disciple of this sage. The sadhu told me that he had never been permitted to stay longer than over one night before being told to leave. This time we were permitted to stay five nights, which I attribute to the grace of Swami Rama.

This was an amazing place, probably the most beautiful I have ever seen. The moon was approximately new moon phase, so the nights were totally dark. There was only starlight which was so bright that the glacier below the cave glowed in luminous white light. I would sit there in the middle of the night, eyes slightly open and sometimes closed, taking in the unbelievable stillness and glow.

I had thought that this cave would surely be a good place to meditate, but that was backwards. You do not meditate there; it meditates you. While I discovered that it was easy to meditate there, I also discovered that it was not better than any other place, including Swami Rama's ashram in Rishikesh, as well as homes in which I had lived or visited both in USA or elsewhere. The feeling in our little ashram in the USA is just as rich as this Himalayan cave. As amazing as it was to be there, it became utterly clear that being in such a place is not necessary.

Swami Rama said many times that we can do this anywhere, including in our own homes. He told the truth.

*Did you really make me a swami?*

Swamiji had given me swami initiation in Honesdale, but without a fancy ritual in front of lots of witnesses, and with the rumors being spread about me that I was not a swami, doubt crept into the mind. Probably the dumbest thing I ever did with Swamiji was to ask him if he had really made me a swami. He said lovingly and clearly, “Yes, a long time ago, in Honesdale.” Swami Rama was mostly always gentle with me. Early on, there were times when he seemed to ignore me when I saw him, but he was never abrupt or harsh with me. He was mostly soft and kind, which is how he responded to me in this moment of doubt.

## Lessons by the Ganga

*Swamiji's sneaky way of teaching me*

It was in 1994 that Swamiji told me he wanted me to teach, to guide others. Then, in fall 1995 one of the forms of this came. He wanted an ongoing residential program set up in his Rishikesh ashram. I was accustomed to residential programs and seminars like they had in the Himalayan Institute in Honesdale, where there were quite a few people to choose from to create a workshop, seminar, or ongoing program. We did not have so many people in the Rishikesh ashram. Swami Veda Bharati was in residence, but he explained very clearly that he had no time for this, and that he would not have time in the future.

After considerable wrestling with what to do to have such a program, the idea came that a curriculum could be developed using Swamiji's books as textbooks. At first I collected eleven books that would form a good curriculum. But then I realized that it would be very difficult to ask international travelers to bring so many books with them in their luggage. I scoured the books trying to think of a solution. I finally settled on the observation that the essence of the teachings was well captured in a few of the books: *Meditation and Its Practice*, *The Art of Joyful Living*, and *Path of Fire and Light Volume 2*. Complementing them was the Introduction and a couple chapters of *Choosing a Path*. The original format of the residential program was one month. The first such program started on October 15, 1996. It ended on November 13, 1996, and Swami Rama left the body later that evening. Coincidence, or hidden meaning? I do not know. We conducted the one-month residential program three more times until the nature of offerings at the ashram was changed, and we were never again able to have this program.

The *sneaky* thing that Swamiji did with me as far as teachings go, was that while he was guiding me personally, the steps he was privately teaching me lined up almost exactly with what he was saying publicly through his books and lectures. Surely, teachings were adjusted or adapted to each of us as individuals. However, there was a central theme that applied to all of us. It took me almost a year to structure the curriculum from these books, and it became ever more clear how brilliantly he blended his private guidance with the book reviews.



*Standing on no ground*

There came a stage under the guidance of Swamiji where I increasingly felt that there was no solid ground under my feet. I had done lots of mantra, a great deal of inspection within, and lots of sushumna kriya. I had meditated, contemplated, and prayed to an unknown something I didn't really know, what Swamiji told me could be called the *lord of life within*, which was apparently one and the same with Self or Atman. It seemed as if I was disappearing, but there was nothing solid there underneath. As I already mentioned above, Swamiji had told me he would give me a practice that, once I had done it, I would be *There*. The ground was fading away, but I knew I was not yet *There*. There seemed to be nothing to do about this; just keep going, and be grateful for Swamiji telling me that I was doing well and should just keep going.

No wonder the path is sometimes called *treading* the path. To me the word *treading* sounded very heavy, very difficult, like dragging one's body many miles through a desert, exerting lots of energy only to make little progress, feeling as if dying of thirst. However, I looked the word up in a dictionary and found one description which was something like "walking lightly, as if to make as little contact with the ground as possible." Surely, there were some heavy definitions, but this one was new, and I liked it. Though I was increasingly feeling as if there was no ground under my feet, I knew in my heart that I really was making progress. I was doing what Swamiji had said. I was following the instructions, and the baggage was getting lighter.

*Ask your mind what's wrong with your meditation*

Once again, Swamiji and I were walking when he said, "Ask your mind what's wrong with your meditation." Predictably, I responded, "Hmmm?" He repeated the instruction again, word-for-word, "Ask your mind what's wrong with your meditation." I said, "Hmmm," to acknowledge that I heard his words. I didn't know what he meant, but I heard the words. As I often did, I dashed back to my room and jotted down his instruction in my little notebook.

As I pondered his instruction, I was somehow led to a transcript of his lectures on Saundaryalahari, which was his last lecture series before permanently leaving Honesdale and the US in 1993. I searched this transcript and found that he had mentioned internal dialogue a total of 32 times, including at least once in each of the four lectures. I saw that this "internal dialogue" was what he was telling me to do when he said, "Ask your mind what's wrong with your meditation." I had been in attendance for this lecture series and took a few notes on some index cards, which I still had with me. I pulled out those cards, and sure enough, I had penned in my own hand "internal dialogue" on one of the cards. I never followed through on this note, and had never done such a practice.

I started to wonder if his instruction to me was literal, if he really meant for me to sit and talk with myself. I thought only crazy people did that, and I didn't want to be crazy, or at least, not crazier than I already was. A few weeks after his instruction I decided to give it a try. I closed and locked the door of my room, as if I expected somebody would come in and catch me talking to myself and have me locked up. If somebody did come in, how would they come inside my head and catch me talking inside? This would not be possible, but this was the degree to which there was resistance to this practice.

I sat with the door locked, my eyes and mouth closed, and mentally said, “What’s wrong with my meditation?” Immediately answers started to come. First was, “You’re lazy,” followed by a string of other responses. “Who the hell was that?” I wondered. This was *dialogue*. I—like many others I have since taught this to—thought that dialogue was the *problem*. My mind jabbered all the time and I wanted it to stop. The problem was that this kind of jabbering is not *dialogue*; it is *monologue*. Somebody is talking, but nobody is listening. On the other hand, dialogue is a two-way street; it is a communication between two beings or entities. Here, it is the surface level *me* having a conversation with the *depth* of me, the higher intelligence, the buddhi, or what has been called teacher or guru within.

