



BIBLICAL TRAINING CENTER

June 16, 2019

Paramahansa Yogananda and Self-Realization Fellowship

By Shawn Nelson¹

1. Self-Realization Fellowship (Encinitas)

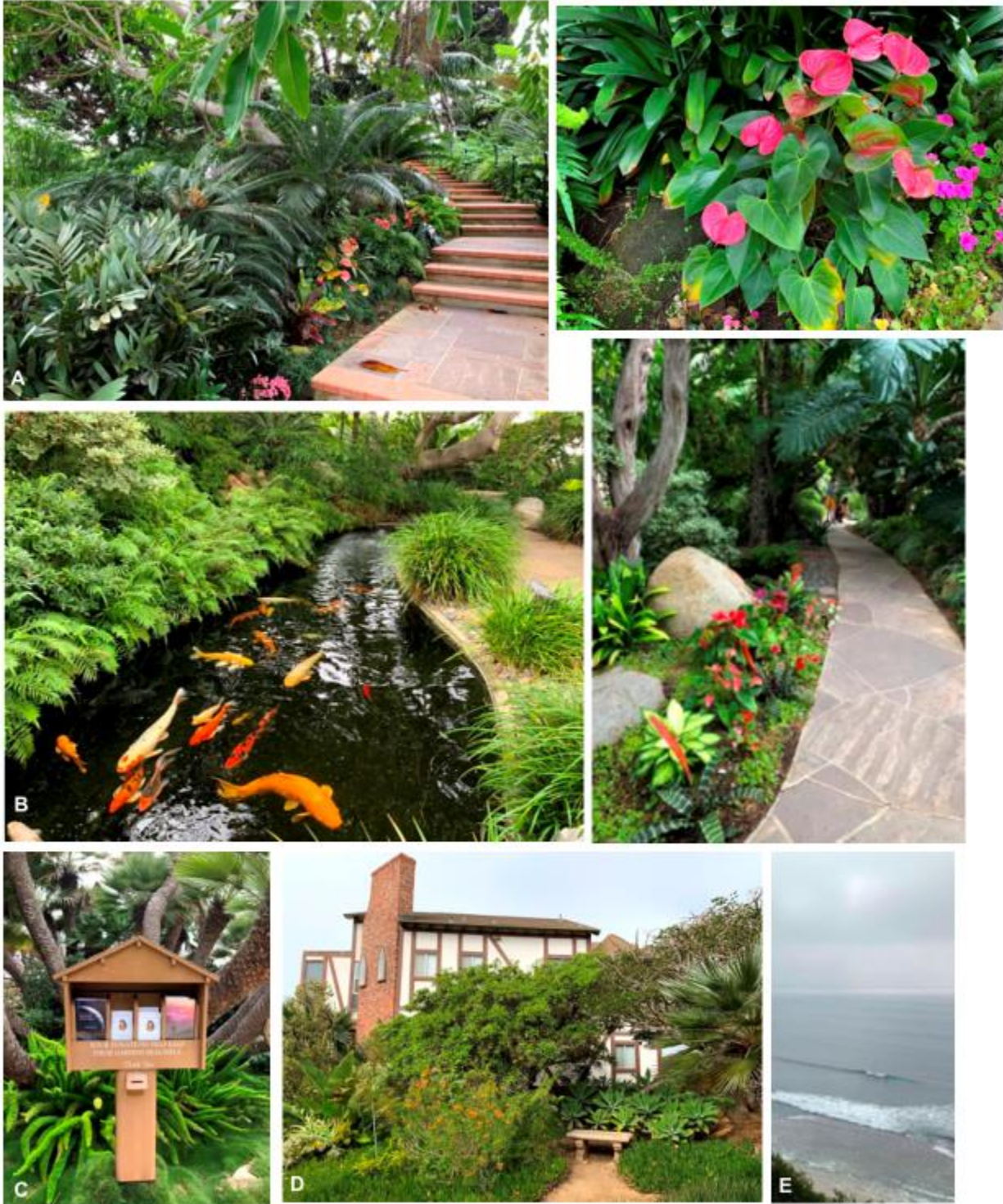
This strangely beautiful complex sits along the 101 in Encinitas. Few locals know the story behind this iconic local landmark, and its founder, **Paramahansa Yogananda**, whose name appears throughout its complex.

The **Golden Lotus Flowers** are symbolic of a person's **journey** into self-realization ("Christ consciousness").



Swami's Beach (A) is just to the south of the Self-Realization Fellowship. Buildings for retreat-goers and **resident hermits** can be seen beyond the Easter Island Heads (B). A walk through the Lotus Flower stairway (C) leads to the beach below, a favorite surf spot (D) in San Diego.

