

Divine Tide Of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Reaches Western Shores

By Swami Tathagatananda

Saul Bellow echoes the sentiments of many Western scholars pondering the destiny of humanity in a materialistic, consumer-oriented and industrial society driven by technology. Addressing the Nobel Committee upon receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1976, he said, "The intelligent public is waiting to hear a broader, fuller, and more coherent, more comprehensive account of what we are, who we are, and what this life is for."

Dr. Ramsay, the Archbishop of Canterbury, said,

Young people are turning to Eastern religions and bypassing the Christian Church, because it has concentrated so much on practical activity. Contemplation has become very widespread in the modern world, and there is a worldwide longing for it. But the Christian Church has perhaps failed to be contemplative enough. We have concentrated so much on practical activity that Christian religion is being bypassed and young people are turning to other things because we have not practiced our religion in sufficient depth.

Living in a brutal, materialistic culture, de-humanized and deprived of deep inner divinity, humanity has gone astray. In his book, *The Conquest of Happiness*, Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) quoted the poet William Blake (1757-1827) to highlight his remarks on the general unhappiness of modern man:

A mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

His Puritan education caused Russell to frankly reveal to his readers that at the age of five, he was already conditioned to feel "Weary of earth and laden with my sin." Living in today's increasingly turbulent, unstable world, we cannot say that we do not have the same thought.

The West Awakens to India's Eternal Philosophy

From time to time, a strong, global, spiritual current appears with the intensity of a rip tide flowing outward across the ocean from another shore. The appearance of Swami

Vivekananda at Chicago's Parliament of World Religions in 1893 is one such spiritual tide of influence in the West. Addressing western audiences, Swamiji said:

The Hindu refuses to call you sinners. Ye are the children of God, the sharers of immortal bliss, holy and perfect beings. Ye divinities on earth. Shake off the delusion that you are sheep; you are souls, immortal spirits, free, blest and eternal.

Swamiji planted seeds in the West that will come to fruition over ages to come. Professor Ninian Smart, a widely acknowledged authority in religious education in England, saw that Vivekananda had bridged the gap between the various strands of Hinduism with his fundamental teachings of Vedanta. The world's current interest in Hinduism, sparked by its revival in India and the work of the Vedanta Centers in the West, is a reflection of his beneficial influence. In his famous book on world religions, Prof. Smart wrote:

Swami Vivekananda can be said to be the chief spokesperson for the modern Hindu ideology. This ideology presented Hinduism not as a backward religion but at the forefront. It was this Hindu who saw his own pluralistic faith as a foreshadowing of the emerging World Religion. With Swami Vivekananda Hinduism as an all-India religion came into being. It is with Vivekananda that Hinduism for the first time gained self-conscious integrity. Various strands of Hinduism that appeared so baffling began to make marvelous sense.

At the end of the last century, *The Times of India* conducted a major poll to find out who their readers considered was the "Spiritual light of India in the past century." The overwhelming evidence was in favor of Swamiji.

Interest of the Global Village in Yoga

Over a century ago, Swami Vivekananda anticipated the dire necessity of the Western mind for an intellectually satisfying, emotionally fulfilling and spiritually enlightening idea of the indwelling soul of man. In an address he delivered at Kumbakonam on the mission of Vedanta, Swamiji said:

Many, nay, most of the cultured men and women are already weary of this competition, this struggle, this brutality of their commercial civilization, and they are looking forward towards something better. . . . The thoughtful men of the West find in our ancient philosophy, especially in the Vedanta, the new impulse they are seeking, the very spiritual food and drink for which they are hungering and thirsting. And it is no wonder that this is so.

Yoga indeed fulfills this necessity by restoring to humanity the innate dignity, immensity and immortality of the soul within man.