The dialogue about my meditation was as if I were to say in my head, “One plus one equals...” and then, after a short pause the mind would continue with the response, “...two....” It was like this, not that I was literally hearing voices in my head. Finally, I started to understand what Swamiji was talking about with this “internal dialogue” that he spoke about and wrote about so often.

The ways in which I was lazy with meditation got more and more clear. I was in the good company of many other people I knew who were not following Swamiji’s suggestion to practice systematically. It was so easy to just plop down on the butt and try to meditate, and then to complain because it wasn’t working. It is so easy to skip the preparation practices of internal dialogue, asanas, and pranayama leading to sushumna awakening. The way I had learned from the institutional cultures surrounding Swamiji, hatha yoga asanas were done separately from meditation. In fact in the locations where I had resided, meditation was done in early morning, without any preparation, and then later, after meditation there came the hatha yoga classes, which is *backwards* from the systematic process that Swamiji repeatedly recommended. It took me considerable time and effort to retrain my habits to follow the systematic process taught by Swami Rama. The payoff for making this adjustment was tremendous. I continued to ask myself from time to time, “What’s wrong with my meditation?” as a way of staying on track.

### *Ask the mind to heal the aching part*

When I was in college I twice hurt my knees. Once was wrestling and the other was in a tumbling class, falling on the hardwood floor with full weight on my left knee during a forward flip off of a trampoline. In both occasions I had received medical therapies including hydrotherapy. The damage was never fully corrected, and I later found this troublesome in trying to sit for meditation. Mostly I just suffered through it without complaint. But then along came Swami Rama and his advice in one of his books:

*“Survey your body thoroughly; if you find a certain part of the body has any aches or pain, you can discover that and gently ask your mind to go to that spot to heal that aching part. The mind definitely has the capacity to correct and heal such discomfort; do not doubt that.”*

Do not doubt that? I had *tremendous* doubt. This seemed ridiculous, if not downright crazy. My knees had hurt off and on for nearly twenty years and here’s this man in this book claiming I should have *no doubt* that my *mind* could correct this? I didn’t believe it; I had no faith in this. Yet, it nagged on me until, finally, I thought I should at least give it a try. I sat alone

in my room, with the door closed and locked so that nobody could come in and catch me talking to myself, inside, in my head. I internally spoke, “Mind please heal this,” as I put my attention on my most sore knee, the left knee. I did this three days in a row, just to be sure. Something amazing happened; within three more days the pain subsided by at least 80%, and this was *without* my believing it to be possible. I was not actively testing Swami Rama, but I kept finding it proved to me over and over that Swamiji knew what he was talking about. I was coming into the company of, and finding myself under the guidance of a real-thing master.

*Be constantly aware of the center of consciousness*

Swami Rama often suggested personally and publicly that one maintain constant awareness of the center of consciousness. He would say it in slightly different ways, but the central theme was the same, whether about awareness of Atman, Self, Brahman, the Absolute Reality, or simply the Center of Consciousness. Over and over this message would ring in the ear of my mind, as I slowly assimilated and experienced the message.

As a boy I was able to visit a couple fire towers in an 800 square mile forest near our home; this was decades before the computer technology that is used today. At the top of each fire tower, in what was like a little house with windows all around, there was an approximately two-foot wide circular metal plate with 360 degrees of marks. There was a rotatable sight that they could line up on a distant fire. They would radio or telephone this into some central location where somebody would draw a line from each of the reporting towers onto a big map. This was called “triangulating” on the point where the fire was located. Then the firefighters could follow a map to the precise location where they could see the fire and deal with it.

These many reminders of Swami Rama started to seem to me like the triangulating from all those fire towers. Sometimes I wondered why he wrote so many books and kept saying the same things. Why didn’t he write one single book that said it all? Triangulating! Sometimes someone would miss one of his lectures at Honesdale, and would ask somebody else what he said today. The answer would be, “Nothing new. Same old stuff.” Many of us would wonder when he was going to finally tell us what practices to do. He actually was telling us all along, using slightly different words. I came to see that he was triangulating on precisely the same point, over and over and over again.

*You should pray twice a day*

One more time we were walking when one of Swamiji’s one-liner instructions came out, “You should pray twice a day.” I had never been a religious person, and the idea of praying to the God that I had heard of in my childhood rang rather strong alarm bells. Sarcasm arose in response to his instruction, and I said, “Who should I pray to, you?” In his usual loving voice he ignored my tone and replied, “Pray to the Lord of life within.” He explained that our center of consciousness is one with the absolute reality, and that we are communicating with that inner wisdom, with what he said was our “friend” within. Swamiji often wrote and spoke of this. It slowly started making sense as being different from the messages of my youth.

## Gods and elephants

One time I talked with Swamiji about the prayers which were done every morning and evening at the Himalayan Institute in the USA, where I had lived for a few years. I was never comfortable with prayers of the religions encountered in my youth, and these did not seem comfortable either. Swamiji was quite flexible and told me that I need not practice them. A couple of years later, when told me to pray to the lord of life within, he explained what that meant in relation to the Self, Atman within. The spirit of what he explained personally is well captured in his comments on the Bhagavad Gita, where he said,

*“The ignorant think that gods dwell in celestial worlds and have power to control human destiny. Such gods are merely projections of one's internal organization, the creation of gods in the external world is a projection of the unconscious. The belief in gods was created to help those who are not aware of their internal resources and are in need of an objectification of supernatural powers. They need to believe in gods that will help them fulfill desires that they feel inadequate to fulfill through their own means. It is said that those who have seen gods are fools, for they have seen something of their own self and mistakenly believe that they have seen gods. Externalists have created gods for their own convenience, but in actuality those gods are symbols of unknown phenomena that occur within.*

*“For those aspirants who cannot contemplate on the attributeless Eternal, symbols are recommended by spiritual teachers. In the path of meditation certain symbols are used to make the mind one-pointed. The student is then advised to go beyond the symbol to comprehend its meaning rather than remaining dependent on the symbol forever. Thus in meditation one leaves the symbol behind and goes forward.*

*“The ignorant worship the symbols without knowing and understanding that which lives behind and beyond the symbol. But if one is capable of exploring that which is being expressed by the symbol, he may eventually discover the existence of the formless archetype that is clothed in the forms of the symbol.”*

While living in Swami Rama's ashram in Rishikesh, I was sitting by the river and looking across the Ganges when an elephant came out of the forest and down to the river. He stepped into the river and appeared to be playing, throwing water all over the place with his trunk and generally thrashing around, splashing water everywhere. It looked like a lot of fun.

