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Chinmoy Hopes To Sow Peace With Meditation

By MATT DAMSKER
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NEW YORK — Silence — profound, yet profaned by the wheeze and whirr of the heating system in this tiny conference room at U.N. headquarters in Manhattan. It is the silence of 30 or so disciples, their eyes half-lidded in deep meditation, their collective purpose seeming to emanate from the small, satin-robed man who sits before them, a lone pink rose to his left, his palms pressed together in a gesture of peace and prayer.

Welcome to the working week of guru Sri Chinmoy and his followers. They assemble twice weekly in this citadel of geopolitical idealism for Chinmoy's Peace Meditation at the United Nations — an hour of quiet spirituality that has been part of the United Nations' varied agenda, attracting diplomats and U.N. staff members for 15 years.

Chinmoy, a 54-year-old mystic who came to America from India in 1964, also takes his soulfulness on the road. Currently, there's a series of free "Peace Concerts" in which he sings and performs — on various Indian instruments such as the cello-like esraj — some of the thousands of meditative tunes he has composed over the years. The concert is set for Bushnell Memorial Hall in Hartford Thursday night.

"We accept the world in order to change it," Chinmoy says in an interview after the meditation hour. He appears powerfully bald, and seems in fighting trim under the loose vestments. Mostly, his eyes seem to swim behind his lids in blissful transcendence, only to focus suddenly, almost fiercely, upon his questioner.

"If you do not accept," he continues, with a smiling sageness, "then what are you going to change?"

Chinmoy is doggedly non-political, non-controversial in his pronouncements. His message is one of pure peace, harmony,

A Guru's Quiet Quest



John Long / The Hartford Courant

Sri Chinmoy, top left, will present a "Peace Concert" Thursday at Bushnell Memorial Hall. Above, Robert Muller, left, assistant U.N. secretary general, visits one of Chinmoy's meditation sessions at the United Nations.

human understanding and cooperation — all the familiar ideals of the United Nations served up with a heady aura of Eastern spirituality ("If the inner world is inundated with peace, then the nightmare of world war cannot even come into being," he affirms). He will not even go so far as to tie the Peace Concert into the hopefulness of the recent Reagan-Gorbachev Summit conference, or to suggest the world needs his message more than ever.

"I am a seeker," he says, his voice soft and liltily accented by his Bengali roots. "And I am a humble instrument of God. I can say only that God is using me at this hour, so for me this is a special time, but I cannot say this is a special time for everybody. I try to be of service to him consciously and devotedly, so right now I

get the inspiration from the Lord Supreme to be of service to him through the Peace Concerts."

Chinmoy lives in Jamaica, Queens, where his Sri Chinmoy Centre functions through sales of his numerous writings (about 600 books) and through donations. Dhruva Hein, who handles the guru's press relations, says Chinmoy is the spiritual master of about 1,100 students worldwide, in all fields. Hein, for example, is a Yale graduate who works in program development at the United Nations.

Then there are the Hogan brothers, Matthew and Larry, former football stars for Northwest Catholic High School in West Hartford. After more than a dozen years as close disciples of Chinmoy, they have received from Chinmoy Indian first names reflective of their spiritual commitments:

Matthew is now Bhima, and Larry is now Tejiyan.

"I was always interested in self-expansion," says Bhima, a computer systems consultant at the United Nations, before the meditation hour. "One important thing about Sri Chinmoy as a teacher is that he helps us get along in the practical world at the same time as the spiritual. I don't think I could stand the pace of living in New York City if it weren't for the peace of meditation and prayer."

The most devoted of Chinmoy's disciples adhere to his lifestyle strictures — celibacy, vegetarianism, athleticism, twice-daily meditations and "doing the right thing," says Bhima. Many of the

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Guru's Quiet Quest Is To Sow Peace

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guru's female followers at the meditation hour wear saris, the males non-descript business suits. Dhruva Hein (his "other" first name is Steven) points out that among the most prominent of Chinmoy's far-flung students now are Bruce Springsteen's saxophonist, Clarence Clemons, whom the guru calls Mokshagun; an Olympic track champion, Carl Lewis (called Sudahota); and jazz fusion musicians Narada Michael Walden and Lonnie Liston Smith.

