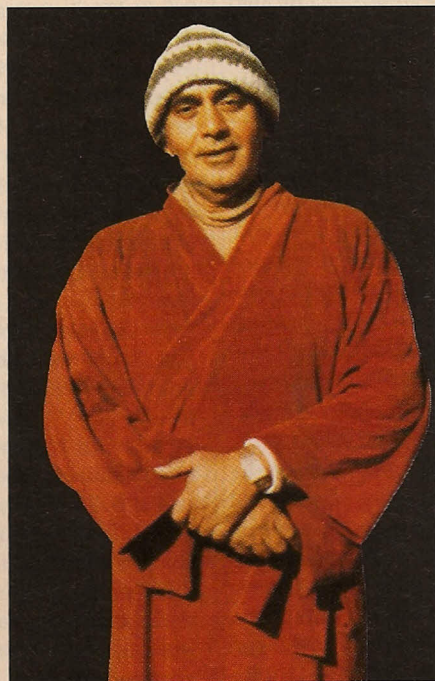


# THE CASE *against* SWAMI RAMA *of the* HIMALAYAS



*Since the early 1970s, women have been claiming sexual abuse at the hands of this prominent spiritual teacher. No one had thoroughly investigated, until journalist Katharine Webster decided to spend two years researching their allegations.*

*Here is her report.*

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*Unpurified ego is an evil which obstructs one's own progress. But the purified ego is a means in discriminating real Self from not-self—real Self from mere self. No one can expand his consciousness if he remains egotistical. Those who build boundaries around themselves because of their ego problems invariably create suffering for themselves.*

— Swami Rama, *Living With the Himalayan Masters*

**C**arolyn,\* an old friend, called me collect. She sounded unhappy, so I made plans to visit her at the Himalayan International Institute of Yoga Science and Philosophy in Honesdale, Pennsylvania, where she had been a resident for more than four years. But a deeper anxiety also motivated my visit: I'd heard a rumor that several women, exmembers of the Institute, were taking Carolyn's guru to court on charges of sexual misconduct. And I feared that Carolyn—young, beautiful, idealistic, and worshipful of Swami Rama, the Institute's founder and spiritual leader—could be vulnerable to such exploitation.

During my weekend visit, Carolyn and I took long walks on the Institute's wooded grounds while talking about her compulsive eating patterns and her disastrous relationships with men suggested as possible husbands by Swami Rama. In the presence of others, we spoke only of positive or spiritual matters, in the deliberately modulated tones all the residents used. When Carolyn had to work, I attended classes in hatha yoga or read. Together we ate superb vegetarian meals in the Institute's dining commons and chanted evening prayers. At some point, we ran into Swami Rama in a hallway. Tall and imposing, he had the sleek look of a successful man in his late 50s, at the peak of his power.

Finally I found an opportunity to broach the topic of the lawsuit with Carolyn. I told her what I'd heard, and that I wasn't sure the rumor was true—as a beginning student of yoga and meditation at the Institute's East West Books in New York City, I was reluctant to believe it myself. To my relief, I could detect no flash of recognition, guilt, fear, or anger in Carolyn's eyes. She listened calmly as I admitted that I'd worried she might be a victim. She thanked me, but assured me I had no reason for concern.

Years later, Carolyn told me that four years of discipleship under Swami Rama had taught her to be a successful liar.

**M**ost rapists threaten women with physical violence. But the victims of what Jungian analyst Peter Rutter, M.D., has termed "sex in the forbidden zone" (in his book of the same name) submit to sexual advances because of a powerful psychological threat. Many people, including the victims themselves, have trouble understanding how damaging such sexual contact can be, because the women are adults and no one is holding a gun to their heads.

As Rutter explains in his book, a sexual relationship between a man in a position of power—doctor, psychologist, mentor, or priest—and a woman who is dependent on him—as patient, student, client, or troubled soul—almost always involves an element of coercion and a betrayal of trust. Such a relationship, instead of giving the woman the healing or validation she seeks, reinforces her feeling that the only thing of value she has to offer a man with worldly power is her body.

In recent years, the harm caused to women by "sex in the forbidden zone" has been recognized in their codes of ethics by

\* Names with asterisks are pseudonyms.

most universities and professional associations, including the American Medical Association and the American Psychological Association. State licensing boards may take away a professional's license to practice if he (or she) is found guilty of "inappropriate sexual contact," which may include everything from verbal sexual innuendoes to a long-term sexual liaison with a client or patient. In some states, a patient has the right to sue her doctor or psychotherapist for malpractice even if she originally consented to sex, because people under psychological or medical treatment are considered too vulnerable and dependent to give free and full consent.

The Catholic Church may discipline a priest who has sex with a parishioner, not only because it violates his vow of celibacy, but because his parishioners must be able to confide in him without worrying that he will exploit their trust for his own gratification. Similarly, gurus in the Buddhist and Hindu traditions are supposed to be examples of self-mastery and right living.

But sexual contact between a guru and his disciples is not regulated by any professional association or religious hierarchy. In the United States, far from the strong cultural morality of the guru's country of origin, it is not regulated at all.

Within a sect the guru's authority is often absolute: He rules from the pinnacle of the institutional hierarchy. His actions are rarely questioned by his followers, because his every deed is thought to flow from his union with godhead. As an enlightened being, he is thought to be beyond the judgment of ordinary mortals, their laws and morality. He is held accountable only to the higher spiritual laws which he is uniquely able to comprehend. His American followers hear the spiritual teachings from his mouth, with his interpretation, and they rarely have the exposure to a variety of gurus which would teach them to be skeptical of their own guru.

Sexual contact between guru and their American disciples is not a new or rare phenomenon. Over the past 15 or 20 years, numerous spiritual teachers have admitted to, or been charged with, having sexually exploitative relationships with their female students. But the followers of such "enlightened" men are usually reluctant to find fault with them, since to do so could invalidate the students' own years of study and devotion. Instead they deny the experience of the "unenlightened" women who are the guru's victims. The victim's confusion and loss of trust are compounded when her community refuses to acknowledge her suffering.

Sex with a guru is a form of spiritual incest. In the mythology of the ashram, the guru is the all-powerful, all-knowing father and the disciples are his spiritual children. Many disciples come from alcoholic and dysfunctional families where they have learned how to deny emotional abuse directed against them or their siblings, in order to believe that their parents really love them and are acting in their best interests. Like incest victims, women who say they have been sexually abused by their gurus are sworn to silence by their abusers. They know, usually without being told, that if they break the taboo of silence they will be blamed for destroying their spiritual families and the "higher" good those families purportedly do in the world.

Carolyn says she spent years blaming herself and trying to rationalize away what she now regards as sexual abuse. It was years more before she felt she had the right to be angry at her spiritual family, the staff and residents of the Institute who, she says, denied the signs of abuse all around them. Only recently has she acknowledged her anger at Swami Rama. Now she says that those who have allowed the abuses to continue unchecked are responsible for destroying the Institute's integrity. Yet she is

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vulnerable to feeling revictimized every time her experience is denied or distorted.

Carolyn is not alone. Numerous former students say they left the Institute because they were sexually exploited by Swami Rama or knew someone who was. Most of the women who say they were abused by Swami Rama express feelings of fear, frustration, and betrayal. When they have contacted their friends and former colleagues at the Institute, they have been discounted as liars or labeled "emotionally disturbed." So far, none of their attempts to communicate their experiences has been met by official Institute willingness to investigate their charges.

The accumulated testimony of their personal experiences over the years exhibits a pattern typical of "sex in the forbidden zone," coupled with institutional mechanisms of defense and denial. Two women wrote statements which said they had discovered that Swami Rama was attempting to "seduce" both of them contemporaneously. Those statements are on file with the Cult Awareness Network (formerly the Citizen's Freedom Foundation) in New York. Several former students of Swami Rama's granted interviews to Patricia Ann Darling, Ph.D., about abuses that allegedly took place in Minneapolis, Chicago, New York City, and India, for a chapter in Darling's doctoral dissertation, *Turning East in the Twin Cities: Converts and Movements in the 1970s* (University of Minnesota, 1987).

