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Roots, Branches, and Seeds

**The teachings of Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo
examined in the light of Indian tradition, colonial
modernity, and one another**

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Roots, Branches, and Seeds

The teachings of Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo examined in the light of Indian tradition, colonial modernity, and one another*

Peter Heehs

Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo are often considered the most important figures in the modern reformulations of Vedanta and Yoga. There were a number of similarities as well as significant differences in their approaches, and I will look at some of these in the course of this study. My aim, I wish to stress, is not to determine the ranking of the Premier Yogi League, but to place these extraordinary individuals in the intellectual and cultural history of late nineteenth and early twentieth century India.

Vivekananda was born in Calcutta in 1863, Aurobindo in the same city in 1872. That's a difference of only nine years, although the two seem to belong almost to different generations. There are two reasons for this trick of historical optics: First, Vivekananda's public work was over before Aurobindo's began; second, the watershed year of 1905 seems to us to separate the history of late colonial Bengal into pre and post-swadeshi eras, with Vivekananda falling on one side and Aurobindo on the other. The contrast between the two is especially marked when we look at their ideas on national regeneration. Vivekananda saw his work primarily as man-making within a spiritual framework, and he took no part in the nascent national movement.¹ Aurobindo played an active role in revolutionary organization and Congress politics between 1902 and 1910, but after that he too came to conceive his work primarily in spiritual terms.

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I have dealt elsewhere with the contributions of Vivekananda and Aurobindo to nationalist thought, and will not repeat this here.² I will also avoid speaking about the similarities and differences – mostly differences – between their approaches to social service, as this subject has been dealt with satisfactorily by others.³ Instead, I will look at the ways that Vivekananda and Aurobindo took aspects of the Indian philosophical and spiritual tradition and developed them in novel ways. My approach will be as follows: First I will examine Vivekananda's and Aurobindo's spiritual *roots*, the traditions and sources they drew from. Then, in the second part, I will look at the different ways that they developed their material, the *branches* jutting out from the trunk of their shared inheritance. In the last part I will examine their legacies, the intellectual and institutional *seeds* that they spread, which developed in different ways during the twentieth century and continue to develop during the twenty-first.

Roots

Vivekananda and Aurobindo may not belong, or seem to us to belong, to the same generation, but their fathers certainly did. Contemporaries of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Keshab Chandra Sen, Vivekananda's father Vishwanath Dutta and Aurobindo's father Krishna Dhun Ghose came of age during the later years of the Bengal Renaissance and were beneficiaries of the recently established English educational system.⁴ The two men also belonged to the same social stratum. Middle-class Bengali Kayasth professionals, they achieved success in the colonial milieu, but were also familiar with financial hardship. Both wanted their sons to enjoy the benefits of the educational system that had been the key to their advancement. As a result Vivekananda and Aurobindo grew up in a world defined as much by Western modernism as by Indian tradition.

From his mother, Vivekananda picked up the rudiments of Hindu religion and ethics, from his father an appreciation of practicality and rationality. At the General Assembly's Institution during the early 1880s he read many European philosophers:

Spinoza, Hume, Fichte, Mill, Comte, and Spencer. He may actually have gained a greater familiarity with nineteenth-century European philosophy than Aurobindo did as a student in London and Cambridge, where he concentrated on Latin, Greek, English, and French literature. Cut off by his father's orders from the Indian tradition until he was over twenty, Aurobindo learned Bengali and Sanskrit as an Indian Civil Service probationer. Neither he nor Vivekananda studied science in depth, but both were influenced by the evolutionary ideas then current, and absorbed the scientific and anti-authoritarian temper of the age. As a result both passed through periods of agnosticism.⁵

Both Vivekananda and Aurobindo came into contact with the Brahma Samaj, undergoing its influence even as they rejected its tenets. Vivekananda became involved with the Samaj during his college days and for a while was quite active, to the extent that he once remarked: 'But for Ramakrishna I would have been a Brahma Missionary.'⁶ His main interest in the group was its work in social reform, particularly as carried out by Sadharan Brahma Samaj. He was less interested in the religious side of the Samaj, remarking later that it was 'not worth a cent'. Personally acquainted with Keshab Chandra Sen, the head of the Brahma Samaj of India, he came to regard him as 'insincere'.⁷ Later he cut his ties with the Samaj altogether, and its impact on his thought has been played down by most of his biographers; but there can be little doubt that the group and its leaders, Keshab Sen included, exercised a significant influence on him.⁸

In any event, Vivekananda considered the Samaj to be dead by May 1894 and did not mourn its passing.⁹ Aurobindo, recently returned from England, expressed a similar opinion in an essay published in August of the same year. One reason contemporary Bengalis could feel hope for the future, he wrote, was 'the waning influence of the Sadharan Brahma Samaj'.¹⁰ It is not known how this statement went down in his family. Probably not very well, since his uncle Krishna Kumar Mitra was one of the leaders of the Sadharan Brahma Samaj, and his grandfather, Rajnarain Bose, was the doyen of the Adi Brahma Samaj. Aurobindo had a lot of

respect for his grandfather but he was, he later said, uninfluenced by his ideas, which ‘belonged to an earlier period’.¹¹ He regarded the Samaj as derivative and inauthentic, one of those ‘apeings or distorted editions of Western religious modes’ that he condemned.¹² But his rejection of the organization carried an implicit acknowledgement of its influence on late nineteenth-century Bengal and so indirectly, on him.

