



Sri Chinmoy with one of the 40 who attended his meditation session last week at the U.N.



Sri Chinmoy meditates before lifting 1,300 pounds in a standing calf raise.

# A Spiritual Lifter

## Chinmoy uses meditation to heave 1,300 pounds

By Damian Cristodero

Sri Chinmoy sat quietly during a recent interview, answering questions in soft, polite tones, and only opening his eyes occasionally. But as the conversation turned to his childhood, his eyes opened slowly and he cracked a wide grin.

"I was an active and dynamic child," said the spiritualist and physical fitness advocate. "You could say that everybody in my family, all my brothers and sisters, were very calm and quiet. In that sense I was very mischievous. I used to break things and my parents said if I entered into a room, it was like a holocaust."

It is hard to imagine.

Chinmoy was born in Chittagong, in what is now Bangladesh, and now lives in Jamaica, Queens. In addition to being his family's No. 1 mischief-maker, Chinmoy was the only member who enjoyed athletics. Even after entering the Sri Aurobindo ashram in Pondicherry, India, at the age of 12 to develop his apparent spiritual awareness, his love of sports continued. "Running, jumping, throwing, any kind of physical activity," Chinmoy said.

Today, the name Sri Chinmoy is known widely in fitness circles around the world and to the thousands of amateur runners in the New York City area. The Sri Chinmoy Marathon Team sponsors more than 500 races a year worldwide, including the 1,000-mile ultra marathon in Queens.

Chinmoy himself was forced to give up running after injuring his right leg in a running accident last year. As an alternative, he turned to weightlifting and, at 5-7, 159 pounds, the 54-year-old is well-conditioned. When wearing his robes, however, Chinmoy looks almost meek, though his supporters would say peaceful.

Still, Chinmoy said he can support 240 pounds over his head with his right arm in an overhead lift — which starts with the weight slightly higher than shoulder level — and he said he lifted 1,300 pounds in a standing calf raise last Monday. Both lifts are on videotape and were shown Wednesday during an affair in Queens celebrating Chinmoy's first anniversary as a weightlifter.

Dr. Terry Todd, a physical education instructor at the University of Texas at Austin, who has written five books on strength and strength training, attended the gathering and said he has seen videotapes of both lifts. Todd made it clear that there are others who could also accomplish that lift, but given Chinmoy's height, weight and that he had been weightlifting for only a year, supporting 240 pounds was extraordinary. "Just to support it," he said. "He's holding it free. It's like holding up a pro linebacker."

Jim Smith, the British Amateur Weightlifting Association Registrar of All-Around Lifts, who also saw the videotape at the gathering, said: "The chief thing really is, regardless of the manner in which it is performed, the final result is that a man of 160 pounds and 54 years is holding a weight of 240 pounds overhead. There can't be too many men in the world of any

weight and that age who can support that weight. Terry Todd, Bill Pearl [a four-time professional Mr. Universe who was also at the gathering] and I all agree, whichever way you look at it, the final result is an absolutely tremendous feat."

Todd said there is no yardstick to measure Chinmoy's calf raise because "nobody's doing it" as a strength test. Todd, who has a Ph.D. in sports history, said bodybuilders do the exercise with lighter weights and higher repetitions to increase calf size. He added, "I'm pretty convinced that that's higher than anybody has ever tried before, and I hear about such odd things and I've never heard about that."

For the calf raise, Chinmoy said he trained only nine days during a three-week period on the calf-raise machine. His strength, he said, comes from an inner power brought to the fore by deep meditation.

"I totally depend on God's grace," Chinmoy said. "My capacity is next to nothing, and I also know that no human being can achieve anything great or significant unless he has God's grace. I know my strength is very limited, but from my prayer life and meditational life I get inspiration and the capacity to do these things."

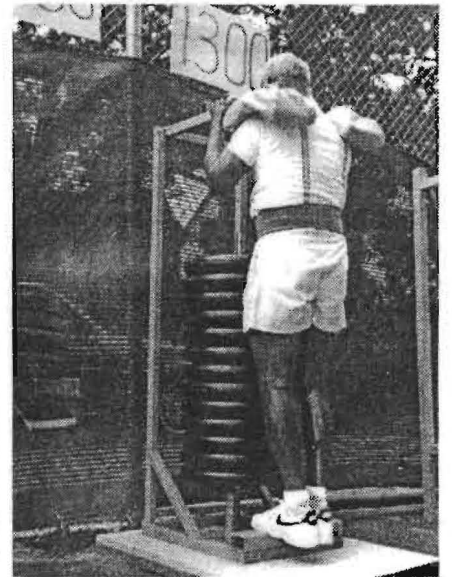
He uses that same principle during his "meditations for peace," which he has conducted at the United Nations since 1970 after an invitation by U.N. staff members. He was encouraged to continue the practice by then Secretary General U Thant, said Dhruva Hein, who helps handle Chinmoy's public relations. Chinmoy, who earlier in the year concluded a worldwide peace concert series in which he played more than a dozen instruments and performed his own compositions, holds the hour-long sessions on Tuesdays and Fridays.

Last Tuesday's session was attended by approximately 40 people. "We are offering good thoughts, good will to the body, the vital mind, heart and soul of the United Nations," Chinmoy said after the session. "I am not a politician, I am not a diplomat, but I am a lover of God. So I am praying to God to grant peace to all the workers, right from the secretary general to the general staff so that everybody can have peace. And this peace will inundate from here the length and breath of the world."

Chinmoy does not charge a fee for his services and his Sri Chinmoy Center in Queens survives on the sales of his 700 books and more than 30 tape recordings on spirituality. He has approximately 1,100 students worldwide, said Hein, who is a program coordinator in a United Nations office that deals with developing countries.

But while meditation is the key to Chinmoy's quest, he said he found out long ago that physical fitness is one key to good meditation. "If you have a severe headache or a stomach upset or something, or you have caught a cold. How can you meditate? If you have good health you will have no obstruction. Someone who wants to pray and meditate but is not in good shape, will have difficulties," Chinmoy said.

His day begins at approximately 2 a.m. after only two hours sleep. For 60 to 90 minutes, Chinmoy, a



vegetarian, will meditate, followed by a rigorous exercise program. Practice on his musical instruments is next, sometimes followed by two or three hours of tennis.

Chinmoy has a following. Kevin Keefe of Seaford, L.I., who works for UNICEF, has run in the New York City Marathon, and swam the English Channel in September to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the United Nations. Keefe, who played basketball at Seaford High School, said he had long ago shunned organized sports because they were too aggressive. Now, he said, athletics and meditation are intertwined. "As I got into it I saw a change in myself. I saw things like humility from doing endurance events," said Keefe, who added that while in college at the University of Dayton, running a mile was a huge achievement. "And the experience I got from watching Sri Chinmoy doing it. If I hadn't met someone like that I would never have been able to put [athletics and meditation] together."

The combination also has helped him on the job at the U.N. "I think my colleagues see it. It's like a slow growth type of thing, but it's incremental progress. I'm able to handle things a lot more positively than I was before," Keefe said.

That is the essence of Chinmoy's philosophy. "Anything that is good we shall try to increase and transcend ourselves. Anything that is bad we shall try to decrease and diminish," he said.

Said Todd: "I think that what he's doing is his way. The way he knows to tap into the type of well springs you have to. My guess is he's a lot more interested in moving past what he can do than in moving past what others can do."

For Chinmoy, this is certain: "If I did not have the capacity from my prayer life and meditation," he said, "I don't think I would lift more than 60 pounds."