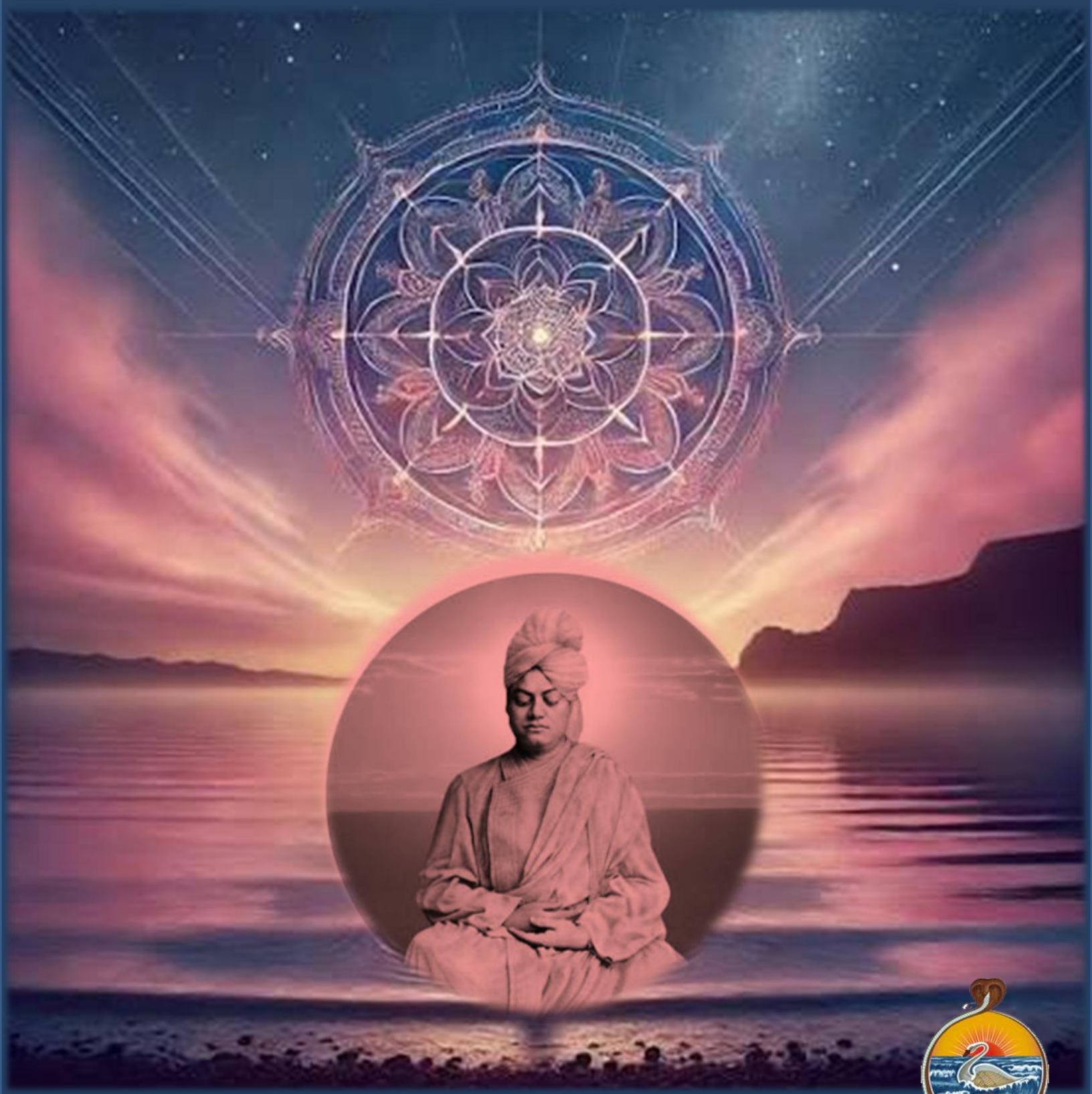
CHICAGO CALLING



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Table of Contents



	Page
Editorial: Benefit of Holy Company	**3**
Swami Vivekananda: A Bridge Between the East and the West *Octavia Harriston*	**4**
Yoga In the West: Light, Shadow, and Path Forward *Julia C Jonson*	**11**
Bhagavata (32): How to Overcome Maya *Swami Ishatmananda*	**18**
Introduction to the Cover Page: Worship and Work	**20**
Advertisements	**25**

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EDITORIAL

Benefit of Holy Company

यस्य स्मरणमात्रेण जन्मसंसारबन्धनात् ।
विमुच्यते नमस्तस्मै विष्णवे प्रभविष्णवे ॥
ॐ नमो विष्णवे प्रभविष्णवे ॥

yasya smaraṇa-mātreṇa janma-saṃsāra-bandhanāt,

vimuchyate namas-tasmai viṣṇave prabhaviṣṇave.

om namo viṣṇave prabhaviṣṇave.

Salutations to that all-powerful Lord Vishnu, by the mere remembrance of whom a person is completely freed from the bondage of birth and the cycle of worldly existence.

[After the great war of Kurukshetra], Lord Krishna returned to his own kingdom, Dwarka, where he found that his own people, the Yadava clan, had become very egoistic.

His own son, Samba (साम्ब) insulted the Rishis.

Only one person from the Yadava clan, Uddhava, was the exception, as he said: "I like to be with Dharma."

By that time, Lord Krishna had already decided to give up his body. Towards the end of the Uddhava Gita, in His conversation with Uddhava, the Lord said [Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 11/ 11/ 25].

सत्सङ्गलब्धया भक्त्या मयि मां स उपासिता ।
स वै मे दर्शितं सद्भिरञ्जसा विन्दते पदम् ॥

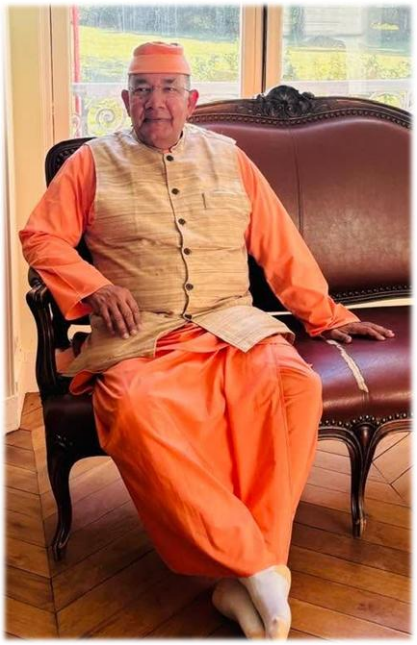
sat-saṅga-labdhayā bhaktyā mayi māṁ sa upāsitā /

sa vai me darśitaṁ sadbhir añjasā vindate padam //

sat-saṅga-labdhayā bhaktyā: From Holy company one develops devotion for me.

mayi māṁ sa upāsitā: Through worshipping and chanting my name.

añjasā vindate padam: Very easily one can realize God. One should have a clear idea of God, then



develop devotion for God, and these two can be achieved only through holy company. Uddhava then asked, O Lord [Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 11.11.26:

साधुस्तवोत्तमश्लोक मतः कीदृग्विधः प्रभो ।
भक्तिस्त्वय्युपयुज्येत कीदृशी सद्भिरादृता ॥

sādhus tavottamaśloka mataḥ kīdṛg-vidhaḥ prabho,

bhaktis tvayy upayuñjeta kīdṛśī sadbhir ādṛtā ॥

"O Uttamaśloka (Lord of sublime verses)! What kind of person is considered a sādhu in Your opinion, O Master? And what kind of devotion should be practiced unto You that is highly honored and accepted by the saintly and helps realize Your Real Nature? Please reveal this to me."

For everything, we need a teacher; for God realization, too, we need a teacher known as Guru. Here comes a triangle of God (Ishvar), Preceptor (Guru), and Devotee (Bhakta).

For the devotee, God means Ishvara; for the Yogi, Paramatma; and for the Jnani, Parabrahma.

Ishvara is *Sat-Chit-Ananda Swarupa* (सच्चिदानन्द स्वरूप)

Sat - Existence: No one wants to die

Cit – Knowledge: everyone likes to know

Ananda – Bliss: everyone wants happiness

How God Acts? Through Three Powers:

1. सन्धिनी शक्ति Sandhini Shakti (The Existence Potency) - Helps to understand existence
2. संवित् शक्ति Samvit Shakti (The Knowledge Potency) - This is the basis of knowledge
3. ह्लादिनी शक्ति Hladini Shakti (The Bliss Potency) - The Principle of Delight

How are we, Jivas, connected with God?

In the Bhagavad Gita (15.7), the Lord says: ममैवांशो जीवलोके जीवभूतः सनातनः (*mamaivāṁśo jīva-loke jīva-bhūtaḥ sanātanaḥ*) "Beings, Jivas, are my parts."

Hence, we too have three powers: Karma, Jnana, Prema.

Who can teach us?

One who is a Sadhu. The qualities of a Sadhu are:

Kripalu: Kind-hearted

Akritadhroha: Never thinks of harming others.

Titikshu Sarvadehinaam: Capacity for forbearance.

Satyachara: Always holding the truth.

Anavadya Atma: Never feels jealous of others.

Samah: Equal in both suffering and happiness.

Sarva-upakaraka: Always ready to help others.



Swami Vivekananda: A Bridge Between the East and the West

Octavia Harriston
Devotee of the Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago

This article is prepared based on the lecture that was delivered on July 18, 2026, at Home of Harmony

Good afternoon, friends. For me, it is not only a pleasure but an honor to be here with you and to share with you.