Bertrand Russell solved the problem that gave rise to his frank revelation mentioned above. He ultimately concluded that happiness lies in "selflessness" and "self-

abnegation.” He writes, “It is in . . . profound instinctive union with the stream of life that the greatest joy is to be found.” Over the centuries, many western philosophers and thinkers have focused their attention on the problem of happiness in life. In the last century, Swamiji provided a definitive foundation for India’s eternal philosophy and religion in the West through his own example and presence and through his teachings of Raja Yoga. People today feel that Yoga offers the answer to the question of peace and happiness in life. They are turning to Yoga because everything else in which they have shown an interest has not brought them lasting happiness. Says the October 14, 2005 issue of *News India-Times* in its column, “Religion and Faith” (p. 17): “As many as half of America’s estimated 15 million yoga practitioners come from a Christian background.” This data was quoted from the Web site of a Catholic priest, Father Thomas Ryan, who has added Yoga instruction to his clerical duties. The *News India-Times* article is a revelatory highlight of the inroads of Yoga to the Christian fellowship:

Christians use yoga to experience their own faith more deeply and express it holistically,” said Father Ryan who harmonizes prayers like Psalm 84, the Peace Prayer of Saint Francis, and the Beatitudes with vitalizing yoga postures to create a spiritual practice. “If you have never experienced the physicality of prayer,” Ryan promises, “a fresh experience awaits you.” Not all Christian theologians have been equally enthusiastic about yoga. In an article entitled, “In New Yoga Classes, Poses and Prayer,” in the *New York Times* of September 17, Katie Zezima wrote: “The Vatican has also expressed misgivings about yoga.”

Even though many in authority in the Church do not agree with the beneficial contribution of Yoga, they do recognize that Yoga is an aspect of spiritual striving and cannot be ignored.

Yoga has also penetrated other faiths, continues the *News India-Times* article:

Most people associate yoga with Hinduism and Buddhism, but it is finding acceptance in other traditions, including Judaism. At Elat Chayyim, a Jewish spiritual retreat in Accord, New York, a yoga course forms an essential part of the religious practice. Elat Chayyim website says: “By taking a conscious stand before the Holy One, you can deepen your understanding of how best to align with your soul’s purpose. In this course you will explore your body using the ancient discipline of yoga *asanas* to discover the sacred experience of inhabiting the human form. You will pay careful attention to the alignment of bones, the strengthening of muscles, the stimulation of your physiological system, and the movement of energy, voice and breath. Iyengar yoga sessions will be supplemented by chanting, meditation, breathing and text study. This unique combination offers you a heightened experience of what it means to be embodied. All skill levels welcome.”

It is true that many Westerners, particularly in the United States, are gradually shifting their focus in life away from rampant sensual enjoyment. They are taking guidance from Hatha Yoga and meditation, which enjoy great popularity there. Yoga training has

penetrated corporate and medical organizations and even the rigid and powerful institution of the Central Intelligence Agency in America.

A Particularly Appealing Event

In 1999 a Yoga association was formed in Iraq under hopeful but dramatically uncertain circumstances. The gist of a moving letter to the Vedanta Society of New York by the Yoga Art Association founded by the followers of a Hatha Yoga teacher in the Kurdish city of Sulaimanya is given below. It illustrates the significant impact of Hinduism in a war-torn, largely Muslim southwest Asian country currently being cast into a western mold in the heart of Mesopotamia, where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers flow, a place once considered the “heart of civilization”:

Despite the lack of resources and a Guru, the Yoga Association proceeded in fulfilling the mission: to make the people of Kurdistan and Iraq familiar with yoga . . . To our information we are the only and lonely yoga group all over Kurdistan and Iraq! . . . scores of people [have] visited our Hall and studied the philosophy of yoga, Gita, Hatha Yoga Pradipika . . . [in addition] the Asanas and Pranayama techniques were given to the aspirants. We mainly practice Ashtanaga Yoga. . . We are more interested in taking yoga as a way of Self-realization with a very deep and rich philosophical background. . . .

Most of these seekers are highly educated persons, possessing graduate degrees in various branches of knowledge.

Role of Vedanta Centres

Vedanta Centres in the West are rising to answer the appeals coming from such groups, as well as from students, teachers, professionals, business people and the general population. People visit these Centres for devotional purposes, seeking refuge from the stressful environment outside and buy books from which they can learn more about spiritual life. Still others are attracted to the subject matter of the Sunday discourses. Vedanta Centres actively champion the cause of Vedanta and Ramakrishna-Vivekananda teachings for the sole purpose of the welfare of humanity.