I pass from general background and education to the textual sources that Vivekananda and Aurobindo drew on in building up their knowledge of Vedanta and Yoga. According to both, the most important books they read were the Upanishads and *Bhagavad Gita*. Engaging in this study on their own, they acquired comparatively little knowledge of scholastic Vedanta, though they had a general familiarity with the schools of Vedantic interpretation, in particular the Advaita of Shankaracharya. Both read Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* and had some knowledge of *hathayoga*, which however they did not practice. In addition, both received direct instructions from teachers and collaborators. Vivekananda was in contact with Sri Ramakrishna for almost five years and met a number of pandits and yogis during his years of wandering around India. Aurobindo received instructions from the yogi Vishnu Bhaskar Lele for a few days in 1908. Apart from that, he wrote, ‘till the Mother [Mirra Alfassa] came to India [in 1920] I received no spiritual help from anyone.’¹³

In their reading of spiritual texts, Vivekananda and Aurobindo concentrated on Vedanta, which they both regarded as the core of the Indian tradition.¹⁴ Vedanta covers a huge amount of ground. In presenting it in their works, both concentrated on the Atman-Brahman doctrine. This was given classic form in the *mahāvākyas* or ‘great utterances’ of the Upanishads – ‘I am He’, ‘Thou art That’ and, ‘This Self is the Brahman’ – which both of them cited in their works.¹⁵ The *mahāvākyas* form the textual core of the various schools of Vedanta, in particular of the Advaita or non-dual school of Shankara. Vivekananda and Aurobindo regarded themselves, in different ways, as Advaitins, and both engaged with Shankara in their works. Vivekananda spoke of him as ‘the

greatest teacher of the Vedanta philosophy’ and considered the doctrine of *māyāvāda* or illusionism, which was formulated chiefly by Shankara, to be the only acceptable interpretation of Advaita.¹⁶ Still, he was not above criticizing the master, hitting out at the ‘sophistry’ and ‘specious arguments’ he found in some of his works.¹⁷ Aurobindo once called Shankara as ‘the greatest of Indian philosophers’, indeed ‘the greatest of all philosophers’, but this did not prevent him from pointing out flaws in his reasoning, and in the end from rejecting *māyāvāda*, affirming instead his own ‘realistic Advaita’.¹⁸

According to Shankara, the way of liberation is to realize the truths of Vedanta through disciplined study and reflection. In accordance with the traditional formula ‘*śravana, manana, nidhidhyāsana*’, a student who has demonstrated his competence and undergone preliminary training must listen to, reason about, and meditate on the great utterances of the Upanishads. Vivekananda provided a summary of this process in one of his lectures: ‘This slavery [to the dualities] has to be broken. How? “This Atman has first to be heard, then reasoned upon, and then meditated upon.”’ This, he said, is ‘the method of the Advaita Jnani’, the method of *jñānayoga*.¹⁹ He endorsed this but it was only one of four paths of yoga that he – and after him Aurobindo – dealt with in his works.

Indian yoga consists of dozens of traditions and lineages, some codified in written texts, others passed down by oral tradition. To help map out this territory, I will perform a brief exercise in historical taxonomy. Early yogic texts speak of two, three, four or more types of yogic practice. The *Gita* mentions five yogas by name, *buddhiyoga, karmayoga, jñānayoga, sāmkyayoga* and *bhaktiyoga*, but does not group them together.²⁰ It does at one point speak of the ‘twofold belief’ of *karmayoga* and *jñānayoga* – a division corresponding to the *jñānakanda* and *karmakanda* of the Vedas – and in another place mentions meditation, *sāmkyayoga, karmayoga*, and worship as four options for self-realization.²¹ Since the tenth century, it has been customary to speak of the *trimārga* or ‘three paths’ of karma, *jñāna*, and

bhakti,²² and to attribute this classification to the *Gita*. In fact the term *trimārga* does not occur in the *Gita* or (in this sense) in any other ancient text.²³ Nevertheless the *trimārga* is now widely understood to be constitutive of yoga or even the Hindu tradition in general.²⁴ Other paradigms exist, however, for example the twofold division of *hathayoga* and *rājayoga* found in the *Hathayoga Pradipika* and the fourfold breakdown of *mantrayoga*, *hathayoga*, *layayoga*, and *rājayoga* mentioned in another medieval hathayogic text, the *Shiva Samhita*.²⁵

Vivekananda and Aurobindo pruned the many-branched yoga tradition down to four main constituents. Both included the *trimārga* of earlier tradition – *karmayoga*, *jñānayoga*, and *bhaktiyoga* – and added a fourth. For Vivekananda, it was *rājayoga*, which for him was another name for the system of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra*. Aurobindo mentioned Patanjali in his works, but for him the fourth path was what he called ‘The Yoga of Self-Perfection’. The origins of this are unclear. Its outlines are presented in a set of mantras he first mentioned in 1912, which he called *Sapta-Chatusthaya*. The system as a whole seems to be original to him, though parts of it are foreshadowed by aspects of *rājayoga*, *pāñcarātra*, *tantra*, and so forth.

In arriving at their fourfold classifications, Vivekananda and Aurobindo omitted the forms of yoga described in hathayogic texts or known only to the oral traditions of the *nāth* or similar *sampradāyas*. They also had little to say about tantra. Neither had a knowledge of tantric texts to equal his mastery of the Upanishads and *Gita*. Both occasionally spoke of topics like the *cakras* and *kundalini*, which are often treated as parts of tantric lore, but they did so in the context of *rājayoga*, not of tantra per se.²⁶ The only tantric text they referred to by name was the *Mahanirvana Tantra* which, as recent research has shown, is not a genuine tantra but a ‘pious fraud’ perpetrated by William Cary, Hariharananda Vidyabagish, and Rammohan Roy at the end of the eighteenth century.²⁷ Vivekananda frequently expressed disgust over the tantric texts that were circulating in Bengal during his lifetime, although his ire was directed primarily against

the practices of the left-hand tantra, and he sometimes spoke of philosophical tantra in a positive way.²⁸ Aurobindo too had little knowledge about the specific processes of tantra, but he made its ‘central principle’ – the divine energy or *śakti* – the lynchpin of his yogic synthesis.²⁹

Branches

Such, briefly, were the textual and other resources that Vivekananda and Aurobindo drew on when they formulated their systems of Vedantic interpretation and yogic practice. In this part I will look at these systems, showing how they accorded with and diverged from Indian tradition and one another.

Modern scholars, aware of the novelty of Vivekananda’s and Aurobindo’s interpretations often characterize them as ‘Neo-Vedanta’. I will avoid this term, which is vague and ambiguous.³⁰ If one wanted to place the systems of Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Radhakrishnan, and others of the time in a single category it would have to be something like late nineteenth and early twentieth-century anglophone synthetic Vedanta–Yoga, or, more briefly, synthetic Vedanta–Yoga of the late colonial period. The use of the socio-political term ‘late colonial’ might seem a bit strange in this context, but it captures three important historical and cultural traits of the systems under consideration – and I remind you I am speaking as a cultural historian. First, the systems were, at least in part, a response to the socio-cultural situation in British India; second, while rooted in the Indian tradition, they incorporated or reacted against certain European ideas; and third, their primary texts were written in English.