I'm going to start with: "We meditate on the glory of him who has produced this universe and who covers earth, heaven, and the interspaces. Who is the glory of the gods? Who is our innermost self? May he illumine our consciousness."

I bow to Sri Ramakrishna, to Vivekananda, the saints, to bless this occasion.

I started with the Gayatri mantra because it encompasses most—I would say all—of what we're going to cover here as we talk about the life of Swami Vivekananda. I think of that spirit that covers the universe, especially when you get into the Isha Upanishad: we are told to cover everything with the presence of God.

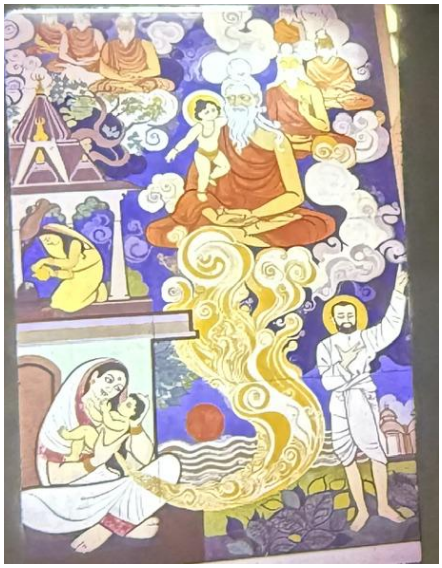
And I want us to bear that in mind because parts of what we're going to cover here may seem like a comparison between East and West. In many ways, it is. But please understand: it is a positive comparison.

I had a long career in business. I want to tell you a little more about myself because we are looking at aspects of Swami Vivekananda's life. I find it important that when you're going to listen to someone speak about, or read about, a third party, you know whose lenses you're looking through.

Another thing I find important, whether reading about or listening to someone speak, is this. I find, for myself—I'm a bookworm—it's important to make a distinction between validated facts and the opinion of the person speaking or writing, because often, when they are giving their opinions, they may be a bit tainted by cultural biases.

I find that now I am, of course, African American, descendant of a grandmother on one side who was a slave, a grandfather on the other who was what we called a Maroon. These were the Africans who escaped when the ships came to the Carolinas, went to the Sea Islands off the Carolinas and Georgia, and lived as free people. Then, when slavery ended, they came inland, and he married my grandmother, who was a former slave.

I find that being of a race of people who have survived what my people have survived gives us a bit of strength and fortitude, and the fact that we are still surviving and still thriving is good. I'm not going to dwell too much on that because we're here not to talk about me, but to talk about Swami Vivekananda.



When I was initiated by Swami Bhashyananda, I was told, "You must read the life of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and Swami Vivekananda." So I set about reading about them.

Who was Swami Vivekananda?

I don't like to say who. I'd like to say, "What was he?"

What we're going to talk about here is Swami Vivekananda as a bridge between East and West.

It has been said that in the East, man was looking inward to solve the mysteries of the universe: Why are we here? What are we about? In the West, man was looking outward to solve all those mysteries.

So you had this great technological development in the West, and in the East you had the great spiritual innovations and revelations. What Swami Vivekananda did—I say he was the linchpin that brought together those sides of the hemisphere to create a whole.

The East needed the technology of the West. The West needed—sorely needed—the spirituality of the East. Swami Vivekananda brought those together. He was the most appropriate bridge, I like to say, the catalyst for bringing it all together.

Now, that does not mean there was no spirituality in the East or no technology in the West. There was, which is why I said Gayatri: that presence is everywhere. If it is manifesting in the East, it is also manifesting in the West—different aspects of it.

Now, to know who Swami Vivekananda is, I want to let Sri Ramakrishna tell us. Then we're going to talk a bit about Sri Ramakrishna.

But I'm going to give you the story behind that. This is Sri Ramakrishna's depiction of Vivekananda—who he was, what he was, I like to say. This is a vision that Sri Ramakrishna had.

He says, and I'm going to read this to you:

"One day I saw through samadhi, that was his high spiritual state. I saw, through samadhi, my mind ascending a luminous path, beyond the subtle world of ideas. The higher it ascended the strata of that realm, the more I beheld beautiful ideal forms of devas and devis, gods and goddesses existing on both sides of the path. My mind came gradually to the last extremity of the region where I saw a fence made of light separating the realm of the divisible from that of the indivisible. Leaping over that fence, the mind entered by degrees the realm of the indivisible. I saw there was no more any person or thing there having a form. The gods and goddesses possessing heavenly bodies, exercising their authority over the realms far below, seemed afraid to enter there. Even the gods would not enter that realm.

"The next moment I saw seven wise rishis."

Rishi, my idea is that the rishis were the same as the prophets in the Old Testament. These were the seers who brought back what they saw in their high meditation states.

So, to continue, Sri Ramakrishna is saying:

"I saw seven wise rishis having bodies consisting of light only. They were seated in samadhi, in that deep spiritual consciousness. I felt that in virtue, knowledge, love and renunciation they had excelled even the gods and goddesses, not to speak of human beings. Astonished, I was pondering over their greatness when I saw before me that a part of the homogeneous mass of light of that abode, of that indivisible abode which was devoid of the slightest tinge of difference. Part of that light converted into the form of a divine child, then coming down to one of those rishis and throwing his arms around that rishi's neck, embracing him and calling to him, trying to awaken him out of samadhi.“

When someone is in that divine state, they are not in this worldly realm. So, to awaken him, this baby was trying to awaken this rishi.

"Soon the rishi awoke and he looked at the child, the wonderful child, with his eyes half shut and seeing the state of the rishi's bright face full of delight, I thought that the child was the treasure of his heart. Their familiarity was of eternity. The extraordinarily divine child then expressed infinite joy and said to him, 'I am going down. You must come with me.' The rishi said nothing in response, but his eyes expressed his hearty consent. Afterward, looking at the child with loving eyes for some time, he went into samadhi again.

"So astonished I then saw that form, that rishi, converted into a bright light and I saw that rishi

come down to earth."

Now, this was Sri Ramakrishna's vision. Swami Vivekananda's birth name was Narendra, called Naren. Sri Ramakrishna then says, "Hardly had I seen Narendra for the first time when I knew that he was that Rishi."

Later, when the Master was asked about the child in the vision, he said, "Yes, that child was me."

This was a vision that Sri Ramakrishna had of who Swami Vivekananda was and how he came.

Now notice, he said, "I am going down. You must come with me." He didn't ask; he commanded.

I say that because, when I look at the life of Sri Ramakrishna and at his relationship with Vivekananda, Sri Ramakrishna was the Master. He commanded that rishi: "I'm going down. You must come with me." We must go down together.

So Swami Vivekananda was considered a nitya siddha, that is, an eternally perfect sage.

Swami Vivekananda was born in Kolkata. In his youth, he was a very rambunctious child. He was energetic. He was bright. He was intelligent. He would sometimes have temper tantrums; when I saw it described, I said, "Oh, he had temper tantrums," and sometimes his mother couldn't control him. She would put cold water on his head to make him settle down.

And he was also inquisitive. He wanted to know everything.

He practiced meditation from an early age. It was a game for him to practice meditation.

As he grew up, his family was well-to-do. They were quite wealthy. At one point, they lost all that wealth. But he had an education in the Scottish college there, and he was a polymath. He was skilled and knowledgeable in several different sciences: mathematics, physics, everything. In philosophy, he excelled.

Then, in his youth, he was also influenced by the Brahmo Samaj. The Brahmo Samaj was an organization whose main purpose, I think, was to revolutionize India and bring it out of what they considered perhaps a dark age.

It was started by Ram Mohan Roy. At the time of Vivekananda's involvement there, it was run by Keshab Chandra Sen. They were into Christian practices, but even though they did not approve and did not have within their organization, idol worship and many of the rites and rituals of the Hindu religious traditions, they revered the Upanishads—those truths coming out of the Upanishads, having been realized by the rishis.

So those were his influences as he was coming up.

When he was 18 years old, he came to Sri Ramakrishna.

Being in the Brahmo Samaj was good. It satisfied many of his longings for knowledge. He was always seeking knowledge. But he said there was something more.

He had this tendency to go around asking, "Have you seen God?" Nobody could answer him.

"Have you seen God?"

His idea: if there is God, why can't I see him? If I'm to believe in him, that there is God, I don't see why I can't see him.

Someone told him about this unlettered sage at Dakshineswar that he should meet. So at 18 years old, he went to Dakshineswar, where Sri Ramakrishna was serving as priest in the Kali temple.

The first thing he asked him was, "Have you seen God?“

Sri Ramakrishna, without hesitating, said, "Yes, I've seen him just as I see you there, only clearer. Yes, I've seen him."

That was it. This is where he was going to be.

As I said, he was 18 years old when he came there, and Sri Ramakrishna molded him.

Sri Ramakrishna, one day—he was sure that this was that rishi he had seen in that vision—in order to test him, touched him and put him in an unconscious state, and then questioned him. In that questioning, he found out: yes, you are that rishi.

He set about molding him.

Now, you might wonder: if he was already on that high level, why did he need molding?

Here I say we separate opinion from fact. This is strictly my speculation here: because Swami Vivekananda was in that nondual state, Sri Ramakrishna's ideal was to reach the masses. The masses were not ready yet for where Swami Vivekananda was.

So he had to, if you will, bring Vivekananda down a bit so that he could take his message, and he would have to appreciate the masses and where they were.

So the molding of him was to prepare him to deliver his message of unity and harmony among religions.

This was Sri Ramakrishna's whole idea.

Now let's talk a bit about him—the God-man. Uneducated, he said, "I didn't need all of that. I asked the Divine Mother."