The women's fears have aborted projects intended to expose possible exploitation to a wider audience. A producer for *60 Minutes* was reportedly unable to complete her documentary on Swami Rama when the women involved backed out and refused to appear on camera. The lawsuit I heard rumors about in New York City never materialized. The two women who wrote statements for the Cult Awareness Movement were among those involved: One stated she was a patient at the Institute's holistic health center in New York City, and the other stated she was 17 years old when Swami Rama initiated a sexual relationship with her. Patricia Trescelli, an attorney with Parker, Chapin, Flattau and Klimpel, agreed to consult with the women concerning possible legal action on a *pro bono* basis. But one by one, Trescelli says, the women backed down and decided not to pursue legal action.

Most of the former members of the Institute who agreed to be interviewed for this article were also afraid to have their identities revealed; they appear under pseudonyms, marked with an asterisk. Some were afraid of Institute retaliation; most were afraid of hurting their families, who in some cases do not know about the abuses the women suffered; still others were worried that their professional reputations would be harmed. But all of them, whether they appear here under a pseudonym or as background sources, understand that if this article provokes a libel suit they can be called to testify in court.

**S**wami Rama, whose legal name is Brij Keshore Kumar, was born in 1925 in Uttar Pradesh, according to his official biography, parts of which appeared in the March/April 1990 issue of *Yoga Journal*. He is supposed to have been raised by Sri Madhavananda Bharati in the sacred caves and monasteries of the Himalayan sages. At a young age, Swami Rama is supposed to have been appointed *shankaracharya* of Karvirpitham, an exalted spiritual post. He is also supposed to have graduated from a homeopathic medical school in India and studied at Hamburg University, the University of Utrecht, and Oxford University.

Swami Rama's claims to this spiritual background have been

questioned by some of his former students. Two of the guru's most devoted disciples left the Institute three years ago because they had learned while in India as part of an Institute tour group that parts of Swami Rama's official biography were fabricated. One of them, along with the other women from the tour group, attended the wedding of Swami Rama's son, although the guru is officially supposed to have been celibate since taking his swami's vows. Attempts to verify Swami Rama's educational back-

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ground have been unsuccessful, according to Vanessa Webber of the Cult Awareness Network.

Despite the questions about his background, there is no denying that Swami Rama made a terrific impact on Western thinking when he served as a research subject at the Menninger Foundation in Topeka, Kansas. During a series of biofeedback experiments in 1970 and 1971, Drs. Elmer and Alyce Green observed that Swami Rama could produce different brain waves at will, including theta and delta (sleep) waves, while remaining aware of his environment. He voluntarily stopped his heart from pumping blood for 17 seconds, and he reportedly demonstrated his telekinetic powers, moving a knitting needle with mental force.

The Greens' experiments caused a furor in the scientific community because they gave powerful support to autogenic biofeedback research, which 10 years earlier had begun demonstrating that body functions which had formerly been considered involuntary could be consciously controlled. A rash of articles featuring Swami Rama appeared in national magazines, including *Time*, *People*, and *Playboy*. His early American followers had been spiritual seekers of the counterculture who found their guru at his ashram on the banks of the sacred Ganges in Rishikesh, India. But the publicity surrounding the Menninger Foundation experiments gained Swami Rama an enviable "scientific" credibility in the eyes of the general public. He rapidly attracted a following that included many graduate and professional students.

Following on the wave of favorable publicity, Swami Rama founded the Himalayan Institute in Illinois in 1971. Its mission, according to the Articles of Incorporation, was "to make known to the members and people in general the real, synthetic, and harmonious view of world religions and philosophy in terms of modern scientific achievements and undertake researches for all around ethical, social, economical, and spiritual development of humanity to attain world peace, international integration, understanding, and spiritual awakening of the human race." Or, in the words of Rudolph Ballentine, M.D., president of the Himalayan Institute and Swami Rama's designated successor, "to

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take the wisdom of the ancients and couch it in terms that are intelligible to modern man."

From its beginnings 20 years ago, the Institute has expanded steadily to include some 25 branches and affiliated yoga and holistic health centers in the Midwest, the Northeast, Texas, California, and abroad. By 1977, the Institute was able to purchase the Honesdale ashram, a former Catholic seminary in the rural Pocono Mountains which now houses more than 100 residents and guests. Residents staff the Institute's administration, bookstores, and other small businesses, including Himalayan Publishers and Distributors and an elementary school.

The Institute's "scientific" approach to yoga has made it a success, attracting long-term spiritual disciples as well as large numbers of people who merely want a boost for their psychological or physical well-being. Most of the Institute's programs are open to the general public. Well-to-do New Yorkers flock to Honesdale on weekends for seminars in stress reduction, meditation, and diet and nutrition. Some stay longer, for a few weeks or months, in the Self-Transformation retreat program. The annual congress, held each June, offers a smorgasbord of lectures and "new age" workshops.

The Institute also offers a dizzying array of education programs, including a diploma program for hatha yoga teachers. The Institute used to offer an accredited masters program in Eastern Studies and Comparative Psychology through affiliation with the University of Scranton. The Combined Therapy program and the outpatient branches of the Institute for Holistic Medicine combine Western medicine, homeopathy, Eastern medicine, psychotherapy, nutrition, yoga, and meditation to treat people with a variety of physical and emotional problems. The Institute also offers instruction to counselors and psychotherapists in the application of yoga and meditation techniques to therapy. To judge by their price tags, these and other Institute programs must bring in a considerable income.

Yet the Institute's success comes at a high cost for many of those involved. Residents are expected to donate a large portion of their labor, and they must sacrifice personal freedoms and privacy. They are instructed to have "no emotional relationship inside or outside the Institute," and residential program directors are charged with monitoring disciples' behavior and attitudes to make sure they conform to Institute expectations. Long-term residents must get administration approval for any overnight absences; permission may be denied if their destination is judged inappropriate. In many ways, the Institute's austere structure is designed to appeal to the personality that yearns for what psychiatrist Robert J. Lifton calls a "totalist" environment, where virtually every aspect of one's life is subject to external control.

Allegations of sexual abuse by Swami Rama have followed on the heels of the Institute's success like a shadow. Megan,\* a former graduate student in the Eastern Studies program, wrote a letter to the Jesuit administration of the University of Scranton saying that Swami Rama was subjecting women students to sexual exploitation. The Institute's program is no longer accredited by the University of Scranton.

Dr. Elmer Green says that he and his wife have heard from a number of women who said they were sexually exploited by Swami Rama. "If someone is a saint, celibacy would be his normal condition," Dr. Green comments. "A lot of people have confused the siddhis—the powers to control body, emotions, and mind—with spirituality. But the siddhis can be an ego trap.... A saint is a person who does what he says." Rather than being a saint, according to Green, Swami Rama is an advanced yogi and

"a mortal with some ego problems."

Carolyn was raised Catholic, and during high school she explored Transcendental Meditation, Zen Buddhism, Hinduism, and the "Jesus freak" movement. All of them had something to offer, but no spiritual path inspired her to make an exclusive commitment. The daughter of an alcoholic, she longed for guidance from a spiritual authority figure. She took a meditation class at the alternative high school program she attended, and one evening her teachers invited her to a lecture by their guru, Swami Rama, who was visiting the Chicago area. They introduced her to the guru afterwards, and she remembers he made a fuss over her, slapping her cheek lightly and calling her a good girl.

Carolyn went away to college at the end of that year, as her parents expected. But after two unsatisfying years, she left college and returned to the Chicago area. She renewed her acquaintance with her former meditation teachers and started taking classes in Glenview, Illinois, at the Institute's original headquarters. There she learned Swami Rama's style of "super-conscious" meditation, which she describes as a basic, impersonal training in mental concentration.

