

1-1-2011

# The Practice of Modern Yoga: Sri Ramakrishna's Four Contributions

Christopher Key Chapple

Loyola Marymount University, [cchapple@lmu.edu](mailto:cchapple@lmu.edu)

---

## Repository Citation

Chapple, Christopher Key, "The Practice of Modern Yoga: Sri Ramakrishna's Four Contributions" (2011). *Theological Studies Faculty Works*. Paper 23.

[http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo\\_fac/23](http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo_fac/23)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Theological Studies at Digital Commons@ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theological Studies Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@lmu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@lmu.edu).

# ***The Practice of Modern Yoga: Sri Ramakrishna's Four Contributions***

**Dr Christopher Key Chapple**

FOR MORE THAN one hundred and fifty years yoga has exerted influence on the lives of many Americans. This article will explore the intellectual history that gave rise to a sustained interest in the theory and practice of yoga. It will then discuss four aspects of yoga as found in the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna that hold particular poignancy in the American context: his emergence from states of darkness, his deconstruction of fixed gender roles, his embrace of religious pluralism, and the excitement generated by his moments of spiritual insight and freedom.

## ***Yoga in the US: A Brief Intellectual History***

As the United States recovered from the trauma of civil war in the latter part of the nineteenth century, three movements were on the rise: Transcendentalism, New Thought, and Pentecostalism. Each in their own way contributed to a receptivity for the teachings of Vedanta and, eventually, the practice of yoga. The first two movements arose in Boston and New York, while the third had its genesis in Los Angeles.

Transcendentalism had its inception with the life and writings of Emerson, Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Henry Alcott, and others in the years during and after the American Civil War. Emerson and Thoreau, who had both protested gov-

ernmental draft policies during the civil war and also supported the abolition of slavery, pioneered a free thought movement that took into account the many translations of Asian classics that had recently been published. This movement planted the seeds for and inspired the American insistence on direct spiritual experience, social change, and the importance of developing meaning in one's personal life. Nearly every schoolchild in the US reads the famous Transcendentalist literature, either in the form of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and *Little Men*, or in Henry David Thoreau's essays 'Walden' and 'Civil Disobedience', or in the poetry of Walt Whitman.

The New Thought movement was originated by Phineas P Quimby, the teacher of Mary Baker Eddy. His ideas gave rise to both the Christian Science and Religious Science Church, noted for their well-known and almost Vedantic emphasis on the power of the mind in shaping human emplacement within the world.

The Pentecostal movement, founded in Los Angeles in 1906 by William Seymour, a black preacher from Louisiana, emphasized a direct relationship with a vibrant presence of the Holy Spirit, a movement that gave rise to the largely white Assemblies of God and the black Church of God in Christ. Deeply emotional and in many ways shamanistic, these churches emphasize the personal saving power of moments of conversion, characterized by speaking in tongues and swooning, a religious-induced form of trance and loss of consciousness.

---

The author is Doshi Professor of Indic and Comparative Theology, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles.

All three movements share a common concern: how to find meaning in human life through an encounter with an experience of transcendence. They reflect an ongoing American tradition of pragmatism tinged with optimism, perhaps best described in William James's classic work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James may be regarded as the intellectual heir to the Transcendentalists who set the stage for Alfred North Whitehead's even more fully developed and clearly articulated Process Philosophy. Unlike Friedrich Nietzsche, whose critique of Christianity helped further entrench the secularism that continues to pervade the European subcontinent, James affirmed the very premises of religious experience. In his definition of conversion, he lauds the pioneers of the inner landscape who, through their willingness to encounter the darkness of the human soul, gave birth to new religious forms and insights. St John of the Cross, the Quaker founder George Fox, and the poet Walt Whitman inspired James to set forth to his readers the value of the search for meaning. Far from calling people to follow the herd, as Nietzsche warned, James suggests that religion brings an individual to a sense of purpose, resulting in a renewed commitment to moral actions, steeped in personal commitment, and not to outward conformity to rules.