He was a devotee of the Divine Mother, that power that is personified as Mother. He would sing to the Divine Mother.

At first Sri Ramakrishna would put up with a lot of teasing from Naren because Naren did not approve of his worship of Kali, the Divine Mother, the Mother of the Universe.

Consider that underlying principle- that consciousness that pervades the universe that we talked about in the Gayatri mantra that I started with—that principle that is there will take form, and when it takes that form, that is when the worlds are created. So that form is the Mother of the Universe, and this was Sri Ramakrishna's mode of worship.

It was not that he was unaware of the other forms, but he knew what was needed by the masses who were not ready to be nondualists, as Swami Vivekananda was.

His message was unity.

We are here in this fine establishment, Home of Harmony. That comes out of that will of Sri Ramakrishna. And I like to say Home of Harmony, not House of Harmony. Home. Home has the connotation of unity, family, love, acceptance, and warmth.

When Swami Ishatmananda erected this place, I said, "Wonderful. This is what we need. This is what Chicago, the world, needs."

Sri Ramakrishna, in his own practice, engaged with all the major religions of the world. He practiced Buddhism and realized that by following its tenets, you reach the Divine.

He followed Islam, and when he followed these different religious paths, he became that person. He became a Muslim, following the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad.

When he practiced Christianity, there's a story that he was walking along and saw a man approaching him. He would often be in these high states. Mind you, his mind was not on the level as ours, but he would see this image coming toward him. He realized that it was Jesus, and that image entered his body.

I was reading something that Swami Vivekananda had said about Sri Ramakrishna. He embodied the truths that are inherent in all religions.

That was why he came: to bring all religions to understanding. No need to quarrel with each other. We're all on so many paths, so many different cultures. We're all going toward the same God.

And that was what his life was about.

He practiced all the religions of the world and all the different forms of Vedanta.

Now, when someone comes—and here we go speculating again, opinion—when an incarnation comes, and they enter this human plane, they take upon them all the aspects of this human existence.

He taught his disciples, "There's a place for everything, everything in its place."

So he was teaching them how to live in the world. Unless he understood how to live in the world, he could not have instructed them.

That incarnation comes and takes on the aspects of this human existence. But that incarnation has a mind that leaps.

I like to think of a phrase of Einstein: that when

he was doing some of his great theories, the mind takes a leap and you see things. Questions are answered. Mysteries are solved.

When the mind takes that leap, when we get out of this human mind that's concerned with: What shall I have for dinner? What did so-and-so say about me? Will I get that promotion? Will I get that new house or that new car?

We take the mind out of that level. It takes a leap into another dimension.

Now, there are people who get into that dimension by various means—drugs. There's a great trend now where people, taking certain herbs and so forth, get into that so-called altered state of consciousness.

The incarnations get into it at will. They don't need any assistance.

Sri Ramakrishna was in and out of that consciousness all day.

Sri Ramakrishna trained and molded Swami Vivekananda for the role he must play in spreading his message of harmony and unity.

And you couldn't think of a better bridge, a better connecting link.

When you think of a bridge, you want to know that it's sturdy, that it's going to hold you.

Let's look at his background: his education in the finest British schools, his knowledge in the sciences. He said that science is now proving the ideals of the Upanishads.

Swami Vivekananda was versed in both Eastern and Western philosophy. He was brilliant. He was strong. He was fearless, even as a child.

Sri Ramakrishna was unique in that there had been others. There had been Jesus, Buddha, Muhammad, who all dealt in a certain aspect of the universal truth. Sri Ramakrishna embraced and embodied all of them, and he had to get that message out to the world.

Swami Vivekananda was his vehicle for that.

There were other disciples he had. Among them, Vivekananda was foremost.

Don't forget, he had said, "You must come with me."

He also said that when an incarnation comes, he brings with him all the souls necessary for him to achieve his ends. He's known to have said that one of his disciples had been a disciple of Jesus.

Sri Ramakrishna was with Vivekananda for about five years, I think—an intense training period during which Sri Ramakrishna not only molded him but also protected him.

There was an instance that I read about in his last days. Sri Ramakrishna died of cancer. It was said that he had taken on the karma of many people who had come to him, and had taken on the dirt they would have to deal with as a result of their karma.

But in his last days, it was said he was on his bed, absolutely debilitated, and Holy Mother went in and saw, he's not here. Where is he?

She looked out, and she saw him running down a path, and she said, "How could he?"

Later on, when he came back, he said, "Yes, it was I."

Some three of his disciples had gone for a walk. He had foreseen a poisonous snake in their path and wanted to protect them from it.

So in his debilitated state—don't forget, the power was within him—he could do anything. If he had wanted to, he could have gotten rid of that cancer.

I often say also, if Jesus Christ had wanted to, he could have come down off that cross. He had that power.

And I don't forget that when he died—what is it?—the veil was rent. The cosmos went wild with all that power.

So they have that power in them. They don't let everybody know.

Sri Ramakrishna said, "If I let everybody know that I have the power, this place would become a dispensary; everybody would be coming here to be healed, and I don't want that. My message is to get people beyond this bodily consciousness and onto a spiritual consciousness. So, I don't want them knowing, " Yes, I can raise the dead; I can heal if I want, but that was not what I'm here for. My

mission is to develop that spiritual consciousness in all of humanity."

In his years with Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda—sometimes their relationship may be a bit adversarial.

Swami Vivekananda—we like the term—spoke truth to power. He would question. He would sometimes not obey.

But Sri Ramakrishna always, when they would be together in his bedroom—can you imagine? In your bedroom, you're giving instructions to 10 or 15 people at times.

In Sri Ramakrishna's bedroom, there was a bed, and at one end was an extension like a couch. He would sit there, and all of the devotees would come, and he'd give profound spiritual lessons when he wasn't bouncing in and out of that higher consciousness.

He would look and say, "Where's Naren? Is he here? Someone must get Naren."

And here was an interesting thing.

We had the advantage, in looking at Sri Ramakrishna's life, that there was M—who recorded what Sri Ramakrishna taught.

He recorded in a journal. He was an educator, and he recorded in his journal. That journal was then transcribed, and it is now the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna.

I've often wished that there had been a Gospel of Jesus because I would have loved to know what his day-to-day activities were.

I grew up Christian, but I said Christian in name only because I didn't really believe that Jesus existed.

I said, "Oh, that's a fairy tale they're telling me. I don't believe he walked water. Come on, let's get real."

It wasn't until I got into Vedanta that I became a Christian because I saw what—who—what Jesus was.

But back to Sri Ramakrishna's disciples.

He trained them because they were all to go out around the world.

There are now Vedanta centers on six continents. Six continents.

His disciples, his direct disciples, started those up, getting his message out to the world.

Swami Vivekananda, chief among them.

There was Swami Brahmananda, who was considered his child, considered Sri Ramakrishna's divine child.

Sri Ramakrishna had said to the Divine Mother—to him, the Mother of the Universe was a living, breathing being that he communicated with. He would sometimes sit talking to her. Nobody else could see her. She's there. He's talking to her as though a child would talk to his mother.

But Rakhal, who became Swami Brahmananda—Sri Ramakrishna had said to the Divine Mother, "Look what you have put me into in this life. I've never had children."

And the Divine Mother said to him, "You will have a son."

When Rakhal came to him, he recognized him as that son that had been promised by the Mother.

Many of the other disciples of Sri Ramakrishna were powerful, dynamic, spiritually enlightened men.

There were some women also. We don't hear a lot about them. There were some women, but not direct disciples. There was Gauri Ma, whom he initiated, and there were other women who would be with Holy Mother for the most part.

But as he prepared his disciples to deliver his message, he wanted to send them out into the world.

After Sri Ramakrishna passed away, Vivekananda more or less took control. He was the main disciple whom all the other disciples followed.

There was a time when, as he was into Advaita, which is nondualism, which does not worship, which does not see God as a person, he was training some of the other monks in his tradition of Advaita.

He had told them, "No pictures, no images around. We are meditating on that ultimate truth, not a person."

He came in and saw them with a picture of Sri Ramakrishna on the altar. He took it away.

The disciples went to Holy Mother, who was the divine consort of Sri Ramakrishna, and said, "He took the picture away."

Holy Mother said, "Do as he says."

That is the respect he had.

He has that force, that power, that mandate, if you will.

After Sri Ramakrishna passed away and Vivekananda became head of the Math, he had this desire to become an itinerant monk.

He walked the length and breadth of India with nothing but his begging bowl and his staff. He went from the Himalayas down to the southern tip of India. Sometimes he stayed with families in villages. Sometimes he slept under a tree.

Imagine that.

Imagine leaving home. You don't have your little bag of toiletries with you, your toothbrush. You can't scrape your tongue—you will get a twig and do that.

But Swami Vivekananda walked the length and breadth of India.

Now, when I was in India, I traveled the length and breadth of the country, but it was on a beautiful jet, which was a bit tiring for me. So I can imagine walking that distance.

What he ate—in his famous poem, "Song of the Sannyasin": "Food what chance may bring, well-cooked or ill, judge not."

So he was eating food what chance would bring. Who knows what it might be?

Walking the length and breadth of India, when he came to the southern tip of India, Cape Comorin in Kanyakumari—I visited that place. I remember being there for the sunset.

The sun—there's this huge orb out there, and everybody's watching. Vendors are there, and children are playing, and everybody's watching.

Suddenly the sun goes—you can almost hear it pluck into the water—and everybody stands up and applauds.

It's a beautiful sight to behold.

But Swami Vivekananda went to that southernmost tip and saw, in the distance, a huge rock. He swam over to that rock.