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The **Meditation Garden** (A) is arguably one of the nicest gardens in the area. It has ocean views (E), koi ponds (B), mini-waterfalls and a succulent garden (D). Notice the **literature station** (C) which has material for **proselytizing visitors**.

2. About Paramahansa Yogananda (1893-1952)

- **Paramahansa Yogananda** was **born in India** to parents who were followers of a Hindu guru named Lahiri Mahasaya, a **yogi master** who was dedicated to reviving an ancient lost form of yoga called **Kriya Yoga** (discussed below).
- Became a Hindu **missionary** to the West (story told in *Autobiography of a Yogi*).
- **Invited to USA** by **Unitarian Church** in 1920 to preach unity of all religions.
- **He packed auditoriums** to capacity, **captivated people** with his **charisma**.



Paramahansa Yogananda.
Photo in public domain.



Yogananda's first night teaching in Los Angeles (1925) drew 6,000 people. Photo in public domain.

3. Yogananda's Impact on USA

He was the **first Hindu missionary to stay** in the US. He had a profound impact in his day, and **every generation** since.

1960s Pop Culture

- **George Harrison** (The Beatles):
Someone gave him a copy of *Autobiography of a Yogi* and in his words, "[I] just looked at the cover, and **he just zapped me with his eyes...** If I hadn't read that, I probably wouldn't have a life... I'd just be, you know, some horrible person with a pointless life. It just gave meaning to life... The *Autobiography of a Yogi* is the book that I keep stacks of around the house. And I **give it out constantly, you know, to people.** You know, like when people need regrooving. Read this."



Photo is public domain.

- **All four Self-Realization Fellowship gurus** are featured on the popular Beatles' album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967). They are present with other cultural icons like Marylyn Monroe and Albert Einstein. These were considered the **most significant people** to shape modern US culture.



(Photo copyright Parlophone/EMI, fair use.)



Yuktswar
Giri



Paramahansa
Yogananda



Babaji



Lahiri
Mahasaya

Continued Impact Today

- “**Steve Jobs** apparently had **only one book on his iPad**. Lo and behold, that book turns out to be the *Autobiography of a Yogi*.”² At his funeral he prearranged to **give every attendee a copy of *Autobiography of a Yogi***.

Yoga in Pop Culture

- For Millennials and Generation Z, the words **yoga** and **meditation** are now common household words. These practices were once foreign to America in the 1920s. But they are now taught everywhere: in **community centers, schools** (even Christian ones), business **seminars** and **malls**. Some also point to the rise in popularity of **centering prayer** in Christian churches today (i.e., emptying the mind, focusing on an object and repeating a mantra).

² Awake: The Life of Yogananda, directed by Paola di Florio and Lisa Leeman (CounterPoint Films, New York: Kino Lorber, 2014)

4. What Yogananda Taught

Yogananda said he was revealing **true Christianity** to the West. But what Yogananda brought was really **Hinduism repackaged** in Christian words.

The Self-Realization Fellowship Bookstore (A) reveals that what Yogananda brought to the United States was nothing other than **Hinduism**. In addition to clothing (H), various **Hindu gods** are available for purchase (B) including **Krishna** (D) (\$4,900), **Shiva** (E) (\$1,000), **Buddha** and **Ganesh** (F).



The album (G) in the reading room (C) shows **Jesus** among many other enlightened ones. From left to right they show Babaji (G1), Jesus (G2), Lahiri Mahasaya (G3), Krishna (G4), Yukteswar Giri (G5) and finally Paramahansa Yogananda (G6).

(Summary of Hinduism from Yogananda's teaching)

Pantheism

- **Pantheism:** God is **all** and all is God. He wrote, "Every grain of food you eat, every breath you take, is God." (*Scientific Healing Affirmations*, K882)

Creation

- The entire universe is an **illusion** (*maya*). God (Spirit) individualized itself through "vibratory activity" to create this world much like the **rays of light from a projector** are individualized onto a movie screen. Pure Spirit created a universe in which it divided itself "into many souls that they may play with Me." (*Journey to Self-Realization*, 32) Just like a movie is **not real**, so creation is also not real.

Humans

- Man is also an **illusion**. Man's **true essence is divine**. Goal is for people to recognize that their true nature is divine and that they are **actually one with God**. This is called "**self-realization**." The **Lotus Flowers** around the Encinitas complex are illustrations of man realizing this divinity within.

Sin & Evil

- There is **no sin**; our problem is **we're ignorant** of our true nature: divinity. Ignorance is "the root-cause of all human maladies." (*The Yoga of Jesus*, K630) We're merely duped into thinking everything is real, including our pain. However, "When we have finished seeing the motion picture, we know that nobody was killed; **nobody was suffering**." (*Journey to Self-Realization*, 20) There is really **no evil, no disease**, no disharmony, no separateness.

