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## Teacher of the way of peace, with a light beer

February 15, 2007

### Upendra Chandra Roy, 1942-2006

IN THE midst of the high rises, bustling city workers and congested traffic of the Sydney CBD, Upendra Chandra Roy, better known as Acharya, lived a simple frugal life at his Pitt Street yoga and meditation centre.

Scores of visitors were met with the fragrance of incense and softly playing Indian music. By day, students would escape the metropolis for this calm sanctuary. The sounds of the monorail passing would be ignored as visitors were gently directed towards breathing, relaxing and stretching. By night, Acharya - the name means teacher of action in Sanskrit - converted the change rooms into his home.

Born in Kumarpur, a village in Assam, India, Acharya lived a traditional rural life as a child. His father was the headman, responsible for spiritual teachings as well as law and order, and Acharya developed an interest in spirituality at a young age.

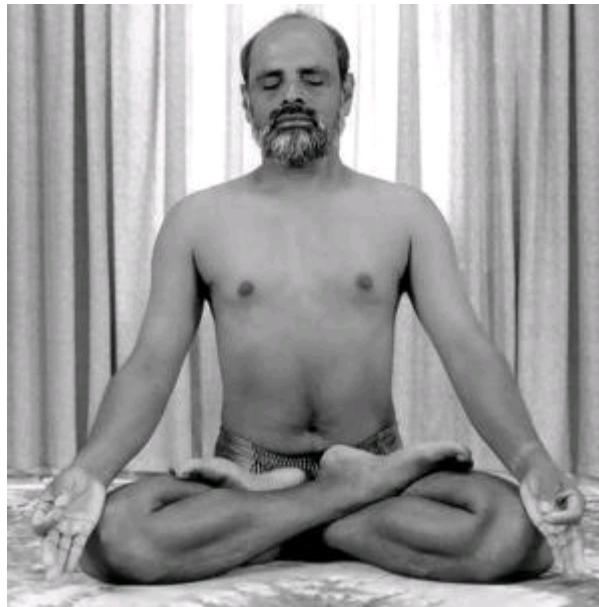
Following the teachings of Swami Vivekananda, the Indian philosopher, young Acharya, then known as Upen, would sit for hours in meditation, sometimes having to be roused for meals by his brothers.

His mother died when he was 10 and the family moved to Nagan, where he completed high school. He excelled academically and was good at football and acting. He studied science at university for two years until 1962 when he joined the spiritual group Ananda Marga (path of bliss). He was ordained a monk at 23.

The group's philosophy, based on Hatha and Raja yoga traditions, emphasised that total human development could be achieved only through personal growth and community service. Acharya spent six years in an ashram, following a strict vegetarian diet, meditating twice daily and practising yoga. As assistant to the leader, he would warm up crowds of thousands, drawing on the charisma that attracted students in later years. In 1969 he travelled to the Philippines to spread the word.

The growing politicisation of Ananda Marga led to external and internal pressures. Members of the group were to achieve infamy in 1978 when they were charged with the bombing of the Hilton Hotel, Sydney, which killed three people, but not the Indian prime minister Morarji Desai, who was visiting. Evan Pederick served seven years for murder and conspiracy; Tim Anderson was convicted and later acquitted.

Acharya had broken from the group, forming his teaching philosophy that emphasised healthy living and wellbeing through the balanced practice of Hatha yoga, without renouncing everyday life. He



Discipline ... Acharya followed a spiritual path from childhood.

moved to Australia in 1969 and opened Acharya's Yoga and Meditation Centre in Day Street, Sydney, in September of that year. The counter-culture of the 1960s and '70s inspired many people to seek spiritual guidance and yoga gained popularity. Acharya developed a body of dedicated students.

Interest in yoga waned with the "greed is good" philosophy of the 1980s but Acharya persisted. While he always thanked the model Christy Turlington for making yoga popular again, Acharya refused to follow the trends that characterised yoga from the 1990s, snubbing techniques such as jumping into postures, using blocks as supports or pumping hot air into the room to make students perspire.

While he had great respect for ascetics, he demonstrated by example that yoga's rigorous discipline could be practised while having a family or a career. His teaching methods appealed to ordinary people. Spiritual insights were interspersed with humorous quips and musings on the day's news. Postures and laughter went hand in hand. He adjusted his conversation to the mood of the class.

He was a frequent speaker at national and international conferences and seminars run by other yoga schools and organisations. He trained scores of Sydney's yoga teachers.

One of his greatest dilemmas was whom to support when India played Australia at cricket. In his later years, Acharya developed a penchant for beer, light of course, while watching sport. A son, Vishnu, realised his father was truly Australian when he arrived at a family gathering with a six-pack of beer. Once Acharya accepted that he could enjoy a beer or a glass of wine and maintain his health, he relaxed his stance on alcohol.

Yet he remained true to his origins. He strove to improve life for family and others in his village in Assam, providing funds to build homes, an orphanage and infrastructure such as water supply and electricity.

Acharya enjoyed camping, fishing and bushwalking. He said that one day he would retire to the bush and live a simple, quiet life. Last June, however, Acharya was diagnosed with glioblastoma multiforma, a primary brain cancer with no cure.

He is survived by his former wives Kathryn and Sue; children Vishnu, Khara, Jyoti, Mahesh, Seeta and Shanti, and grand-daughter Yasmin.

A memorial service will be held at the centre this evening.

## **Zoe Pollock**

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