Now, I have made that trip from Cape Comorin over to that rock, where there is now a Vivekananda shrine. The waters there—here you have the confluence of the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, and the Bay of Bengal. So the currents are tremendous.

You can imagine—he swam.

He had these extraordinary tendencies about him, which I'm sure that he didn't exhibit either, but he swam that distance to that rock, and he sat there.

Now, in his travels on foot throughout India, he had seen the suffering of the Indian people. He had seen their misery. He had seen the conditions they lived in, and it broke his heart.

He was this Advaitic Vedantin, into that all-luminous power that is this universe, that consciousness, that compassion.

He saw his people's suffering and determined he had to do something to help them.

So he goes over to the rock, and he's sitting there pondering. I'm assuming this was the end of his journey. He had traveled all of India.

And this is where he had the vision of Sri Ramakrishna entering the water, heading toward the West, and beckoning to him, "Come, you must go.“

That's when he determined he was going to come to the West.

He had heard—now, I did not get the chronology of these events—but somehow there was the news of this World's Parliament of Religions to be held in Chicago, and he was determined that's where he was going to go.

Now, his reason for going there: the World Parliament. People from all over the world representing all religions were going to be there.

It was part of the Columbian Exposition, the World's Fair, in 1893. The Parliament of Religions was a program within that program.

[To be continued…]



Yoga In the West: Light, Shadow, and Path Forward

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This article is prepared based on the lecture that was delivered on June, 6th, 2026, at Home of Harmony

We are gathering in anticipation of International Day of Yoga on June 21st. I would like to begin with a question today.

When you hear the word yoga, what comes to mind?

Stretching, stress relief, flexibility, maybe expensive leggings, or how about a time-lapse asana sequence on Instagram: "please follow and like." So today, over 300 million people practice yoga worldwide. You can do yoga with goats, alpacas, snakes, on paddle boards, in infrared heat, at breweries, at airports, and at DJ yoga parties. So, human creativity clearly knows no bounds when it comes to finding new ways to make yoga more entertaining, especially when livestock, reptiles, and a soundtrack are involved. And yet, despite yoga being more visible than ever, many people know surprisingly little about where it came from, how it arrived in America and the Western world, and what it was originally designed to do. And that fascinates me.

Because one of the stories (and there are lots of stories of how yoga traveled from ancient India to modern Chicago) is one of the most remarkable cultural journeys in history. And it feels especially meaningful to be talking about that story and a few others that helped shape how yoga took root in the West, right here at the Home of Harmony in Chicago.

International Day of Yoga was established by the United Nations back in 2014. So, it's still relatively new and is now celebrated around the world each year on June 21st, recognizing yoga as one of India's greatest gifts to the world. A tradition that can continue to connect people across cultures, generations, and borders. And as I mentioned right here where you're sitting, Chicago holds a special place in that story, because in 1893 Swami Vivekananda introduced many Americans to yoga and Vedanta Philosophy at the World's Parliament of Religions. And that moment changed history, and it was one of the many catalysts, not just one catalyst but one of the many catalysts that helped yoga to circle the globe.

Today yoga means many things to many people. I teach modern yoga. I love modern yoga. I am a part of modern yoga. But I also believe we have a responsibility to understand how yoga arrived here. How it changed. What's been lost, and how can we carry it forward with integrity? Because yoga survived the travesties of colonization, cultural suppression, political upheaval, and much more. Yet, the teachings endured, and it's really up to us to carry them forth with honor.

Now, my personal story. I wanted to share with you how yoga entered my life. I just turned 54 in March, and I've been practicing yoga since I was 18. I feel it entered my life in a very serendipitous way. At the time, my life felt really dark. I grew up without a father, and my mom raised me alone. And many of the hardships tied to that came up for me when I went away to college.

In school, I was, as most of us were at that time, trying to figure out who I was, how to survive emotionally, and how to move through life with strength. And thankfully, yoga entered my life... not through extreme poses, not through performance, but through simple things: gentle breath awareness, simple philosophy, meditation, and stillness.

In the early 90s, one of my university drama professors taught a course called stage voice and

movement and began each class with 15 minutes of simple yoga. On the days I attended that class, I noticed something subtle, and I do emphasize the word subtle, beginning to change. I felt a little more at ease in my own skin. I felt a little more grounded, a little more connected to myself. There was nothing dramatic about it. There were no lightning bolts and no grand revelation. It was just a quiet sense that for the first time I was beginning to come home to myself, which I later learned is the whole point of yoga.

It has nothing to do with flexibility or impressive poses. So, eventually and with consistent self-exploration, yoga helped me discover something I didn't know I had: a lot of resilience and an inner light. And this seeking- and I emphasize that word "seeking" because that's what we all are if we're students of yoga: we're seeking. And this is a great place to seek. It gave me tools to regulate my nervous system before I even understood what that meant. It taught me how to breathe through discomfort, how to sit with uncertainty (and even embrace it), and how to soften without collapsing.

And I'm still learning those things today. And honestly, I think yoga changed the trajectory of my life. And that's why I care so deeply about preserving the depth of this practice and tradition. Because yoga is not merely about shaping the body. It's about shaping consciousness. And it did so for years, thousands of years before it ever arrived in the Western world. And in difficult times, personally and collectively, yoga can help human beings. Yoga can help us all cultivate steadiness, resilience, compassion, clarity, and hope.

Before we talk about yoga in the West, or how yoga came to the West, let's talk about what yoga is. What is yoga? We've talked about yoga everywhere from airports to livestock farms. But beyond the trends and the postures, what is yoga really? Yoga is a path of awakening. It's a journey inward through breath, awareness, ethics, meditation, and self-study. The poses are one doorway, but not the whole house.

And I would like to engage the crowd just a little bit. Raise your hand if you like to shop at IKEA. What are some of the things that you can partake in at IKEA? There's not just one thing. Did I hear meatballs? There are even vegan meatballs. What else? Pretzels, what else? Furniture, blankets, knickknacks, bathroom goods, plants; they have a whole plant section. Think of yoga in that way. I like to do simple analogies because then they make sense to us. So, yoga, in a way, is like IKEA. This is just an analogy.

Most people use only a small portion of what it has to offer while overlooking many things. We don't just go for the houseware; we go for the plants. And again, the Swedish meatballs. And even the vegan meatballs. Before we delve deeply into yoga in the West, we also need to remember that yoga did not begin there. Yoga emerged from the Indian subcontinent over thousands of years. The philosophical roots of yoga are ancient and vast. The Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, the Yoga Sutras, the Hatha Yoga text, Vedanta philosophy, Tantra, Bhakti, Karma Yoga, Jnana Yoga, meditation traditions, breath modulation practices, ethics, and self-inquiry: yoga was never just one thing.

And, importantly, yoga survived British colonization, other catastrophic events, invasions, and inquisitions. And I know that's heavy subject matter, but you need to remember that much was taken, much was suppressed. Many traditional systems were destabilized. But miraculously, these teachings endured. And that staying power matters, because when we practice yoga today, we are participating in a living tradition. Let's remember that it's a living tradition, that it survived enormous historical pressures, and that it's somehow still here today, and in some ways maybe bigger than ever. And that deserves care, study, and a word you'll hear me say a lot today: stewardship.

There was an early Western fascination with Indian philosophy. So during the 1800s Hindu

texts and yogic ideas began circulating through translations and philosophical studies. The Mughal prince Dar Shikho commissioned translations of important Indian texts centuries earlier. And these translations fostered dialogue between Hindu and Islamic traditions while helping preserve the teachings for future generations. They also made these ideas more accessible across cultural and religious boundaries. And I know that's what it's all about here at the Home of Harmony. Later European and American thinkers began engaging with the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, and Vedantic philosophy. I have a list here of some early Western thinkers, and who you see pictured there: the first gentleman in the white shirt is Walt Whitman, and right next to him is Nikola Tesla. But there was a long line of people who were inspired by Vedantic texts. Johan Wolfgang von Goethe studied the Bhagavad Gita. Ralph Waldo Emerson described the Gita as a consistent voice of intelligence. Henry David Thoreau carried the Bhagavad Gita with him. And then Walt Whitman, who you see there on the left, his poetry has been described as the Gita in American verse.

T.S. Elliott studied Sanskrit and the Upanishads at Harvard University, and Carl Young was deeply influenced by yogic psychology. We explore this in my yoga teacher training program, where Young used the Chakra Model to help people understand where they were feeling certain things in their body and much, much more. Werner Heisenberg said Indian philosophy helped him reconcile paradoxes with quantum theory. Oppenheimer studied Sanskrit and famously quoted the Bhagavad Gita; and, of course, Nikola Tesla was influenced by Swami Vivekananda. So even before postural yoga exploded in popularity, yogic philosophy was already shaping Western intellectual thought.

Then came a pivotal moment in 1893: Chicago hosted the World's Parliament of Religions. Swami Vivekananda arrived in America not as a celebrity but as a monk. He wandered throughout India before traveling west. He came here partly to raise American awareness and seek support for India's poor. Then he delivered one of the most influential spiritual speeches in modern history. He introduced audiences to Vedanta and Yoga as universal pathways towards spiritual understanding. His message was not about performance, aesthetics, or fitness. It was about unity and harmony (and I use that word very boldly in this Home of Harmony space). Human dignity, inner freedom, strength, and service. Many historians consider Vivekananda the Father of Modern Yoga in the West.

Then another important shift occurred. Teachers in India began helping yoga evolve into forms more accessible to modern householders. Not just as ascetics or renunciates. They were innovators who adapted yoga to their times in India. And that's important, and I'll tell you why.