In March 1978, she says, Swami Rama came to Glenview and initiated her. Given a mantra but little guidance, Carolyn dutifully performed her assigned practices, hoping that Swami Rama's "scientific" approach to yoga would eventually yield results. From her childhood Carolyn had been steeped in Catholic faith and educated in scientific skepticism; now it seemed the Institute could help her harmonize these two seemingly contradictory ways of perceiving the world. At about the same time, Carolyn was accepted into the residential program at East West Books Chicago, the Institute's downtown branch. The program seemed to provide the ideal family she'd never had, where everyone shared her values and spiritual goals.

In May, Swami Rama visited the area again. Carolyn says he called her out to Glenview for a special appointment, at which he invited her to come live and work at his new ashram in Honesdale—and told her he would waive the usual residential program fees. When she shared her news with the other residents at East West Books, they told her she should feel honored: She had been chosen, while long-time devotees had been denied the privilege. A few weeks later she moved to Honesdale. Once there, Carolyn devoted herself to her yoga practices and threw herself into her assigned jobs.

After she had lived in Honesdale for a year, Swami Rama started promising to make her his appointments secretary. She was thrilled; it was commonly believed at the Institute that the fastest way to reach enlightenment was to spend as much time as possible in the presence of the guru. At the same time, she felt anxious, because she'd seen how severe Swami Rama could be with those closest to him.

Meanwhile, Carolyn says, Swami Rama began singling her out for special attention. He would call her to his office for a private audience, and as she hung anxiously on his words he would paint a flattering picture of her future with the Institute. She recalls that he would repeat a series of affirmations and commands in a hypnotic monotone: She had done very well organizing the book distribution operation, Carolyn says he would tell her. Since she had taken over, everything had been put in order. Perfect. That was why he wanted her to be his secretary. She would start with handling the appointments and then she would make his plane reservations, schedule lecture tours. In a few

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months time she would handle his bank account, income taxes, everything. Become more involved with the projects of the ashram—seminars, residents, the patient program—in time she would be in charge of the whole thing. They would travel together to England. He would take her to the Orient—Japan and India. She would live with him in the house he was buying. And she would help him write books.

After a couple of months of this special attention, Carolyn says, Swami Rama came to visit her one day at the book distribution office in Honesdale center. After dismissing the other workers, she says, he repeated the familiar litany, but this time he slipped in a new message. She recalls that he said they would become very close, their bodies would come together, and then they would part. During that time, neither of them would see any other, and she should never tell anyone. Then, later on, when the right man came along, she would marry and be very happy.

Carolyn remembers being amazed: Could Swami Rama possibly be talking about sex? Hadn't he taken vows of celibacy? Gurus were supposed to have conquered their desires, but in the spiritual literature they were often portrayed as contradictory, tricking their disciples into enlightenment. Carolyn rationalized: Swamiji was her guru, so even though the prospect of having sex with him seemed morally wrong and physically revolting, he must be doing it for her own good. "I thought, 'Maybe it's the only way he can break through some stubborn barrier in my ego. Or maybe he needs to have sex just to release energy so he can meditate better. Anyway, he said that our relationship would be exclusive, I'd be like a spiritual courtesan. Maybe it's an honor that this great yogi asked me of all his students to serve him in this way. He must see something special in me.'" At bottom, however, she believed her feelings didn't matter. Everyone said you had to surrender to the guru, so she would simply have to follow through with whatever he ordered her to do.

In August, Carolyn says, Swami Rama told her to meet him in New York City for the next step of her spiritual training. He promised her he'd set up a complete, personalized yoga program for her there—a prescribed diet, special yoga postures and meditation practices—as well as a game plan for her higher education and future career. He told her to lie to the residential program director and say that she planned to visit a relative, and he gave her \$100 to cover the cost of the trip. She says he arranged for her to meet him at the Gramercy Park Hotel and instructed her not to call him Swami in public. After they reached his hotel suite, he talked with her briefly, Carolyn says, and then he announced that now they would go to bed. After he had, as she describes it, "had sex on my body," she took a blanket into the other room and slept on the floor. Early the next morning, she says, he announced to her that she was going to leave; he never set up the promised program. She walked around New York City for hours, until it was time for her bus to return to Honesdale.

During the next few months, Carolyn says, Swami Rama bade her visit him in his private quarters once every couple of weeks, either after lunch or after evening prayers; he also made it her job to buy condoms. Swami Rama, she says, would extol his own sexual abilities but tell her she was bad at making love. She says he instructed her in how to give him pleasure and admonished her to always tell him that she had received pleasure, even though she never did. Carolyn says she experienced their sexual encounters as brief and rough, and that she performed her sexual duties mechanically: "I numbed myself in order to survive."

Swami Rama made Carolyn his appointments secretary in

August also. But she says his attitude toward her underwent a dramatic change; he began to make her a target for his anger, issuing contradictory orders and then screaming at her for her incompetence in front of the other secretaries and disciples and gossiping about her behind her back. She became paralyzed by her fear of angering him. In three months, Carolyn says, she gained 20 pounds.

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In mid-autumn, the day came for Swami Rama's annual trip to India. His devotees hovered near the ashram's entrance, hoping for final instructions or a blessing from the guru. Carolyn felt important, entitled to be there because she was one of his secretaries. As the other disciples looked on with envy, Swami Rama called her aside for a final, intimate word: She should work on herself, he reportedly told her—lose some weight and learn to admire herself.

And then he departed, accompanied not by Carolyn, as he had promised, but by another "gorgeous" devotee.

In my interviews with current and former members of the Institute, I heard an almost unvarying litany of beliefs about Swami Rama's abilities. Many of those beliefs are based on Hindu and Buddhist teachings about the nature of the guru.

Swami Rama is supposed to have freed himself from the bonds of karma. His disciples generally agree that the only reason his soul still inhabits a physical body is because he wants to help others achieve liberation from maya, the realm of illusion. In his enlightened state, they believe, he could never commit any selfish acts which would create new karmic burdens.

Dr. Ballentine, the Institute's president and director of the Combined Therapy Program, explains that human beings have the potential to do "all kinds of things, like move our bodies at will from one place to another, or be aware of what people are thinking on the other side of the earth, or inner states of consciousness that take us to the future and the past." The yogis, he says, have demonstrated these abilities in the past and continue to do so. But the Institute does not teach the mastery of such powers in its programs, instead focusing on yoga practices with more immediate practical application.

Swami Rama has a reputation among his followers as an incredible psychologist who uses his insights to help others. His students believe he is able to read minds and manipulate physical reality with his advanced yogic powers; thus they believe he can heal sickness with the power of the "superconscious" mind. His disciples believe he knows them better than they know themselves, and that if they want to achieve their spiritual goals they should do exactly as he says. Obedience to the guru's commands is implicitly expected of all long-term residents; former students

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describe him walking through the main dining room and ordering one person to move to the New York branch, another to change jobs. In private sessions, exdisciples say, Swami Rama has arranged marriages and instructed disciples to break off relationships.

Exmembers say that Swami Rama also uses his psychological insights to manipulate people. Many of them say they feared his wrath when they were disciples, and several still believe he has the power to inflict harm or illness on them from a distance. Each of the women I interviewed described how he would discern her particular needs and self-doubts and manipulate her spiritual beliefs or naïveté in order to exploit her sexually—he has an uncanny ability to suit his approach to each victim, they say.

Pandit Rajmani Tigunait is the resident spiritual director of the Honesdale ashram, as well as a member of the Institute's teaching staff. He says that Swami Rama has been his guru since he was a child in India, and that he came to the U.S. at Swami Rama's request to head up the Honesdale ashram. Rajmani explains the basic goals of the Institute's tradition of yoga: "The most important part of the practice is nonattachment." Swamis, he explains, are renunciates who take vows of abstinence which include giving up sex, wine, and red meat, as well as other stimulants to the physical senses. A swami, or monk, is supposed to be "one who is master of oneself: senses, body, mind." He must also vow that he will not harm any living being.