Karma & Reincarnation

- **Illusion** (*maya*) keeps people trapped in a near-endless **cycle of rebirth**. Man is travelling a path of **upward evolution** played out over many lives. Actions from previous lives affect subsequent ones. This is the **law of karma**. Yogananda said people **work out karma** through "**many lifetimes** of physical, mental, and

spiritual evolution.” (*The Yoga of Jesus*, K929). Only then can we break the cycle of rebirth.

Jesus

- Jesus was an **ordinary man** who attained “**Christ Consciousness.**” Jesus was just one of many sent to help mankind throughout history (there were many others including **Krishna, Buddha, Yogananda and his gurus**). Jesus did not die on the cross to provide salvation for our sins, but **to be an example** for us and show us the way to self-realization.

Salvation

- **Self-realization** (not forgiveness) is what we need. **Our problem is ignorance** of our divinity. We must follow the **example of Jesus** and become like Christ, resurrect the Christ within us, and **attain “Christ Consciousness”** for ourselves. **The “second coming”** of Jesus will be when the masses finally achieve this.

5. Yoga: Paramahansa Yogananda’s Emphasis

Kriya Yoga

- **Most Americans** who practice yoga today are **completely unaware** that it is an ancient **Hindu practice** aimed at producing “**union**” with God (*kriya* means “action” and *yoga* means “union”).³
- Yogananda taught that it would normally take the average **person a million years** to climb the upward path of **spiritual evolution** to achieve self-realization.⁴ However, using his yoga technique, it is taught that one can achieve this enlightenment in just **three** years’ time.⁵
- The key to Kriya Yoga, according to Yogananda, is that it is **direct access to God**. Other Hindu devotees seek reunification with God through personal deities (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Krishna, etc.). But Yogananda taught it is far better (and faster) to have **direct experience** of God through yoga union. Below is how he said it works.

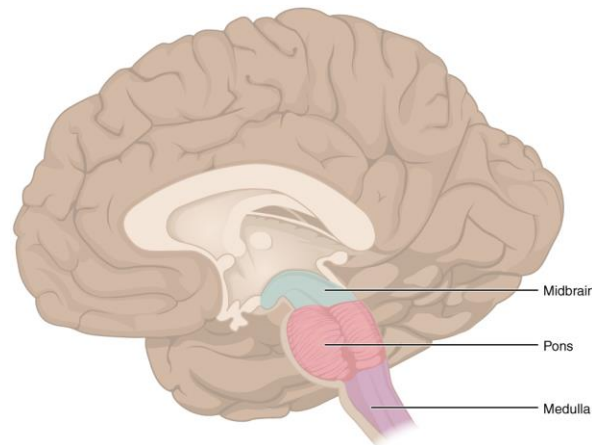
³ Ibid., Kindle locations 141, 142.

⁴ Yogananda, *Autobiography*, 269.

⁵ Larry A. Nichols, George Mather, and Alvin J. Schmidt, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Cults, Sects, and World Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 415.

Medulla Oblongata

- Per Yogananda, there is a point of contact between a **person's divine spirit** and a **person's body**. The medulla oblongata (which sits between the brain and the spinal cord) is where the contact occurs.



The medulla oblongata joins the spinal cord to the brain.⁶

- Following Hindu teaching, he said that during creation, **divine Spirit energy** moved at **different vibratory rates**. This resulted in **Spirit individualizing itself** into **conscious thought**, and then it further condensed to **create matter**, including our own bodies.⁷ The medulla is the **doorway** through which the divine Spirit provided and continues to provide the energy and lifeforce of matter. Using Kriya Yoga techniques, one learns to open this doorway not only to **commune** with the divine flow, but also to **release vibratory Spirit power** for healing of self and others.

Direct Experience with the Divine

- Yogananda taught that his yoga technique was a way for people to have direct experience with the divine. Through it, “God can be known, **not as a theological concept** but as an actual **personal experience**.”⁸ By direct contact, a person can receive intuition knowledge of God directly, which is considered far better than mere “theoretical knowledge about” God. In yoga union, people are said to “experience **direct perception of truth** without the intermediary of the senses.”⁹

⁶ Image by OpenStax - <https://cnx.org/contents/FPtK1z mh@8.25:fEI3C8Ot@10/Preface>, CC BY 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=30147954>

⁷ Self-Realization Fellowship, *Worldwide Prayer Circle* (Los Angeles, CA: Self-Realization Fellowship, 1984), 7.