In the early 20th century, yoga faced skepticism from colonial authorities in India. Western scientists and many educated Indians viewed yoga as mystical, aesthetic, and even outdated. And two teachers, Shri Yogendra and Swami Kuvalayananda worked to present yoga as a rational, scientific, health-promoting, and accessible practice that was available to ordinary householders. And the major figure that I want to focus on first is Shri Yogendra. He's the one on the left. He's often called the Father of Modern Postural Yoga. His teacher was the Himalayan ascetic Paramahamsa Madhavdasji, and Shri Yogendra helped to make Hatha Yoga accessible to ordinary people living everyday lives; importantly, he began scientific research on yoga. He studied breath practices, Prana, Neti Kriya, and the physiological effects of yoga. He even traveled to America in 1919.

Another pioneer pictured to the right is Swami Kuvalayananda, who also studied in the same lineage under Paramahamsa Madhavdasji. He conducted scientific research on yogic techniques using X-rays and physiological studies. He studied practices such as Urnanabha and Nauli Kriya at

the Kaivalyadhama Ashram near Mumbai. Here, yoga and science began interacting in entirely new ways.

Meanwhile, figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Shri Aurobindo emphasized yoga's spiritual and philosophical dimensions. And this entire period, my friends, became known as the Modern Yoga Renaissance in India. And eventually, yoga continued evolving into what we now recognize globally. And you may be wondering what about Krishnamacharya, Iyengar, and Pattabhi Jois. Those teachers were also pivotal in shaping modern yoga and in supporting Western yoga students. However, I chose to focus on these two pioneers, who are perhaps lesser-known to Western students, because yoga did not come to the West through a single lineage or a single teacher. And stories like theirs help to illuminate other important pathways through which yoga spread globally.

The Light of Modern Yoga: there's always a light side and a dark side, right? We'll explore the lightness first. Modern yoga has done many beautiful things. It's now accessible to millions of people who might otherwise never encounter these teachings. People discover breath awareness, nervous system regulation, stress reduction, mindfulness, and so much more. One of my favorite aspects, as a yoga studio owner and teacher for many years, is the community. I watch people become friends, go out for coffee, make plans together, and sign up for workshops together.

Yoga helps with healing and strength, not just physical strength but emotional and mental strength. It is also very important for physical, mental, and emotional mobility, as well as for compassion and self-awareness. Modern yoga has helped us normalize conversations around mental health. I don't think it gets enough credit for that embodiment and mindfulness. And for that, accessibility matters. Now yoga does not belong only to ascetics; it has spread to ordinary people like us. That evolution is not inherently bad because adaptation has always existed.

But of course, there is also a shadow side: cue Darth Vader's Empire music. Today, much of yoga in the West has become heavily commercialized. There's nothing wrong with making a living teaching yoga, in my opinion. Teachers deserve compensation. Studios deserve sustainability as well, and most local studios function more like non-profit organizations and don't turn a huge profit. But there's a difference between sustainable exchange and hyper-commercialization. Today we see yoga reduced to body aesthetics, social media performance, culture, expensive branding, influencer culture, consumerism, feel-good-only messaging.

I want to expound on that for a moment. While yoga can make us feel good, it can make us feel wonderful, but it can also reduce this rich, transformative tradition to little more than comfort, positivity, or entertainment. Traditionally, yoga is a path of self-inquiry, discipline, and liberation. And sometimes that process feels wonderful, but not always as we're going through it, right? Sometimes it's uncomfortable. And then here's my personal favorite, said very sarcastically: “competitive spirituality”. This is the tendency to turn spiritual practice into a subtle contest where we measure, compare, or judge ourselves based on perceived spiritual achievement. Spirituality is very practical. Examples include bragging about maybe meditating for two hours or saying things like “I've heard this before” or “I'm beyond needing therapy.”

As a discipline, yoga teaches humility; it encourages practitioners to observe the ego's tendencies. Since our ego tends to seek identity and status at all costs, it can attach itself to spirituality just as easily as to wealth, career success, or athletic achievement. And then again, the extreme gimmicks which we went over in the beginning, as cute as they are: goat yoga, glow stick yoga, there's even snake yoga now, and rage yoga, and then other yoga hybrids. Increasingly, yoga has become disconnected from its

philosophical roots.

And then the next topic is cultural appropriation, and it is a tough one. There's one question I really want to touch on because it's become increasingly relevant as yoga has grown in the West, and I even get asked it on occasion by yoga students and teachers: "Is modern yoga cultural appropriation?" I don't think the answer is a simple yes or no.

Just like anything in yoga or philosophy, there's a lot of gray that needs to be examined. And I say this as someone who has wrestled with this personally. As a Caucasian yoga student and a teacher born and raised here in the United States, I've experienced moments of real impostor syndrome. I've wondered: Do I belong in this tradition? Do I have the right to even teach yoga? Can I teach this practice respectfully? And how do I participate and teach responsibly? Those are important questions. And over time, and with counsel from my teachers (and I do believe it's important to always have a teacher), I found myself thinking less in terms of appropriation and more in terms of adoption.

And I can think of this concept that I learned from my teacher, Prasad, who has worked with me tirelessly. When we adopt something meaningful from another culture, we're entering into a relationship with it. We don't simply take from it; we learn from it, we care for it, we allow it to shape us. And most importantly, we honor it because yoga did not originate in the West; it is a gift from a rich and profound tradition that has traveled across languages, borders, and generations to reach us. And the question is not whether non-Indians can practice or teach yoga. Millions already do. The question is: how do we practice it? How do we engage with yoga? Do we engage only as consumers, or as caretakers? Do we treat it as a product or as a living tradition? And not to ask, do I belong? Because that's just our ego talking again. But rather, how can I honor this tradition more deeply and with respect? That's the real question.

And as someone who is not Indian, I recognize there are aspects of yoga (maybe just a little bit) and Hindu traditions that I'll never fully understand through lived experience alone. For example, many students and close friends of mine have shared with me that Hindu teachings invite us to see the divine in every single person that we encounter. While I can contemplate and reflect on this beautiful sentiment and sometimes, I feel it as well, and I do my best to embody it, I cannot claim that same cultural relationship with it as somebody who grew up immersed in this traditional ideal. And that awareness has actually brought me a great deal of humility. And I think it's made me a really good student of yoga and possibly a better yoga teacher. I have come to believe and embrace that my role is not to claim ownership of yoga but to be a responsible steward of the teachings.

We see examples in other traditions, and I like to apply context to everything. There are countless practitioners and teachers in the United States who practice Asian martial arts such as kung fu, judo, and aikido, yet they are not Chinese or Japanese. And the question is not whether they can practice or teach. The question is whether they do so with respect, understanding, humility, and a commitment to honoring the tradition that shaped those arts. I think the same is true for yoga. For me, it ultimately comes down to stewardship. There's that word again: not ownership. Not claiming expertise in a culture that is not my own, but stewardship. Receiving these teachings with gratitude, studying them sincerely, practicing them with integrity, and passing them forward with as much respect as possible. Many Indian practitioners may have the advantage of growing up closer to certain cultural, philosophical, and spiritual dimensions of yoga. And for those of us who did not, that simply means our responsibility is to remain humble, curious, and committed to learning.

So, what's missing from modern yoga? As yoga has become more visible, some of its quieter dimensions of yogic practices have become less

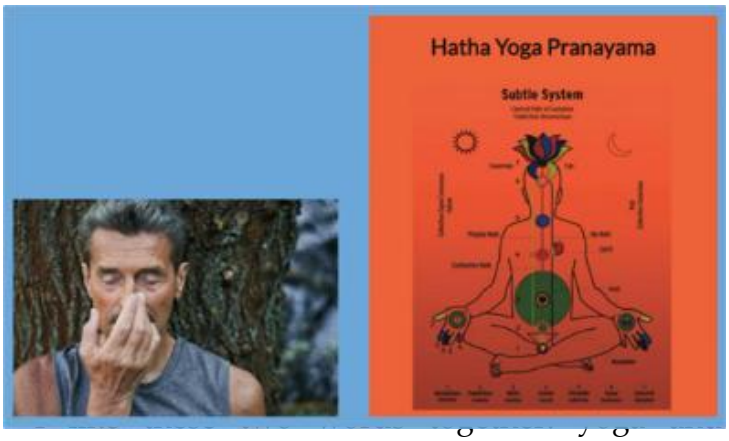
visible; for example, Shanmukhi Mudra and Bhramari Pranayama. Yet, philosophy, breath, stillness, ethics, self-inquiry, and service remain at the heart of the tradition. Offering not entertainment, but transformation. You can watch Netflix for entertainment, right? We go to yoga to slow down, to quiet down. And while bodily appearance becomes the focus and entertainment the aim, we can lose sight of yoga's deeper purpose. And yoga was never meant to be about displaying the body. It asks us to explore more profound questions, like: How do we relate to suffering? How do we steady our mind? How do we reduce attachment? How do we cultivate compassion? How do we live ethically? How do we serve others? And these are questions that really matter, especially right now because we are living in anxious times. People are overwhelmed. They're disconnected. They're lonely. They're burned out. They're afraid. And yoga has something profound to offer through quiet practices such as philosophy, pranayama, stillness, ethics, self-inquiry, and service.

I like to talk in threes or fours. Today I have chosen the three S's so that hopefully you will remember, as I humbly share my opinion that I believe the future of yoga in the West requires these three things.

Seva, of course, meaning selfless service. Yoga is not only about personal wellness. It's also about community care, compassion, support, and contribution.