But Swami Rama's disciples do not hold him to these standards. In order to believe in his perfection, they must rationalize behavior that others would judge to be tyrannical, cruel, or self-indulgent. According to exmembers, Swami Rama often acts in ways his disciples find humiliating, but they tell each other he is humbling their stubborn egos to help them reach enlightenment faster. He reportedly smokes cigarettes, watches television for hours every day, and gossips, but his disciples rationalize this nonabstinent behavior: "Oh, Swamiji just smokes to bring himself down to the earth plane," or, "The TV is on incessantly just to give the student one more distraction to challenge his ability to maintain yogic balance," or, "All the stories Swamiji tells about other people are just to give the disciple the opportunity to develop objectivity and not get caught up in meaningless gossip."

Dr. Ballentine says it is "presumptuous" to judge whether or not someone is perfected. He and Pandit Rajmani say that a guru is "that which dispels darkness." "The real guru is within," Dr. Ballentine says, "that still small voice within you." It is a mistake to judge the external guru's worthiness by his behavior; instead, the student should look inside and determine whether that person is helping dispel the darkness of her ignorance.

A guru has the wisdom of experience and the ancient teachings, so he can provide guidance, Dr. Ballentine says, but students should "judge every [practice] on the basis of your own experience." The teachings contained in the sacred texts cannot play any meaningful part in judging who is a good guru and who is not: "How could they? I mean, he's giving you the teachings and you're going to use the teachings to evaluate him? You're bound to get mixed up. . . . I just don't know that it makes sense to go run around trying to evaluate other people, when you haven't evaluated yourself."

Swami Rama is held by his disciples to be a kind of god: He makes up the rules of the game, he can change them at will, and he cannot be judged by them. Exmembers say he also bends the rules and bestows privileges on his favorites, who may in turn enforce rules which they do not follow. This seemingly whimsical

application of standards demoralized many of the exmembers I spoke with and led many to resent the members of Swami Rama's inner circle. Both women and men say they blamed themselves and their own spiritual obtuseness when they repeatedly failed to discern and follow the shifting rules.

A system that rewards a particular behavior or person and then arbitrarily ignores or punishes that same behavior or person can quickly lead even healthy individuals to develop profound anxiety and uncertainty—the antithesis of self-confidence. Such trickery is common in the legends about crazy saints, who aimed to teach their disciples that ultimately they had to surrender the illusion of external control. But it is also common in the thought-control techniques of totalitarian states. Surrender only leads to enlightenment if the "guru within" is strong and well-developed. Many of Swami Rama's followers are still young and naïve, unskilled in comprehending and interpreting their own "inner experience"—and they entrust their spiritual yearnings to his care. A system that encourages such vulnerable individuals to give up their own "egotistical" judgment to the arbitrary whims of one person is one of the key features of a totalitarian organization, or "cult."

**T**erry\* and Brian\* say they were recruited into the Himalayan Institute's inner circle for their wealth and social connections. Both came from prominent Midwestern families; each had an alcoholic parent, and they now believe they were seeking not only spiritual growth, but a strong parental figure. Shortly after they started studying with Pandit Usharbudh Arya at the Meditation Center in Minneapolis, he introduced them to his guru, Swami Rama. The guru spoiled them, they say, calling them his spiritual son and daughter, and soon invited them to come live in Pennsylvania.

They resided in their own house in Honesdale, unencumbered by the strict rules of the residential program. Swami Rama frequently invited them to parties in his private quarters, where they say he entertained them with funny stories and racy gossip. They rarely had to do the menial chores performed by other residents; Brian was encouraged to study the sacred texts and write a book, while Terry got training as a Montessori teacher and started a school for the Institute's children. "We were Brahmins in the Institute's caste system," Terry recalls.

But in 1980, they say, they returned to Honesdale after a brief vacation to learn that their friend Rose\* had allegedly been sexually assaulted by Swami Rama during their absence and had fled the Institute for New York City. Rose, they explain, was not a disciple of Swami Rama, but had been invited by family members in the Institute's administration to come to Honesdale for medical treatment. According to the story Terry and Brian say Rose later told them, late one night Swami Rama tapped at the door of her room and then walked in on her. He reportedly sat down on a chair next to her bed and proceeded to make sexual advances. Rose said that she struggled, but the guru physically overpowered her, throwing himself on top of her on the bed and forcing her to perform oral sex. Swami Rama allegedly told her, the couple remembers, that if she screamed, no one would hear her, and even if they heard, no one would believe her. When he was finished, Rose told them, Swami Rama left her room, saying he'd be back the next day.

Rose told Brian and Terry that she was afraid to seek help from the family members who'd invited her to the Institute—they were unquestioningly loyal to Swami Rama—and she knew no one else there. She was afraid to stay in her room, which had

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no lock on the door, or to use the hall telephone, because all calls had to be routed through the main switchboard. And she was afraid to leave in her old car because a freezing rainstorm had covered all the roads with ice. After a sleepless night, she said, she snuck out at 5:00 or 6:00 a.m. and drove to Brian and Terry's empty house in Honesdale. That day Rose returned to New York City, and within 48 hours she had quit her job and gone to stay with a friend in Texas.

Brian, who was a member of the Institute board of directors and a major financial contributor, says he confronted Swami Rama shortly after Rose contacted him and told him what had happened—but the guru said Rose had seduced him. Brian didn't believe his teacher, and he spoke with several other Institute administrators and board members about Rose's claim of abuse. He also sent out a letter resigning from the board. Initially, Brian says, most of the other directors responded with concern. However, after Swami Rama talked with them, they either told Brian and Terry that the guru should be allowed a "mistake," or they shunned the couple altogether.

Swami Rama called a meeting to defend himself. At the meeting, Brian says, Dr. Ballentine presented letters from another woman, Karen,\* who also claimed to have been sexually exploited by Swami Rama. By that time, Brian recalls, the other directors had adopted the line that famous and powerful men were always subject to such vicious rumors, and that the women's stories were ludicrous and unbelievable. Brian says he refused to tell Rose's story in such an atmosphere. Instead, he told the other board members that he believed Rose, and that they should investigate the incident for themselves.

As the couple started making arrangements to move to England, they received another blow. A pearl necklace that Brian had bought from Swami Rama as an "investment" was appraised at roughly one-third of the \$100,000 he had paid for it. Brian says he felt betrayed, but the knowledge that Swami Rama had financially exploited him made it easier for the couple to cut their ties to the Institute. Brian sued Swami Rama, and eventually the guru settled out of court for the full amount. Brian says he did not realize at the time that a conviction for fraud could have lost the Institute its federal tax-exempt status as an educational institution.

Meanwhile Janet,\* a Honesdale woman who worked as the couple's babysitter and housekeeper at the time, says she received threatening phone calls at Brian and Terry's house, asking if she was alone with the children. For a time, she says, she considered getting a pistol to carry to work. Brian also received a threat, he says: a note telling him he "might get hurt," which was accidentally shoved under the door of a lawyer who rented the office next door to his in a Honesdale office building.

Rose spent the next six months moving from place to place, terrified that the Institute network would track her down. Brian and Terry say her family members at the Institute harassed her by mail and by telephone, with accusations that she had "a habit of inducing this sort of behavior from men."

Years later, Rose contacted Patricia Trescelli, hoping to support a lawsuit by the other women working with Trescelli and hoping to press charges against Swami Rama in her own sexual assault. But Trescelli says she had to discourage her. Under New York state law, according to Trescelli, a woman who does not get a medical exam or report the incident to police within a limited period of time has little chance of obtaining a conviction.

Terry, who is now a practicing psychotherapist, says she believes Swami Rama's behavior is "compulsive—he can't help it." She loved him like "a second father," she says, "and the real

tragedy is that this is how our relationship ended. I like to believe that somewhere inside of him, he is the good person I believed him to be. It is sad for him, and for those who cared and were so deeply hurt by him, that his behavior has been allowed to continue with such devastating results to people just looking for help." In such a situation, she says, the whole system becomes sick and no one can see the light: "There's no truth

***When confronted with allegations of sexual abuse by Swami Rama, Pandit Rajmani, resident spiritual director at the Himalayan Institute, replies: "Believing in such stories means disbelieving in myself. Because that's my whole life. . . . Even if I found out—how can I find out? Because I do not want to find out. There's no need for finding out, if I know it is completely wrong."***

allowed; it's a no-talk rule."