In the 1970s, as jazz-rock fans may remember, guitarists John McLaughlin and Carlos Santana prominently touted Chinmoy on several albums, and the guru gave them their spiritual names, Mahavishnu and Devadip, respectively. But McLaughlin and Santana since have left the fold and the guru is less visible in the rock world.

Indeed, the benignly beatific guru of the '60s and '70s — from Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who briefly guided the Beatles spiritually, to Chinmoy — have something of an image problem in the '80s, what with the controversial Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh and his followers in Oregon, and the general fear of cults, brainwashing, the giving of worldly possessions to dubious messiahs. Chinmoy's followers are sensitive to this, and make it clear there is nothing cultish here.

"Sri Chinmoy lives modestly," Hein seeks to assure. "No Rolls-Royces."

If anything, Chinmoy seems

steeped in U.N. credibility. It was former Secretary General U Thant who first invited him to conduct his meditation workshops there, and since then the guru has won praise from leaders as diverse as Pope John Paul II and New York Mayor Ed Koch. The state of New York has even given Chinmoy's group a once-blighted, tugboat-sized island in the East River, in view of the U.N. complex, upon which Chinmoy's followers have planted a tree and grass, in a symbolic show of renewal.

The guru's meditation hours are certainly impressive, if low-key, rituals. During a recent one, the Bahamas' permanent representative to the United Nations, Davidson L. Hepburn, was serenaded by a chorus of Chinmoy disciples, who sang a personalized song of praise written by Chinmoy.

Later in the hour, Robert Muller, assistant U.N. secretary general, presented Chinmoy with a medal commemorating the United Nations' current 40th anniversary. At the end of each session, the guru makes a token offering of a rich chocolate (called prasada) to his disciples, who receive it as a joyful little sacrament. The atmosphere is light, unadorned, but well-drilled; Chinmoy speaks hardly a word to his students, who seem to anticipate his instructions at every turn.

"Just because one brother is good and one brother is bad in the same family, we cannot say that the rest of the family is bad or good," says Chinmoy afterward, in response to a question about public suspicion of Eastern gurus. "In the mind, we



SRI CHINMOY

doubt and suspect, and we get a kind of pleasure, a kind of joy from that. But in the heart, we try to encompass the full world, and by loving the world we get joy.

"So we have to know what we want, and from which place we get joy — the mind or the heart. In the mind we doubt — we doubt our own capacities, doubt our own life, our own motives, and afterwards we feel miserable that we have doubted ourselves. By doubting we weaken ourselves. . . . By saying you are a nice person, I gain strength; by calling you a bad person, I divide myself."

The image of Chinmoy that is so scrupulously projected by his staff — in newsletters and publicity releases — is of a true renaissance man: a musician, poet, painter (more than 40,000 works of art) and athlete whose boyhood as a champi-

on sprinter has inspired him to sponsor a number of marathons and running events worldwide. In 1977, he took up tennis enthusiastically, and as a result of a running injury, five months ago he took up weight lifting. The guru pumps iron enthusiastically these days; Dhruva Hein says Chinmoy now can single-handedly press more than his body weight.

"All my life I have been inspiring my students to run, because spirituality is an inner run and you have to make an outer run to keep the body fit," says the man born Chinmoy Kumar Chose (the Sri means, simply, "Reverend") into a religious family in Chittagong, in what is now Bangladesh. "If in the morning you suffer from headache and stomach upset, that's a wonderful excuse not to pray and meditate. So physical fitness is of paramount importance in spirituality."

But Chinmoy soon cuts short the interview. It seems so much talk is a drain on the perfect silence of the inner life. "I have answered thousands of questions," he says politely, "and if I try to answer more I will only display my ignorance." The eyes retreat into bliss. Someone hands him the pink rose from the table and he touches it to his brow, meditates on it for a fervent moment, as if drawing sustenance from its organic harmony. Then the guru takes his leave.

"The Peace Concert" featuring Sri Chinmoy will be Thursday at 8 p.m. at Bushnell Memorial Hall, 166 Capitol Ave. in Hartford. Admission is free, and tickets will be distributed at the door.