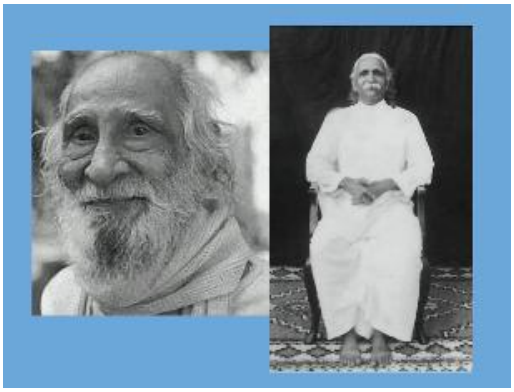
Study; we might also use the word Svādhyāya. Study meaning commitment to ongoing learning. Svādhyāya means studying yogic philosophy, history, context, lineage, texts, and culture. And then putting these concepts back on ourselves, as though I could relate to all of Arjuna's psychological states in the Bhagavad Gita. He had impostor syndrome and lots of fear, and maybe I can get through it too, knowing that not to become perfect, and not to become performative, but to remain connected to depth.

And then my favorite word, Stewardship. Stewardship means carrying yoga forward responsibly. You see people on the stairs holding hands and helping each other up. I want us to picture our yoga like this: how do we carry it forward with care and responsibility, allowing it to evolve while respecting its roots? Not freezing yoga in the past, but not stripping it of its meaning either. We can modernize yoga without emptying it. Even though we are modern practitioners, we all still have depth, and we can bring that through.



resilience, because life is difficult and yoga teaches us how to meet it. Yoga never promised us perfection. It offers practice that helps us be more resilient. Yoga helps us face what we have to face through pranayama, breath modulation, awareness, steadiness, compassion, presence, ethical living, and so on. And most importantly, self-inquiry. I like the picture of the man just standing by a tree. I'm guessing he's either practicing Chandra Bhedana or maybe Nadi Shodhana, but he's just doing something so practical, and he looks like a normal person, a normal practitioner. And I chose the Hatha Yoga Model for pranayama, where you see the Chakra System with the nadis Ida and Pingala, and this energetic map of yoga is really quite profound. Yoga is a science in and of itself that's been around for a long time. And if we look a little bit deeper into these teachings, they really help us understand a lot about ourselves.

Where do we go from here? The path forward. I think we are at another pivotal moment. I think 1893 was a pivotal moment, and I feel like 2026



the one on the left is Shri Yogendra, and the one on the right is Swami Kuvalayananda



The heart chakra



Stewardship means carrying yoga forward responsibly

could be another. I've put a heart chakra here. The heart, as you may know, is the most significant of all of the chakras in Hatha. The color is a beautiful green, and it's the bridge between the upper and the lower. And if we can walk around with an open heart yet a protected one, I think that's a good message for us going forward.

The world is hungry for meaning right now, my friends. It's hungry for regulation, for grounding, for hope, for disconnecting from devices and connecting to each other. It's nice to make eye contact with humans instead of looking at our phone, right? And yoga can help with that. Not because yoga is trendy. It's not. Remember, it's rich. It's vast. It's been around for a long time. But it teaches human beings how to meet life. It is hope and resilience. It emblazons those words into your psyche. I believe the future of yoga should shift toward inner abundance rather than external performance.

Nervous system regulation, instead of image cultivation. Depth, instead of gimmicks. Practical wisdom, instead of perfection. Community, instead of comparison. Integration, instead of escapism. Practical wisdom, hope and resilience. Take care of the body. Absolutely. Your body matters. Your body's sacred. But it's also true that yoga is larger than the body. I always remind myself: you have a body, but you're not a body. You have thoughts, but you're not your thoughts. And perhaps most importantly, yoga teaches us that even in uncertain times, human beings contain enormous resilience. Sometimes we forget that. But yoga helps us to remember.

I want to close with: yoga is already profound and interesting enough. Nothing needs to be added. Goats, as cute as they are, we don't need them. Yoga is enough without goats. Yoga is a practice of subtraction. It's not a practice of addition. You're already enough. And the vast science of yoga is enough, just as it is. Just discover you, and that's yoga. And yoga doesn't need any gimmicks. It doesn't need constant reinvention. It doesn't need flashy performance. Its depth is already extraordinary. And the question is whether we are willing to slow down long enough to receive it. Studying with teachers who can guide us to peel away the layers of bitterness, of stress, resentment, and tension to understand the core of our goodness. And my hope is that yoga in the West continues evolving with integrity, humility, accessibility, respect, intelligence, and heart. And that more people encounter yoga not merely as an exercise but as a pathway toward inner alignment, compassion, resilience, and hope.

BHAGAVATA (32): *HOW TO OVERCOME MAYA*

Swami Ishatmananda

In our previous issue of eZine, we discussed Maya – a power that deludes our mind and forces us to think the way it wants us to think.

Under the spell of Maya we are all bound. To know the way out, the king Nimi asked:

यथैतामैश्वरीं मायां दुस्तeरामकृतात्मभिः ।
तारन्त्यञ्जः स्थूलधियो महर्षेेदमुच्यताताम् ॥ १७ ॥

yathaitām aiśvarīṁ māyāṁ dustarām akṛtātmabhiḥ
taranty añjaḥ sthūla-dhiyo maharṣe idam ucyatām

O great Sage, kindly tell me how even an ordinary person can quickly overcome this power of the Supreme Lord, Maya.

This question was answered by Prabuddha, the fourth brother of the Nava Yogi, who said: to get freedom from Maya's spell, one should, under the guidance of a proper Guru, Spiritual teacher, practice some spiritual disciplines.

These instructions have been enlisted in the 23rd through 28th verses of the 3rd chapter of the 11th book.

सर्वतो मनसोऽसङ्गमादौ सङ्गं च साधुषु ।
दयां मैत्रीं प्रश्रयं च भूतेष्वद्धा यथोचितम् ॥ २३ ॥

sarvato manaso 'saṅgam ādau saṅgaṁ ca sādhuṣu
dayāṁ maitrīṁ praśrayaṁ ca bhūteṣv addhā yathocitam.

In the beginning, he should learn to let go of attachment to the objects of the senses and develop love for holy company. As we find in verse 82 of the Viveka Chudamani text:

मोक्षस्य कांक्षा यदि वै तवास्ति त्यजातिदूराद्विषयान्विषं यथा ।
पीयूषवत्तोषदयाक्षमार्जव प्रशान्तिदान्तीर्भज नित्यमादरात् ॥

mokṣasya kāṁkṣā yadi vai tavāsti tyajātidūrādviṣayānviṣaṁ yathā ।
pīyūṣavattoṣadayākṣamārjava praśāntidāntīrbhaja nityamādarāt.

The verse advises the aspirant that if one desires liberation, they should renounce sense objects as far away as poison, while treating contentment, compassion, forgiveness, straightforwardness, peace, and self-control like nectar to be cultivated constantly.

Our scriptures talk about cultivating these qualities: ***Kindness, Friendliness, Humility, Purity of body and mind, Perform duties, Patience, Avoid vain talks, Study scriptures, Be straightforward, Observe continence, Practice harmlessness, Steady mind in joy & sorrow, Presence of God, Live in solitude, Faith in scriptures, No criticism of others' holy books, Control of mind and speech, Practice silence, Desirelessness, Truthful, Hear, talk, and meditate on the Lord, Dedicate all actions to Him, Charity, Japa, Good conduct, Friendship with holy men, Love to talk with God's devotees, Develop intense joy, satisfaction, and detachment.***

The practice of all these qualities is known as Bhagavad-Dharma-Abhyasa. Bhagavad-Dharma is the "religion of the soul" and refers to the disciplined, repeated practice (Abhyasa) of the divine path of devotion and righteous duty prescribed by God. The practice of these qualities can break the bond of maya.

The Nava Yogi brothers sometimes, to mention supreme Brahman—Para Brahman, have used the word Narayana. Hence, the King wanted to know about Para Brahman – Narayana. He also requested clarification of the process of Karma.

श्रीराजोवाच
नारायणाभिधानस्य ब्रह्मणः परमात्मनः ।
निष्ठामर्हथ नो वक्तुं यूयं हि ब्रह्मवित्तमाः ॥ ३४ ॥

śrī-rājovāca
nārāyaṇābhidhānasya brahmaṇaḥ paramātmanaḥ
niṣṭhām arhatha no vaktum yūyaṁ hi brahma-vittamāḥ || 34||

The King says, "O Brahmavid-Uttama, the greatest knower of Brahman, please tell me what differences are there between Brahman, the infinite Supreme Spirit (Paramatman) and Narayana – the

Divine Person."

Pippalayana, the fifth brother of Nava Yogi, explained this most difficult question in the next four verses.

He says it is difficult because Brahman/ Para-atman Who is beyond time-space and causation and cannot be imagined by the mind, can not be expressed by word (*vākya-mana-atita,* Beyond the realm of the mind and words).

Pippalayan, through an example explained why in verse 36,

नैतन्मनो विशति वागुत चक्षुरात्मा प्राणेन्द्रियाणि च यथानलमर्चिः स्वाः ।

शब्दोऽपि बोधकनिषेधतयात्ममूलमर्थोक्तमाह यदृते न निषेधसिद्धिः ॥

nai tan mano visiṣṭi vāg uta cakṣur ātmā prāṇendriyāṇi ca yathānala-mṛciḥ svāḥ

śabdo 'pi bodhaka-niṣedha-tayātma-mūla-arthoktam āha yat ṛte na niṣedha-siddhiḥ .

As sparks, though born out of fire, cannot illumine the fire, similarly entities born of Him, the Brahman, cannot express Brahman.