A few short years after Swami Vivekananda's 1893 appearance at the Parliament of the World's Religions, James writes that 'In India, training in mystical insight has been known from time immemorial under the name of yoga.'<sup>1</sup> He quotes Swami Vivekananda's classic work *Raja Yoga* to define the culminating state of yoga: 'There is no feeling of *I*, and yet the mind works, desireless, free from restlessness, objectless, bodiless. Then the Truth shines in its full effulgence, and we know ourselves—for Samadhi lies potential in us all—for what we truly are, free, immortal, omnipotent, loosed from the finite' (315). For

free-thinking Americans, James articulated and validated the personal spiritual quest linked to the practice of yoga.

In the early decades of the twentieth century the *Autobiography of a Yogi* was published, and Paramahansa Yogananda built a significant number of centres in Southern California and developed extensive outreach for teaching yoga by correspondence. He developed a style of communicating yoga to Americans that suggested that Jesus is the *ishta devata*, Chosen Deity, or avatara for the West.

The Vedanta societies belonging to the Ramakrishna Mission, with branches throughout the United States—particularly in New York, Chicago, Boston, San Francisco, Hollywood, and Portland—helped distribute literature and provide centres for knowledge about Vedanta and its applications through yoga. As noted below, the prodigious writings of Christopher Isherwood in partnership with Swami Prabhavananda helped greatly popularize the philosophies of India throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

Yoga got perhaps its biggest boost in the United States with the passage of a landmark immigration legislation in 1965, inspired by the Civil Rights Movement. Starting in 1880, and more forcefully from 1920, non-Europeans were barred from entering and settling in the United States. The exception were Japanese nationals, whose country had never been subjected to European colonization, occasional Punjabi farm workers on special permits, and Filipino males, whose nation had been captured by the US from Spain in the war of 1898 and who were allowed to work in the US until a process granting independence was begun in 1936 and each visiting farm worker was given a one-way ticket home. In the 1940s hundreds of thousands of Japanese Americans were incarcerated in remote camps, resulting in a severe economic setback for families

who lost their businesses, homes, and farmlands. To redress various aspects of racial discrimination, each nation throughout the world was granted an immigration quota in 1965, beginning a near half-century of influx to the US of some of the best minds of Asia, as well as the immigration of many prominent teachers of yoga. This coincided with the rise of the 1960s counter-culture, setting the foundation for a major cultural shift in the US.

Disciples of Swami Shivananda, such as Swamis Vishnudevananda and Satchidananda, set up yoga centres throughout the country. The Bengali Vaishnava leader A C Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada established centres for the worship of Krishna. The Punjabi Sikh Yogi Bhajan founded Kundalini Yoga centres nationwide. In the 1970s disciples of Krishnamacharya began to teach various forms of yoga as learned in Mysore. Today countless yoga centres thrive throughout North America. An estimated twenty million individuals in the US practise yoga on a regular basis, and the 'yoga industry' generates billions of business dollars each year.

Rather than cleaving to its origins in Hinduism and Vedanta, most forms of yoga in the US seek to emphasize movement of the body and control of the mind through meditation, with reduced emphasis on particular religious teachings. Called 'modern postural yoga' (MPY) by Cambridge University scholar Elizabeth de Michelis, it provides a non-religiously identifiable spiritual respite from the toils and troubles of modern daily life. She writes: 'The lack of pressure to commit to any one teaching or practice, the cultivation of "Self" and of privatized forms of religiosity make MPY highly suitable to the demands of contemporary developed societies'<sup>2</sup>, and this offers 'some solace, physical, psychological, or spiritual in a world where solace and reassurance are sometimes elusive' (ibid.). Sarah Powers, Joseph Alter, and others have documented the

rise of this new approach to the physical aspects of yoga. Mark Singleton's book *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (2010) traces the interactions in India between British notions of physical culture and the development of new expressions of hatha yoga, particularly at the Jaganmohan Palace in Mysore under the sponsorship of Maharaja Krishnarajendra Wodeyar in the early twentieth century.

The world of yoga in twenty-first-century North America could not have been imagined even fifty years ago. Yoga studios can be found in abundance in every city and in many small towns. Part of this can be attributed to an ongoing concern with physical health, fitness, and vanity. Nevertheless, beyond the physical presence of yoga, assumptions about the nature of reality have been changing due to many social trends and movements, and many yoga practitioners are delving into the spiritual aspects of the practice through philosophical study, chanting, and singing kirtan.