Suddenly the thought flashed in my mind that the scene here must have been similar over the past several thousand years. I imagined a teacher sitting here, long ago looking across the river, when an aspirant approached and asked for advice on spiritual sadhana. I imagined the teacher pointing to the elephant and telling the student, “Be like him. Be like the elephant. Be strong. Be free. Be the enemy of no other creature. Be intelligent like the elephant. Notice that the elephant does not kill other animals for his food, but is a natural vegetarian.” In my fantasy

## *Witness Everything*

the teacher picks up a gray stone, the color of the elephant, and gives it to the student, asking him to keep this with him as a reminder of the elephant and the powerful qualities that he symbolizes. Then I imagined how—after thousands of years—this teaching symbol may have evolved as it passed through many generations of humankind and turned into the deity Ganesha, the elephant god that is prayed to as a remover of obstacles. In this way, starting with the guidance of Swami Rama, I have gradually become more accepting of the saguna (with attributes) forms, and how they may be used as stepping stones to the nirguna (without attributes) Absolute Reality, or Brahman.

### *I validate that for you*

Swamiji had an amazing ability to speak to people of all cultures and to speak in their own familiar terms. One of these—for me—was “validate.” That word was common vernacular in my culture and personal background. From time to time in some conversation about a point of practice or another, or some experience he would say, “I validate that for you.” I appreciated that; it felt genuine and comforting.

### *Ignoring the sri yantra*

There came a point when several of the centermost chakras of sri yantra—the high symbol of tantra—started to appear in my meditations. I had two responses to this: one was the intuition this was not really so important, and the other was that this was a sign of advancement. Ego popped up—not a lot, but a little. I went to Swamiji to tell him, some part of ego thinking he would tell me how wonderful I am with this advancement. Instead, he told me, “Ignore it.” He explained that I should only seek the bindu, the dot in the center of the sri yantra, the symbol of the ever-present union of shiva and shakti. Ego took a little bit of a hit with that, but I already sensed that it was not really very important; a small sign of advancement maybe, but mostly a signal to just keep going. I learned to follow his advice to ignore this and to pursue only the bindu and beyond.

### *Are we walking fast or slow?*

Once again we were walking when Swamiji asked, “Are we walking fast or slow?” It struck me as odd. Not knowing what he was really asking, I just responded factually, “I usually walk a little faster.” He sped up and I had to work a little to keep up with him. Initially, I completely missed the point. He knew how we were walking because he was paying attention. He was always paying attention, constantly. I was not paying attention and was lost in my thoughts. That was really the point: to pay attention. I still smile at the memories of his amazing skill in making a point in very simple, direct ways. He did not—in this moment—give me a lecture or philosophical explanation of attention, mindfulness, or meditation in action. He showed me, and the lesson has stuck with me. I now walk with much greater awareness.

## *Witness Everything*

Swamiji and I were walking along the Ganges about 50 meters upstream from the ashram when two words fell out of his mouth, as if falling at my feet in a pile. “Witness everything,” he

said in a firm, even-toned, though gentle way. The sounds came into my ears; brain and mind tried to process the instruction, scanning the field of memory in the chitta. No match; it made no sense. I did not have a clue what he was talking about.

The words came out, “Baba, I don’t think I know how to do that.” We had not been talking about anything else; this was not a carryover from a previous conversation. It was a stand-alone comment that came from where I did not know. Gently and lovingly—without the previous firmness—he said, “It will come.” I kept silently repeating the words “witness everything” so that they would not be lost.

After the walk I raced back to my room to write the two words in my notebook, “Witness everything!” I pondered, “What was he talking about? What does he mean? What is he telling me to do?” I kept wondering. Over weeks and months—years, actually—it started and continued to unfold what he was talking about. He had given me a key that would start to unlock all the locks of the secrets of the Himalayan masters.

The two words have become the heart of all of my understanding of all of the teachings of Swami Rama and our Himalayan tradition, and the essence of sadhana. So simple, but so profound: “Witness everything!” Swamiji was right when he said my understanding of this “will come.” The Self, the Atman is the center of pure consciousness, that which truly is the witness of everything. The instruction to witness everything is therefore both the means to, and the goal of Self-realization. Because these two words have meant so much, I use them as the title of this article which you are now reading: “Witness everything!”

### *Use no Willpower to Cause Your Mantra to Come*

One more time, Swamiji and I were walking quietly along the Ganga by the ashram. Once again, there was no conversation going on, when suddenly one of his gems was dropped at my feet. He said, “Use no willpower to cause your mantra to come.” I replied, “Hmmm?” Once again he repeated, “Use no willpower to cause your mantra to come.” This time I said, “Hmmm,” acknowledging not that I understood, but only that I had heard the words. I always appreciated the fact that whenever I would question “Hmmm?” he would always repeat his comment word-for-word. He would *not* say, “What I meant to say was....” He would literally say the same exact words, which allow me to hear it again, clearly. After his instruction about mantra sunk in, I asked, “What if it never comes?” Swamiji said, “Eventually it will come.”

Later I remembered that he had written an instruction in one of his books that one should allow the mantra to arise and repeat itself. I started to remember the concept in the field of advertising that if a catchy tune was created about a product, after some time people would have internalized that song, and the company would now have free advertising. The product *jingle* would just go on, inside the minds of their target market, and that this would not cost them any more money. The advertising would be on a sort of free autopilot. I came to see that this is what is referred to as *ajapa japa*, the automatic remembering of the mantra.

He was right, as usual. For a while it was very difficult to break the habit of *speaking* the mantra in my mind (using the karmendriya of speech). As he had predicted, the mantra *eventually* started to come on its own, without me intentionally talking internally. Then, finally, I was truly able to start to follow the mantra into the silence where it was trying to lead me. These

empowered mantras that are given to us by the tradition really are tremendous gifts, if only we are willing to learn to *follow* them instead of just *jabbering* inside our heads.

### *Enjoy life*

One day I was feeling deep gratitude for Swami Rama and wanted to do something for him. Here I was, living in his ashram without any personal financial expense. I had a roof over my head, was given free food, and was told to spend all of my time doing sadhana (practices of contemplation and meditation). I know that you can't really do something for someone who doesn't want anything, but the silly mind wants to try anyway. I waited in the garden for him to get back from the hospital so I could tell him how much I appreciated him. I was sitting in one of the wicker chairs practicing what words that I could say to him. I heard the sound of his car coming down the driveway. It was late afternoon, about 5:00 or so, and I was hoping we would walk together as we usually did during these times. He walked around the corner; we met and greeted, and turned towards his quarters where he would change into his walking shoes. We walked maybe twenty paces or so when I said with the most loving tone I could summon, "Baba, I want to do something for you. What can I do for you?"

Without a moment's hesitation he said, "Enjoy life." I could feel the little muscles between my eyebrows come together slightly. Mouth muscles tightened ever so slightly, as if something was going to be said, but nothing came out. Mind didn't know what to do with that request of his. I really wanted to do something for him, so the mind was alert for whatever he would say. I would do *whatever* he asked (within reason, as I'm not totally crazy or inclined towards cult fanaticism). But *this! This* I didn't know what to do with. Whatever he asked for I was *really* ready to do, and do *well*. I knew how to have fun, to enjoy in a pleasure seeking sort of way. But, I sensed that he really meant he wanted me to *enjoy* life, as in finding *real* joy—the *big joy* of living. He really meant it, I sensed.