Pippalayan further explains (verse 35):

श्रीपिप्पलायन उवाच

स्थित्युद्भवप्रलयहेतुरहेतुरस्य यत्स्वप्नजागरसुषुप्तिषु सद्बहिश्च ।

देहेन्द्रियासुहृदयानि चरन्ति येन सञ्जीवितानि तदवेहि परं नरेन्द्र ॥

śrī-pippalāyana uvāca

sthity-udbhava-pralaya-hetur ahetur asya yat svapna-jāgara-suṣuptiṣu sad bahiś ca ।

dehendriyāsu-hṛdayāni caranti yena sañjīvitāni tad avehi paraṁ narendra .

The Supreme Truth, the basis of origin – sustenance – dissolution of the Universe, though Itself causeless, unchanging – known as Brahman or Paramatma. Again, for the benefit of the ordinary minds, the same Truth becomes Narayana.

यर्ह्यब्जनाभचरणैषणयोरुभक्त्या चेतोमलानि विधमेद् गुणकर्मजानि ।

तस्मिन् विशुद्ध उपलभ्यत आत्मतत्त्वं साक्षाद् यथामलदृशोः सवितृप्रकाशः ॥ ४० ॥

yarhy abjanābha-caraṇaiṣaṇayoru-bhaktyā ceto-malāni vidhamed guṇa-karma-jāni ।

tasmin viśuddha upalabhyata ātma-tattvaṁ sākṣād yathāmala-dṛśoḥ savitṛ-prakāśaḥ ।। 40 ।।

When the heart is purified, the truth of the Atman shines in it.

How can this purification be achieved?

By the growing delight in the service of the Supreme Lord, Powerful devotion develops and destroys the heart's impurities.

The intelligent King Nimi, taking up the clue, wanted to know the secret of Karma, the practice of which one can become purified.

Nimi asked –

कर्मयोगं वदत नः पुरुषो येन संस्कृतः ।

विधूयेहाशु कर्माणि नैष्कर्म्यं विन्दते परम् ॥ ४१ ॥

karma-yogaṁ vadata naḥ puruṣo yena saṁskṛtaḥ

vidhūy ehāśu karmāṇi naiṣkarmyaṁ vindate param

King Nimi said: O great sages, please speak to us about the process of karma-yoga. Purified by this process of dedicating one's practical work to the Supreme, a person can very quickly free himself from all material activities, even in this life, and thus enjoy pure life on the transcendental platform."



Illustrations of the Bhagavatam from a 19th century Deccani school. Here are two golden chariots on either side of a mount Meru. The left one is the Sun and on the right is most probably the Moon.

Introduction to the Cover Page: Worship and Work

Pravrajika Matriprana
Sarada Convent
Vedanta Society of Southern California

The world is celebrating the advent of the Divine Mother. In the Northern Hemisphere, she comes as a soothing breeze after the scorching summer, and in the Southern Hemisphere, her arrival announces spring after the leafless winter. She comes with all her beauty, prosperity, and spiritual joy. Whether we realize it or not, she fulfills all and uplifts all spiritually — even if the form may not always be attractive.

Her beauty is unfathomable. Her meditation mantra says: "Adorned with matted locks of hair on her head and decorated with a crescent moon on her brow. Endowed with three eyes, her face radiates with the beauty of the full moon. Her complexion has the brilliant radiance of the Atasi flower (resembling molten gold); she is firmly established and possesses beautiful eyes. She is blessed with the freshness of youthful vigor and adorned with all kinds of ornaments. She has charming teeth and full, uplifted breasts. Standing in a graceful three-fold bending posture (tribhanga), she is the vanquisher of the demon Mahishasura. Her touch is as tender as lotus stalks, and she is endowed with ten arms."

She is called Dasha-bhuja, the Ten-Armed One. She is holding a weapon in each of her hands, for she is protecting her creation from all ten directions: east, west, south, north, northeast, southeast, southwest, northwest, up, and down. She is protecting it with all her power. She is the embodiment of power, Shakti-rupa. This process of protection is manifested in three ways: jnana shakti (power of knowledge), iccha shakti (power of will), and kriya shakti (power of action). This action is entirely full of love and equality—there is neither attachment nor aversion. That is how God works. She is the only doer.

Her hands symbolize affluence and doership as well. Swami Vivekananda saw Sri Sarada Devi as "Living Durga." Swami Gambhirananda wrote, "Brahmachari Gagan (Ritananda) noticed more than once that whenever her divine side had the upper hand, it created all around a supernatural atmosphere which, by an irresistible magnetic force, transported all within its orbit to a higher plane for the time being. One morning, at about nine o'clock, he sat on the Mother's verandah at Jayrambati, chewing some fried rice, while the Mother swept the verandah. Just then, somebody was heard calling from outside, 'Mother dear, may it please you to give me alms!' At this, the Mother said aside, 'I can't finish my duties, working though I am with innumerable hands.' Attracted by an ethereally soft and compassionate voice, no sooner had Gagan looked up at her face than she stopped her broom and, bending forward with one hand on her knees, said with a beaming face, 'Look at the fun; I have only two hands, and here I speak of having infinite hands!'"

It is interesting to note that in Sanskrit, work and its result are both expressed through one word, "karma." This is because karma begets karma. An action begets many results, and those results multiply into more karma. It is a chain that binds all with eternal knots.

Generally speaking, all six schools of Indian philosophy interpret karma as a universal principle of moral causation and natural consequence. Nyaya philosophers treat karma within a logical framework of rational inference and moral stewardship. This school asserts that a supreme moral administrator, Ishvara (God),

impartially dispenses the appropriate fruits of human deeds. Vaisheshika, too, sees karma as moral acts that attach invisible merits and demerits to the soul. Both Samkhya and Yoga view karma through a dualistic lens in which matter (prakriti) operates autonomously. Karma is a mechanical, material process of cause and effect belonging to the physical and psychological realms, while the pure conscious spirit (purusha) remains a detached witness, unattached to action. Yoga, in particular, addresses the psychological side of karma through mental impressions (samskaras and vasanas). Actions leave deep traces in the mind (citta), which fuel emotional afflictions (kleshas) and future cravings, meaning that liberation requires burning these seeds through meditative discipline.

Purva Mimamsa focuses strictly on ritual action (kratu or karma) and duty. It posits an unseen potency called apurva (the non-perishing residue of a performed ritual), generated by Vedic sacrifices, that guarantees the delivery of future results, placing ritual duty above abstract cosmic justice. In general, there are two types of karma: auspicious and inauspicious. According to Purva-Mimamsa, karma can be categorized into five types: nitya (daily duties), naimittika (circumstantial duties), kamya (actions performed to fulfill desires), nishiddha (prohibited actions), and prayashchitta (atonement). Daily duties, or nitya karma, do not bring any specific result, but not performing them incurs trouble. For example, taking a daily shower, doing some spiritual practices, and the like are necessary. These keep the body and mind healthy. Along with these regular activities, on special observance days, one is expected to perform some additional services, whether extra japa, ritual worship, homa (fire ritual), and so on. These two are auspicious forms of karma. Usually, any spiritual seeker would avoid nishiddha, or prohibited, actions, as one develops a strong foundation of moral and ethical character before becoming spiritual. All religions begin with instructions such as "Do not lie," "Do not steal," and the like. In the Bhagavad Gita, Sri Krishna also talked about vikarma, which is somewhat similar to nishiddha karma. However, life does not always move in a straight line. If, by chance, one has to perform any prohibited actions, willingly or unwillingly, the question of confession and atonement, or prayashchitta karma, arises. Both of these are inauspicious forms of karma. The borderline case is kamya karma, which involves acting with a desire for something. It covers numerous activities, and if they are undertaken for spiritual upliftment, then they are all right; however, they should be avoided when they make one more worldly. Purva Mimamsa helps a spiritual seeker move forward from thoughts of this world toward the world beyond. Its main emphasis is not on giving up the fruits of actions.

Uttara Mimamsa, or Vedanta, had to point out that karma itself is not the problem; rather, it is our attachment to the fruits. It says that individual actions, sanchita (accumulated karma), prarabdha (ripe or fructuous karma), and kriyamana or agami karma (current or future karma) govern the empirical world (samsara) under divine oversight, but they are ultimately recognized as transient phenomena that dissolve upon attaining Self-realization (moksha). This philosophy views karma within a non-dualistic (Advaita) or devotional framework.

Vedanta practitioners thought about this a great deal. They noticed that prarabdha karma is actually part of sanchita karma and that, depending on the individual, its effects manifest as iccha (results aligned with one's own desires), aniccha (unasked-for results that come about due to accidents or natural calamities), and paraiccha (results or outcomes brought about by the desires, requests, or wills of other people). All these actions are the same for the holy and the unholy. However, the reactions are different for a discerning person and an egotistic person, especially in the case of iccha prarabdha, as the intensity of attachment to worldly objects is negligible in the former.

Therefore, cleansing the mind is necessary to

prepare it for the right kind of discernment. Different philosophies have varying perceptions of the impurities of the mind. For example, in Kashmiri Shaivism, they are categorized as gross (sthūla), subtle (sūkṣma), and subtlest (para). Our focus is Vedanta, where there are three types of impurities of the mind: mala (desires), vikshepa (distraction due to attachments), and avarana (ignorance). The first two are the results of actions performed with ego. If one clings to the doership of any action, attachment to the result arises spontaneously. This expectation of obtaining a desired result is defined as mala. Doership also causes reactions such as anger, jealousy, and so on, which, in turn, scatter the mind. This deviation from one-pointedness is vikshepa. Prayerful, unselfish actions can eradicate all three types of problems.

