

YOGA TOURISM IN INDIA

by

Kenneth Liberman, University of Oregon, USA

It is not a widely known fact, but Swami Vivekananda did not go to the Chicago World Congress of Religions in 1898 for the purpose of proselytizing Yoga or Vedanta. The brahmin masters of these two Hindu traditions generally bear some skepticism about the likelihood of foreigners or non-Hindus achieving substantial spiritual accomplishments. They are open to teaching Westerners, but the more traditional among them have expressed the opinion that perhaps the most that an American should hope for is to be reborn as a brahmin, presumably male. While their skepticism is surely myopic, it may not be very far from being a correct assessment of the results of America's encounters with Hinduism.

The actual aim of Swami Vivekananda's journey to America a century ago was to encourage financial investment in economic projects in India, an aspiration that has turned out, a century later, to be more successful than the propagation of *ahimsa*, *aparigraha*, *pratiyahara*, and other fabulous but formidable core practices of Hindu culture. It is for certain that America has bred more capitalists in India than India has been able to foster yogis in America, provided that we hold to a chaste definition of "yogi." This is no fault of Indians, since the American culture of self-satiation does not lend itself naturally to recognizing the shortcomings of *ahamkara*.

For most Americans, both in the US and in India, a "yogi" usually refers to a person who "does" yoga. And by "yoga" what is meant is the practice of *asana*, the physical positions that compose the third of the eight limbs of yoga, according to Patanjali. Alongside this practice of *asana*, there may be the suggestion of something spiritual affixed to it, but not any hard-core religiosity, since most of the Americans who practice yoga (and especially those who have come to India to study it further) have rejected anything that is too regulated or doctrinaire. One must have some independence of mind to begin to adopt cultural practices that are not one's own, and typically, American students of yoga are fiercely independent, original (autochthonic would be the precise term), and somewhat self-reliant. If they are sung at all, bhajans are sung for the sake of "feeling nice" and not for their core spiritual content. "Meditation" (*dharana*) may be attempted, but the five *yama* and five *niyama* are usually not known by their names, much less practiced. *Pratiyahara*, the cultivation of one's resources for contentment besides what can be provided by the senses, is missing altogether.

What is it to "do" yoga? This question has been contemplated by tens of thousands of Americans who now gaze upon yoga magazines on the supermarket counters. For the vast majority of Americans, "yoga" is a not-too-strenuous way to lose fat effectively and to reduce the stress of a busy life, in that order. For Americans who are not overweight, "doing" yoga involves more strenuous postures that permit one to achieve some slender muscularity, become more flexible, firm up the abdomen, and above all, retain a tight butt. Others find their way to "yoga" in order to delay or reverse the onset of arthritis in their joints. Those who keep up a practice of *asana* for as long as six months

express satisfaction with the firmness of their calves and abdomens, and sense of well-being. The fact that the buttocks really do become tight motivates additional dedication (i.e., if there was doubt about the spiritual benefits of "yoga," the cultivation of a tight butt overcomes such hesitation). In sum, "yoga" is viewed as a way to become more beautiful.

What these motives share in common is that they are all directed to a notion of yoga *in which the most vital aspects are missing entirely*. Swami Vivekananda would not even have recognized it. Nevertheless, quite a few of those Americans who have cultivated a "practice" - usually referred to possessively as "my practice" - find their way to India to secure further instruction at dozens, if not hundreds, of centers for teaching "yoga." Few of these centers offer much more than *asana* and a web-site, although some elementary *pranayama* may be included. At a number of these establishments the commodification of yoga has taken hold, and ad hoc yoga-tourism industries, actively promoted by the Government of India, have bloomed wherever American yoga students gather. (I speak of "Americans," since I know them best, but much of what I describe may be applied to European and Latin American nationalities.) Yoga is for sale, almost exclusively *asana*, and there are a great many purchasers who come for periods of a few weeks to a few months and even years, if they can secure the visas. The commodification - yoga mats, yoga bags, yoga shirts, yoga leotards, etc., mostly geared to the practice of *asana* - is an American modification of yoga, and not part of the original ascetic ideal of a yogi practicing *aparigraha*, perhaps living in the forest sitting on an animal skin in *padmasana*. But it does ironically fulfill Swami Vivekananda's dream of American investment in India.