Finally, after a pause, I said, "Baba, I'm not sure I know how to do that." He did not hesitate when he prophesied, "It will come." He was right, which should be no surprise. Yet, it *was* a surprise. In the next year or so something shifted. I found that I actually enjoyed daily life in a way I never had before. It wasn't just some momentary spiritual experience; it was ongoing; it never left. I found that I seemed to perpetually enjoy living. Even if a "button got pushed," that enjoyment of living remained. To this day it is there. I wish he was here with a body so we could take another walk again, though I know it is not really needed. Swamiji was a constant message of love.

I never felt the slightest sense of having to make payment or barter with Swami Rama, but there was one thing which stood out in terms of what he wanted from me. Surely I had done some things for him, on this or that project, but I think the only thing he wanted from me was when he said, "Enjoy life!" Over the years since then, I have come to see that I have given him what he asked for. There are, of course, bumps and potholes in the road of life, but I really do enjoy life. I am happy, loving, and have a pretty good understanding of life and relationships. When I think of what Swamiji asked for from me, a smile comes to the face, there is a warm glow in the heart, and a few slight tears come into the eyes. I gave him what he asked for.

*Seek Self-Realization at all cost*

Swami Rama declared unequivocally, “Seek Self-realization at all cost.” No discussion; no debate. It was not in the middle of some other conversation. It was just sitting there all on its own—a direct instruction. It was music to my ears. There were quite a few times in my life when somebody would tell me what to do. But, no other human being had ever told me anything even remotely like this, and with such conviction, with such support, with such clarity, and yes, with such love. Finally, somebody had told me what I was thinking in my mind, and wanted to hear from some other person. It’s not that I needed permission, though it sure is nice in life to have a bit of human validation, especially in the bigger, more important parts of life. Lots of people have told me lots of things they thought I should do; I have experienced no shortage of that. But this was different; this was very different.

This drive to “seek Self-realization at all cost” turned out to be the magnificent obsession that I had dreamed about in childhood. There it was, all along, but I had no name to go with the passionate urge that was driving me from within for so many years. It was also the calling to serve others in the spirit that nobody should have to go through this alone on the path to Self-realization.

Once again, we had been walking along the Ganges near the ashram. I’ve often thought about those walks along the Ganges, remembering that this a place where Swami Rama spoke of walking with his own master many years before. It is a place where sages have walked for millennia. The geography is rather obvious; this is the precise spot where the Ganges comes out of the mountains and meets the plains. It looks so natural to move up into the high mountains during the hot summer months and the monsoons, and to come down, settling in here during the colder winter months. This place and presence of the Master felt like home to me; finally, a physical place in the world which felt like home.

*The more I’m around you, the more I like you*

After one of those walks with Swamiji, we were walking down the steps into the ashram, holding hands. I found myself saying to him, “Baba, the more I’m around you, the more I like you.” By this time I had found *love* to be relatively easy, what Swami Rama often said, “Love all and exclude none.” It was ever more clear that everybody is Atman at his or her core, and that was easy to love, even for those who had distaste or disdain for me. But *like* was a different story; it was *like*, not *love*. I came to see that in some sense *liking* is more important than *loving*. I really quite liked Swami Rama as a person; I liked being around him; I liked his personality; I liked his sense of humor. Of course I loved him, but to my ever increasing delight I also just plain *liked* him. Although on a smaller scale, this reminded me of the comment in Bhagavad Gita where Krishna told Arjuna that the reason they could do what they were doing together was that not only was Arjuna devoted to him, but they also were friends. As we walked, I felt close to Swami Rama, person to person, like friends.



### *Renaming the dog*

“I’m going to give him a new name. I’m going to call him Jnaneshvara, because he’s loyal to me just like you.” He was talking about his dog Tiger. The three of us were sitting together in the yard in front of Swamiji’s apartment at the hospital site.

I was scared inside when Swamiji said this. I was afraid that he might discover that this was not really true, that I was not really loyal to *him*. I had seen many of his loyal followers. They came with gifts and flowers, and money, and they touched his feet. They praised him incessantly. None of these was what I was about.

It was not *him* to which I felt dedication or loyalty. It was this longing in my heart and mind that was driving me. It was that towards which I felt dedication, that forced me to keep going, to get up when I fell down. Being a bit of a slow learner at times, I have come to understand that this is precisely what he was talking about. This is what loyalty is really about when dealing with a true master. He knew this and, as usual, it just took me a while to understand. There is nothing you can do for a great one such as he is. The only thing you can really do for them is to do the practices they so freely give, and come to the realizations they are trying to guide you towards. I understand this now, as I feel this way towards those whom I serve.

I still feel an affinity towards the dog Tiger whenever I remember our special relationship and that day with Swami Rama.

### *Glasses*

I was sitting with Swamiji in the yard in front of his apartment on the hospital campus. A few people had come to visit, but they had already left. Whenever I would sit with him like this and people came, I would start to get up and leave to give privacy to Swamiji and his visitors. This time was no exception to his making a gesture to me to stay seated there and not leave.

There was a table in front of Swamiji, on which he had a newspaper and a pair of reading glasses. I was sitting in a chair to his right. The visitors sat in chairs across from him. After the visitors had left, Swamiji reached down and picked up his glasses. He turned toward me and placed them on my face, over my eyes. (My own glasses were folded up and in my shirt pocket.) Making gestures like a model showing off the glasses, turning my head here and there, I said to Swamiji, “Is it me?” meaning to ask if they looked good on me. Then I added, “Or is it you?” since they were his glasses. He responded with that familiar grin and said, “They are one and the same.”

“What did he mean by that?” I wondered. Ego could go off in several directions with a comment like that. Maybe after he left the body I could claim to be Swamiji’s successor. I could claim to be his reincarnation. After all, he had told me that we were “one and the same.” Wouldn’t it be obvious to others that I had some special circumstance in relation to Swamiji? I opted to think he just meant that we are both Atman, or that, even simpler, it was just a gesture of love. I responded to him, “That’s a nice thought,” as I felt a warmth in my heart.

## Awakening

### *Find the tiny circle*

Swamiji gave me an instruction to find and meditate on a tiny circle in the space between the eyebrows. It took me two years of persistent practice to find this little circle. At times I would be frustrated looking for what I thought of as “that stupid circle.” When I finally started to find it, I realized that had been trying to avoid this for many years. From time to time—probably every six months or so—I would run into this circle by accident when lying down at night to sleep. It looked like a hole, and sometimes I had the sense of going into it. Usually, it would lead to a strong jolt in my body, and sometimes my body would jump off the bed. Sometimes it made me feel afraid to go to sleep at night.

After finding the circle under Swamiji’s guidance, the fear permanently disappeared, and I started to feel a warmth and calmness when I encountered the circle. I came to see that this was the circle Swamiji had drawn on the blackboard during some of his lectures. It was the entrance to brahma nadi, the channel from ajna chakra to sahasrara, the thousand-petaled lotus at the crown chakra.