Physicist Jay Dilip Lakhani was inspired to retire early from his professional duties and promote Hinduism by propagating its immortal teachings. For nearly a decade, he has been directing the *Vivekananda Centre, London* and speaking about the living religion of Hinduism throughout London’s educational system with significant impact. *Hinduism Today* reports in its last quarterly issue of 2005 that *Vivekananda Centre, London* has greatly influenced the academic and Christian communities in England by disseminating the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. In mid-2005, the organization was invited to deliver a presentation on Hinduism to more than one hundred Christian ministers at King’s School in Canterbury Cathedral. The audience was thrilled to hear about Vedanta and felt a tremendously inspired affinity for its teachings, according to the commentator. He also reported that the Centre conducted Vedanta assembly presentations to 1,400 eleven-to-eighteen year old English boys at Watford

Grammar School. The spontaneous burst of student applause that occurred in the middle of the presentation could only be stopped by the appeal to continue the presentation. This highlights the fact that young people in the West need much more than dogma to satisfy them. They are sincerely seeking something beyond mere belief, namely, a religious experience and a truly spiritual attitude in life. In this sense, they are truly awakened.

Vivekananda Centre, London was also asked to deliver an address to a large congregation of chairpersons in religious education from eminent institutions like Eton. That address elicited this tearful confession from someone in the audience:

I have been living in a spiritual desert; thank you for bringing me out.

Religious Pluralism of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda

The Semitic religions generally equate pluralism with relativism in their theology. We view the world from the prism of our individual minds. Naturally, our concept of God is bound to differ; hence, the necessity for pluralism. Hinduism simply says that the different facets of the One should not be accepted as the goal. Vedanta teaches that religion is one: “God is One; He is called variously by the sages.” Mystics of all religions have borne out this universal truth. The words of the *Siva-mahimnah Stotam* illumined Swamiji’s message of religious pluralism at the Parliament:

As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee.

Sri Ramakrishna’s famous dictum, “As many faiths, so many paths to God,” teaches that one single faith, however lofty, can never become a universal religion, or, there can never be a single concept of religion for all humanity. On this coordinating thread, his major principle of religious harmony, he sought to string the gems of the various religions. He may be regarded as the real founder of the harmony of religions. His principles of religious harmony are the foundation for the seeds scattered in the West by Swamiji. The other principles he embodied and taught were:

- 1) Each faith has a unique mode of life that leads to God,
- 2) Religion is the experience of Realization, not mere talk of it, and
- 3) No one is capable of knowing God in all His dimensions without realizing the same Truth by practicing other faiths.

When the director of *Vivekananda Centre, London* presented Hinduism at a meeting of the Religious Education Council of England and Wales, he asked the Archbishop of Canterbury, “Why do you say, ‘We Christians must tolerate other religions? Is the word, *tolerate* correct? Religious pluralism would disagree with such usage’.” The head of the Anglican Church replied, “The word *tolerate* was not right, as it suggests a concessionary attitude towards other religions.” This is a dramatic illustration of the fruition of the seed of religious pluralism sown by Swamiji in the West.

If we merely tolerate other religions than our own, we are forced to reason that the proof of our religion lies in the all-too-familiar response, “Because our Prophet says so.” Vedanta teaches that Truth is not validated by scriptural dogma, system of beliefs, debates or long-winded discussions; Truth is validated by one who has direct experience of Truth. In the entire history of man, the only synthetic spiritual personality to appear has been Sri Ramakrishna. He was the embodiment of synthesis, joining his vast spiritual experience of realizing the same God through his native Hinduism as well as through his practice of the fundamental teachings of other world religions. Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda as one unleashed a great spiritual wave of religious harmony upon the world stage.