While Sri Ramakrishna did not involve himself in any demonstrable way with the rigours of hatha yoga and *pranayama* practised at most modern yoga studios, he nonetheless made a significant contribution to the embrace of yoga worldwide in the past half century. The life and thought of Sri Ramakrishna set forth four themes that have become particularly relevant to the practice of yoga in twenty-first-century America. These four themes are found in his periods of emotional darkness, his experiments with gender identity, his blueprint for the practice of religious tolerance, and his embodied example of spiritual attainment in samadhi.

### **Emotional Darkness**

As has been articulated since the time of Buddha, suffering, *dubkha*, can spur an individual to embark upon the spiritual path. This may have

been the case with Sri Ramakrishna, who in the early years of his spiritual practice, *sadhana*, fell into states of extended despondency, spiritual yearning, and periods of what he himself characterized as 'madness'. Sri Ramakrishna went far beyond transcending these dark periods and was propelled into great ecstasies unimaginable by ordinary persons. However, his descriptions of his struggles in darkness may hold particular relevance for and speak to the condition of many segments of the present-day population that struggle with a lack of meaning and a general sense of helplessness in the face of seemingly impossible situations. Suffering exists both in the personal lives of individuals and on a global scale, as seen in seemingly endless and often meaningless warfare and instances of ecological degradation. Acknowledging the role of suffering in the process of spiritual maturation gives voice to the significance of personal struggle. William James documented numerous instances of how the 'sick soul' breaks through the darkness to experience what George Fox described as the 'Ocean of Light' that provides respite, solace, and meaning.

Many people in the US suffer from a general sense of malaise. There are several sources for this anxiety, including unstable family structures, worries about economic security, and a sense of not measuring up to the images of beauty and status promoted by an all-pervasive media and marketing machine. Before the advent of radio, television, and Internet media, and before the growth of megacities, entertainment consisted of active participation in local theatre and musical groups, often supported by church communities, as well as through a greater emphasis on family life. Work often centred on small family enterprises, usually farms, until the middle of the twentieth century. As people flocked to the cities and suburbs with the rise of industrialization, a sense of isolation and depersonalization

arose. The individual became estranged from food sources and nature herself. This development has been further exacerbated with falling rates of religious and social engagement through participation in fraternal societies, bridge and bowling clubs, and the like in the past three decades. The optimism of the New Thought movement, though it did not totally vanish, became eclipsed by the burdens of modern life. The fastest growing churches are now to be found in the Pentecostal movement, which provides a sense of community even in the midst of mega churches, whose membership can number in the thousands within a single congregation. These churches continue to emphasize an ecstatic personal relationship with God and involve their members in singing, social activities, and service projects.

Not all Americans, however, while remaining spiritually inclined, choose to align themselves with churches. Yoga presents an important option for these individuals. Regular attendance at a yoga class fosters a sense of community without requiring a fixed set of beliefs or adherence to a unitary code of behaviour. Yoga movements and meditations, supplemented with an occasional session of call-and-response singing, bring the practitioner into direct contact with his or her body and allow one to feel creative and 'real', rather than a passive recipient of pre-packaged media entertainment. Yoga's emphasis on gentle movements holds appeal for an aging population, while its more rigorous forms present an athletic challenge for those who seek to find their 'edge'.

For individuals who have fallen into the darkness of substance abuse, yoga facilitates a reconnection with one's body and mind. And for many, yoga becomes an important component of recovery. Carl Jung, a scholar and student of yoga, and William James, whose work is mentioned above, both inspired Bill Wilson and Dr Bob Smith, who established Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935.





This movement has grown to include more than a hundred thousand groups worldwide. It encourages honesty and constant introspection, not unlike the application of the self-regulating ethics of yoga—which suggest the cultivation of non-violence, honesty, restraint from stealing, bodily restraint, and renunciation of excessive material attachments for the purpose of self-improvement. Just as Sri Ramakrishna struggled to overcome his periods of darkness and appealed to a higher force for deliverance, so also the addict first acknowledges a need for help and then discovers a faith in something higher than oneself to enter into the path of recovery.