### *I was a fool yesterday*

One day an insight came which was so revealing that it left me thinking, “Finally, today I understand something. Yesterday, I was a fool, but today I finally have some understanding.” A funny thing happened. The next day another insight came, and on this day, I also thought, “Yesterday, I was a fool, but today I understand something.” There was a period where this happened day after day. This did not feel like I was going somewhere, as we might say about going into deep meditation or samadhi. This was insight, wisdom coming forward, out of the depths of stillness and silence. It was rich, and inspiring. I started to feel as if my mind may explode before long. I thought this must be some sort of fantasy, not at the moment realizing that this explosion of the mind was soon to come as part of the journey.

### *Don't come back*

I was in a downstairs office in the apartment building where Swamiji lived on the hospital campus. I don’t recall why I was there that day, but I had come from the ashram for some particular task in that office.

Swamiji walked in the door; I saw him out of the corner of my eye, but did not look up at him. He asked, “How are you doing?” I said in a flat, sort of grumpy tone, “I’m stuck.” By that, I meant that I had been doing everything he had told me to do, but it all added up to nothing. I had long ago completed my 2.4 million round mahapurascharna of Gayatri. I had done as good as I could with his instruction to spend 100% of my time doing the practices he had given me. I had meditated and contemplated. I had done internal dialogue. I had grown callouses on the bones of my butt and also on my ankles from sitting so many hours. Nothing was working it seemed. I felt like I was pressed against a polished stone wall the height and breadth of a Himalayan mountain. There was no way over it, no way around it, and no way through it. I felt absolutely stuck.

Swamiji asked, “What do you want?” I said, “I want the journey to be done.” I did not mean I wanted enlightenment or any help from him. I felt completely hopeless and just wanted it all to be over. I would have accepted complete annihilation; anything, just to have it over with. I had felt like this before, but this was an even stronger sense of desolation. Although I was still not looking directly at him, he explained with that familiar grin on his face (I could see him out of the “corner of my eye” without actually looking at him) that the next step would be piercing of the bindu and the experience of the union of Shiva and Shakti, the latent and manifesting forces that are actually one and the same. He had previously told me this would come.

The time was at hand, but I was unimpressed. He was going to remove the final barrier over the Self, but was I unresponsive. I didn’t believe him; I didn’t *not* believe him. His words just had no effect on me. I responded, “Hmm.” He told me to wait some time and this would be given. I waited; what else could I do? Time was going to pass with or without my actively waiting.

Swamiji added, “...and don’t come back.” A little wave of shock came over me. Two weeks before I had had an intuition that I did not need to see Baba any more. It was a scary thought. I thought, “What kind of ego is this, that I think I don’t need the teacher any more?” I rejected the intuition. Now, here was Swamiji saying exactly that. I had heard or read that there was a time when this would happen, but I had not really expected it; certainly not now, while I was feeling so failed in my practices.

A few years before this, while still living at Honesdale, I was thinking about Swami Rama’s own story in which he told his master he was going to go into the river and drown himself. This was Swamiji’s version of getting so exasperated with practices that this was all he saw left to do.

I thought that maybe if I told Swamiji I was going to kill myself, he would give me shaktipata and show me the Self. I did not try this with him, mostly because I’m a coward and knew I would not really suicide. He would see through my guise and I guessed would probably tell me to go ahead and do it, but would probably ask me to not do it at the Institute, but rather, to go somewhere else. This suicide approach was Swamiji’s version of being stuck, but it was not mine.

You can’t fake this; this point of exasperation comes in its own way, which matches each individual person. Swami Rama had spent many years along the river, so that was fitting. I had spent many years in offices, so it was fitting that my point of exasperation was sitting at a desk in an office with Swamiji standing beside me. This was perfect; it was the way which matched my own life history.

### *Piercing the Bindu*

It took virtually no time. If I was to put a time on it, the whole process would have been less than three seconds, probably less than one. Baba’s face showed up in front of me in the inner world. I had the sensation of accelerating forward at the rate of race car, going right through Swamiji’s face, up a tunnel (brahma nadi), and crashing through walls of consciousness and light. The image was like a pearl, just as I had read in explanations of the bindu. There was red (pinkish) and blue and black. It was like explosions. Then there was only what has been

described as “the light of a thousand suns.” It happened very quickly. Time, space, and causation were literally gone.

With meditation there is usually the sense of going *into* meditation, and then coming *out of* meditation. This was different. There was no *into* and no *out of*. There was only *through*, as if going into meditation, but coming out the other side. Where did I go after this piercing of the bindu, after going *through*? I reemerged and was *here*, right here in this world. A mahavakya (great contemplation) went through my mind several times, “sarvam khalvidam brahman” (verily, everything is brahman, the one, nondual, absolute Reality). “It’s true, it’s true, it’s true!” rang through my mind repeatedly. It was unbelievably awesome.

Although it’s been quite a few years since then, those words still come to mind sometimes, “It’s true, it’s true, it’s true!” Then I smile and remember Swami Rama, the one who showed up in my life to help when I was finally ready to be guided. The eyes get tears, of love. It is so true that when the student is ready, the teacher will appear. Many, most of us have such egos that we insist that we are ready, when we are not. In retrospect, I see that the one quality that I most possessed—but did not see along the way—was that when I fell down, I got up. I think this is what Swami Rama was talking about when he repeatedly said that we must build determination, sankalpa shakti—that we must cultivate the attitude, “I *can* do it. I *have* to do it. I am *going* to do it.” I never felt strong in this, and it is truly only in retrospect that I see this strength.

Since then I’ve truly known how to enjoy life, fulfilling his previous request of me to enjoy life. I had asked what I could do for him, and his request was that I enjoy life. Now, finally, his request was happening in full fruition. With the experience of the piercing of the bindu I now know how to fully enjoy life. Life is humorous and filled with love and joy. I often laugh for no reason. People and personalities are still there, including my own, but that’s the beauty of it. We really can live “in the world” while not being “of the world” like the ancient metaphor of the lotus flower, which grows out of the mud of the world to open its beautiful petals.

I find it fascinating that my first encounter with Swami Rama and this most significant event were both done internally, not somewhere like a lecture hall or an appointment room. These external happenings were there, the many walks together when practices and love were given, but the most profound teachings and experiences were given from within. I have taken this to be a means of teaching me the fact that in our tradition, guru truly is an energy, a force field of Knowledge, and that it is ultimately true that this comes from within.

I meet many people who feel bad because they have not met Swami Rama in the body, and that we have no embodied exemplar of his stature in our midst. My experience serves as a reminder which impels me to passionately assure people that guidance is here for them, just as it has been for me. Swami Rama taught me and others that the job of the external teacher is to lead people to find the teacher within. This is utterly clear to me, and is a guiding force of how I try to serve others.

