

The Enduring Legacy Of A Yogi

The name of Paramahansa Yogananda will be familiar to many readers, as will that of the Self-Realization Fellowship of which he was the founder. But why was the beloved Yogananda such an important figure, and what is the Self-Realization Fellowship all about? I met Brother Atmananda from the Fellowship's Lake Shrine Temple in Los Angeles on a recent lecture visit to London.

An eloquent, soft-spoken man, Brother Atmananda radiates the kind of calm which we associate with spiritual people. His introduction to the topic was both fascinating and accessible, and when asked to elaborate on some of the subjects covered, he did so with kindness and patience.

Not everyone is familiar with Yogananda, and it is probably wise to confess that I (like many other readers) have only dipped into the *Autobiography of a Yogi*. For the less-informed, I asked, can you give a kind of brief "For Dummies" heads-up about him and why he and his teachings are so important?

"Yogananda was the first highly-regarded Indian guru and yoga master to live permanently in the West," Brother Atmananda replied. "He brought to the west Kriya Yoga, an ancient and yet timeless, and very effective, technique of meditation which raises spiritual practice above the level of religious dogmas and beliefs into personal experience based upon mastery of the Kriya technique. He established the headquarters for

his teachings – Self-Realization Fellowship – in 1925 in Los Angeles, California, and presented those teachings in a way that was accessible to the western mind. He also spent his life pointing out and explaining the fundamental unity of the Eastern teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the teachings of Jesus Christ."

I wonder how Yogananda was introduced to Kriya Yoga, and recall that in his lecture, Brother mentioned that at the tender age of five the guru had an "experience of cosmic consciousness". Did he think, I wondered, that this was what Abraham H. Maslow dubbed a "peak experience"? Was this a direct spur, or was it only one incident on his path?

"He was aware of Kriya Yoga from his early years, as his parents were Kriya Yoga disciples of Lahiri Mahasaya (who was the guru of Yogananda's guru Swami Sri Yukteswar). Yogananda received Kriya initiation from his guru as a young man," Brother told me. "Even as a child he had numerous superconscious spiritual experiences which are documented in his autobiography, and they all

had meaning in the context of his eventual role as world guru and yoga teacher: One in particular came out of his intense devotional desire for a direct response from God as the Divine Mother, an aspect particularly meaningful for him because he lost his birth mother at age 11. The Divine Mother appeared to him not long after that, saying to him, 'Always have I loved thee; ever shall I love thee!' This could be called a 'peak' and formative experience, although it was one of many." Kriya Yoga is fascinating in that it is very ancient, and

less accessible than more familiar forms of yoga. Why and how, I asked, is it relevant today?

"A true technique of liberation isn't relevant only for a particular age," explained Brother Atmananda. "Kriya Yoga did disappear from general knowledge during what the Vedas refer to as the Kali Yuga – the Western dark ages – when mankind in general was very unevolved in consciousness, lacking for instance the ability to grasp the concept of energy. Kriya Yoga is a pranayama (energy control) technique, and it was res-

Kriya Yoga

Classically, kriya yoga is a blend of raja, jnana, and bhakti practices. Kriya yoga formally consists of three techniques, but there also are similar practices under different names throughout the world. The term Kriya Yoga has also been employed with reference to other practices plus the ones that follow.

A lot of teachers regard kriya yoga a sublime preparation. It is said to clear the way for a seeker to enter into a successful relationship with a qualified guru. The three techniques are: Self-Discipline
Introspection
Devotion

The word Kriya is composed of two syllables, kri and yâ. In Sanskrit, kri means karma dhatu, action of the elements, and yâ means Soul or Atma. The word Kriya indicates action of the Soul or prâna karma. The first and most important action of the Soul is breath.

Brother Atmananda
Photo: Chico Kidd



Paramahansa Yogananda

Paramahansa Yogananda was one of the first Indian spiritual teachers to reside permanently in the West. He taught the techniques of Kriya Yoga meditation and founded the Self-Realization Fellowship. He is the author of *Autobiography of a Yogi* and *The Bhagavad Gita: God Talks With Arjuna, The Royal Science of God-Realization*.

urrected by Lahiri Mahasaya with divine permission in 1861, during the time of transition out of the Kali Yuga into the higher Dwapara Yuga that we are in today. Mankind in this age is more evolved and can comprehend subtler concepts such as energy and consciousness.”

This was mentioned in the lecture, and I am a little sceptical about this rosy world-view. How can we be emerging into a higher age, I enquired, when it seems to many people that we are descending into chaos?

Brother acknowledged: “Yogananda remarked frequently that the world does seem to be descending into a lower state, what with all the violence and upheaval we are experiencing. However, this is not evidence of descent into chaos, but rather the natural conflict and tumult that is occurring because the concepts and institutions that had their roots in Kali Yuga have to be shaken off to make way for the ascending age. This process could be called growing pains for mankind.” Well, I like that idea. It is an encouraging thought.

Coming back to what Kriya Yoga is, exactly, I asked how it differs from Raja Yoga, and received a very clear explanation. “Raja Yoga is a broad term that comprises various spiritual practices, including Kriya Yoga. Raja Yoga is aimed at hastening spiritual evolution towards Self-realization. This is a different focus than other Yoga paths like Hatha, which are more about improving bodily health and harmony.”

So is this why a practitioner needs a guru? “Kriya Yoga uses breath and visualization to raise the consciousness above body-awareness and into the higher centres (chakras) of spiritual awareness in the spine and brain. As a sacred technique of liberation, its power is traditionally associated with transmission by a liberated guru. The SRF Kriya Yoga diksha (initiation) includes both learning the technique and embracing the guru-disciple relationship with Paramahansa Yogananda. An important part of the process is recognition that the power and blessings inherent in the technique come through the channel of the guru.”