Each time the Institute's top professionals have been confronted with complaints that Swami Rama is abusing his position, institutional mechanisms of denial have come to the guru's aid. Karen, the woman whose claims were ridiculed at the meeting where Swami Rama and the other directors responded to Brian's charges, was one of the first exmembers to confront top Institute administrators. In the mid-1970s, she and her husband George,\* both students of Swami Rama, traveled to India and stayed at the guru's ashram in Rishikesh. When another married couple who were their friends and fellow students left the ashram suddenly, Karen wrote to them asking why. She never received a response.

Several months later, the two couples met up again. Karen and George say their friends told them that the woman had been pressured to have sex with Swami Rama even after their marriage, which the guru had arranged. Ultimately, the woman had revealed the liaison to her husband. When the couple confided their resulting marital troubles to Karen and George, Karen confirmed her friend's experience by revealing that she, too, had had a supposedly exclusive and spiritual sexual relationship with Swami Rama before her marriage.

Fortified by their mutual discovery, Karen says, the two couples undertook to inform their fellow students back home in Minneapolis. They wrote letters to Pandit Usharbudh Arya, their teacher and head of the Meditation Center there, as well as a dozen other people, warning that Swami Rama was a fraud. Shortly after they returned to the U.S., Karen and George say that they and all their correspondents received a bizarre, defamatory letter containing an implicit death threat.

Meanwhile, the couple says, they discovered more evidence of illicit activity. A former disciple of their acquaintance wrote and signed a statement alleging that he had procured illegal drugs—including mescaline, psilocibin, and LSD—for Swami Rama in 1971. The two couples referred to this statement in a petition to the FBI; they asked the FBI to investigate the threat letter and argued that Swami Rama could be deported by the Immigration and Naturalization Service as an undesirable alien on four

## The Case Against Swami Rama

grounds: possession of narcotics, sexual immorality, fraudulent financial dealings, and "affliction with [a] psychopathic personality." Friends of the two couples set up a "truth booth" outside the entrance of the Institute's first annual congress in 1976.

The FBI has confirmed the existence of a file documenting the agency's investigation, but at the time of publication the file had not yet been released under the Freedom of Information Act. According to Karen and George, no legal action resulted.

Following on the heels of Karen's and her friend's revelations, several other women and men left the Meditation Center in Minneapolis. Pandit Arya reportedly alternated between disbelieving and believing the growing number of his women students who told him that Swami Rama had sexually harassed or abused them. But ultimately he chose to believe Swami Rama. The chapter on the Meditation Center in Patricia Darling's dissertation details the growth of the center and the subsequent disillusionment of many of Pandit Arya's students with his new guru. Arya, however, says that much of Darling's information is inaccurate.

Of all the Institute's swamis and teachers, Pandit Arya is by far the most scholarly. Trained to meditate and educated in the scriptures from early childhood, he was able to translate and interpret any of the 20,000 verses from the Vedas by the age of 13, according to a biographical pamphlet put out by the Meditation Center. After teaching, studying, and traveling throughout India and Europe, he came to the University of Minnesota in the 1960s, where he taught Sanskrit and Indian religions. There he founded the Meditation Center.

In 1969, Pandit Arya met Swami Rama, who gave him "one of the highest meditation initiations," in which he experienced himself "as a being of light." The Meditation Center became affiliated with the Himalayan Institute, and eventually Pandit Arya achieved his dream of having his own ashram in India, when Swami Rama made him president of his Rishikesh ashram. He is also head of the Institute's Holistic Studies (formerly Eastern Studies) program and has written a number of scholarly books on yoga philosophy.

Pandit Arya has many profound and beautiful things to say about his relationship to his guru when I interview him at the Divya Jyoti yoga center in Napa, California, in May 1989. He says it is a relationship that goes beyond religions, the purest relationship possible, "the relationship of water flowing from a hill and filling a hollow at the bottom—the hollow has nothing to give in return, but only to accept that grace in gratitude."

Pandit Arya is not so reluctant as Dr. Ballentine to articulate how one can recognize a worthy guru. "By their fruits you shall know them," he says, paraphrasing the Bible. "If the guru's instruction leads to a deeper peace, freedom from conflict, a deepening of meditation, . . . harmony in relationships—all of these. Relationships are the first test of spirituality. Wisdom must show itself in action and lovingness." Pandit Arya radiates calm as he speaks. He warns against relying too heavily on the inner voice: "When we look for the guru within, we only end up finding our own *samskaras*—vagaries of the unconscious mind are mistaken for directions from the superconscious. Is it not better to follow someone who has charted the path?"

When I ask Pandit Arya about the allegations of sexual abuse, he admits that he was very disturbed when he first heard them. He also has the integrity to admit that if they were true, it would be very terrible, a violation of the teaching that says one should treat all women as daughters. But for a man of Pandit Arya's background and beliefs, the relationship with one's guru is more momentous than any merely temporal bond. He cannot disbe-

lieve his guru.

Minneapolis was the site of another Institute-related scandal in 1981. On January 24 of that year, a jury awarded \$15,000 in actual damages and \$50,000 in punitive damages to Barbara Marston, who had sued psychologist Phillip Nuernberger for engaging in "sexually intimate behavior" with her during therapy sessions. Shortly after Marston filed her suit in 1978, Nuernberger moved to Honesdale, where he is currently a member of the Institute's teaching staff. Exmembers say he has counseled patients in the Combined Therapy Program, although he lost his license to practice psychology in Minnesota in 1979. According to Marston's attorney, Philip W. Getts, his client never recovered the \$50,000 in punitive damages Nuernberger owed her, because Pennsylvania is one of the few states that does not allow the court to garnish wages.

I ask Dr. Ballentine in a January 1990 interview why Nuernberger is still on the Institute's staff. Dr. Ballentine, who says he studied psychology at the Sorbonne and completed his training in psychiatry at Louisiana State University, defends Nuernberger. He explains that Nuernberger was just a graduate student, inexperienced and lacking in professional judgment, when the incident with Marston occurred: "At a time when he was learning to be a therapist and thought that someone is asking for you to reach out, you reach out and you touch them and you let them see your feelings, and I think that was very bad." Marston, however, testified that Nuernberger had "hugged and kissed her and fondled her breasts," according to an article in the *Minneapolis Tribune* (Jan. 24, 1981).

Dr. Ballentine says he has good reason to think that Marston "was very anxious for [Nuernberger] to go further, and he didn't. And there is a statement, 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.'" Marston's lawsuit, he says, was an act of revenge. He says that Nuernberger's one mistake has "ruined his life, in essence, which is really too bad."

What Dr. Ballentine does not mention is that a second jury judged Nuernberger guilty of unprofessional conduct in his treatment of Nancy E. Williams, another former client, on February 17, 1981. Williams, however, did not sue Nuernberger himself; she sued the clinic where he worked, alleging that the clinic "knew or should have known" that Nuernberger was engaging in harmful sexual activity while treating her. Although the jury entered a judgment against Nuernberger, it also found that the clinic was not liable for his actions, so Williams failed to recover damages.

Nor does Dr. Ballentine mention that in 1977 Nuernberger was formally reprimanded by the Minnesota Board of Psychology for unethical practices stemming from his relationship with a third woman patient. According to the stipulation he signed with the Board's Ethics Review Panel, Nuernberger admitted that he terminated a counseling relationship with "Victoria S." during the third session in order to enter into a "personal relationship . . . such relationship to include intimate sexual contact."

**M**egan\* started the Institute's graduate program in Eastern studies in the fall of 1982. She opted to forego pursuing a Ph.D. in clinical psychology because the Institute's program allowed her to earn a degree in a related field while studying Eastern philosophy and meditation with Pandit Rajmani, who had initiated her in Chicago. During her first eight months at the Institute, Megan was able to pursue her studies, but her situation altered



## The Case Against Swami Rama

dramatically when Swami Rama returned to take up summer residence.