The typical day of a yoga student in Varanasi or Rishikesh, Kovalam or Goa, Mysore or Poona, begins with the student's "practice" of *asana* - beginning a little too early for most students' preferences (5 or 6 am, but some sacrifice seems appropriate). A few enterprising Indian yoga teachers have learned that there is a solid niche in the yoga market for an 8 am starting time, and they are able to secure more students that way. Following a post-*asana* shower, there is always a large, healthy vegetarian breakfast to be found. This usually takes place in the dining room or yard of an enterprising Indian housewife, but a number of yoga students themselves have recognized the opening for a more Western-oriented menu, and Westerner owned and operated black market restaurants have appeared spontaneously, which permit the students to fraternize among themselves, uninterrupted by actual people from India. Enterprising Americans ("Are all Americans so enterprising? I wish we Indians were equally enterprising," an Indian housewife once told me) have purchased automatic washing machines and will do yoga students' laundry for a fee, relieving students of the opportunity to attempt to communicate with even a *dhobi* (an Indian washer-person), or indeed wash their own clothes by hand. American yoga aspirants remain very much inside their own cultural universe and have minimal contact with Indian society, except for the commodified yoga they desire and receive. They cannot read any signs in the regional language, learn little about the politics or culture ("We're only here for a few months"), and keep their focus upon their own practice of *asana*. The most appalling part of it is that many of them suffer from a smugness that is derived from having completed such a fine, advanced practice of *asana* early in the morning, entitling them to spend the rest of the day in idleness while bearing a feeling of superiority toward most any other person they meet during the day.

Following the breakfast, many yoga students head off into “town” or “city” for shopping and generally end up at a four or five-star hotel’s swimming pool where they rendezvous with their fellow practitioners and encounter only the few smiling but sycophantic Indians who work on the hotel’s staff. The pool-sides are not all that different from the pool-sides in their own back yards in America, and one wonders what kind of seekers would try to duplicate the identical milieu they already know. By their own reports, many of them did come on a quest of sorts, but they are misguided by the American yoga tourists who have preceded them and who quickly school them in the routes for deriving amusement from the Indian locality. Insulated by a critical mass of like-minded pleasure-seekers, they are socialized quickly to a mild hedonism, and they unnecessarily limit their opportunities for discovering India; instead, they invest a good deal of their energies shopping, a task at which they are masters.

It can be said without any cynicism that Americans are brilliant at shopping, and India offers quality and bargains that cannot be obtained in the US. The same brand-name clothing Indians ship to the US is available on the Indian market for a fraction of its US cost. The cotton and silk garments are luxurious, and woolen shawls and sweaters are rich, natural, and sold for less than a second-hand store in the US would sell them. Cassettes of the latest world music are available for \$2 each, and a fabulous array of Indian classical music is available for \$1 each (CDs \$2). India is the world’s second largest publisher of books in English, but they sell them for a tenth of what an American publisher charges. Woodcrafts, beauty oils, soaps, jewelry, the list of inexpensive items available keeps the “yoga” students’ heads spinning, and the *satisfaction* of acquiring so much for little money leaves the students satisfied that they have been living fruitfully. But is that satisfaction a healthy thing, at least for a yogi who should be practicing abstinence from greed (*aparigraha*) instead of coveting everything that is spread out before one and is within one’s grasp? What is troubling about this is that the students are building *vasana* – habitual, automatic mind-energy patterns – for doing even *more* shopping, and it is not difficult to imagine that this *vasana* will continue to operate after they return to the US, rendering their trip to India a failure, by any yogic standard. It is not difficult to encounter American yogis who are shopping animals, ravenous for yet another bargain-filled outing. Even for Americans with modest incomes, it is as if they have become rich at last. The serious *problem* here is not that they acquired a good book at a low cost, but that they have developed not more, but less, ability to be satisfied with few possessions (the practice of *santosha*, during which one learns to be responsible for one’s own contentment, without any props) – an accomplishment that will endlessly enrich their lives and that can serve as the basis for a real practice of yoga. That is why *santosha* and *aparigraha* belong to the *niyama* and *yama* (respectively) and are placed at the beginning of a yogi’s quest. Ask most students what is the meaning of *aparigraha*, and they will not be able to offer a response. This is rendered more pathetic by considering that a majority of these yoga tourists are yoga teachers in the US.