Being old enough to remember the 60s, I remarked that it sounded similar to what, back then, was called transcendental meditation, but this is, apparently, different. “Transcendental Meditation,” Brother told me, “is a form of Mantra Yoga (repeating a special phrase to help focus the consciousness), and is different from Kriya Yoga.”

Changing the subject, I referred back to the lecture once more. Brother had emphasized that the philosophy is not religious but spiritual. Some people, however, may not understand

“Yogananda remarked frequently that the world does seem to be descending into a lower state, what with all the violence and upheaval we are experiencing. However, this is not evidence of descent into chaos, but rather the natural conflict and tumult that is occurring because the concepts and institutions that had their roots in Kali Yuga have to be shaken off to make way for the ascending age. This process could be called growing pains for mankind.”



The Self-Realization Fellowship Lake Shrine is one of Los Angeles's hidden delights. The ten-acre site, with its gardens and natural spring-fed lake, is home to a variety of flora and fauna, including swans, ducks, koi, and lotus flowers. Thousands of visitors come each year to enjoy the scenic beauty and serenity of this spiritual sanctuary.

the difference between god and God; so I asked if he could elaborate on this. He began by defining religion: “By religious, I mean the custom of most of mankind to embrace a particular formal religion, usually due to birth in a family of that religion. A religion has a history, a cultural context, a teaching, one or more founders, a set of beliefs and customs, and requirements for being a member. Most major religions focus primarily upon moral behaviour and certain observations and restrictions, rather than upon the goal of personal God-realization. For many religions that is not a relevant or acceptable goal.”

And that is the point – the difference. He continued, “By spiritual, I refer to those specific practices, such as meditation, that provide the practitioner with direct personal experience of God, in the form of peace, tranquility, inspiration, expansion of the heart and the consciousness, and the other qualities and results that come into a life directly influenced by God-contact.

This experience is universal and accessible to all of humanity, and not dependent on a particular religious affiliation, culture, or race. Deep practice of a liberating technique of meditation bring this experience, not beliefs, rituals, or prayers alone. That is why Yogananda often used the phrase ‘the science of Kriya Yoga’ – a way of saying it is not based on faith or belief, but on practice.

“Those who embrace the Kriya Yoga sadhana become members of Self-Realization Fellowship, but that does not mean joining a religion. SRF is not another religion but rather an institution that carries on the teachings of Paramahansa Yogananda and provides support and guidance to its members in their spiritual practice.”

In his lecture, Brother Atmananda told a story about when he himself first came to try to meditate when a student, and finding the thought of meditating for three hours extremely strange. Part of that strangeness must be that it is a huge chunk out of the day. Is it possible, I wondered, to incorporate the practice into a “normal” life?

“Very few people in today’s world,” he pointed out good-humouredly, “can schedule in three hours of meditation every day! Our recommendation for those beginning is to try to have a half- to one-hour meditation in the morning upon awakening, and the same in the evening before retiring. Sometimes of course when a person’s life is extremely busy, even that is too much to fit in. But we do stress the importance of having at least a short period of meditation, and Kriya Yoga practice, both morning and evening every day. This is how to obtain the

fastest results. And we also recommend the benefits of a longer period of meditation, such as three hours, on a weekend or day off when one has extra time.”

I was also interested to learn about the work that SRF does worldwide. I met up with Brother in the London Centre, but find that he is quite the traveller: “SRF’s primary work is making available the Kriya Yoga teachings of Paramahansa Yogananda worldwide, and in supporting and counseling members in their practice. We have Temples with large memberships in California and Arizona, meditation centres in the major population centres of the world, and smaller meditation groups scattered worldwide,” he explained. “We monastics regularly travel to these centres and groups for lecture programs, retreats, and Kriya Yoga initiation ceremonies. At these events we teach meditation and provide guidance and inspiration for local members.”

And SRF also does humanitarian work. “We have a Worldwide Prayer Circle. Monks and nuns of the Fellowship pray morning and evening for all those asking for help and healing. SRF also supports many local and national organizations that provide food, clothing, shelter, medical attention, and educational opportunities to, among others, the poor and homeless, the elderly and disabled, and victims of natural disasters. Our sister organization in India, Yogoda Satsanga Society of India (YSS), offers a wide variety of charitable services – maintaining free medical clinics and providing basic education to thousands of underprivileged children through the YSS schools. The society actively supports a number of projects including a tubercular hospital, an eye bank, aid to leprosy victims, and famine and disaster relief.”

Finally, I asked Brother what he considered Paramahansa Yogananda’s legacy to be. There are two really, he told me: “First, bringing the science of Kriya Yoga to the world – a technique of God-communion that will help hasten mankind’s spiritual evolution, and aid in establishing a true world brotherhood based on a shared inner perception of God, the one common Creator of humanity and of all life. In this lies hope for reconciliation of the many and varied peoples, religions, and cultures throughout the world.

“Secondly, his message of the underlying unity between original Yoga as taught by Bhagavan Krishna, and original Christianity as taught by Jesus Christ. Yogananda’s two major works, *God Talks with Arjuna* (a commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*), and *The Second Coming of Christ* (a commentary on the New Testament teachings of Jesus) point out how these two great prophets brought a similar message of salvation and liberation to the world. Yogananda’s purpose was to point out the fundamental similarity and unity of all true religions. He thus points the way out of the great suffering caused by religious intolerance, which has always led to violence, war, and death. He plays an important role in this ascending Dwapara Age of human life on Earth, an age that will be marked by mankind’s evolution into increased understanding of spiritual truth.”

It is a very uplifting thought, and one with which we can all identify. And wish, too, that those unaccepting of this view could learn to be a little more flexible.