Megan recalls that in one of her first encounters with Swami Rama, she watched as he humiliated a quiet, withdrawn woman resident. The swami, she says, bragged to a crowd of disciples that the woman would do whatever he told her, then put his dog's collar and leash around her neck and walked her back and forth, while the others laughed. Megan says she squelched an urge to speak out, instead deciding, like most of the Institute's residents, to suspend judgment so she could "understand and learn" from this "great master." But during the next three weeks, she says, she saw the swami mistreating his disciples, especially the women, on a daily basis—yelling at them, ridiculing them, ordering them around, and occasionally kicking a woman in the buttocks when she was on her hands and knees weeding.

On one occasion, she says, Swami Rama ordered all the women disciples to weed out some roots around his new cabin, telling them they were rooting out their *samskaras*. He laughed, Megan says, and told her that the women didn't know what they were weeding. Later, many of the women broke out in head-to-toe swelling and rashes from what had in fact been poison ivy roots. When she questioned him, Megan says, he became angry and dismissed the women's suffering, saying that a little poison ivy could be good for them.

Yet the women never seemed to complain about such treatment, Megan says. On the contrary, they sought opportunities to serve the guru's every whim, or even to be abused by him: Megan remembers one woman saying she wished the guru would kick her. In daily lectures by the Institute's teachers and in conversation with Swami Rama's disciples, she frequently heard that Swami Rama had a "greater purpose that we couldn't understand," and that he was "beyond morality and judgment."

Shortly after Pandit Rajmani introduced her to Swami Rama, Megan says, the guru called her into his private quarters and told her that they'd been together in a past life, that he'd waited to meet her again in this lifetime, and that now they were reunited. During this spiel, she says, he put his hands on her buttocks, but she told him she wasn't buying it. He backed off, Megan says, while telling her that sex wasn't necessary—she could be his special student. After a bit, she was inclined to dismiss his behavior as a joke or a "test."

But as she spent more time around Swami Rama and his inner circle, Megan says, the guru subjected her to a barrage of sexual harassment. At the same time, she says, he offered her money and told her he wanted to put her in his will. He bragged about his sumptuous homes in India and Japan and about his shopping sprees for designer clothes, she says. He told her he was writing a book of poetry for her, and he offered to find her a husband. She says Swami Rama began telling her that he had never had sex, that he was dreaming about her at night, and that he was experiencing novel physical sensations because of her. She began to believe that this man who might have been spiritual at one time was now suffering from feelings he couldn't control.

Megan remembers asking him why he was trying all this on her. She couldn't make sense out of his behavior, because she found it impossible to believe that it was really about sex—and she repeatedly told him so. Megan says her feelings told her that something was amiss, but because of the social environment, she began to entertain the notion that the Swami's motives might not be what they appeared to be, and that his attempts at a con job might be a spiritual test. Through her sympathy for what appeared to be his plight, and disarmed by his jokes, she says she

allowed him to cajole her until she let her defenses down.

Now Megan says that in a different atmosphere, she would have immediately recognized Swami Rama's behavior as sexual harassment or "sadistic manipulation." But within the Institute, she says, everyone else seemed to accept the guru's sexually suggestive behavior and humiliation of women. Megan went through a brief but painful and confusing time during which she

***Megan says she saw Swami Rama mistreating his disciples, especially the women, on a daily basis—yelling at them, ridiculing them, ordering them around, occasionally kicking them in the buttocks. Yet the women never seemed to complain about such treatment, she says. On the contrary, they sought opportunities to serve the guru's every whim, or even to be abused by him.***

doubted her own feelings and perceptions. How could she be the only one who realized what was going on? she wondered. Then he started giving her practices without any spiritual meaning, she says, and telling her she wasn't doing them right. When the manipulation started to involve her meditation and spiritual practices, she says, she decided to confide in one man who had been at the Institute for a long time and who was planning to leave. The man, she says, informed her of Swami Rama's long history of alleged sexual misconduct.

"I only needed one person to corroborate my experience," Megan says now. She became outraged at the residents and the professional staff who enabled and legitimized the swami's behavior. She began talking about Swami Rama's exploitative behavior with anyone who would listen, especially women who she thought were being victimized.

Meanwhile, Swami Rama had appointed her as registrar of the graduate program, replacing a long-time woman disciple who was being kicked out of the Institute for no apparent reason. But to accept a tuition-free second year, or even to leave the Institute quietly, Megan says, would have meant giving tacit approval to the continuing exploitation. She believes Swami Rama was trying to buy her collusion, as he had bought the collusion of the Institute's staff and many residents. Before leaving, Megan says, she tried to confront Swami Rama publicly—but he went into seclusion, claiming illness.

Carolyn and others say Megan caused a scandal in the Honesdale ashram by breaking the silence surrounding Swami Rama's sexual behavior. Two other women left the Institute shortly afterwards. The scandal convinced Carolyn not to reveal her own secret, she says; she was learning that the Institute administration dealt with such accusations by smearing the women's reputations. Carolyn had sought a consultation with Pandit Rajmani, who told her that Megan was either lying because she was "on an ego trip," or fantasizing a sexual encounter that had never taken place. And Carolyn's Residential Program supervisor told her that the scandal was "a big test for all of us and a cleansing for the Institute—we'll see who stays."

In retrospect, Megan says, she believes that Swami Rama was indifferent to the problems that his behavior might cause the

## The Case Against Swami Rama

Institute, but was using such scandals to purge it of anyone who questioned his authority.

**P**andit Rajmani cannot entertain the notion that the women's stories could be true. "Anyone who lives a public life can go through such remarks; . . . you have heard about all that blackmailing" of famous, rich athletes, he explains to me in the spring of 1989 at the Honesdale ashram. "Before [these women] started saying these things, I also had a very good feeling that these people were wonderful people and they would never lie and they were trustworthy people. But after they started saying all these things, I never trusted them anymore."

Why would the women want to blackmail Swami Rama? I ask him. "The person wanted something, and the other person did not agree to fulfill their desires," he says. "This sudden animosity indicates that there is something fishy in the statement of this person. Otherwise . . . there would be no need for this person to propagate this whole story."

Pandit Rajmani says he also has concrete reasons to know that Swami Rama could not be sleeping with his disciples. He says he spends most evenings with the guru until midnight or 2 a.m., and that he knows better than anyone who is with Swami Rama late at night and who isn't. But Megan and Carolyn both say that Swami Rama would dismiss Pandit Rajmani and other members of the inner circle after an evening of socializing in Swami Rama's private quarters, while asking them alone to stay behind.

Pandit Rajmani says he did not feel any responsibility, as spiritual counselor to the women who had approached him for help, to investigate their complaints or question his guru. I informed him that I had interviewed women who sought him out because they respected him and trusted him to be interested in the truth. His response: "Listen, there are certain things which are based on witnesses—those are facts. But something which is truth cannot be falsified by having one hundred witnesses. If a hundred people come and say that the day is night and I know that it's not, the voting system doesn't do it here, you know?"

"Believing such stories means disbelieving in myself. Because that's my whole life. . . . My relationship with [Swami Rama] is purely divine and spiritual—there cannot be impurity in it, and there is no room for such thoughts. I might doubt my own perception, I might doubt my own eyes, but I cannot doubt that strength which has given me everything."

If somehow Pandit Rajmani were forced to acknowledge that the women were telling the truth, would this shatter his faith in the guru? No, he says: "Even if it happened, what's the big deal? . . . People say that Mahatma Gandhi . . . slept with women. God knows whether it was true or not, and even if it was true, this is a normal phenomenon. And that did not undermine Mahatma Gandhi's work! . . . No, this would not be shattering, certainly not. My father certainly had sex, and that's why I was born, so will I lose my faith in my father?"

"Even if I found out—how can I find out? Because I do not want to find out. There's no need for finding out, if I know it is completely wrong."