⁸ Yogananda, *The Yoga of Jesus*, Kindle locations 628, 629.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Kindle locations 2420, 2421.

The **divine intuition** that comes from meditation not only serves to make one aware of their divinity, but also acts as a type of **soul guidance**.

Chanting and Affirmations

- Since ultimately mind (conscious Spirit) drives matter, the **mind** has power to **cure diseases**.¹⁰ One can concentrate the mind to consciously **increase the supply of cosmic energy** into a sick part of the body. It is said this can be done through **positive affirmations** made by the mind which reject the illusion of sickness.
- Some **examples of affirmations** from Yogananda are: “I am charming and magnetic, I am pleased with all; I wipe away all tears and fears. I have no enemy. I am the friend of all. I have no habits, In eating, thinking, behaving; I am free, I am free.”¹¹ Affirmations can be made for anything: material success, social success, sexual purity and curing bad habits.¹² Or, they can be made for healing things like eyes, stomach and teeth.

We’re Out of Time!

- For a Christian response:
 - See last week’s notes for how to respond to Hinduism in general. These can be found at <https://callup.org/hinduism>
 - See Elliot Miller, “Swami Yogananda and the Self-Realization Fellowship,” Christian Research Institute, <https://www.equip.org/article/swami-yogananda-and-the-self-realization-fellowship/>.
- For more info about Yogananda:
 - See my paper, “Paramahansa Yogananda And The Self-Realization Fellowship,” Nelson.ink, November 1, 2018, <https://nelson.ink/paramahansa-yogananda-and-the-self-realization-fellowship/>.

¹⁰ Yogananda, *Scientific Healing Affirmations*, Kindle locations 215, 216.

¹¹ Ibid., Kindle locations 718-723.

¹² Ibid., Kindle locations 667-794.

Deeper Questions and Answers

Yogananda said the Bible teaches Hinduism. Can you give me some examples of Scriptures he used?

Christians believe the below are clear examples of *eisegesis* (ignoring the plain, ordinary meaning of the text and inserting his own meaning instead).

- ***Man shall live by the medulla oblongata.*** The familiar passage from Jesus' Temptation says, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Mt. 4:4). Yogananda said the "mouth of God" refers to the medulla oblongata and the words that proceed from it "is life energy or cosmic vibratory force."¹³ What we really need for living is not food alone but the life energy that comes from our medulla oblongata.
- ***Jesus said the light of the body is the "third eye."*** Matthew 6:22: "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light." Yogananda said this refers to a "third eye" that becomes visible during deep meditation, appearing in the middle of the forehead. This is a doorway into the presence of God.¹⁴ If this "third eye" is healthy, then we are full of light.
- ***The traditional Gospel message from John 3 is really about Hinduism.*** John 3:14-15: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." He said the serpent refers to our consciousness and life force. When we lift our consciousness up through the "passageway at the base of the spine" (medulla oblongata) we will "gradually acquire the immutable state—Christ Consciousness, the Son of God."¹⁵
- Other passages, such as the **Genesis account of creation** is treated as pure allegory. Yogananda was taught by his guru that "Genesis is deeply symbolic, and cannot be grasped by a literal interpretation."¹⁶ His master went on to explain that the tree of life was actually the human body, the forbidden fruit was sex, the serpent is our desire for sex, and the knowledge of good and evil is illusion (*maya*).

¹³ Yogananda, *Scientific Healing Affirmations*, Kindle locations 199-203.

¹⁴ Yogananda, *The Yoga of Jesus*, Kindle locations 1340-1344.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Kindle locations 1181-1184.

¹⁶ Yogananda, *Autobiography*, 191.

Definitions

- **Atman.** Deep down inside our souls is Atman or the “true self” and this is Brahman.
- **Caste.** Hindus believe all people are born into their caste based on karma. Not possible to switch castes or marry outside one’s caste. Four basic castes are: Brahmins, Vaishyas, Shudras, Dalits.
- **Dharma.** The natural universal laws which must be observed to be happy and content. This Hindu word literally means “religion.”
- **Guru.** A mentor or spiritual leader.
- **Karma.** Actions in previous life determines effect of next life. Must accept suffering.
- **Mantra.** A mantra is a phrase in Sanskrit on which one meditates to invoke the powers of a deity and invite it to enter you. (*Compact Guide*, 101)
- **Maya.** Everything else that is not Brahman is not real and called maya. Maya encompasses all physical objects, our feelings and emotions.
- **OM.** *OM* is the mantra containing the primal vibrations of the universe. (*Compact Guide*, 101)
- **Swami.** A religious teacher from a monastic order.
- **Reincarnation.** Endless cycle of higher/lower lives (animals are lower, humans higher).

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