### *After the lifting of the final veil*

After the lifting of the final veil, I was like a child doing a “show and tell” to his young classmates in school. I wanted to scream it out to everybody, I knew that this is possible, that the

sages and great teachers have told the truth. We can all experience this, our True Self, now, in this very lifetime. Swamiji has written of this stage, and how the process continues to unfold,

*“At this stage, a student experiences the Truth. He may have only a momentary glimpse of the Truth, but at least it is a direct experience, which helps him understand the greatness of the Truth. Now, sadhana consists of trying to maintain that state. As his practice matures, he becomes an adept; then he need not try, for the experience of non-dual Reality is maintained effortlessly and spontaneously.”*

Over and over these two things repeated themselves in my mind: the mahavakya (great contemplation) “sarvam khalvidam brahman” (“Verily, all of this is brahman”) and “It’s true, it’s true, it’s true!” Still, I am not an adept, a master, but keeping moving forward, continuing the practices, loving and serving others.

To my surprise, as I wanted to practice show and tell, very few people were interested. I wondered what was wrong, “Is it that they just don’t see it, don’t understand it or want it, or is it that they don’t believe *me*, just a guy from America who was not born into some special circumstance in the Himalayas, and not a learned Sanskrit scholar?”

Gradually I came to see that Swami Rama was right in saying that few were interested and would do the practices. Although he told me to serve others, the principle he taught of “na datavyam, na datavyam, na datavyam” (“do not impart, do not impart, do not impart”) was part of the counterbalance to giving freely, loving all and excluding none, as Swamiji often suggested. I have a tremendous feeling of love and sense of duty to the few who are on the path. Once again, I find myself often reminded of Swamiji’s words to me, “You are on the path and I will lead you.”

I have also come to see that we each bring our own uniqueness which serves some, but not others, and that the service to those whom we match is what is important. Those who are scholars and have a background of living around the Himalayas is the strength of some, while not having such characteristics and background is the strength of others in that, “If this guy can do it, can have this kind of direct experience, then so can I!” I believe with all my heart that all people with the determination to follow the path as outlined by Swami Rama and our tradition, can have direct experience of their True Self in this very lifetime.

*I would always get up*

I started to ask myself how such good fortune, such grace could come to me so freely, as a gift. I did not feel special in any way. I was not born in India in some special circumstance in the Himalayas. My family was a pretty typical American family; nothing unique in the spiritual sense. I was never religious, never having even been given initiation (baptism) into Christianity, the dominant religion of my country.

So, “Why?” I would wonder. “Why has this happened for me?” After considerable reflection the answer came, which was one characteristic I had had all along, throughout my life, whether in worldly life or in treading the path of awakening, though I was not really aware of it along the way. That characteristic was that whenever I would fall down—or was kicked down—I would get up. I have never thought of myself as a strong man. This getting up was not with a

great sense of strength that I could stand up and conquer obstacles. Rather, it was getting up right in the middle of suffering, of experiencing the kicks and blows of life. Slowly, I have come to see that this really is strength, and that I have had this strength all along. It is why Swami Rama kept telling me I was doing well, and that I should keep doing exactly what I was doing.

*Anyone can do this*

I can honestly say with conviction that if someone like me can be graced with the level of direct experience that I have been given, then anyone can do it. However, I have become painfully aware that it is true what Swami Rama often said, that very few people want it. It is a great joy to me to be in service of a few who are sincere and dedicated in their practices. Serving such rare people is all I have left to do. I have fulfilled my worldly desires, and with a spirit of contentment, serving others is all there is left to do.

Swamiji explains that after the “glimpse” of the Truth, the Self, “Sadhana consists of trying to maintain that state. As his practice matures, he becomes an adept; then he need not try, for the experience of non-dual Reality is maintained effortlessly and spontaneously.” Although the piercing of the bindu has come, I am not an adept. That seems to come later, as Swamiji suggests, although there is an ever-present awareness of the non-dual.

## Swamiji has left his body

*You should go see Baba*

During the couple months before Swamiji left his body, Prem, the ashram manager, suggested to me from time to time that I go to see Baba. He did not know about Swamiji's instruction to not come back, so I would just smile and say, “Thank you.”

I was in complete denial about the fact that Swamiji's body really was decaying, and that he would soon be leaving. It was inconceivable that he was leaving soon; the thought would not, or could not enter into my conscious mind. I think it must have been the fact that finally, after so many years of longing, here was someone who understood my passion for Truth seeking. It was just not possible that this was coming to an end, so soon, too soon, way too soon. I was unable to connect the instruction to not come back with the fact that I no longer really needed him in a body. I *wanted* him in a body, but truly, by this time, I did not *need* him in a body any longer.

Swamiji had explained that after his master left the body, he felt closer to him because there was no longer the obstacle of physical body and distance. He also touchingly said he missed his master being in a body because of the warmth of a person being in a physical body. I did not yet understand this, and had become attached to those walks along the Ganga. Over time, I gradually came to understand what Swamiji had said about both feeling closer after the dropping of the body, and yet missing the warmth. I find it a bitter-sweet kind of joy.

*Teke hai*

A couple days before Swamiji left the body was one of those times that Prem suggested that I needed to go see Baba. This time I thought differently, that maybe I should go. I pondered how I could go to see him, but still honor his instruction to not come back. There was a married

couple staying in the ashram who had booked a taxi the next morning to visit the hospital. Swamiji was now staying in his apartment on the campus, and I asked if I might catch a ride with them so I could visit him. They of course accommodated.

The couple went on about their business at the hospital and I walked to Baba's apartment. I asked one of the young women if she would do a favor for me. I asked her to please go to Swamiji and precisely tell him, "Swami Jnaneshvara is here but he is NOT asking to see you." I had learned from the best how to be *sneaky*; he had told me not to come back, and I was not coming back; I was not asking to see him. If he wanted to see me, that was an entirely different matter.

She came back and said that Baba wanted to see me. He was sitting in a wingback chair in the bedroom. A few weeks before this I had seen where Swamiji wrote, "Everybody wants to touch my feet; nobody wants to touch my heart." Although I had only once touched his feet, I resolved that the next time I saw him, I would touch his heart. When I entered the room I stooped down on my knees in front of him, just to his right side. I put my right palm on the center of his chest, over his heart. He reached out with his right arm and hand, and pulled my head down onto his heart. He kissed me on the top of the head, on the space of sahasrara, the crown chakra. He softly said, "Teke hai," Hindi for, "It's okay."

It was perfect, succinct and to the point, and very loving. It was over; my time with the physical Swami Rama had come to its end in that infinitely small moment. I left, still in denial that he was about to leave us. No, not *us*, but *me*. I think one of the things we all have in common with the grace of Swami Rama was that he had this amazing ability to make each of us feel that it is only about *me*, but not in an ego-feeding way. Such was the nature of his love.

### *Baba has left*

There was a knock on my door at the ashram. Prem, the ashram manager, was standing there with his usual friendly glow on his face, though he looked somber. He simply said, "Baba has left his body." I felt a shock go through my whole body. I did not see this coming. Some people saw this coming, but many, including me, did not. I had been blind to what was going on with Swamiji's body.