As Sri Ramakrishna overcame his periods of darkness through the light of religion, similarly many individuals in the modern world find in yoga a respite from a life without meaning and a community of like-minded people.

### ***Deconstruction of Gender Identity***

Sri Ramakrishna engaged issues of gender identity with abandon and bravery, decades before a discourse exploring these possibilities emerged in

Western culture. In order to better worship Lord Krishna, he took on the garb and manner of a woman. Though cross-dressing has been known throughout history in various cultures, Sri Ramakrishna's sadhana gives room and voice to the freedom that comes from breaking free of prescribed gender roles. Swami Nikhilananda writes:

While practising the discipline of the madhur bhava [adopting the affect of romantic love], the male devotee often regards himself as a woman, in order to develop the most intense form of love for Sri Krishna, the only purusha, or man, in the universe. This assumption of the attitude of the opposite sex has a deep psychological significance. ... If he can inoculate himself thoroughly with the idea that he is a woman, he can get rid of the desires peculiar to his male body. Again, the idea that he is a woman may in turn be made to give way to another higher idea, namely, that he is neither man nor woman, but the Impersonal Spirit. The Impersonal Spirit alone can enjoy real communion with the Impersonal God. Hence the highest realization of the Vaishnava draws close to the transcendental experience of the Vedantist.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to taking on the mood of a lover of the male god, Sri Ramakrishna also from time to time took on the demeanour of the mother of God, particularly towards Lord Ramlala, as noted by Swami Nikhilananda: 'While worshipping Ramlala as the Divine Child, Sri Ramakrishna's heart became filled with motherly tenderness, and he began to regard himself as a woman. His speech and gestures changed. He began to move freely with the ladies of Mathur's family, who now looked upon him as one of their own sex. During this time he worshipped the Divine Mother as Her companion or handmaid' (24–5).

This behaviour in many ways validates the fluidity of roles and gender identities, which for certain audiences in the US can be both frightening and liberating. By challenging the hegemony of machismo, Sri Ramakrishna demands by his very presence an openness of mind. Ultimately, his example requires going beyond all gen-

der identity and the transcendence of all sexual urges. For some individuals, even to read about a willingness to experiment with gender identity for the sake of spiritual advancement presents a refreshing perspective.

On several occasions I have assigned Christopher Isherwood's *My Guru and His Disciple* to my university classes. This narrative includes the author's own struggle to overcome homoerotic urges. Reflecting a general acceptance of gender ambiguity, his guru Swami Prabhavananda quietly advised him to see the face of God in the object(s) of his affection. This advice, given at a time when homosexuals were arrested, imprisoned, and subjected to harsh treatments, including electric shock therapy, came as great solace to Isherwood. His friend and neighbour UCLA psychologist Dr Evelyn Hooker, inspired in part by Isherwood's honesty and fine human qualities, undertook a path-breaking study proving that homosexuals were often mentally well-adjusted and productive members of society. Her research eventually resulted in the declassification of homosexuality as an illness by the American Psychiatric Association in 1974 and the decriminalization of homosexual acts in most states in the US—and most recently in the Indian capital territory as well.

Classical India has long accepted the notion of a 'third sex', *napumsaka*, and has tolerated the existence of non-standard gender identity communities, the *hijra*. A small but not insignificant community of Vedanta and yoga practitioners in the US have taken inspiration from Christopher Isherwood. More than one student has confided in me the relief they have felt when they discovered a model for spirituality that did not condemn their sexual orientation. As a professor, however, it is my duty to remind them that true spirituality lies beyond all identities.

**Viveka and Vairagya**—Viveka means the sifting of the real from the unreal; and Vairagya, indifference to the objects of the world. They do not come all on a sudden; they have to be practised daily. 'Woman and gold' have to be renounced, first mentally, and God willing, they should be renounced afterwards both internally and externally. It is said in the Gita that by Abhyasa Yoga (continuous practice of meditation) dislike for 'woman and gold' is engendered. Continuous practice brings to the mind extraordinary power; then one feels no difficulty in subjugating the senses, passions and lust. It is like a tortoise that never stretches out its limbs, once it has drawn them in. Even if you cut it to pieces, it would never stretch them out.

—Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna, 167–8

**Blueprint for Tolerance**

Sri Ramakrishna famously worshipped God in many forms and in many garbs. He experienced what it means to worship God as a woman and as a mother, as we have seen above. He experienced total immersion into the consciousness of God. He worshipped God as would a Christian, a Muslim, and a tantric. He set forth a blueprint for tolerance, a desire to understand the views and perspectives of those held by members of other faiths.

Since the changes to the immigration law in 1965, religious diversity has arrived throughout all corners of the US.<sup>4</sup> With the model set forth by Sri Ramakrishna and proclaimed by Swami Vivekananda at the 1893 parliament for the world's religions, we are well equipped for the realities of religious pluralism in today's America. Aided by the guarantees of religious freedom set forth in the United States Constitution, the pluralism celebrated by the parliament has become a reality.

Due to his innate curiosity and undying quest to see God in all possible forms, Sri Ramakrishna spoke of the Supreme Being as the inactive Purusha or Brahman, as the active Shakti or Maya or Prakriti, and as both impersonal and personal. He worshipped God as the transcendent and as the Divine Mother. However, even this expansive view of God as taught in the traditions of Vedanta, yoga, and tantra could not contain Sri Ramakrishna's devotion. Swami Nikhilananda reports:

Toward the end of 1866 he began to practise the disciplines of Islam. Under the direction of his Mussalman guru he abandoned himself to his new sadhana. He dressed as a Mussalman and repeated the name of Allah. His prayers took the form of the Islamic devotions. He forgot the Hindu gods and goddesses—even Kali—and gave up visiting the temples. He took

up his residence outside the temple precincts. After three days he saw the vision of a radiant figure, perhaps Mohammed. This figure gently approached him and finally lost himself in Sri Ramakrishna. Thus he realized the Mussalman God (33–4).

This immersion into a faith significantly different from the faith of his birth demonstrates the fervour Sri Ramakrishna felt in his quest for God. Similarly, by extension, this aspect of his quest might give permission for Muslims to revisit the earlier practice of learning about how yoga might help one strengthen one's worship.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, Christians might be fascinated with Sri Ramakrishna's embrace of the truths of Christianity, as summarized by Swami Nikhilananda:

Eight years later, some time in November 1874, Sri Ramakrishna was seized with an irresistible desire to learn the truth of the Christian religion. He began to listen to readings from the Bible. ... One day he was seated in the parlour of Jadu Mallick's garden house at Dakshineswar, when his eyes became fixed on a painting of the Madonna and Child. Intently watching it, he became gradually overwhelmed with divine emotion. The figures in the picture took on life, and the rays of light emanating from them entered his soul. ... And, breaking through the barriers of creed and religion, he entered a new realm of ecstasy. Christ possessed his soul. For three days he did not set foot in the Kali temple. On the fourth day ... he saw coming toward him a person with beautiful large eyes, serene countenance, and fair skin. As the two faced each other, a voice rang out in the depths of Sri Ramakrishna's soul: 'Behold the Christ, who shed His heart's blood for the redemption of the world, who suffered a sea of anguish for love of men. It is He, the Master Yogi, who is in eternal union with God. It is Jesus, Love Incarnate.' The Son of Man embraced the Son of the Divine Mother and merged in him. Sri



Ramakrishna realized his identity with Christ, as he had already realized his identity with Kali, Rama, Hanuman, Radha, Krishna, Brahman, and Mohammed. ... Thus he experienced the truth that Christianity, too, was a path leading to God-Consciousness. Till the last moment of his life he believed that Christ was an Incarnation of God. But Christ, for him, was not the only Incarnation; there were others—Buddha, for instance, and Krishna.<sup>6</sup>

Many practitioners of yoga in the US come from a Christian heritage and accept the basic tenets of the faith. They try to abide by the Ten Commandments and the key teachings of the Sermon on the Mount: love your neighbour, practise forgiveness, and develop a social conscience. Sri Ramakrishna would undoubtedly embrace all these principles. It is important for many Christians, and Jews too, to maintain a sense of identity with their birth faith, and yoga does not interfere with this wish.