Vivekananda’s Vedanta: Experience, Authority, Universality

Vivekananda considered himself an exponent of Advaita Vedanta and he accepted Shankara’s *māyāvāda* interpretation. He accordingly is depicted by many writers as a faithful exponent of orthodox Advaita Vedanta, though in fact he diverged from classical Advaita in a number of ways.³¹ To get some idea of his

originality, let us consider a single passage from the introduction to *Raja-Yoga*, originally a lecture delivered in New York in 1895:

All our knowledge is based upon experience. What we call inferential knowledge, in which we go from the less to the more general, or from the general to the particular, has experience as its basis.... Now, the question is: Has religion any such basis or not?...

Religion, as it is generally taught all over the world, is said to be based upon faith and belief, and, in most cases, consists only of different sets of theories. ... These theories, again, are based upon belief. One man [makes a certain assertion] and he asks me to believe that solely on the authority of his assertion.... Nevertheless, there is a basis of universal belief in religion, governing all the different theories. ... Going to their basis we find that they also are based upon universal experiences....

So [it is] with the Hindus. In their books the writers, who are called Rishis, or sages, declare they experienced certain truths, and these they preach....

Vivekananda says first that all knowledge, including religious knowledge, is based on *experience*. He adds that proponents of the various religions think that religious questions ought to be decided on the basis of *authority*, whereas the true basis is *universal* experiences. He then specifies, in regard to Hinduism, that its truths are based on experiences obtained by the Rishis, who wrote them down and taught them to others.

Vivekananda's statements must have thrilled his American audience, for they opened the way to a new understanding of religion. In addition – and this is a point I want to stress – they were just as revolutionary for nineteenth century Indians, and by and large remain so today. To substantiate this claim, I will take up his themes one by one and flesh them out using passages from his other works. I will then compare his position to that of the

orthodox Hindu tradition as presented by commentators like Shankara. After that I will look at modern sources that may have influenced him.

Vivekananda said many times that personal experience was the basis of religion. ‘Knowledge can only be got in one way, the way of experience; there is no other way to know,’ he said in a talk of 1896. The previous year he boldly proclaimed: ‘If God ever came to anyone, He will come to me. I will go to God direct; let Him talk to me. I cannot take belief as a basis; that is atheism and blasphemy.’ The experience that opened the way to what he called ‘real religion’ was *samādhi* or superconsciousness. Without this, there was no ‘difference between us and those who have no religion’. In the end however the attainment of superconsciousness was a matter not of religion but of science. ‘We must’ he said, ‘take up the study of the superconscious state just as any other science.’³²

Since the science of religion was a matter of realization, not of doctrine, it followed that the ‘records of great spiritual men of the past do us no good whatever except that they urge us onward to do the same, to experience religion ourselves.’ Similar statements are found throughout Vivekananda’s works. ‘The Vedas are true, he said, ‘because they consist of the evidence of competent persons;’ yet the ‘power of perception’ that produced the Vedas was not the sole preserve of the Rishis; anyone, Aryan or Mleccha, might develop it. Discussing the *pramānas* or sources of knowledge mentioned in the *Yoga Sutra*, he defined the third one, *āptavākya* (authoritative utterance), as ‘the direct evidence of the Yogis’ and stressed that a yogi’s experience ‘should never be singular; he should only represent what all men can attain’.³³

Religion does not depend on dogma but on what we realise through experience: ‘The end of all religions is the realising of God in the soul. That is the one universal religion.’ This religion is characterized by essential unanimity and a plurality of manifestation. Once we ‘recognized unity by our very nature,’ we would also recognize ‘the natural necessity of variation.’ This

pluralism implied that no historical religion was itself the universal religion: 'If by the idea of a universal religion is meant that one set of doctrines should be believed by all mankind, it is impossible; it can never be,' Vivekananda declared. He made several such statements while speaking in the West, so it comes as some surprise to find that while speaking to Indian audiences he sometimes suggested that Hinduism or Vedanta was itself the universal religion: 'Our claim,' he said in Madras in 1897, 'is that the Vedanta only can be the universal religion, that it is already the existing universal religion in the world, because it teaches principles and not persons.'³⁴

Vivekananda's Yogas: Karma, Jnana, Bhakti, Raja

In the introduction to *Raja-Yoga*, Vivekananda noted that 'in modern times' people have come to think that the experiences that form the basis of spiritual knowledge are no longer available. Spiritual authorities, that is, the founders of the various religions, had them a long time ago, but 'these experiences are impossible at the present day', and people are obliged 'to take religion on belief'. This assumption, he said, 'I entirely deny,' for it ran contrary to the tenets of the 'science of yoga'. He insisted 'that religion is not only based upon the experience of ancient times, but that no man can be religious until he has the same perceptions himself. Yoga is the science which teaches us how to get these perceptions.'³⁵

What are the methods of scientific yoga, ways that human beings, each of whom is 'potentially divine', could learn to 'manifest this Divinity within'? It could be done, Vivekananda said, 'by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy – by one, or more, or all of these,' in other words it could be done by the practice of *karmayoga*, *bhaktiyoga*, *rājayoga*, and *jñānayoga*, separately or together.³⁶

Vivekananda published a book on each of the four yogas, and I excuse myself from the task of summarizing them in twenty-five words or less. He himself summed them up in only fifteen,



and I will fall back on this: ‘Discrimination between the real and the unreal [*jñānayoga*], dispassion and devotion [*bhaktiyoga*], work [*karmayoga*], and practices in concentration [*rājayoga*].’ On another occasion he spoke, at greater length, of the ways of ‘the active man’, ‘the emotional man’, ‘the mystic’, and ‘the philosopher’.³⁷ The active man engaged in *karmayoga* sought freedom by means of disinterested action; the emotional man absorbed in *bhaktiyoga* sought union with the personal Divine by means of worship and devotion; the mystical *rājayogī* sought *samādhi* or superconsciousness by means of concentration; and the philosophical *jñānayogī* sought the Atman or Self through reflection and discrimination. But according to Vivekananda the right approach for men and women of ‘this age’ was to make a ‘synthesis of Yoga, knowledge, devotion, and work’, a ‘harmony of the four kinds of yoga’.³⁸

Vivekananda’s Vedanta and Yoga in Relation to Tradition and Modernity

Such, briefly, are Vivekananda’s approaches to Vedanta and Yoga. How do they compare with the classical traditions? What, specifically, do Indian texts have to say about the three themes of Vivekananda’s Vedanta we identified above: The importance of experience, the limitations of authority, and the opening to universality. And where does his fourfold yoga stand in relation to the traditions of yoga?

