



Paramahansa Yogananda, 1951

IT'S 60 YEARS since the most influential yoga text of the last century was published. *Autobiography of a Yogi* offers the key to the door of enlightenment and has changed the lives of millions.

Words: Alison Batley

Ambassador of light

There is no mistaking that Paramahansa Yogananda was an extraordinary man. Incredibly influential from the day he set foot in the US more than 80 years ago, he is often referred to as the modern-day father of yoga in the west. Through methods of meditation based on the ancient Indian form of kriya yoga, he proffered a path to God open to all, whatever their religion. And he left this legacy in some of the most influential 500 pages ever printed, *Autobiography of a Yogi*.

Prophesied by a line of Indian gurus to revive the once-widespread but then-forgotten tradition of kriya yoga, Yogananda was charged with advancing it further than ever before, taking it beyond the east to those who had never known its power. Even in 1920, when Yogananda first set foot on western soil, the world was becoming ever more materialistic, and he sought to teach another way with a new meaning to life.

Paramahansa Yogananda – considered by his followers as an avatar (descent of divinity into human form) – was born Mukunda Lal Ghosh in 1893, in the holy city of Gorakpur, in Uttar Pradesh. It was at 17 that he met and became a disciple of revered sage Swami Sri Yukteswar, with whom he studied for the next 10 years. He was the last in what became known as the Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF) line of gurus, preceded by Mahavatar Babaji, Lahiri Mahasaya and Swami Sri Yukteswar. His lineage felt commanded

by God to coach a new teacher for all – one who would openly teach the modern world the secret yogic science of self-liberation. This missionary, Yogananda, was also to ensure this message did not die with him. “When I am gone, the teachings will be the guru,” he told his disciples. “Those who loyally follow this path of Self-Realization and practice these teachings will find attunement with me, and with God and the Paramgurus [lineage of gurus] who sent this work.”

One Man's Life

During his spiritual training with Sri Yukteswarji, Yogananda also graduated from Calcutta University and in 1915 took formal monastic vows, joining the ancient Swami Order. Just two years later he established the Yogoda Satsanga Society of India, founding an Ashram in Ranchi, Jharkhand, which included a “how-to-live” training school for boys, where modern educational methods were combined with yoga training and instruction in spiritual ideals. Twenty-three Yogoda educational institutes across India, now for both boys and girls, continue this work today.

However, Yogananda had a greater purpose given from the first guru in the parampara or line, Babaji. In an apparition to Yogananda, Babaji set forth the mission he intended for the young swami: travel to America and spread in the west a knowledge of yoga techniques by which man can enter into conscious communion with his creator.

Yogananda seized the moment and immediately set sail, arriving in the US in 1920. His undertaking was all-inclusive: “Yoga is for everybody, for the people of the West as well as for those of the East... useful to all mankind,” he said. During his 32 years of public ministry he brought a knowledge of yoga philosophy and meditation, as well as guidance on the art of balanced spiritual living, but his message can be summed up in two words – kriya yoga.

After his arrival in the US, Yogananda spent more than 15 years touring and lecturing in the States and across Europe. However, following a visit to India in 1935-36, Yogananda turned his attention to his legacy and began to write his life story. Written over a period of many years, *Autobiography of a Yogi* was first published in 1946, to much acclaim. It is an eloquently written chronicle of an exceptional life, and provides an intimate account of his encounters with modern-day saints and illumined masters of India, coupled with the absorbing tale of his own singular search for truth. A joyous read, sensational stories soon become apparent as poignant parables. Widely acclaimed as a literary masterpiece, it is his book, even more than the mortal man, which has been the key to taking India's ancient techniques of yoga meditation worldwide.

Autobiography of a Yogi is a spiritual text that continues to have a significant impact on the millions that have journeyed through its pages. Though the



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Paramahansa Yogananda at Caxton Hall, London, England, 1936

“Time and time again when faced with a problem or challenge, people find that when they open up one of his books there is something relevant and helpful to their situation.”

book was originally published over half a century ago, it has become no less powerful over the decades, and is most commonly the text that offers the first introduction to kriya yoga and the SRF. It provides the spiritual doorway to a new meaning to life for millions – one where deep fulfilment comes from within, rather than from the many outward distractions the material world suggests will satiate our longing.

