

Bhanté and Ramamurti S. Mishra, MD at Ananda Ashram

One of the great privileges and pleasures of my early explorations was to introduce my mentors and guides to each other. In regard to human healing responses, how to evoke or inhibit them and how to use non-invasive self-care as the core of primary prevention practice, Dr Ramamurti Mishra was a source of affirmation when my self-esteem was low and of chastisement when my ego sought gratification.

He and I met at his Ashram in the Mission District of San Francisco. This episode occurred at his initial Ashram, Ananda, settled onto rolling countryside. The following is redacted from a NYTimes article about Ananda and the Yoga Society of NY from 2008:

“FOR those whose ideal day trip hinges on the possibility of returning home aglow with a lingering sense of tranquility, Monroe, N.Y., which sits in the foothills of the Catskills, can feel like a small Shangri-La.

A little over an hour north of Manhattan, Monroe is child-friendly, adult-friendly and, perhaps most important, spirit-friendly.

Follow twisting Route 208 into town, a road framed by vistas of puffed-up summer greenery, and several satisfying diversions become apparent. Chief among them are the Heritage Trail, a scenic stretch of asphalt that was once home to the Erie Lackawanna Railroad, and Museum Village, a museum of living history that doesn't require a caffeine IV drip to stifle potential yawns.

But the siren call of a local oasis geared mostly to adults can be pretty seductive, too. In fact, the hamlet of Monroe may be a grown-up's best bet for cultivating inner harmony without getting on a plane. Sometimes, that steamy bath at the end of the day just isn't enough.

That's why, for those with children, figuring out a strategy before heading to Monroe is crucial. If an hour in the car with kids poses no more of a threat to your patience than an afternoon of soaking your feet in the kiddie pool, follow an agenda similar to the one I pieced together last summer for me, my daughter, Gillian, and my son, Elliott, who were then 9 and 6.

If you arrive, on the other hand, in need of immediate restorative measures for frayed and tattered nerves, reverse our itinerary and reward yourself first: Head directly to Ananda Ashram, headquarters of the Yoga Society of New York.

No matter how many sun salutations you have pretzeled yourself into over the years, no matter how fervently and frequently you have chanted “Om,” chances are you never envisioned yourself indulging your yoga habit — not merely nodding at it, but really indulging it — while your

children were within shouting distance. At the roughly 85-acre pastoral retreat, where deer wander and swans float under a footbridge that affords soothing contemplation of a pristine lake, it *is* possible.

If you arrive at the ashram and don't know anyone — we visited while a family friend was staying for a week's worth of Sanskrit classes and meditation — whoever is behind the registration desk will helpfully explain that ashram staff members, an easily identifiable 25-member team found floating about the vast property, frequently make themselves available for child sitting.

But the children won't sit; they'll be kept busy. In addition to the hilly grounds, great for [hiking](#), and the abundance of wildlife, Ananda also has a swimming pool. And because most adult guests are already in a state of deep relaxation, nobody minds a little splashing.

Meanwhile, once the \$15 for an hour and a half of hatha yoga is paid (classes are twice a day) enlightenment, but not necessarily the kind normally associated with yoga, awaits.

Bob, who taught the 6 p.m. class when I visited, doubled as the ashram's maintenance man. It was a shock to realize that the heavily tattooed man with the thick Boston accent and the Keith Richards-like aura was skilled at tucking one foot behind his neck. But Bob could, and he gently persuaded those who took his class, or those taught by any of the other ashram staffers, that they could, too — after a few sessions, of course.

Once chakras are balanced and restored — not unlike a tune-up on the metaphysical lift — a reunion with the family is in order. But whether arriving at Ananda in the morning or after a whirl through town, do not leave without first eating together at its cafeteria. At \$10 a person, the colorful [vegetarian](#) buffet prepared three times a day is a bargain, even though you are asked to wash your own dishes afterward.

“Most people don't know it, but 75 to 80 percent of what we're serving is organic and grown locally,” said Harvey, who was in charge of preparing the buffet when I visited. Harvey, like Bob, chose not to be identified by a last name; many of the ashram employees go by long Sanskrit names.

It's not easy to say goodbye to Ananda Ashram, so it was good that we explored Monroe's low-key downtown offerings first. Mill Pond Park, abutting a tiny row of assorted shops on the main drag, Lake Street, is a pretty spot for a morning picnic with sticky sweets from Giovanni's Italian Pastry Shop, a few storefronts up Lake.

Ananda Ashram (13 Sapphire Road, 845-782-5575; www.anandaashram.org) is open year around. In addition to yoga classes and workshops, breakfast, lunch and dinner are offered daily (\$10 for a [vegetarian](#) meal). Overnight stays on a weekend cost \$100 for a semiprivate room and cover yoga classes — \$15 per class for drop-in guests — and all meals, but not workshops.”

In about 1979, Bhanté, Richard Kyle (a medical student and housemate at the time) and I proceeded to Ananda for a week retreat. Dr. Mishra took a look at Bhanté and said to

Viyassananda (his main Sanskrit student) and Sarasvati (Mary Tash, RN and Viyas's mom) that while Bhanté was in residence, all question would go to him. Later I was able to ask Dr. Mishra what he found so worthy about Bhanté. He smiled and affirmed that Bhanté radiated and reflected the Buddha's wisdom and presence.

As would often happen, during the quiet time in the afternoon, people would line up for a brief consultation with Bhanté. He would often whisper what he suggested they needed to do to minimize the creation of karma in this lifetime and to burn off or complete as much residual karma as possible.

On one occasion, a yogini sat down. Bhanté said, "Everyone out." Along with the others, I began to leave. Bhanté said, "The doctor can stay." He leaned in and asked if she might be pregnant. The urine test was not yet positive for several days. This means the implantation had occurred, yet the usual hormonal response had not occurred.

When he and I had a quiet time together, I asked what he saw. He said, "Did you not see the light in her uterus?"

He often saw, sensed or knew what few discern. He taught by example rather than didactically. While he took in stride with no discernable pride the regard in which global spiritual leaders held him.

The following photo was taken at about this time. Dr Mishra usually played harmonium; in this photo he is on tabla. Nadabramananda was a renowned percussionist. When I knew him he lived at the SF Ashram in the Mission District.