When we look into the Upanishads, we find scattered mentions of inner experiences, especially in texts that present yoga techniques, such as chapter two of the *Shwetashwatara* and chapter six of the *Maitri*. But we look in vain for anything like the emphasis on inner experience that we find in Vivekananda. The word *samādhi*, so central to his thought, does not even occur in the ten major Upanishads.³⁹ On the other hand, a multitude of Indian texts speak of unusual states of consciousness. The Upanishads, parts of the Pali Canon, the texts of Yogachara Buddhism and Kashmir Shaivism, the songs of the saints and bhaktas, and the sayings of Ramakrishna – not to mention the Puranas and other sources of popular lore – speak of inner

experiences that were vehicles of spiritual knowledge. On the other hand, recent scholarship has shown that the stress Vivekananda put on inner experience is not really supported by the primary texts he invoked.⁴⁰

What about the secondary texts, the works of philosophers and commentators? According to scholastic Vedanta and most of the other *darśanas*, the means of knowledge (*pramānas*) are perception, inference, and testimony. Experience, *anubhava*, is never listed as a *pramāna* of comparable importance. It is true that Shankara, in a couple of places, spoke of *anubhava* as a secondary *pramāna*.⁴¹ These passages have been much discussed by scholars, but no one yet has succeeded in showing that Shankara gave a major role in his version of Vedanta to individual spiritual experience. All in all, few contemporary Indologists would argue in favour of Vivekananda's claims about the centrality of experience in traditional Indian philosophy or religion.⁴²

To Shankara and other philosophers the most important of the three *pramānas* was *śabda*, testimony or authority. Testimony was of two types, human and divine. Human testimony was subject to correction; divine testimony, that is, the text of the Vedas (including the Upanishads), was infallible.⁴³ Vivekananda regarded the Upanishads as authorities but only because they were the records of the experiences of those who composed them. This runs contrary to the traditional idea that the Vedas are unauthored (*apauruseya*) revelation.

As for universality, so far as I know there is nothing in the Vedantic tradition to support the idea that the truths of the Upanishads were meant for humanity in general. The traditional understanding is that the Upanishads were meant for twice-born males of Aryavarta. Only they could study the texts in the original Sanskrit. Here and there, in scattered texts, there are passages that can be read as enunciations of what we now call universality, such as the well-known phrase of the *Maha Upanishad*, *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, 'the world is [my] family'. This occurs



in a list of the characteristics of the liberated individual and it is doubtful whether it can bear the sense of socio-political universalism that has been given to it by organizations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).⁴⁴ We are on firmer ground when we look at the Pali Canon and some of the scriptures of the Jains, as well as the hymns of the *bhaktas*, the *sants*, and the Sikh gurus. But there is no reason to believe that Vivekananda got his ideas about universality from such texts.

If he did not get his ideas about experience, authority, and universality from traditional Indian materials – or, at any rate, not exclusively from them – where did his ideas about them come from? This is a very large question that I can only touch on briefly. Primarily, of course, Vivekananda’s heart and mind were formed by his contact with Ramakrishna, and Ramakrishna affirmed the primacy of experience, the limitations of textual authority, and the universality of spiritual truth. He spoke of spiritual experience in general and *samādhi* in particular and gave evidence of them to his disciples. Through his touch and influence, Vivekananda was able to experience trance states and *samādhi*.⁴⁵ Ramakrishna, no pandit, said that scripture was meant only to ‘point out the way to God’.⁴⁶ By means of vivid parables he affirmed that all religions were essentially the same, that all paths led to one goal.

In regard to yoga, Ramakrishna once said that while ‘the ways that lead to God’ were ‘innumerable’, there were, ‘roughly speaking’, ‘three kinds of yoga: jnanayoga, karmayoga and bhakityoga.’⁴⁷ Vivekananda took these three and added the *rājayoga* of Patanjali to complete his four paths of yoga. He looked on Ramakrishna as the living embodiment of this fourfold path, a ‘synthesis of the utmost of Jnana, [Raja] Yoga, Bhakti, and Karma’.⁴⁸

Ramakrishna’s influence on Vivekananda was clear and undeniable, but the cultural historian has to go beyond the obvious. Ideas that had been developing in Europe since the seventeenth century reached Vivekananda in his college classrooms and at meetings of the Brahma Samaj. His belief that

knowledge is based on experience obviously owes a great deal to Locke, whose *tabula rasa* image he mentioned four times in his lectures. The Protestant insistence on personal religious experience was central to the liberal theology of Schleiermacher, which according to some is at the root of the modern idea that experience is the essence of religion.⁴⁹ The historical criticism of the *Bible* that Schleiermacher and others pioneered forever changed Europe's approach to revelation. A rational view of scripture and a humanizing of Jesus were among the characteristics of the Unitarian church, and the influence of Unitarians on Rammohan Roy and other Brahmos is well documented.