Innumerable people have experienced this, like the student who, three years after first reading it, chose to dedicate his life to Yogananda's mission, taking the monumental decision to join the SRF's monastic community in Encinitas, California. Now known as Brother Chidananda, he is currently a senior editor and assistant to the editor-in-chief of SRF publications. He told me what had inspired him so deeply to make such a life-changing decision. “At the time, I was seeking a means to expansion of consciousness, and when I read *Autobiography of a Yogi* I got an immediate sense that this is someone who can be trusted and knows what he's talking about. Everything I read and everything I heard about him from those who were closely asso-

ciated with him, led me to believe this was someone talking from real experience, not just theory. That gave me the confidence that I could also experience it, if I followed the path he had shown.”

In 1920 Yogananda founded an international organisation, the Self-Realization Fellowship, to perpetuate the legacy of kriya yoga and continue to share his teachings worldwide after his passing. SRF, which has been headquartered in Los Angeles since 1925, now has centres and meditation groups throughout the world, which provide a place for people to come together to meditate and seek God. Spread across 62 countries, there are now 639 SRF temples and meditation centres. The organisation is led by Sri Daya Mata, one of Yogananda's first disciples in the West and the woman he personally chose for this great role.

Having worked with Yogananda's writings for years, Brother Chidananda is a man who knows the guru's teachings more thoroughly than most. I asked him which part he had found most useful in his life. Without hesitation he replied citing the core of *Autobiography of a Yogi*. “The technique of Kriya yoga meditation. It is not a reli-

gious dogma; it is a science. Through kriya yoga, you experience what you really are – an immortal soul: ever-existing, ever-conscious, ever new joy. This is the essence of what Yogananda taught. In one word, it is to meditate.” The organisation keeps this teaching central by offering a complete course in meditation, beginning with an initial series of lessons in basic techniques of pranayama, concentration, and meditation (taking about a year to complete), before the student receives instruction in the advanced technique of Kriya yoga itself.

“Yoga means union,” Brother Chidananda continued. “Its essence is that each one of us can realise our oneness with the Infinite. Kriya yoga works with the breath and life force, or prana, and concentrated thought to interiorise the consciousness in the spine and awaken the chakras. You become very calm and centred, and in that interiorised state you are able to experience the divine love, peace and bliss of your real Self, the soul.” Yogananda himself offers a concise definition in his commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*, *God Talks With Arjuna*: “Yoga meditation is the process of cultivating and stabilizing the awareness of one's

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Swami Sri Yukteswar and Paramahansa Yogananda, Calcutta, 1935

real nature, through definite spiritual and psychophysical methods and laws by which the narrow ego, the flawed hereditary human consciousness is displaced by the consciousness of the soul.” Brother Chidananda feels this is the message of the yoga tradition – that there are things far superior to what we experience on this worldly level. He told me how personally fulfilling Yogananda’s teachings about daily meditation are. “His teachings tell us, in

essence: Why be satisfied with a tiny thimbleful of happiness when you can have the whole ocean of divine bliss? One of the things that really attracted me to SRF is that it isn’t a negative teaching, focusing only on ‘don’t do this, don’t do that.’ It says that if you really knew the joy and love that are inside you, you would do anything to live in that state. Meditation gives you a first glimpse of ‘undreamed-of possibilities’ and as you go deeper in your practice, you see

that everything Yogananda wrote in the *Autobiography* is true.”

In his teachings Yogananda refers to kriya yoga as “the scientific technique of God-realization”, but science and religion are more often placed at odds with each other. Brother Chidananda explained their synergy. “He called it a science because it is based not on belief or blind faith, but on verifiable principles of truth. It provides an understanding of what it is that prevents us as human beings from experiencing what we really are in our souls: a spark of the infinite blissful divine consciousness. In the outer world there are very specific forces at work preventing us from having this consciousness in our lives, and kriya yoga deals with these in a scientific way. In science, anyone who applies particular steps will gain the same specific results, whether in the Himalayas or Hollywood. Yoga is just as universal, just as scientific.”

Literature of Peace

Autobiography of a Yogi is the pinnacle of Yogananda’s writings, but the complete body of his work is prolific – covering just about every topic pertinent to spiritual and balanced living. Including, most famously, commentaries on both the Hindu holy book the *Bhagavad Gita* in *God Talks with Arjuna*, and the Christian New Testament in *The Second Coming of Christ, The Resurrection of the Christ Within You*. These reflect a key part of his teaching – the harmony of eastern and western traditions, and the essential unity of all religions.