After the shopping comes the poolside activities – swimming, sun-tanning, and reading (which mostly consists of gossiping with friends while holding a book in one’s hand). A few yoga centers offer some afternoon classes or “*satsangh*,” but only a minority of American yoga students choose to attend them, preferring to attend the “anti-*satsangh*” of their poolside banter, or perhaps preferring the suntan itself. Asked about the wisdom of their selection, they typically mutter

something about being “so tired” from waking up at such an early hour. While some impromptu classes are offered by an ad hoc yoga tourism industry (including Indian cooking, Ayurvedic massage, Sanskrit, etc.), the Indian teachers of these classes, mostly ordinary householders, nearly always report surprise and dismay over the lack of responsibility many yoga students display by not showing up at classes for they have registered, skipping classes (for the pool or party), or leaving town inadvertently forgetting to pay balances (insignificant to them but significant to most Indians) owed on services rendered. “One expects more from yoga students!” is the exasperated lament I have heard most frequently from Indians. Study of any yoga that Swami Vivekananda would have recognized is rarely undertaken.

Even book-reading is kept to a minimum, and most serious texts that elucidate the thought of Vedanta, Buddhism or Jainism are considered “too heady.” That is because many of the people who are attracted to yoga are vehemently anti-intellectual. The strategy of using the body and one’s 72,000 nerves in skillful ways to produce harmony - which is surely the genius of yoga - attracts Americans who have mostly rejected analytic strategies. Yes, we have bodies, but the point is to use them to gain more control over the mind, for the object of a practice of yoga is to control the mind. In *Vivekachudamani* (which some attribute to Shankara) the sage himself cautions against “book-knowledge,” and yet Shankara is tendering this advice in a book. While the *Chandogya Upanishad* asserts, “If speech were not there, there would be no knowledge of virtue, truth and falsehood, good and bad, pleasant and unpleasant. Surely speech makes all this known.” Yet Swami Sivananda argues correctly that since *samadhi* is “beyond the reach of speech and mind, you will have to realize this yourself.” Hence, the study of texts is a necessary but not sufficient part of *swadhaya* (self-study), yet most yoga tourists skip the text study part, while offering glib anti-intellectual cants about the shallowness of words and the need for “actual practice.” One expects more from people who will teach yoga.

Phrased differently, Hatha Yoga attracts participants in the tens (now possibly hundreds) of thousands, whereas Raja Yoga attracts hardly dozens. One time during a visit to a Sanskrit university in Tamil Nadu, a curious stranger asked me “what kind of yoga” Swami Gitananda taught his students. I replied, “Hatha Yoga.” Unfortunately for me, Swamiji overheard me, and it was the only time that Swamiji ever became furious with me. He would not speak to me for the remainder of that day, commenting only that he “never” teaches Hatha yoga. (Actually, he only rarely taught it - and those were days when the earth would sing.) The next day I asked Swamiji what my answer should have been, and he replied “Ashtanga Yoga.”

By “Ashtanga” Swamiji meant *all* eight limbs of Patanjali’s yoga. How emblematic it is of the problem facing American yoga that in America “Ashtanga Yoga,” is known widely as a highly athletic form of *asana* practice involving *vinyasa* and regulated breathing. It is a brilliant method of *asana*, but most Americans are unaware of the correct meaning of “*ashtanga*.” America has reinvented yoga in ways that are more compatible with its commodified, pleasure-seeking culture.

While at the five-star hotel in the afternoon, American yoga students find beer and wine, and other alcoholic drinks - one sign at a yoga center advertised “Alcoholics Anonymous for Yogis.” It was not a joke. And non-vegetarian meals

are the rule rather than the exception. The sterility of the social ambience of a hotel is compensated somewhat by the relief of its air conditioning. The real India may be waiting for the students a block a way, but for the afternoon it can remain out-of-mind.

