

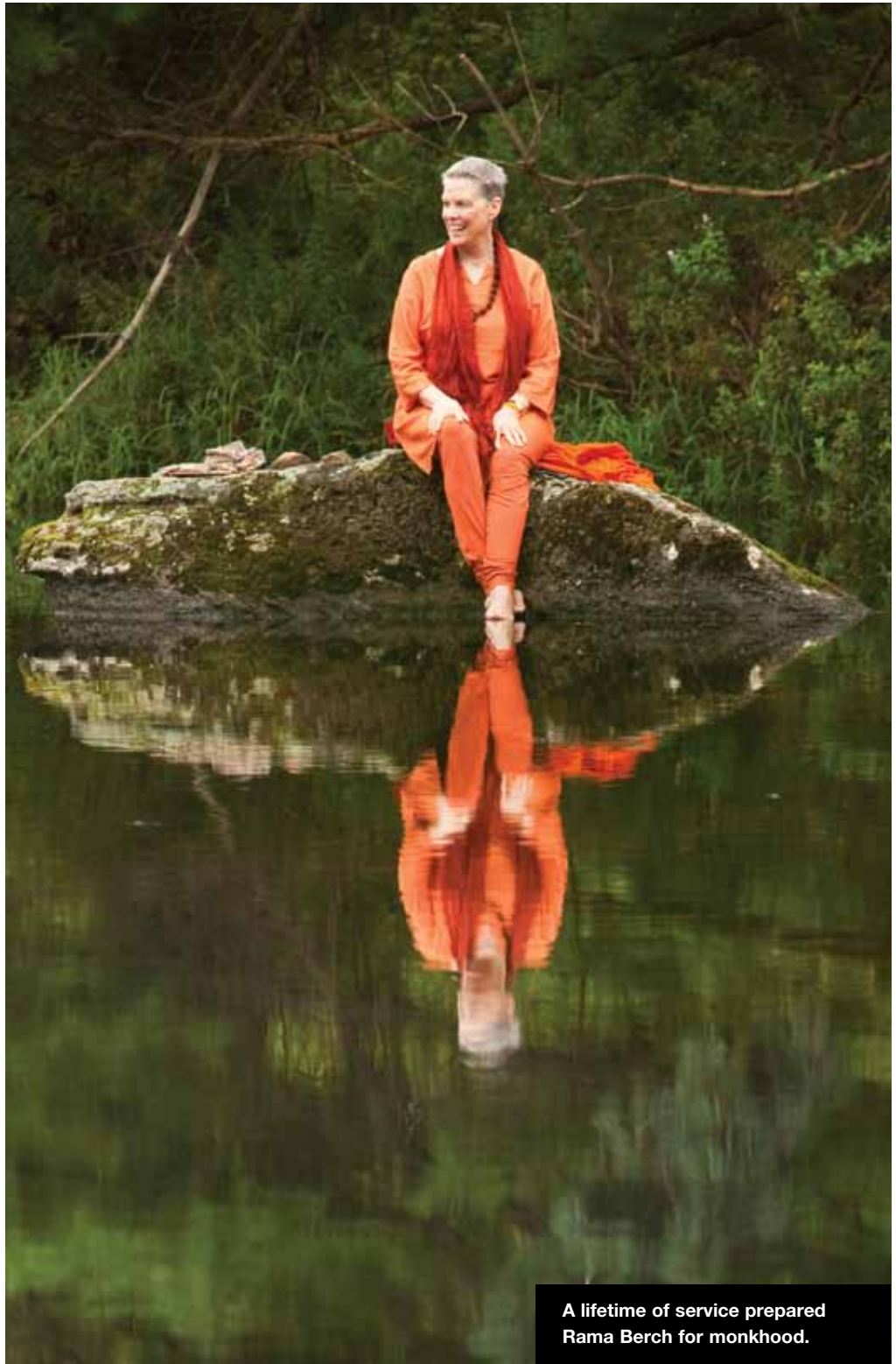
## Not-So-Suddenly Swami

In 2009, Rama Berch traveled to Ganeshpuri, India, and returned to the United States as Swami Nirmalananda Saraswati.