Another new development has emerged: Christian yoga, which seeks to minimize the Indian—Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Jaina—origins of yoga. Christian forms of yoga practice are continuous in many ways with the Pentecostal commitment to a direct, personal, physical relationship with Jesus. Surya Namaskar, the twelve part movement in honour of the rising sun, has been re-themed by some Christians and newly described to follow the Lord's Prayer. Some, like Aseem Shukla of the Hindu American Foundation, are concerned and upset with this adoption.<sup>7</sup> Given his own experience, Sri Ramakrishna would undoubtedly see no conflict between yoga practice and adherence to Christianity.

Like many Hindu households today—and many US households as well—Sri Ramakrishna adorned his surroundings with multiple images to remind him of the divine. He 'accepted the di-

vinity of Buddha' and 'showed great respect for the Tirthankaras, who founded Jainism, and for the ten Gurus of Sikhism. ... He kept in his room at Dakshineswar a small statue of Tirthankara Mahavira and a picture of Christ, before which incense was burnt morning and evening.'<sup>8</sup> He considered all faiths to be complementary and suited to the different temperaments of their devotees. In this regard, he would be comfortable with the wide range of symbolism in use at modern yoga centres. Some centres will include a full altar with multiple images of Hindu deities and Christian saints. Others will use flowers and a lighted flame as a focus point. Other yoga studios might use no imagery at all, but emphasize clarity of intention through sparse yet beautiful decor.

### **Spiritual Attainment**

Swami Nikhilananda writes: 'No doubt Sri Ramakrishna was a Hindu of the Hindus; yet his experiences transcended the limits of the dogmas and creeds of Hinduism' (viii). He himself experienced the full range of samadhi states as described in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*, the core text of yoga that is currently taught at hundreds of yoga centres throughout North America. He was also an accomplished adept of tantra, as taught by the mysterious woman in orange robes Bhairavi Brahmani. Sri Ramakrishna described in detail his experience of the chakras and the movement of kundalini:

He actually saw the Power, at first lying asleep at the bottom of the spinal column, then waking up and ascending along the mystic Sushumna canal and through its six centres, or lotuses, to the Sahasrara, the thousand-petalled lotus in the top of the head. He further saw that as the Kundalini went upward the different lotuses bloomed. And this phenomenon was accompanied by visions and trances. Later on he described to his disciples and devotees the various

movements of the Kundalini: the fishlike, birdlike, monkeylike, and so on (22).

Every practitioner of yoga in the US has heard about and perhaps some have experienced sensations associated with the chakras and the awakening of the kundalini. Some gurus in the US, particularly Swami Muktananda and his disciple Swami Chidvilasananda, have specialized in conveying Shaktipat to energize these centres within their followers.

Samadhi, mentioned above as the culmination of yoga practice, also figures prominently in Sri Ramakrishna's accounts of the spiritual quest. In his early years at Dakshineswar, he experienced loss of external consciousness in samadhi. Later, with guidance from his sannyasa guru Sri Totapuri, he came to master the accomplishment of samadhi. Sri Ramakrishna himself describes this event:

Nangta [Totapuri] began to teach me the various conclusions of the Advaita Vedanta and asked me to withdraw the mind completely from all objects and dive deep into the Atman. But in spite of all my attempts I could not altogether cross the realm of name and form and bring my mind to the unconditioned state. I had no difficulty in taking the mind from all the objects of the world. But the radiant and too familiar figure of the Blissful Mother, the Embodiment of the essence of Pure Consciousness, appeared before me as a living reality. Her bewitching smile prevented me from passing into the Great Beyond. Again and again I tried, but She stood in my way every time. In despair I said to Nangta: 'It is hopeless. I cannot raise my mind to the unconditioned state and come face to face with Atman.' He grew excited and sharply said: 'What? You can't do it? But you have to.' He cast his eyes around. Finding a piece of glass he took it up and stuck it between my eyebrows. 'Concentrate the mind on this

**T**he Hindu Renaissance led in the nineteenth century to modern Reform Hinduism. In it appeared an uncouth, barely educated, childlike peasant boy from a poor village Brahmin family who finally, after some resistance, became a priest in a quite new temple in Calcutta. In time he began to show even the intelligentsia with a modern English upbringing that Hinduism was not dying out, that it was by no means finished. Rather, once again it could become an inexhaustible source of spiritual renewal. From his youth Ramakrishna, as his name now was, had had trance-like experiences and visions, the expression of an excessive longing and love of God. ...