Since Brother Chidananda had worked extensively on the editing and production of both these particularly significant volumes, I asked him whether the SRF was a religion. After all, they have the same outward appearance with their own temples and services. He replied: “What Yogananda taught is not a religion; it is religion – in its deepest and most fundamental sense. He emphasised the universal, scientific truths that underlie and unite all religions.” During a lecture in 1937 Yogananda put this concisely: “It is a new world we face... and we must mould ourselves to the changes. An absolute necessity for the new generation is the recognition of the divinity of all mankind, and the sweeping away of all divisive barriers. I cannot conceive of a Jesus Christ, or a Lord Krishna, or the rishis of old calling any man a Christian, a Hindu, a Jew and so forth. I can conceive of their calling every man ‘my brother’. There will be no new order built on contempt of other races or on a ‘chosen people’ complex; but rather on recognition of the divinity of every man who walks the face of this earth, and on recognition of the common fatherhood of God.”

Brother Chidananda explained what this means to him. “Yogananda doesn’t require you to believe anything, only to practise so you can experience truth for yourself. He enables you to form a dynamic personal connection with God, which transcends the superficial baggage that has accumulated around the various dogmatic religions. The important point is to experience what God is, not what small-minded human beings make him or her out to be. When you feel that connection, it doesn’t matter what you call God – ultimate bliss, or joy, or truth, or Spirit. What matters is the experience.”

Solace in City Life

Tucked away in an unassuming street in the heart of the capital is a former Welsh chapel, now home to SRF’s London Centre. It is an oasis of peace and calm amongst the hordes of tourists that descend on the area to visit the famous waxworks of Madame Tussaud’s and Regent’s Park, one of the city’s largest areas of greenery. Yogananda visited England in 1935-36, and some of those who attended his lectures and yoga classes began to meet for regular meditation services and the London branch was born.

Jennie Hill is currently co-ordinator of the committee of volunteers that run the centre. She first became involved after reading *Autobiography of a Yogi* as a music student back in 1969. “Not long after that, I was talking to one of the SRF nuns from the American headquarters who was visiting England. I had been going through a difficult time, and suddenly, as we were talking the whole room was filled and enveloped with this amazing love. You cannot describe it, but I just knew that that love was coming from the presence of Yogananda,” she said.

Sonal Sachdev is a management consultant and attends the Baker Street temple weekly, sometimes leading the Sunday service. She’s been a member of the SRF since she was 11 years old. Her passion for the Fellowship permeates every word as she explains how she first got involved. “Even at that age I was aware there must be something else, something more to life. I was drawn to the SRF because it offers a balanced path and teaches how to live in a spiritual way that can be integrated in everyday life, but also that you can experience direct results yourself. That really appealed to me as you can describe to someone what an orange tastes like, but you can’t really know until you’ve experienced it yourself – meditation is like that too.”

For both Sonal and Jennie, Yogananda’s teachings bring into balance busy city life. “They have been like a bedrock in my life, giving a core of strength and support that I wouldn’t otherwise have had,” said Jennie. “Regular meditation and the SRF teachings



help me to keep more balanced and calm, and gives a perspective to what is happening in life. They cover an immense range of practical and spiritual subjects. Time and time again when faced with a problem or challenge, people find that when they open up one of his books there is something relevant and helpful to their situation.”

Sonal has also experienced this. She continued: “Yogananda’s teachings are like someone talking to you. He seems to guide each one of us to the teaching that we most need, particularly at difficult times. As Yogananda said, ‘If you think me near, you will find me near’. It’s a huge blessing. Life is such a joy if you let it be and having these teachings as support has really helped me experience this. You feel you have a constant supporter in life as you develop a personal relationship with God. I also feel I’m much more successful at work as I have a balanced attitude and am very focused, something I’ve developed from my meditation practice. Life is full of bumps and knocks whoever you are and this is a key that works in all situations to help you to deal with life. In this world full of insecurity and change I have this complete feeling of security, joy, warmth and love.”

Autobiography of a Yogi has now been translated into 26 languages, whilst an audio version – read by Sir Ben Kingsley – has been flourishing on iTunes since its digital debut over a year ago. I asked Brother Chidananda whether a book written 60 years ago could be as relevant to a very different life in the 21st century. “No!” he replied. “It is more relevant today! You only have to look around at where the world is

going to see this. People are starving for peace and fulfilment. Materially the world has advanced significantly over the years, but this has not given us more peace and security. Today it seems the world is on the brink of war in the name of religion. But Yogananda brought a very realistic and broader approach that unites us all. All religions are right, in the sense that there is only one God and one set of universal moral laws of life, which we find in all great religions. When we touch the core of truth, it doesn’t matter what name we use. Yogananda’s teaching gives the means to experience that unity. So it is not only relevant today – indeed it is vital.”



To find out more about the life and teachings of Paramahansa Yogananda, Self-Realization Fellowship and its global centres and services, visit www.yogananda-srf.org.

Autobiography of a Yogi is available in any major bookshop, and can also be ordered online from SRF and www.amazon.com amongst others.