**T**wo months after Swami Rama left for India, Carolyn went to Chicago to visit her family for Christmas. One evening she went out to dinner with Martha,\* an old friend from East West Books Chicago. Halfway through their meal, Carolyn remembers, Martha hesitantly said, "I know this will sound like a weird ques-

tion, but has Swamiji ever asked you to have sex with him?" Carolyn says she feigned shock and tried to mask her distress as Martha told her about a woman at the Glenview center who was confused and distraught about her alleged sexual relationship with Swami Rama.

Carolyn says she knew that Swami Rama often promised his disciples he would take them to India or appoint them to important positions within the Institute—promises that rarely materialized. Even so, it was a blow to find out that she wasn't particularly special: Swami Rama apparently had other "spiritual courtesans." But Carolyn says she stifled her doubts about the guru, transforming them into doubts about her own selfishness: "Because I'd rationalized that he was teaching me a lesson, I believed he must be teaching other women the same lesson, and I shouldn't begrudge his attention to other students."

When Swami Rama returned from India two months later, Carolyn resumed working as his appointments secretary during the day, and, she says, as his sexual servant on some nights. She remembers that Swami Rama received love letters from several women; one or two of them even mentioned "your child." When she asked him what she should do with the love letters, she says, Swami Rama would laugh and say, "Oh, these goofy women! They are crazy. Put that letter in the 'goofy' file." Carolyn says the "goofy" letters never got answered.

By this time Carolyn had gained 25 pounds from binging on sweets. She was feeling so disgusted with her body and afraid of the guru's humiliating comments that one night she couldn't face going to his room, she says. The next day, she says, Swami Rama called her to his office and asked her if anyone had said anything to her. Carolyn says she told him no, it "just didn't feel right." A short time later, Swami Rama let her go as his secretary—because, she says he told her, she didn't really want the job. At the same time as he dismissed her, Swami Rama also gave her a Sanskrit name.

Carolyn stayed at the Institute for three more years, working at a variety of jobs. In the spring of 1983, Swami Rama began to court her again, she says: He told her that she would help him prepare a book of sacred poetry he was writing, and he assured her repeatedly that he would take her to India the following autumn. Every time he saw her, she says, he told her she was "perfect," as if she had passed some important test. When he told her to visit him at night again, Carolyn says she did not have enough self-confidence to say no, but she hoped that this time he would treat her differently, with more sensitivity and respect. But their encounters were exactly the same as before, she says—emotionally impersonal and sexually mechanical.

Soon Carolyn noticed she wasn't the only woman being favored by the guru; he was also paying attention to Megan and Nirvana.\* "Nirvana was up at his cabin, walking his dog at 5:30 in the morning, and Megan was with him day and night." Still, she felt she had no right to question the guru's actions.

One evening in early June, Carolyn remembers, Swami Rama's housekeeper phoned the women's dorm and asked her to bring the manuscript she was preparing over to Swami Rama's new cabin. Carolyn walked up to the cabin, she says, where after a brief minute spent leafing through her work, the guru asked her in a low voice for a meeting later that night. She said no: She had been on a work crew Swami Rama had ordered to weed poison ivy roots for his new garden, and she was covered with oozing blisters. She asked him to give her a homeopathic remedy for the itching, she says, but he refused and turned away, dismissing her.

That one gesture unleashed a storm of long-suppressed emo-

## The Case Against Swami Rama

tions: "I felt two-dimensional, like a piece of paper, a cunt—he didn't care about me. And that was the first time I realized what all that stuff meant—the other women, the 'goofy' file, and the rumors about the lawsuit. Up to that point I had felt like he was a guru, that he cared about me at least, but no, he was just using me."

One spring evening a couple of weeks later, she says, Swami Rama called her aside to ask why she'd been avoiding him, and she tried to tell him she'd discovered his lies. She recalls that she blushed as she forced out the words: "I think you have been sleeping with other women." Who? she remembers him demanding. "Nirvana is one," Carolyn says she told him. At that, she says, he raged at her until she was sobbing, unable to speak a word in her own defense: No! Had Nirvana said anything? Why did Carolyn say these things? Why did she think these things? What a foolish woman! She was dreamy! This was not true! Had anyone spoken to her? What a foolish woman! She could not control her emotions, he could not talk to her! And he abruptly dismissed her.

Now Carolyn is more articulate: "When I finally start listening to myself, and I tell him I know he's sleeping with other women—and this is the man I came to, to help me learn how to listen to my inner voice, and then he tells me not to listen to it just as I'm starting to get some confidence in it—that's when I realized, this isn't yoga, this isn't truth, this is abuse."

A week later, Megan blew the lid off Swami Rama's private life, confirming what Carolyn already knew in her heart. But still, she was afraid to leave the community she'd been part of for so long and reenter a world that had practically forgotten her existence. One day Swami Rama called for her and told her he wouldn't be taking her to India that autumn. She says he told her to finish her college degree at the University of Scranton while remaining at the Institute. But the University of Scranton didn't offer a degree program in Carolyn's area of study, so she saw a way to rationalize leaving the Institute while still saving face; she could still be considered a good disciple if she could get the guru's blessing to go away to college. Finally, she obtained his permission.

Carolyn moved back to Chicago, found a job, returned to school, and soon met a non-Institute man she wanted to marry. Before the wedding, Carolyn and her fiancé went to see a couples counselor both separately and together. She says she confessed her secret relationship with Swami Rama for the first time, telling her counselor that she was still confused about it. "My dear," she says her counselor told her, "You sound just like a sexually abused child, a little girl whose Daddy told you never to tell anyone."

Carolyn has been in therapy for the past five years, trying to rebuild her self-confidence and heal the damage done by what she now calls her "sexual abuse" by Swami Rama. Whenever she has communicated her experiences to former friends at the Institute, she says, they have responded with a series of rationalizations: "That's your experience, but we all have to make our own decisions based on our own experience with Swamiji, and he has positively redirected my life. Everything happens for a reason, and we can't judge him." Carolyn says she is at a loss to discern any positive reason behind Swami Rama's behavior toward her. And the secondary trauma of having every single one of her former friends turn their backs on her, she says, has scarred her and left her with a legacy of emotional distrust and feelings of betrayal.

At the same time, Carolyn is trying to understand how her family background and conditioning contributed to her victimization. Brought up by authoritarian parents—one of whom was

an alcoholic—and given a strict Catholic schooling, she felt at home in the authoritarian structure of the Himalayan Institute. Conformity to others' standards was always expected of her. She had never received help in setting her own goals: "There was never the concept of self-empowerment." The rigid behavioral expectations of the Institute and its stigmatizing of emotional expression, far from validating the guru within, taught her to

***Carolyn has been in therapy for the past five years, trying to rebuild her self-confidence and heal the damage done by what she now calls her "sexual abuse" by Swami Rama. And the secondary trauma of having every one of her former friends turn their backs on her, she says, has scarred her and left her with a legacy of emotional distrust and feelings of betrayal.***

mistrust her own judgment and emotions. And her "devastating" experiences with Swami Rama, Carolyn says, haunt her sexual relationship with her husband today.

Carolyn says she is more committed to yoga than ever; she continues with her practices, the hatha yoga postures and a centering meditation, but she does not use the mantras Swami Rama gave her. She has studied with other teachers, but she has learned the hard way that her "inner voice" must be her guru and her guide. She has sacrificed the highs of shared group experience in favor of the freedom to authenticate her own experience, without group pressure to conform. She and some of the other women who say they have been sexually abused by Swami Rama, as well as men who feel their spiritual trust was betrayed, have organized an informal support network to help each other heal.

Carolyn says she recognizes the positive work of the Himalayan Institute and has no desire to destroy the Institute's beneficial programs. "But the most important thing," she says, "is that the abuse must stop. Women need to be informed that this could happen to them—be it with Swami Rama or any man in a position of power—so they will be able to see it coming and avoid it. And people must stop covering up for the perpetrators by ignoring or denying that it is happening. Those who do so," she says, "are responsible for the continuing abuse."

