

Foreword

It wasn't what I'd expected. I'd spoken at many yoga centers before; they were often large, empty rooms where students could unroll their hatha mats and launch into a series of stretches and twists imported from India. When I'd show up to lecture, folding chairs would materialize from hidden closets and an audience would listlessly filter in from the dirty city streets.

The American Meditation Institute, it turned out, was more like a beautiful estate than a yoga business. The grounds were magnificent, colored with an astonishing array of flowers and flowering shrubs. A sparkling pond brimming with minnows and a small, man-made waterfall interrupted the rolling green lawn. This oasis twenty minutes outside Albany, New York was a paradise of tranquility and fragrant blossoms.

The AMI building was friendly and clean, scented with the inviting aroma of vegetarian cooking and filled with co-founder Jenness Cortez Perlmutter's paintings of country landscapes, scenes from Indian mythology and especially—everywhere—horses. Jenness herself was tall and lean, exuding both warmth and intelligence. Her husband and fellow AMI founder Leonard Perlmutter had a thick beard that made him look like an Indian *baba* who'd just come down out of the Himalayas after years of meditation. He appeared very serious but the moment he began to speak, not only his vast

knowledge of the world's mystical traditions but also his totally disarming sense of humor were immediately evident.

I didn't for a moment feel I was visiting a yoga "institute." Len and Jen made all of us at the seminar feel like family. Their emphasis on yoga as a preeminently practical form of spiritual discipline kept their teaching very real, grounded and relevant to their students' everyday lives.

The Perlmutter are students of Swami Rama of the Himalayas, the yogi who revolutionized our understanding of human physiology back in the 1970s. Before Swami Rama allowed researchers at the Menninger Institute in Topeka, Kansas to hook him up to their EEGs, EKGs and temperature monitors, Western scientists had never believed India's yogis could do what the Indians always claimed they could, controlling every component of their physical bodies to the extent that they could appear virtually lifeless according to the electronic printouts, yet remain fully conscious. The swami repeatedly demonstrated full mastery of his autonomic nervous system, which until then most Western doctors had assumed was impossible.

I studied with Swami Rama for some years when he founded a graduate program in Eastern Studies here in the United States in the 1980s. Swamiji complained that the experiments the researchers conducted at Menninger were comparatively trivial. The real value of yoga lay not so much in stopping one's heartbeat or regulating the temperature in individual cells in his body (skills he actually demonstrated there) but in its deep and transforming effect on human consciousness. That, unfortunately, the scientists didn't know how to measure.

Swami Rama left his body permanently in November, 1996. He died like a yogi, having announced the exact moment of his departure earlier that day. He sat up in a yoga posture and, in full consciousness, vacated the body we'd come to love so well. He taught us how to live and, in his final moments, showed us how to die.

Swami Rama's work lives on through the efforts of his

students. Swamiji strongly encouraged the Perlmutter to teach. His blessings have transformed their originally modest home into one of the finest yoga centers in North America. *The Heart and Science of Yoga* is the story of yoga as they live it, in the vibrant tradition of Swami Rama of the Himalayas.

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