

[HINDU BOOK REVIEW](#)

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Living with the Himalayan Masters

This is a book that can be read at one absorbed stretch in a cozy chair before a crackling fire with snow powdering the pine trees outside. Or you can sit in lotus asana and dip into each chapter as an inspiring meditative tale and wish, "Why don't I get a life like that?" Rest assured, you probably will-at a time when God awareness freezes out sense awareness and the austere aloneness of Himalayan mountain life under a yogi master is a paradise warmed by willpower.

In the meantime, curl up in the comfort of home and hearth and enjoy a future you through the enchanting samadhi-and-snow tales of Swami Rama.

Himalayan Masters is what might be termed a scrapbook biography. It doesn't follow a time line strictly, but jumps from one peak event to another: from a deliciously deep teaching with Swami Rama's master (known as Bengali Baba or Babaji) to a baba who teaches him a mantra for pacifying bees so he can plunder their hive with impunity. In fact, the account is so thick with babas and yoginis, each portrayed deftly but with broad strokes, that they tend to blur. Each reader will find those that resonate and stand out in his or her mind.

At the outset we are told that Bengali Baba approached Swami Rama's parents eighteen months before he was born and told them he would claim a son born to them in the near future. And indeed, hiking out of his high mountain cave, he arrives on the day Rama is born and gives him a cuddly blessing that fructified in Rama's early teens when he left his parents to follow his master into the highest reaches of yogi adventure and teachings. These would stretch over four decades, till 1972, when Swami Rama first came to America.

The real core of Rama's chronicle is his relation with Bengali Baba-all the other babas and the incredible depictions of siddhi powers weave back to the master, who sitting like a wise old spider plucks his web to teach young Rama many a lesson: lessons that also hit the reader right between the eyes. One of the beauties of this book is Rama's honesty about his own shortcomings and infidelities to the path. He was installed as the Shankaracharya of the Bhadrinath Mutt, a semi-comical event by his own account from which he extricated himself after three years but not before undergoing a near temptation into married life.

Overall, this book is an avalanche of real life magic and teachings, well told and guaranteed to entertain and uplift.

S.

Time magazine listed S. as one of the best books of 1988. The Vajradhatu Sun, the leading U.S. Buddhist newspaper, concludes that S. is at best a "wickedly amusing pilgrim's progress" and at worst a "silly book." Updike calls his latest biting, satirical novel a "religious comedy." We would weigh in with our Buddhist brothers that S. is at times sassily funny but overall is a book without meaning or substance, despite the fact that Updike, in his zest for realism, riddles the book with ashram lingo and kundalini jargon. It rings hollow.

S. stands for Sarah Worth, her sign-off to a flurry of letters (the whole book is composed of her letters) she effusively writes from an ashram in Arizona run by a guru named Arhat. Sarah is an escapee from upscale life in New England where her doctor husband is practicing more adultery than medicine. The ashram is loosely based on Rajneesh's ill-fated Oregon community, including its penchant for free-range sex. So inevitably, as Updike spins his prose, Sarah ends up with the Arhat and tape records the whole session to send to her friend. Later, the Arhat unveils himself as a Jew from Brooklyn. This, thankfully at least, completely disassociates-for us and millions of other readers-S. from anything resembling hallowed Hinduism.

The Indian Theogony

Bhattacharji's subtitle for this very scholarly tome is "A Comparative Study of Indian Mythology From the Vedas to the Puranas." Comparative studies tend to bog down into inconclusive swamplands, so beware of picking up this book as an enjoyable flight into Hindu myth. However, if you enjoy the process of an able scholar building composite Gods out of thousands of splinters of scriptural reference, this book may suit you. It follows a general pattern of Siva, Vishnu and Brahma, the classic tri-murthi motif. Of course, composite Gods are just that: manufactured, like building the composite wing of a jet aircraft. Before they were put together in the minds of men they didn't exist. We'd rather follow the perception of the rishis that man and universe are a living construct of the Gods, not the other way around.

Inner Yoga (Antaryoga)

Inner Yoga is a pithy book of surprising power and insight. The author is an accomplished yogi sannyasin, a man who ran his guru's ashram for twelve years, then left to wander, meditate and write in solitude. Anirvan zeroes in on the "inner" steps of the eightfold yoga: dharana, dhyana and samadhi. The text is lit with yogic moonbeams of his own experience fused into rarely quoted passages of the Upanishads. His pinnacle plateau of samadhi is Mahasunya, "the Great Void." This book alone won't launch you into mahasunya, but it does offer a pretty good map.