

Theories and Practices in the Yogas of Switzerland

Modern Traditions The Yoga Sampradaya of Swami Sivananda

No longer the domain of a relatively small group of elite males on the Indian sub-continent, yoga has become part of the contemporary repertoire of men and women at all life stages and in many different countries and cultural contexts. The modern transformation of yoga represents a century-long shift from a regional, specialized religious discourse and practice geared toward liberation of the self from the endless cycle of lives, to a transnational, secular, critical ideology and practice aimed at freedom to achieve personal well-being. The spread of yoga from its origins on the Indian subcontinent provides many examples of how geographically distant communities can create themselves in part through participation in shared values and practices. Here, I discuss the transnational community of yoga practitioners associated with Swami Sivananda and his Divine Life Society in Rishikesh. The transformation of yoga has been shaped by interactions with the local history of Rishikesh, India, and the personal life histories of two major Indian spiritual figures of the last hundred years, Swami Vivekananda and Swami Sivananda. The people around the world who are linked through Sivananda's sampradaya, or ideological community, together comprise what I call a shared community of practice.

Two of Swami Sivananda's best-known disciples are Swamis Vishnudevananda and Satchidananda. Of all Sivananda's disciples, Swami Vishnudevananda best exemplifies the commodification of yoga, Indian spirituality and the guru in the world market. While the majority of India's "export gurus" have coexisted peacefully with their new neighbors abroad, some high profile groups, like Sivananda's disciple and gurubhai of Vishnudevananda, Swami Omkarananda in Switzerland, have done much to damage the credibility of Indian spirituality internationally and, it might be added, at home in India as well. When discussing globalization and change, we must consider both the role of the international media (print, internet, and audiovisual) to create and transmit shared ideas, and the significance of discrete cultures in shaping the interpretation of those ideas. By developing a transnational network of institutions and individuals who belong to the same community of practice, Sivananda's DLS family of yoga centers provides a way to participate in yoga prac-

tice while remaining fully engaged in the travails of everyday life. The DLS sampradaya is a modern, ideological community grounded in shared practices which are based on the teachings of one individual, Sivananda. But the disciples who left Rishikesh to found other related yoga institutions or support international branches of the DLS maintained allegiance to Sivananda. Rather than starting new sampradayas, their organizations function more as variants of the original, using nearly identical practices and rationales, with only the packaging and catchwords („Integral yoga“ vs. „yoga of synthesis,“ for example) differing.

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