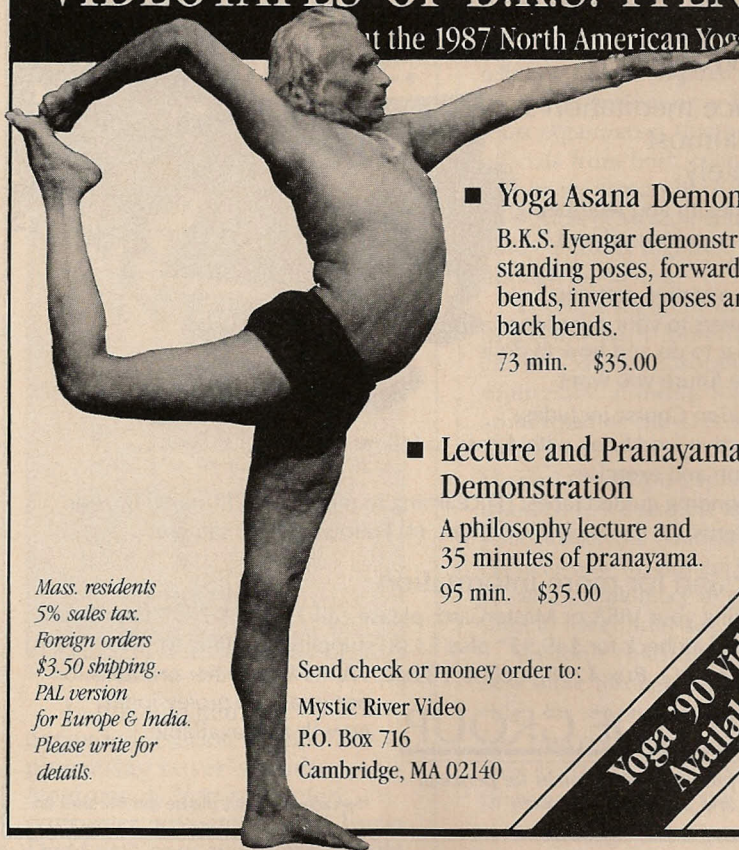
Ask Dr. Ballentine how he would respond if a woman were to come to him and tell him she's been having sex with Swami Rama, and that her "inner voice" has been telling her that it isn't a positive experience. He says it's only happened to him once or twice, but he asked the woman, "Are you really sure about this? Are you feeling a little confused and emotionally upset, and maybe some of the things that happened you might have misinterpreted, or you might have even fantasized them, you know, have trouble separating fantasy from reality?"

Like Pandit Rajmani, Dr. Ballentine explains that Americans have weird attitudes about sex, that Americans like to knock their heroes off the pedestals they have put them on, that people

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# VIDEOTAPES OF B.K.S. IYENGAR

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## Swami Rama

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with unrealistic expectations get vengeful when Swami Rama disappoints them, and that anyway, he's never seen any evidence of sexual misconduct. He says he once had a patient falsely accuse him of getting her pregnant, and that any psychologist knows that this happens frequently with emotionally disturbed women patients. He says he was only directly confronted once—the rest has been hearsay.

Dr. Ballentine doesn't believe any of the stories, and when I ask if he's ever talked to Swami Rama about them, he answers, "Oh sure, and he's shown me his file, of . . ." He doesn't finish the sentence. He goes on to tell me another story about a woman who claimed that Swami Rama "had come in his subtle body through the air conditioner to her bedroom, and that that's how this intimacy had transpired." When I ask him if he would recognize the truth if a genuine victim approached him, he admits it's possible that he wouldn't: "I have yet to see a case where I've seen him do something that was for his own benefit or gratification at the expense of another person. . . . So if someone wants to come to me and say, this man's taking advantage of me for his pleasure, I just find it hard to believe."

Since our interview, Dr. Ballentine has been sent at least two letters by women who say they were sexually abused by Swami Rama: one from Carolyn and one from Susan.\* Several months earlier, he received a letter from Bob Hughes, a member of the Institute's board of directors from 1978 to 1980. Hughes, who ran East West Books Chicago and then worked as publicity and sales director of Himalayan Publishers and Distributors, now has a masters degree in counseling and hosts a successful TV series in Memphis, Tennessee: "Total Health and Relaxation: An Ounce of Prevention." Two years ago, when Hughes openly asked questions about Swami Rama's sexual activities during a weekend workshop at the Glenview Center, where he was the featured guest lecturer, he was escorted off the premises and driven to the airport. Hughes wrote Dr. Ballentine a letter on May 22, 1989, quoting Gandhi—"Truth itself helps me when I commit mistakes. Truth alone is the real teacher and master"—and asking for an explanation of the women's stories and challenging a possible Institute "cover-up" on professional ethical grounds. He sent copies of his letter to many of his former colleagues and other



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## Swami Rama

professionals on the Institute's staff. Dr. Ballentine's response was reluctant: "It is only in view of your many years of association with the Institute that I have decided to take the time to reply to your letter of 22 May. Otherwise I would not deem such a letter worthy of a response."

The letter is curt in tone. "If you give more weight to rumors instigated by emotionally disturbed individuals and by those who are jealous or vindictive than you give to your own experience of dealing with Swamiji, then you are indeed in trouble." The people Bob had referred to were Carolyn, Susan, Brian and Terry, Dr. Edwin Funk, a former member of the Institute board of directors and physician on its staff, and Sister Audrey Rymars, a Catholic nun who had worked with the Institute in Glenview for 13 years. "I will not tolerate anyone propagating malicious stories about the Institute or its founder on the Institute's own property," Dr. Ballentine's letter says. "Until you get your priorities straight and your head clear, I would request that you refrain from attempting to represent the Institute or its teachings in any way."

Dr. Ballentine sent copies of his letter to the same Institute members who had

received Hughes's letter. One of them reported back to Hughes that Dr. Ballentine's letter was accompanied by a copy of a private letter Hughes had written to Swami Rama in 1985. In that letter, Hughes had told Swami Rama why marriage and parenthood were probably not for him. Yet Swami Rama, knowing that Hughes was gay, had repeatedly urged him to marry various women Institute members and had insisted that his homosexuality was unnatural and unhealthy. Dr. Ballentine denies sending out copies of Hughes's letter: "I didn't do that. I don't have access to those files." Hughes is not so easily coerced into silence; he says he plans to continue to press the Institute's administration to fulfill its ethical obligations to investigate the women's complaints and put a stop to any abuse.

Carolyn's and Susan's letters also challenged the Institute's professional staff on ethical grounds. Carolyn has received no reply from the Institute. Susan's letter detailed her relationship with Swami Rama and the emotional damage she suffered; she sent it to a select group of Institute staff and members, past and present, but has not gotten an official response. She did receive an anonymous letter from "a friend" in May 1990, warning her that the Institute had contacted "one of the most vicious lawyers in New York City" and that it planned a defama-

tion action against her if she continued her "harassment." According to her anonymous correspondent, "the Himalayan Institute and Swami Rama are one and the same," and Susan's action could destroy "the unselfish work of many people."

Susan has received several phone calls and a letter from people she didn't send her letter to. One woman Institute member, who was desperate to talk with someone but afraid to give her name, called twice. Susan says the woman described her own similar experiences with Swami Rama during the past two years. Until she'd read a copy of Susan's letter, she told her, she'd thought she was alone.

Dale Colton, director of public relations at the Himalayan Institute, never returned my repeated phone calls requesting an interview with Swami Rama. □

*Katharine Webster, who recently completed her master of journalism degree at the University of California, Berkeley, is an occasional student of yoga who has had many teachers, but no guru.*

### RESOURCES

The Healing Network [former Himalayan Institute members], P.O. Box 148252, Chicago, IL 60614. Please enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

Himalayan Institute, RR 1, Box 400, Honesdale, PA 18431; (717) 253-5551.

Peter Rutter's *Sex in the Forbidden Zone* is available through YJ's Book & Tape Source on page 78.



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