Then a surprising thing happened in reaction to Prem's news: there was an intense emotional pain in the core of my being, in the heart, but it only lasted a couple seconds. I responded to Prem, "Thank you." He left and I closed the door, returning to my meditation seat. Swamiji had apparently taught me how to let go of his physical form when the time came to do so. I was amazed at how smoothly that moment went.

### *Burning the body*

There was Swamiji's body, lying on what looked like a table, decorated with lots of flowers. This body did not look like the Swami Rama whom I knew. Of course, the prana, the life force had left, but this corpse was extremely drawn in, and, well, dead. I had seen dead bodies before at times of funerals in the US I was holding the hand of my mother, singing the Gayatri mantra aloud to her when she left. Later, I sat beside the gas cremation oven as her body was burned. At other funerals—where the body was to be buried—I had seen the faces with makeup on them to make them look more lifelike.

But, here was the body of Swami Rama clearly showing the face of death. One thing that oddly stuck in my mind was the look of cotton balls stuffed into his greyed nostrils and mouth. One of the doctors later told me that he had seen many people die, but that he had never seen anything like this. He told me that he watched Swamiji's body age by *hundreds* of years in the last few weeks he was in the body.

There was speculation that Swamiji had taken on a lot of karma from his students, and he was allowing it to play out through this body. I sensed that I was part of this process. There were times—especially during the past year—where it had felt like my samskaras were being attenuated much faster than I was capable of doing. At times it seemed that insights were coming much faster than this brain and mind had the ability to function.

I had never been to an Indian cremation, and just went along with the flow of the many people who formed the procession to the banks of the Ganga in Haridwar. It was odd to see what appeared to be a few people vying for the most visible position at the pyre, trying to be the one in charge. I was back some distance, looking around a few people as others positioned the body. There was a small log on the ground and I stood with my heels on it so that I could see better. Somebody came and pulled it out from under my feet, walked up to the pyre, and placed it there with the rest of the wood. Apparently the logs had been placed around so that people could have the privilege of participating in the cremation. I missed it; I just didn't see it because of my ignorance. It could have been embarrassing, but I have always had the feeling that Swamiji loved me, despite my many cultural ignorances. I suspect that he would have just smiled over this cultural faux pas. It was hard to watch this roaring fire of Swami Rama, but there was something final about it. I appreciated his choosing to have the body disposed of in this way.

Many people keep photographs of Swami Rama on altars; I do not. I want to know him as he *is*, not as he *was*. Somebody gifted me a large photograph of Swami Rama so that I could hang it on the wall in our ashram. It remains rolled up with a rubber band around it. I don't know if it will ever be framed and hung, but I have no plans to do so. In my late twenties, I realized that many of my memories were not of people and events, but were memories of the photos which I had stored in boxes and photo albums. After that I almost completely stopped taking photographs with cameras, as had been my hobby for quite a few years. I did not want this to happen with Swami Rama. I did not want photographs to replace my memories of *him*.

## Life after Baba

### *The presence of Swamiji*

Swami Rama spoke of his relationship with his own master after his master had left the body. Two comments stick in my mind: 1) that he (Swami Rama) felt closer now that there was not the limitation of his master being in a body, and 2) that he missed the warmth of his master being in a human body. I have felt both of these in relation to Swami Rama. Sometimes I think about how wonderful it would be if he had a body and just walked in the door of our little ashram, and gave me one of his embraces of his arm around a shoulder. But, then, whenever I need a boost he seems to be there from within.



*Come to Mysore*

The keynote speaker of the mahasamadhi function a couple weeks after Swamiji left the body was Sri Shivaratri Deshikendra Mahaswamigalu of Suttur Mutt in Mysore. After the mahasamadhi function, Deshikendra Swami visited Sadhana Mandir. As he was stooping to get into the car to leave he turned to me and said, “Come to Mysore,” which is the place of the seat of his tradition. About a year and a half later, I was able to visit and stay with him for a month.

I enjoyed listening to stories from him about his interactions with Swami Rama. For example, he described when Swamiji had visited with him in Mysore, and the more distant location where they had a temple where his guru was entombed, a large house, and a conference center. There were difficulties in the Rishikesh ashram after Swami Rama left, and I never knew what the future would bring for me there. Deshikendra Swami became a sort of insurance policy for me in that he said I could stay with him permanently if I wanted, either at the main ashram or this other location. He was extremely well known and respected in that part of India, and I felt that he could have removed all obstacles to my staying permanently. I have not seen the need to take him up on his offer, but I have always appreciated his heartfelt offer. I think the offer probably still stands, though the need seems unlikely.

*Dandi Swami Sadashiva Bharati*

Most of the biographies of Swami Rama speak of him as Shankaracharya of Karvirpitham in South India, and that he was successor to the Shankaracharya who had the birth name of Kurtkoti. I had the good fortune to be in the home where Kurtkoti lived for more than fifteen of his last years in the body, met several of the families who were his disciples, and visited the samadhi shrine where his body was entombed after he left the body in 1967.



## *Witness Everything*

One of the people I met had been the lawyer of Kurtkoti and he explained much of that earlier history. He had known Swami Rama as Bhole Baba when Bhole first showed up around 1950. He was there when Bhole was given danda swami diksha under the new monastic name Dandi Swami Sadashiva Bharati. He also explained that in the early 1930s the current Raj of the region and the government did not like the fact that Kurtkoti was too open to equality for foreigners and women, and that they unseated him while he was away from the mutt on a trip. Thereafter, Kurtkoti moved to Nashik where he fought this in court until he left the body many years later. He lived in the home of one of his disciples.



One of the families who were disciples of the Shankaracharya gave me a few high quality full-page prints of an oil painting of him. I have had the honor of being messenger to gift one of these to the Swami Rama Center at HIHT, where the print hangs in the photo museum honoring the memory of Swami Rama.

### *The only picture with Swami Rama*

From time to time I would see people pose for a photograph with Swami Rama. I never did that, thinking it would be an ego problem to ask him for that. I had read in Swami Rama's commentary on the Bhagavad Gita of the three eshanas that the renunciate renounces: desire for spouse and children, for wealth, and for name and fame. It seemed to me that consciously seeking out photographs with the master would be a small form of trying to feed desire.

Secretly, I thought somebody would take a picture some day. But the day never came, and I never had a photograph. But, I later recalled that there was one exception. In the last one second of his last lecture on Saundaryalahari, his last lecture series in the US, before he permanently returned to India in 1993, the video cameraman was following Swamiji as he left the podium and started to walk toward the back of the lecture hall. Suddenly Swamiji turned to his left and walked directly up to me and spoke. Just as he was approaching me, the camera went

off. I noticed it at the time, but only clearly noticed it a few years later when I saw the video recordings. There I was, immediately over Swamiji's right shoulder in the photo, literally in the last one second. Minds (ego) seem to like to make something out of nothing, or out of coincidence, in this case wanting to make something significant out of this last frame being of Swamiji and *me!*



*Who is Swami Rama's successor?*

“Who is Swami Rama's successor?” is a common question that I have heard. This is a natural thing for seekers to wonder about, and there are some students of Swami Rama who are thought to be “the” successor. However, Swami Rama named no single successor. He did leave many of his students with the specific assignment to carry on the teachings, including me.