It may be said objectively that the preoccupation of American "yogis" in India is courtship. Romantic love has its place, and loneliness is not to be praised; and even sexuality is to be celebrated. However, the average American residence in India of three months' duration is marked most prominently by the high of a new love affair and the pain of its demise, often as the fallout of the entry of a third party and yet an additional affair. That would be alright if such experience would teach a lesson in false expectations and the projection of fantasies, but the disappointment more commonly is solved by cultivating a subsequent affair, until the day for leaving India finally arrives. Romantic partnership is legitimate, but so is yoga, which comes to play a bit part during the Indian sojourn, even though it may have motivated the journey. Whatever may be the value of such courtship, it is not what the rishis has in mind when they placed *bramhacharya* on the list of *yama*.

Any day prior to a person's departure is genuine grounds for a "yoga party" (I'm not making this up – but just which yogi is it who is searching for a party?). Since tourists are always arriving and departing, parties can be found a good deal of the time. Just what yogi is it who is searching for a party? If no one happens to be leaving, it may be someone's birthday. If there are fifty yoga students in town, then there can be one birthday party per week. And the relative visibility of one's birthday party becomes a sort of de facto measurement of one's standing on the local social scale: the American yogis have successfully reproduced in India the social structure of their high school experience. What is difficult is to find a period of time that is without a party. One needs only interview the staff of the local Indian police station to collect the details, which include noise complaints and some drug usage.

So that is the yogi's typical day in India. But it is the morning "practice" that ennobles it, and it is that practice by which a yoga sadakh may be judged. Of what precisely does the practice – to which yoga tourists are focused – consist? Young people seeking fitness, older people wanting to regain youth, most of them self-absorbed with a focused effort to become or remain attractive, focus their energies intently upon what each of them term "my practice." For one or two hours they direct their energies (and in many cases this energy is abundant and highly directed) upon themselves. Only themselves. Each breath is a celebration of one's body electric. It may be beautiful, but the danger is that it easily reinforces egotism and self-centeredness at the very time that one's practice of yoga should be eradicating the self, egoistically conceived. In all fairness, it may be said that a yoga practitioner will inevitably meet other practitioners who are more adept at *asana* or run up against the limits of his or her body. But a sense of inadequacy is not actually the opposite of egoism, since it is just another form of self-absorption. If Patanjali is to be believed, spiritual lessons are indeed to be gained from a correct practice of *asana*, but when the practice is distorted by what is already most abundant in the culture – vanity, pleasure-seeking, and self-absorption – is there a fair chance for its cultivation? The metaphor of the camel that is able to pass through the eye of the needle seems appropriate here.

One longtime friend of mine was undertaking a three-year meditative retreat, and he decided that he and his fellow retreatants could benefit from some physical mind-body activity, and he invited a senior instructor of Ashtanga Yoga to the retreat to teach the meditators the basic sequence of *asana*. After practicing this method for some time, my friend began to be disturbed by his observation that with each breath, more "self" cultivation was being practiced. Instead of developing a mind that tended towards thinking about the needs of others – the purpose of the retreat – the practice drew him and his party to think more about themselves. He devised a technique to remedy the problem: with each slow inhalation he visualized taking upon himself the suffering and pain of others, and with each slow exhalation he imagined offering to these suffering fellow beings a healing, consoling energy. In this way, with each breath he was able to redirect his mental focus away from "my practice" to a practice that would sustain the cultivation of a concern for others.

This method is more consistent with a genuine practice of yoga. And what is yoga, properly conceived, one may ask? Yoga is learning to direct one's heart and mind to identifying the *vasana* (habitual, characterological energy patterns) that pollute one's experience and that continue to taint oneself and others with gross, selfish, short-sighted thoughts, and then reducing or removing those *vasana* so identified. Yoga is evolution. Or, as Swami Gitananda once said, "The meaning of life is to evolve. But most of us are preoccupied with devolving."

That seems an apt way to sum up the sojourn of most American yoga seekers in India. It is not really India's fault – they could never have estimated how powerful and resilient could be the commodification of everything by American culture, nor how effortlessly it could reduce the spiritual resources of yoga to more of the same. Swami Vivekananda could not have known. But if he could, it would be my guess that he would not have gone to Chicago, and would have stayed in India, remaining with a culture that may yet have more opportunities to put the practices of yoga to meaningful use.