Ramakrishna became convinced that all religions were true, even if they are not free from errors. Whether it is a primitive veneration of images which does not in fact venerate the image but the deity, or the contemplation of Brahman without images, which certainly represents a higher form of religion, they are all different ways to the one all-embracing deity. ... It should not be difficult even for Christians to recognize this extraordinary man as a saint of Hinduism and as an embodiment of a being mystically filled with the deity.

—Hans Küng,

*Tracing the Way: Spiritual Dimensions  
of the World Religions*, 73–4

point!' he thundered. Then with stern determination I again sat to meditate. As soon as the gracious form of the Divine Mother appeared before me, I used my discrimination as a sword and with it clove Her in two. The last barrier fell. My spirit at once soared beyond the relative plane and I lost myself in samadhi (29).

Swami Nikhilananda comments on the enormity of this accomplishment:

Sri Ramakrishna remained completely absorbed

in samadhi for three days. 'Is it really true?' Totapuri cried out in astonishment. 'Is it possible that he has attained in a single day what it took me forty years of strenuous practice to achieve? Great God! It is nothing short of a miracle!' With the help of Totapuri, Sri Ramakrishna's mind finally came down to the relative plane (ibid.).

Though Sri Ramakrishna could never be thought of as an ordinary person, he in fact was able to integrate experiences of great ecstasy into his daily life and to teach others about the various paths of yoga that he had experienced.

Sri Ramakrishna sets forth an approach to spiritual attainment that is utterly driven by a yearning to experience the transcendent in all possible forms. He became spiritual not due to a desire to please others, but was driven by an unrelenting quest for truth. He experienced both the bliss of losing his individual identity and the bliss of retaining his identity as a worshipper of the Divine Mother. He understood what it means to be utterly devoted to the worship of God as within Islamic practice, and he also experienced the message of God's love as set forth in Christianity. This vision of seeing God within all things extended even to the poorest of the poor. Sri Ramakrishna insisted that the hungry be fed while going on a pilgrimage to Varanasi, demonstrating a solidarity with others that laid the foundation for the important social activities taken up by the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda movement. Through his actions, Sri Ramakrishna taught that spirituality must not remain a private experience but must lead to positive action in the world.

Yoga practice has become an indelible part of American and global culture. It addresses the ills of the body. It helps calm the perturbations of the mind. It allows one to explore and discover pathways to spirituality. In some instances, it

can help the pious to be more effective in their devotions.

Sri Ramakrishna set forth a path of yoga through the example of his life, highlighting features of yoga that are both obvious and overlooked. As a human being, he overcame tremendous physical and emotional suffering in the process of his spiritual quest. His occasional unconventional behaviour has helped 'outsiders' worldwide gain self-acceptance and even validation of their 'difference'. His spiritual yearnings brought him to understand the profound truths in so many different religious traditions. His accomplishments in meditation have inspired practitioners of yoga worldwide to aspire to the heights of spirituality for more than a century. The example of Sri Ramakrishna remains relevant for yoga practitioners throughout the world, particularly in his call for tolerance, his willingness to act outside of conventional gender roles, and in the profound depths of his immersion into the purest form of consciousness.



## References

1. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Collier, 1961), 314.
2. Elizabeth de Michels, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Western Esotericism* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 252.
3. M, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 23.
4. See <<http://www.pluralism.org/>> accessed 30 June 2010.
5. See Carl Ernst, 'Sufism and Yoga According to Muhammed Ghawth', *Sufi*, 29 (Spring 1996), 9-13.
6. *Gospel*, 34.
7. See Phil Goldberg, *American Veda* (Doubleday, 2010); also <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/philip-goldberg/yoga-reaffirming-the-tran\\_b\\_589652.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/philip-goldberg/yoga-reaffirming-the-tran_b_589652.html)> accessed 10 July 2010.
8. *Gospel*, 34-5.