Rammohan took a liberal approach to Jesus that outraged Christian missionaries, and a liberal approach to the Vedas that outraged orthodox Hindus. He wrote that the Vedas 'recommend mankind to direct all researches towards the surrounding objects,' which would lead people 'to the notion of a Supreme Existence.'⁵⁰ This is closer to European Natural Theology than to orthodox Hindu belief. Devendranath Tagore, who revitalized the Samaj after Rammohan's death, rejected the infallibility of the Vedas, insisting that 'Truth is revealed in an intuitive knowledge.'⁵¹ Devendranath's associate Rajnarain Bose brought in another thread of contemporary Western thought when he argued the Brahmoism was 'the prototype for the next stage of religious evolution'.⁵² Keshab Sen combined natural theology, scientific evolutionism, personal revelation, and ecstatic devotion in his iteration of the Brahma dharma. The New Dispensation he launched in 1881 (when he was in contact, in different ways, with Ramakrishna and Vivekananda) foreshadowed Vivekananda's universal religion.⁵³ The mission of his organization, Keshab said, was 'to harmonise religions and revelations, to establish the truth of every particular dispensation' in a way that was consistent with the comparative science of religions, which Keshab adopted from his acquaintance Max Müller.⁵⁴

The scientific, universalistic religion that Keshab and other Brahmos imported from the West between 1850 and 1884 left its



mark on Vivekananda's 'science of yoga', which he exported to the West between 1893 and 1902. His yoga also incorporated elements of Western Esotericism, which he brushed against in the United States during the mid-1890s in the guise of what was called 'New Age Religion'.⁵⁵ To him the most striking side of New Age Religion was its insistence on spiritual practice. It was to audiences who longed for practical experience, that he addressed the lectures of 1895 that later were published as *Raja-Yoga*.⁵⁶ His 'textbook' for these lectures was Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*, which he called 'the highest authority on Raja-Yoga'. He was probably the first person to apply the name *rājayoga* to Patanjali's system.⁵⁷ Since then, this equation has become ubiquitous.

Aurobindo's Philosophy and Yoga and their Relation to Indian Tradition

Vivekananda did not present himself as a pioneer. His philosophy and yoga, he said, were based on the teachings of the Upanishads and *Gita*; his version of Vedanta was not in fundamental disagreement with the Advaita of Shankara; his *Raja-Yoga* was patterned after Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*. If there was any sort of novelty in what he said, it came from his master Ramakrishna. Only occasionally did he suggest that he himself had something new to offer. Once when he told an audience in Madras that it was possible to synthesise the approaches of Advaita, Vishishtadvaita, and Dvaita, a listener asked him how he dared to propose something 'that had never been mentioned by any of the Masters'. Vivekananda's reply was: 'I was born for this and it was left for me to do'. Aurobindo found this anecdote so striking that he recounted it twice in his writings.⁵⁸

Unlike Vivekananda, Aurobindo did not hesitate to speak of himself as a trailblazer. He acknowledged the influence of the Upanishads, the *Gita*, and the Rig Veda, but he made it clear he was opening a new path or rediscovering one that had been forgotten. He took special care to distance himself from scholastic Vedanta, saying that his philosophy was based on 'the original

Vedanta, not of the schools of metaphysical philosophy, but of the Upanishads'. This 'ancient Vedanta' offered a solution to the age-old problems of error, suffering, and death 'in the conception and experience of Brahman as the one universal and essential'. Brahman is a unity that permits endless multiplicity, even allowing, as a 'temporarily deformative factor' the 'interference of the individual ego', which is the source of error, suffering, and death. It is possible to eliminate this ego and restore 'the right participation of the individual' in the consciousness of the totality and transcendent. This is the purpose of existence. Unfortunately, 'later Vedanta' – by which he meant primarily the Advaita of Shankara – conceived of the ego not as a temporary deformation but 'the essential condition for the existence of the universe'. To achieve spiritual freedom one had to eliminate the ego, but this would mean the end of 'our existence in the cosmic movement'. This was the error of *māyāvāda*.⁵⁹

Aurobindo's alternative to liberation through annihilation of the ego was the transformation of the ego and the world through the action of the divine *śakti* or conscious-force. Transformation meant that 'the higher consciousnesses or nature is brought down into the mind, vital, and body and takes the place of the lower.' It had three statuses: A 'psychic transformation' through the intervention of the soul-element in the personality, a 'spiritual transformation in which all is merged in the Divine in the cosmic consciousness', and finally a 'supramental transformation' in which the whole nature is raised to the level of the 'divine gnostic consciousness', which Aurobindo called the supermind.⁶⁰

The method for effectuating the threefold transformation was yoga. Aurobindo's integral yoga was 'a fourfold path, a Yoga of Knowledge for the mind, a Yoga of Bhakti for the heart, a Yoga of Works for the will and a Yoga of Perfection for the whole nature.' Its aim was 'a complete transformation of the nature', since that was 'necessary for the complete union and the complete liberation not only of the soul and the spirit but of the nature itself.'⁶¹ Aurobindo devoted a part of *The Synthesis of Yoga* to each of his four yogas, showing how they could be synthesized.

For this, it was necessary to get hold of a central principle and force common to the practice of all four. Aurobindo found this in the Tantric idea of *śakti* viewed as ‘the sole effective force for all attainment’. He contrasted this view to Shankara’s idea of ‘Shakti as a power of Illusion’. In illusionistic Vedanta the goal is liberation through absorption ‘in the silent inactive Purusha’. In the Integral Yoga, ‘the Conscious Soul is the Lord, the Natural Soul is his executive Energy’.⁶²

Vivekananda’s and Aurobindo’s Approaches to Vedanta and Yoga Compared

Such, briefly sketched, are the outlines of Aurobindo’s approaches to Vedanta and Yoga and their relationship to Indian tradition. In regard to modernity, his position was similar to Vivekananda’s. He was exposed to Enlightenment thought and the scientific worldview at school and college, and learned something about the Brahma Samaj after he returned to India. One important difference between his and Vivekananda’s knowledge of modern writers was that Aurobindo read and was influenced by Vivekananda himself.

Aurobindo returned to India in 1893, the year Vivekananda captured international fame at Chicago. During Aurobindo’s early years in Baroda, his main interests were politics and literature, and he was not drawn to traditional or modern spirituality. Then, around 1903, he became ‘interested in the sayings and life of Ramakrishna and the utterances and writings of Vivekananda.’⁶³ At first the contact left few traces. He did not mention the Swami in his Baroda writings, and fewer than ten times in his political journalism and speeches. Only after leaving politics and settling in Pondicherry did he begin to cite or allude to specific works of Vivekananda. These references show that he was familiar with *Raja-Yoga* and the other books on yoga; the *Lectures from Colombo to Almora* and other collections of lectures; and some of the posthumously published works, the *Epistles*, for example.