When Swami Rama left the body, I was living in, and was physically present in his Rishikesh, India ashram. About two or three days after Swamiji left, someone was sent to me to tell me, “Now there will be politics, and you must decide whose side you are on.” I responded that I would not take sides, one against the other. I had learned much from many of Swamiji's students, and I truly did not want to take sides in a political battle. My position of neutrality left me standing alone, separate from the prevailing institutions and their management. This has been very painful at times. I gratefully remember that Swami Rama explains that our tradition is of the cave monasteries, and it is not affiliated with institutions.

I continue to do what I was trained and asked to do, which is to guide from direct experience of our tradition of the Himalayan masters, knowing that the guru tradition works through me, as it also does with others. I often say to people that I modify the ancient dictum

that, “When the student is ready, the master will appear.” I lightheartedly change this to say, “When the student is ready, sometimes the master will send one of his assistants.” I have a beautiful job, being one of the assistants. It allows me to serve, and yet remain a friend.

Sometimes I think that this subject of successorship should not be talked about at all, but allowing that to remain secret has a way of hurting and confusing people. Swami Rama had many many wonderful, brilliant, and loving students. Now that he is not with us in a body, many people serve others in her or his own unique way. I long for there to be cohesion, cooperation, and love among all the people whom Swamiji served, and who now carry on with sharing the principles and practices of our Himalayan tradition. Yet, this is not likely to happen except in the inner chambers of many hearts who know the common ground we share. Swami Rama was one of the most rare of sages, who truly lived his suggestion to “love all and exclude none.”

### *Time to leave India*

A pattern seemed to have formed during several years. After Swami Rama left a place where I had been staying, it was soon time for me to leave. First it happened in Minneapolis, and then in Honesdale. Now, it had happened again, although this time by virtue of Swami Rama leaving his body. He was my supporter, the one who wanted me to be in his ashram and to serve others by teaching there. Others had different tasks to perform and people to serve. There was virtually no support for what I had been asked by Swamiji to do there, though it took a great deal of time for me to see this. I did the best I was able to do, but eventually, it just wasn't enough. It seemed the time to leave was coming. I did not know where to go, and wondered if it was time to leave India. I made a three month exploratory trip to the US in 2000, and then shifted back to the U.S. in 2001.

### *Abhyasa Ashram*

Patanjali outlines in Yoga Sutras the twin foundations of Yoga of practice (abhyasa) and non-attachment (vairagya). Swami Rama describes Sadhana as “the specific practices of a tradition—hatha yoga, pranayama or breathing practices, repetition of mantra, and so on.” He explains that Abhyasa “is a more encompassing term that includes not only practice of specific techniques, but the overall goal of life and the application of belief systems.”

Swami Rama named his Rishikesh ashram Sadhana Mandir. We chose the broader name for our little ashram in USA, calling it Abhyasa Ashram. We serve a relatively small number of people who feel strongly drawn to the practices outlined by Swami Rama, and while I share from experience, we are dedicated to maintaining that focus by exposing people to Swamiji's video lectures and books as primary learning tools. At Abhyasa Ashram we have aspirant training, not teacher training. Our approach to training is mostly individual or small group coaching, as has been traditionally taught for thousands of years, and as I was guided personally by Swami Rama. Aspirants with various degrees of experience naturally teach or coach others within the context of their own lives and modes of service.

### *Stay home and meditate*

After Swami Rama left us in the physical sense, one of his earlier instructions to me has served as a fresh and constant reminder. A business executive from Mumbai was trying to get me

to come there to do seminars for other executives. He invited me two or three times and I declined. Then he wrote me a formal letter and said he had arranged a conference room and wanted me to choose one of two weekends he had specified. My sense was that I should gracefully decline this invitation too and remain in Rishikesh. But, wondering if I was possibly wrong, and should go, I forwarded the letter to Swami Rama and asked if I should go there. His advice was very clear. He advised that “ You would be disappointed,” and that I should “stay home and meditate.” I felt a great sense of relief that he had validated my instincts.

Now, many years later, his advice is still guiding. It reminds me to spend minimal time traveling to other cities and countries. I sometimes travel to a small number of places where there are a handful of sincere sadhakas whom I know personally, but mostly stay home in our Abhyasa Ashram. I try to keep life simple and serve the few who feel inclined to come our way.

### *Yoga and Religion*

Swami Rama has repeatedly taught that yoga is not religion. He explains that although yoga principles can be found in religion, yoga itself is not religion. I have found it difficult at times to encounter strong criticism for promoting an Eastern religion; this comes from conservative Christians in the USA. Most often this has come through internet, either by email or through social media platforms. Interestingly, there are at least four Christian churches within two blocks of our ashram and we have never had any trouble whatsoever. They do not bother us, and we do not bother them. At the same time, however, people of Christian roots sometimes find their way here to learn how to integrate meditation into their spiritual life.

Strong criticism has also come from people who self-identify as Hindu who complain that we do not call the practices Hinduism, and do not identify ourselves as practicing Hindus. It seems that words like yoga and dharma ought to be universal, but they are not widely accepted as such, at least not yet. Swami Rama explains that yoga is in religion, but that religion is not in yoga. He writes in *Path of Fire and Light*, “I hope that one day this science will be popular and available for the true seekers in modern society.” I hope that he is right, but I know I may not live to see it in this lifetime. Yet, we all do what we can do to serve the few, including people of all religious orientations.

### *What we bring to the party*

Each of us who have the grace-filled gift of having direct guidance from Swami Rama brings our own unique qualities to the party of life and service of others. Swami Rama was raised throughout childhood by a great master of the Himalayas. Others were trained from early childhood in Sanskrit and the traditional texts. Still others had the good fortune to have advanced training from some of the most prestigious psychology and medical training programs in the world. All of these are special gifts that allow our tradition to flow through a wide variety of individuals in service of humanity.

However, there are others of us who are able to serve *not* because we *have* such qualities and backgrounds, but because we do *not*, yet, can speak and serve others from the perspective of experience coming from the persistent treading of the path of those who have come before us and have shown the way. This is what Swami Rama did for me, and then asked me to do, to help

*Witness Everything*

others from such experience. My heart overflows with gratitude and love for his presence and guidance, and the grace of direct experience from which to share.

Sometimes I wish I could do more for people, though I have to remind myself that the process works for others exactly the same as it has for me, and as Swami Rama said it worked for him. That is, everybody needs to faithfully do the practices, and from that effort the obstacles will be removed by grace of Self and grace of guru. The job of the external teacher is to guide another to find the guru within, according to Swami Rama.