On this specific point, that is, how to work unselfishly, or how to attain equanimity of mind while performing thousands of duties and responsibilities, and the like, Sri Krishna defined karma and akarma, that is, action and non-action, in relation to the immanent and transcendental states. According to the commentary of Adi Shankaracharya, the word karma, or duty, was sometimes used to mean yuddha, or fighting, as well. Sri Ramakrishna also often equated the performance of duties with karma yoga. For instance, he said, "There are four stages of life: brahmacharya, garhasthya, vanaprastha, and sannyasa. During the first three stages, a man has to perform his worldly duties. The sannyasi carries only his staff, water-pot, and begging-bowl. He, too, may perform certain nityakarma, but his mind is not attached to it; he is not conscious of doing such work. Some sannyasis perform nityakarma to set an example to the world. If a householder or a man belonging to the other stages of life performs action without attachment, then he is united with God through such action." It is a fight, as it were, to conquer our inner limitations, which are basically attachments to results, and to attain infinite freedom.

In the context of ritual karma as mentioned in the Vedas, Sri Ramakrishna cautioned, "Karmayoga is very hard indeed." It took quite a few years, first for Sri Ramakrishna and then for Swami Vivekananda, to clarify the definition, concept, and application of karma yoga in the modern setup. Let's take the example of October 27, 1882. As soon as Sri Ramakrishna says that karma yoga is difficult and that one should instead first pay attention to realizing God, a Brahmo devotee asks, "Then, sir, must we give up our activities until we realize God?"

MASTER: "No. Why should you? You must engage in such activities as contemplation, singing His praises, and other daily devotions."

BRAHMO: "But what about our worldly duties—duties associated with earning money, and so on?"

MASTER: "Yes, you can perform them, too, but only to the extent that you need them for your livelihood.

"At the same time, you must pray to God in solitude, with tears in your eyes, that you may be able to perform those duties in an unselfish manner. You should say to Him: 'O God, make my worldly duties fewer and fewer; otherwise, Lord, I find that I forget Thee when I am involved in too many activities. I may think I am doing unselfish work, but it turns out to be selfish.'"

Clearly, Sri Ramakrishna is not counting the selfless offering of activities as karma; rather, it is another expression of devotion that comes with knowledge of the one for whom the work is being performed. Who is the doer? So Sri Ramakrishna's karma yoga is none other than jnana-misra-bhakti yoga, that is, devotion mixed with knowledge. He cautioned, "People who carry to excess the giving of alms, or the distributing of food among the poor, fall victims to the desire of acquiring name and fame."

Therefore, he told Sambhu, a devotee who was greatly engrossed with charitable activities, "Suppose God appears before you; then will you ask Him to build hospitals and dispensaries for

you?" A lover of God never says that. He will rather say, "O Lord, give me a place at Thy Lotus Feet. Keep me always in Thy company. Give me sincere and pure love for Thee."

Sri Ramakrishna further shared, "Sambhu Mallick once talked about establishing hospitals, dispensaries, and schools, making roads, digging public reservoirs, and so forth. I said to him: 'Don't go out of your way to look for such works. Undertake only those works that present themselves to you and are of pressing necessity, and undertake those, too, in a spirit of detachment.' It is not good to become involved in many activities. That makes one forget God. Coming to the Kalighat temple, some, perhaps, spend their whole time giving alms to the poor. They have no time to see the Mother in the inner shrine! First of all, manage somehow to see the image of the Divine Mother, even by pushing through the crowd. Then you may or may not give alms, as you wish. You may give to the poor to your heart's content if you feel that way." In his opinion, "Work is only a means to the realization of God."

Here, the Durga Puja festival of 1916 can briefly be revisited in this context. Ma Sarada came to Belur on the first day (Saptami) of the worship and lived in the garden house north of the monastery. On the morning of the second day (Ashtami), she came to the courtyard of the monastery. Nearby, the inmates were dressing vegetables for the kitchen. At this, the Mother remarked, "The boys, I see, can dress vegetables well enough." Swami Jagadananda, who was also engaged in the work, said with a smile, "Our object is to please the Great Mother, be that through spiritual practice or through dressing vegetables."

Sri Ramakrishna himself had gone through the path of Vedic karma. The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna records that on August 9, 1885, the Master said, "I have practised all kinds of sadhana: Jnana yoga, karma yoga, and bhakti yoga." From his own experience, he could see clearly that "In the Kaliyuga it is extremely difficult to perform the rites enjoined in the scriptures." Speed is the characteristic of "Kali." Symbolically, it moves fast on horseback. People of this age look for quick remedies. Sri Ramakrishna further noticed, "Nowadays man's life is centred on food alone." In addition, with the advancement of technology, the attention span of human beings has been reduced drastically. Scriptural rites require dedicated attention. Therefore, in Sri Ramakrishna's words, "He cannot perform many scriptural rites. Suppose a man is laid up with fever. If you attempt a slow cure with the old-fashioned indigenous remedies, before long his life may be snuffed out. He can't stand much delay. Nowadays the drastic 'D Gupta' mixture is appropriate. In the Kaliyuga the best way is bhaktiyoga, the path of devotion — singing the praises of the Lord and prayer. The path of devotion alone is the religion for this age."

Perhaps the keyword here is "mixture." Not monotonous practice. For quick results, one has to mix jnana, bhakti, yoga, and karma. He appreciated the Brahmo devotees by saying, "Blessed you are indeed that you chant the name of Hari and sing the Divine Mother's glories. I like your attitude. You don't call the world a dream like the non-dualists. You are not Brahmajnanis like them; you are bhaktas, lovers of God. That you speak of Him as a Person is also good. You are devotees. You will certainly realize Him if you call on Him with sincerity and earnestness."

"Sincerity and earnestness" grow quickly in an unselfish mind. That mind is capable of being in union with God. Through daily actions, that state can be attained. The Master says, "Generally speaking, there are two kinds of yoga: karmayoga and manoyoga, that is to say, union with God through work and through the mind." To demonstrate this at a very practical level, Swami Vivekananda appeared with his "mixture."

The Self is Eternal, Pure, Conscious, and Free. It is beyond action. All actions and reactions are perceived due to ignorance, avidya. For the eradication of ignorance, Swami Vivekananda believed in the inner divinity of each individual.

On the spiritual journey toward Self-realization, therefore, Swami Vivekananda would suggest that beginners engage in work and worship side by side. He defined "work" as "service." Through intense service with love and devotion, aspirants will be able to see their work as worship. In the words of Sri Sarada Devi, "Only through work can one remove the bondage of work. Total detachment comes later. One should not be without work even for a moment. Work helps one to fend off idle thoughts."

For readers who have an interest in Vedic astrology, here is a trivia for them. There are 27 stars distributed among 12 houses. Each star has its own special trait and each person who is born under a particular star will manifest those special qualities. Swami Vivekananda's birth star is hasta (hand) and its ruling power is moksha shakti, the power of liberation. No wonder that he set an ideal of Karma Yoga for all ages to come.

Anyway, Physics defines work as force multiplied by displacement. The force is usually applied against either friction or gravity. Some effort against the mind has to be made until one can see work as worship. The less the friction, the greater the acceleration. In the case of serving others, one begins to see that the one who is serving, the one who is being served, and the act of service are essentially one. At that point, work is worship. Sri Ramakrishna explained this state beautifully: "When the fruit appears, the blossom drops off. Love of God is the fruit, and rituals are the blossom. When the daughter-in-law of the house becomes pregnant, she cannot do much work.

"Her mother-in-law gradually lessens her duties in the house. When her time arrives, she does practically nothing. And after the child is born, her only work is to play with it. She doesn't do any household duties at all." In this state, as Sri Krishna said in the Bhagavad Gita, one sees action in non-action and non-action in action. In terms of ritual practices, Sri Ramakrishna would say, "The sandhya merges in the Gayatri, the Gayatri in Om, and Om in samadhi. It is like the sound of a bell: t-a-m. The yogi, by following in the trail of the sound Om, gradually merges himself in the Supreme Brahman. His sandhya and other ritualistic duties disappear in samadhi. Thus the duties of the Jnani come to an end."

Now, the celebrations of the Divine Mother, the ten-armed Durga, are ongoing. Immense actions and activities are centered on this celebration. Devotees are serving the ten-armed Durga in various forms, being the ten-armed Durga themselves. Through sincere and earnest service, devotees transcend form and reach the formless, as Sri Ramakrishna said: "One who worships God without form perhaps sees at first the deity with ten arms, then the deity with four arms, then the deity with two arms. At last, he sees the Indivisible Light and merges in It."



"Although a man has not studied a single system of philosophy, although he does not believe in any God, and never has believed, although he has not prayed even once in his whole life, if the simple power of good actions has brought him to that state where he is ready to give up his life and all else for others, he has arrived at the same point to which the religious man will come through his prayers and the philosopher through his knowledge; and so you may find that the philosopher, the worker, and the devotee, all meet at one point, that one point being self-abnegation."

— Swami Vivekananda

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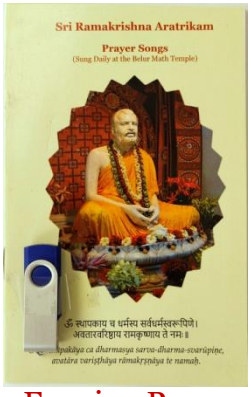
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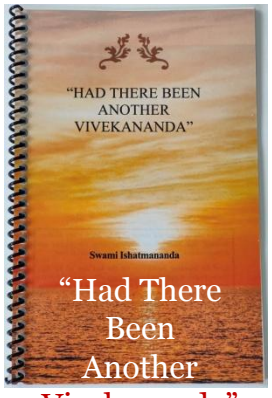




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