Given Aurobindo’s familiarity with Vivekananda’s works, it

is not at all surprising that there are a number of similarities between his versions of Vedanta and Yoga and his predecessor's. Neither is it surprising, given their independence and originality, to find that there are many differences. It would take far too long to compare them in detail. To limit the discussion I will return to the themes I isolated when speaking about Vivekananda's Vedanta and Yoga – experience, authority, universality, and the four paths of yoga. First the similarities: Like Vivekananda, Aurobindo made it clear that experience is the basis of Vedantic knowledge and the key to yogic practice. Like the experimental practices of the scientist, the methods of the Yogin are, he wrote, 'formed upon a knowledge developed and confirmed by regular experiment, practical analysis, and constant result.' This was clear in the Upanishads: 'The sages of the Veda and Vedanta relied entirely upon intuition and spiritual experience.' Where there is an appearance of debate, it is in fact just 'a comparison of intuitions and experiences'. Reason plays a secondary role in the practice of philosophy, but 'the first rank has always been given to spiritual intuition and illumination and spiritual experience; an intellectual conclusion that contradicts this supreme authority is held invalid.'⁶⁴

For Aurobindo, as for Vivekananda, intuitive experience overrides the word of the scriptures. The historical scriptures gain their authority from the experiences of the sages that composed them. There is nothing infallible about the texts that have come down to us. The Upanishads, Aurobindo wrote, give us 'the truth of the Brahman' clearly and comprehensively, but 'where anything essential is missing, we must go beyond the Upanishads to seek it.' The aspirant has to remember that 'no written Shastra [scripture], however great its authority or however large its spirit, can be more than a partial expression of the eternal Knowledge.' In the end 'the supreme Shastra' is the eternal book of knowledge lying 'secret in the heart of every thinking and living being'.⁶⁵

This knowledge in the heart of every living creature is uncovered by means of a path of yoga that is universal in the senses I have mentioned: Unified in essence and pluralistic in

form. In this connection, Aurobindo alluded to a passage from his predecessor and developed the ideas it contained:

Vivekananda, pointing out that the unity of all religions must necessarily express itself by an increasing richness of variety in its forms, said once that the perfect state of that essential unity would come when each man had his own religion, when not bound by sect or traditional form he followed the free self-adaptation of his nature in its relations with the Supreme. So also one may say that the perfection of the integral Yoga [Sri Aurobindo's name for his system] will come when each man is able to follow his own path of Yoga, pursuing the development of his own nature in its upsurging towards that which transcends the nature. For freedom is the final law and the last consummation.⁶⁶

There is a fair amount of common ground between Aurobindo's and Vivekananda's systems of yoga. Both divided the world of yoga into four main paths, the first three of which were *karmayoga*, *jñānayoga*, and *bhaktiyoga*. Both said that these paths could be practiced separately or in combination, but the ideal way would be a synthesis of all four. Both spoke about, but excluded from their systems, the practices of *hathayoga* and tantric yoga

So much for similarities. In what ways do the philosophies and yogas of Vivekananda and Aurobindo differ, and are the differences superficial or deep? We have seen that Vivekananda believed there was 'absolutely no other explanation of Advaitavada except Mayavada', while Aurobindo rejected *māyāvāda* completely. To him this was not a minor point.⁶⁷ Once when he was told that one of his disciples had debated with an admirer of Vivekananda over the question of *māyāvāda*, he said that his followers should avoid laying emphasis 'on a difference with regard to the doctrine or the exact course of the Path followed', as this might be taken as 'a sign of a sectarian spirit'. On the other hand, they should not gloss over real differences of

understanding. ‘All ways lead to the Divine’, he wrote, but the divine realization was not all there was to yoga. Beyond individual liberation in the static experience of Brahman was the further goal of world-transformation by means of the dynamic power of the Divine. In this, he concluded, lay ‘the importance for us of not subscribing to the Shankara idea’, the idea of *māyāvāda*. ‘We need freedom to move towards the dynamic realisation of the Divine in the world and the idea of the Great Illusion bars the road to that.’⁶⁸

The other main difference between Vivekananda’s and Aurobindo’s philosophies had to do with the higher levels of consciousness. To Vivekananda everything above the ordinary mind was a ‘superconsciousness’ accessible only in *samādhi*. Aurobindo spoke of levels of supraintellectual mentality leading to what he called the supermind. Both he and Vivekananda used the term *viññāna* when speaking of the higher modes of knowledge, but it meant different things to them. Vivekananda used *viññāna* to designate a universal form of knowledge above the three types of individual knowledge – instinct, reason and inspiration.⁶⁹ This sounds similar to what Aurobindo called ‘cosmic consciousness’, which to him was a superior level of awareness, which was able to ‘liberate but not effectuate’.⁷⁰ But to Aurobindo *viññāna* was synonymous to supermind, which was both universal and transcendent, both liberating and transformative.

Given the lack of antecedents to Aurobindo’s supermind in Vivekananda’s works, it is interesting that Aurobindo believed that his predecessor gave him his ‘first insight’ into the ‘the higher places of consciousness leading to the Supermind’. This happened when Aurobindo was a prisoner in Alipore jail in 1908 – that is, six or seven years after Vivekananda’s death. According to Aurobindo, Vivekananda came to him ‘not in a visible form but as a presence’ and spoke to him for about two weeks.⁷¹ No contemporary documents relating to this event survive – nothing like Madam Blavatsky’s ‘precipitated letters’! – so, as historians, we need not pay it too much heed. It is however remarkable that Aurobindo gave Vivekananda credit for something that the

embodied Vivekananda never spoke of.