A Touch of the Spiritual Wave in Russia

By the nineteenth century, Russian citizens—constricted as they were under an oppressive Russian regime, wanted to enjoy a modicum of spiritual freedom and joy. When Swamiji’s *Raja Yoga* was published in Moscow in 1906 as *Filosofia loga: Laktsii o Radzha loga, so Vkliucheniem aforizmov Patandzhali*, many Russian scholars, artists and others became extremely interested in the book. It created a huge uproar among the intellectual elite. Leo Tolstoy was full of praise for *Raja Yoga* as were other philosophers and theosophists. Apart from scholars, gymnasts, ballet dancers and other performing artists took full advantage of practical Raja Yoga principles to develop their particular skills and art. In 1994 Cambridge University Press published the elaborate and lengthy book, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations*, written by Dr. Partha Mitter [Mitra], Professor Emeritus of Indian Art, University of Sussex in Brighton, England. It gives the full account of the influence of Swamiji’s *Raja Yoga* on many sections of the Russian population following different persuasions. In his famous book, Dr. Mitter writes:

The Yogic system expounded in Swami Vivekananda’s Chicago lectures played a part in the art of Malevich and his Circle. In this fascinating world “upside down,” the Indian painters turned to the West while the European avant-garde headed East for inspiration. Mrs. Douglas, one of the contributors to the book, wrote, “The spiritual mental discipline of Yoga, especially as expounded by Swami Vivekananda and his followers was a Consistent for the Russian Theosophist P. D. Ouspensky and all Theosophical writers.”

A Current Touch of the Wave in America

Mr. Dave DeLuca of Foothill Ranch, California, a highly regarded inspirational speaker and leader of seminars, has been studying Indian philosophy at the Vedanta Society of Southern California for over a quarter of a century and lectures at other Vedanta Societies in California. He compiled and edited selections from Swamiji’s teachings for the 290-page book, *Vivekananda: Lessons in Classical Yoga, Selections from the Master*. The contents of Swamiji’s teachings on Oneness, Classical Yoga and the four Yogas—Jnana Yoga, Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga and Raja Yoga, are enjoying immense readership, with the first edition rapidly selling out since it became available in the United States for twenty dollars.

Mr. DeLuca gave the following testimony of Swamiji's effect in his life to us during his visit to the Vedanta Society of New York on November 10, 2004:

I have been going to New Thought Churches throughout America and Canada to teach their members of their spiritual heritage vis-à-vis the spiritual treasures of ancient India—the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita and the Yoga Sutras. After spending three years working on a book about Swami Vivekananda's writings that would be American-friendly, i.e., one to four-page selections, Swamiji inspired me to reach out to Unitarians and Unity Churches, where there was interest in the origins of New Thought, in particular the main tenets of Vedanta: the oneness of existence, the unity of the soul and the harmony of religions.

Last March, I spoke at the Ministers Conference of the organization, Religious Science International, in Vancouver. I spoke to 150 ministers who have churches throughout the United States and Canada. As a result, I have been speaking on a regular basis at their churches throughout the country and Canada. I am normally asked to do the Sunday service. I speak for about a half hour on the connections and heritage between the wisdom of ancient India and New Thought, and then afterwards, I usually lead a three-hour class entitled "The Spiritual Treasures of Ancient India," where I give an overview of the Vedas, the Upanishads, the *Bhagavad Gita* and if there is time, the *Yoga Sutras*. The response has been phenomenal, because in part, I believe people are hungry to hear of their heritage. The ministers are thrilled to know how true the wisdom they believe in has been over such a long period of time and many of them have told that the writings of Swami Vivekananda should be required reading in their church. Every religious member should be required to read Swami Vivekananda. And, in fact, the book *Vivekananda: Lessons in Classical Yoga* is on its way to becoming required reading in Religious Science International's curriculum.

We read recently in an American newspaper of an influential Hollywood film producer and student of Yoga who has drawn up a scheme to invest millions of dollars for the purpose of introducing Yoga to school-age children after school hours. In addition, it is well known that Westerners are fond of reading a wide diversity of magazines on health, beauty, the home and garden, pets, the environment, medical, scientific, and current news magazines. These journals regularly feature articles on the practice and study of Yoga.

Conclusion

The fact is that we are still seeing but the froth of the great spiritual wave set in motion by Ramakrishna-Vivekananda. No doubt, it will leave behind numberless spiritual gems that will satisfy the heart and mind of people everywhere seeking their true treasure in life.

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