She'd shed her hair as well as her name, adopted an all-orange wardrobe, and taken a vow of celibacy. At a time when yoga was bursting into the mainstream, the founding president of Yoga Alliance embarked on the über-fringe path of an American swami.

"Swamis," she explains, "are the ones who say, 'I've been there. I've done that. I've tried those things that all of you are so frenetically trying. And you know what? I've figured it out: it doesn't make you happy.' Swamis are those who renounce the world and dedicate their life and their energies to the inward exploration of their own divinity."

At 65, Nirmalananda is undaunted by the job description. She has taught yoga for more than three decades, developed a unique style known as Svaroopo yoga, and raised three children. Since her initiation into the ancient order of Saraswati monks, she has opened Svaroopo Vidya Ashram near Philadelphia and started two charitable projects in India. Swamihood has in fact made everything "incredibly easier," she insists. "For



A lifetime of service prepared Rama Berch for monkhood.

so much of my life, I did the best I knew how to do, but then I would finish the task and look around and think, *Did anybody see that? How do I look to you? Did you like it?*” The daylong initiation ceremony in Ganeshpuri banished her self-consciousness and her expectations of how things should go. “I’m no longer looking or waiting for something particular to happen, so now I can show up and give it my all with a tremendous sense of openness and ease. The monkey’s off my back.”

That’s not the only change she’s experienced as a swami. “The change that really surprised me is that I want to feed people,” she marvels. “I’m not much of a cook, but I have this impulse to get out there and put pots out on the lawn and feed the people walking up. I want to feed everybody.” Surprising as it was, the impulse makes sense to her. “It comes directly from my guru because he had this thing about feeding people.”

The Los Angeles-born teacher found her Indian guru, Swami Muktananda, in the mid-1970s and studied with the Siddha Yoga founder until the end of



I'M NOT MUCH  
OF A COOK,  
BUT I HAVE THIS  
IMPULSE TO GET  
OUT THERE AND  
FEED PEOPLE.

his life in 1982. In the '90s she established the nonprofit Master Yoga Foundation, which oversees the spread of Svaroopa yoga; created Dr. Deepak Chopra's yoga program; and helped draft the first national standards for yoga teachers.

All the while, she knew that her ultimate purpose was to serve humanity as a yogic monk. “I was in active and conscious preparation to take initiation as a swami,” she says. “So by the time I was graced with the initiation, it was a little bit like having been pregnant for ten months.”

In a culture unaccustomed to religious renunciants, some people aren't sure how to behave around Swami Nirmalananda—or even what to call her. She doesn't much care whether you call her by her old name or her new one (pronounced “near-mu-la-nundah”). The “official protocol,” according to her ashram's website, is to say “hi,” followed by “anything else you want to say.” No topic is off limits. And nobody leaves hungry.

—Anna Dubrovsky >>

## A SVAROOPA-STYLE TWIST

**Try this Svaroopa-style variation** on *jathara parivartanasana* (revolved abdomen pose) anytime, or just before settling into *shavasana*.

Lie on your back, holding your bent knees, for 3 to 5 breaths. Your knees must be touching. Keeping your knees close to your body, spread your arms wide, palms up. Roll your legs and hips left, resting them on the floor. Slide your knees partway toward your shoulder, so that the kneecap of your right leg touches your left wrist, decompressing your lumbar spine. Now move your feet slightly left for a 90-degree knee bend. Your knees will be staggered, not stacked. For low backache or sciatica, put a thick pillow between your thighs and knees.

Place your right palm on the right side of your waist

to protect your rotator cuff. Roll your head toward your left shoulder, lengthening the right side of your neck, shoulder, and collarbone. Stay here for a minute or more, enjoying a deepening twist in your whole spine.

Bring your head to center, and then slowly roll it toward your right shoulder. Roll your head *even more slowly* toward your left shoulder. Move more slowly each time you move your head from one side to the other. “The slower you go, the more blissful it becomes,” Swami Nirmalananda says. After 3 to 5 rolls, bring your head to center for a few breaths.

Bring your legs back to center and hold your bent knees, pausing to observe the results. Repeat on the other side.