The theoretical differences between Vivekananda's and Aurobindo's philosophies yielded practical differences in the nature of their yogic *sādhana*s. For Vivekananda the goal of yoga was liberation by means of *samādhi* or superconsciousness.⁷² For Aurobindo it was transformation by means of supermind. For Vivekananda, *samādhi* was the crown of *rājayoga*. For Aurobindo, supermind was of central importance in the yoga of self-perfection

Aurobindo explained the necessity of the yoga of self-perfection in an important passage from *The Synthesis of Yoga*, where he distinguished the static from the dynamic sides of spiritual development. 'The common initial purpose of all Yoga is the liberation of the soul of man from its present natural ignorance and limitation,' he wrote. This was the aim of what he called Vedantic Yoga, whereas Tantric Yoga made 'liberation the final, but not the only aim; it takes on its way a full perfection and enjoyment of the spiritual power, light, and joy in the human existence,' and hinted at a 'supreme experience in which liberation and cosmic action are unified.' For this to be possible, 'a perfection has to be aimed at, which amounts to the elevation of the mental into the full spiritual and supramental nature.' Therefore, he concluded, 'this integral Yoga of knowledge, love, and works has to be extended into a Yoga of spiritual and gnostic self-perfection.'⁷³

The replacement – if one can call it that – of *rājayoga* by the yoga of self-perfection was the most salient difference between the fourfold paths of our two Yogis, but there were others. I will mention just a few. Vivekananda often spoke of 'duty' in his treatments of karmayoga.⁷⁴ Aurobindo just as frequently said that duty was at best a conventional label for an outwardly acceptable action. Work should be done, he wrote, not 'from any sense of duty, but solely for the sake of the Lord of works and because it is felt or known to be the Divine Will.' In a similar way, he wrote that 'philanthropical *seva*' was not 'part of my yoga or in harmony with my definition of work.'⁷⁵ He thus rejected an essential aspect

of the work of the Ramakrishna Mission.

For Vivekananda as well as Aurobindo, *jñānayoga* was the attainment of spiritual knowledge through the realization of the ātman or Self as presented in the Upanishads, *Gita*, and other Vedantic texts. Vivekananda's book *Jnana-Yoga* consists for the most part of discursive lectures on philosophical topics. Aurobindo's 'Yoga of Integral Knowledge' is more focused, going into fine detail on such topics as the modes of the Self and the realisation of Sachchidananda. In a sort of appendix to this part of the *Synthesis*, Aurobindo considered *hathayoga*, *rājayoga*, and *samādhi*. He concluded that 'on the whole, for an integral Yoga the special methods of Rajayoga and Hathayoga, may be useful at times in certain stages of the progress, but are not indispensable'.⁷⁶ This explains why he omitted *rājayoga* from his synthesis, though, confusingly for the comparative student, he discussed much of the content of Vivekananda's *Raja-Yoga* in his 'Yoga of Self-Perfection.'⁷⁷

Aurobindo wrote in 'The Yoga of Self-Perfection' that the principle by which he would effect the synthesis of the four paths was the *śakti* or divine power of the Tantras. 'In the Tantric method,' he explained, 'Shakti is all-important, and becomes the key to the finding of spirit.' In some traditional forms of Tantra, this was done by awakening the *kundalini*. In Aurobindo's synthesis the way was to spiritualise the being 'by the power of the soul and mind opening itself directly to a higher spiritual force and being, and to perfect by that higher force so possessed and brought into action the whole of his nature.'⁷⁸ This differed enormously from Vivekananda's idea of the unification of *his* four yogas. For him, they were 'synthesised in the person of Ramakrishna.'⁷⁹ He seems to have felt that he and his brother disciples would be able to propagate the universal message of Ramakrishna by means of preaching and example. 'The capable Sannyasin children of Shri Ramakrishna, the teacher of the great synthesis of religions,' he said, 'will be honoured everywhere as the teachers of men.'⁸⁰

Aurobindo also felt that Ramakrishna embodied a synthetic



approach to yoga, but he did not think that he was a model that others could emulate. Like Vivekananda – who said that his master was one ‘you will not find in the history of the world again’ – Aurobindo considered Ramakrishna ‘unique’. By means of a ‘colossal spiritual capacity’, he took ‘the kingdom of heaven by violence,’ and then mastered each of the paths of yoga in turn. ‘Such an example,’ he thought, could not ‘be generalised.’ He proposed instead a ‘selection and combination’ of the ‘varied energies and different utilities’ of the different yogic paths under the direction of a ‘central dynamic force’ – the divine *śakti*.⁸¹

Seeds

I have been speaking of the similarities and differences between the ideas of Vivekananda and Aurobindo as expressed in their writings and speeches. But what about the ways these ideas developed and spread after their lifetimes, the ways they have been received, absorbed, and transformed by others? The seeds of their thought have been disseminated widely by means of printed texts and organizations. How have these seeds taken root?

Fortunately for us, the words of Vivekananda and Aurobindo have been carefully preserved in printed and digital texts. Earlier teachers did not have it so good. We read the Pali Canon and Greek New Testament but have reason to wonder how far the printed words correspond to what the Buddha and the Christ actually said. We have no such worries in regard to the works of Vivekananda and Aurobindo – but we do have another worry. As willing or unwilling postmodernists, we know that the process of dissemination is never straightforward. Whatever we might think of Jacques Derrida, we pay heed to his warning about ‘the impossibility of reducing a text as such to its effects of meaning, content, thesis or theme’.⁸² Philosophers – and perhaps mystics as well – strive in vain to control the dissemination of the meanings of their texts.

Over the last hundred years, the teachings of Vivekananda and

Aurobindo have been reduced to platitudes and turned into political slogans, have been cherished by the faithful, analysed by scholars, and have slowly and invisibly worked their way into the fabric of modern Indian life. The influence of Vivekananda is so pervasive that is almost impossible to measure. Shops in Jaisalmer use his face to peddle their wares; cramming houses in Bhubaneswar use his words to inspire students to strive for success – after paying a hefty fee. His namesake Narendra Modi put Vivekananda's image and words on footballs that were distributed in the run-up to the recent election.⁸³ Aurobindo suffers less from this sort of thing, but his words too are quoted by politicians of the left, right, and centre, and his image graces the walls of every business establishment in Pondicherry and many in other places.⁸⁴ Still, you will say, their teachings do inspire a vast number of people and are taken very seriously by Hindus throughout the land. Aghananda Bharati went further, saying, 'Modern Hindus derive their knowledge of Hinduism from Vivekananda, directly or indirectly.' He and a few others – Bharati mentioned especially Aurobindo and Swami Sivananda – have come to represent what Hinduism is to many Indians, especially those who read English.⁸⁵

Recently a few writers have challenged this 'modern' paradigm. Neo-orthodox scholars such as Bhitika Mukerji, Anantanand Rambachan, and Michael Comans (a.k.a. Sri Vasudevacharya) have cautiously suggested that Vivekananda's understanding of Vedanta is not supported by the views of earlier authorities. Historians of yoga, such as Elizabeth De Michelis, Mark Singleton, and Joseph Alter examine the role Vivekananda and Aurobindo played in the modern history of yogic theory and practice, pointing out that they omitted much of what was taken to be yoga before the late nineteenth century.⁸⁶ All these writers have created images of Vivekananda and Aurobindo that stand in contrast to the simplified and sacrosanct versions of the pious and the politicians. Where in the midst of all this are the *real* Vivekananda and Aurobindo? Locked up in the books they wrote or the institutions they founded? Or lofting in the ceaseless winds of dissemination?



Experience, Authority, Universality, and Synthetic Yoga Today

To help plot the current position of Vivekananda and Aurobindo in contemporary Indian thought and life, I will return to the themes I identified while discussing them in the context of their own eras. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the ideas on the primacy of experience, the limitations of scripture, and the universality of religion are regularly presented in popular and scholarly literature as fundamental aspects of Hinduism. This follows a pattern established by the philosopher Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan during Aurobindo's lifetime. 'If philosophy of religion is to become scientific,' Radhakrishnan wrote, 'it must become empirical and found itself on religious experience.' Scripture is a record of experience: 'The Vedas register the intuitions of the perfected souls. They are not so much dogmatic dicta as transcripts from life.' Accordingly Vedanta, the essence of the Vedas, 'is not a religion, but religion itself in its most universal and deepest significance'.⁸⁷ These notions, taken directly from Vivekananda and Aurobindo, have been repeated by innumerable writers since then, taking ever less subtle forms. Thus we find in a popular book by Swami Nikhilananda: 'The authority of the Vedas does not depend upon supernatural beings or historical evidence. . . . It is ultimately derived from spiritual experiences which are attainable by every human being.' And: 'The Bible, the Vedas, the Koran, are so many pages in the scriptures of the universal religion.'⁸⁸

Rambachan has written two books and several papers trying to correct what he feels are the deficiencies of this approach, which he traces back to Vivekananda. Before the nineteenth century, Rambachan claims, spiritual experience was not regarded as the basis of Vedantic knowledge. The supreme authority was *śruti*, that is, the Vedas and Upanishads, and scriptural study under a qualified teacher was necessary to obtain knowledge of the Self. Differences between doctrines are more significant than the similarities claimed by the votaries of universality. He therefore challenges 'the direct heirs of Vivekananda's legacy... to provide a consistent and coherent account of the synthesis he attempted.'

In particular, they need to evaluate elements ‘that have been uncritically incorporated into the contemporary evaluation of Hinduism,’ such as ‘arguments for the scientific character of Hinduism, the claim of many paths to the same goal, the nonessential character of doctrine, and the devaluation of reason.’ Those who support Vivekananda, Rambachan insists, assume continuity ‘between Vivekananda’s interpretations and those of Shankara’. Since no such continuity exists, the foundations of Neo-Vedanta are insecure.⁸⁹ The flaw in Rambachan’s reasoning here is his assumption that Vivekananda accepted the authority of Shankara in every respect. He certainly did not: he made it clear that his ideas on Vedanta were based on his reading of the Upanishads, which he saw as records of experience; on Ramakrishna’s words and experiences; and on the experiences he received through Ramakrishna.

Rambachan also examines Vivekananda’s synthesis of yogas, making the plausible point that while Vivekananda said that each person could chose his or her own path, in the end he insisted that realization could only come by the practice of *rājayoga* leading to samādhi. Rambachan also shows how Vivekananda’s reading of Patanjali brings in elements not present in the *Yoga Sutra*.⁹⁰ This is good textual criticism but is subject to the same refutation as his claims in regard to the necessary authority of Shankara.

De Michelis and Singleton likewise examine the relationship between Vivekananda and Patanjali, showing how Vivekananda’s version of *rājayoga* was more a product of the late nineteenth century than a faithful exposition of the yoga *darśana*. De Michelis’s work tracing the nineteenth-century antecedents of Vivekananda is invaluable, but in her haste to set right the historical record, she occasionally goes to ridiculous extremes, as when she asserts, ‘the inspirational role played by Ramakrishna notwithstanding, Vivekananda was moulded by the formative influence of Neo-Vedanta rather than by Ramakrishna’s Hinduism’.⁹¹

During the twentieth century, as De Michelis and Singleton show, Vivekananda's fourfold yoga was adopted by other gurus, and Patanjali's text, which had fallen into relative obscurity, was turned into the bible of the international yoga movement.⁹² The physical yoga taught in centres around the world is in large measure a Europeanized form of *hathayoga* but, as Alter points out, it also includes an infusion of 'the yoga teachings of Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo,' which were integrated into 'postural, embodied yoga' during the early twentieth century.⁹³

Institutions: Sri Ramakrishna Math and Mission and Sri Aurobindo Ashram

So far for Aurobindo's and Vivekananda's teachings, what about the organizations they founded to preserve and perpetuate them? The Ramakrishna Math is a monastic institution geared towards the practice of Vivekananda's *rājayoga* in a highly structured way. It is centrally organized under a President, who is himself a monk. The Mission – which forms part of the same organization – is for the most part composed of laymen practicing worship and social service. The Ramakrishna-Vivekananda centres in India and abroad are legally connected with the Math and Mission. In contrast, the members of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram are not renunciates. They practice *sādhana* on their own and carry out productive work in the spirit of *karmayoga*. The institution is administered by a Board of Trustees, who guide it along lines set by the Mother, but try not to interfere in the life of the members. Sri Aurobindo centres in India and abroad have no direct connection with the Ashram.

The differences in the structure and functioning of the two organizations have influenced the ways they have reacted to contemporary challenges. When teachers in a school connected with the Mission asserted the right to chose their own principal, the Mission authorities filed a civil suit. After many permutations, the case went to the Supreme Court, which ruled that the claim made by the Mission that it was a minority religion, rather than a Hindu denomination, could not be sustained. It did however uphold the right of the Mission to appoint the principal of the

school in question. In a later case involving a Sri Aurobindo-related organization that claimed to be a religion, the Court took the opposite position, ruling that Sri Aurobindo's philosophy was *not* a religion, as Sri Aurobindo and the Mother themselves had declared.

The trustees of the Ashram have always been loath to institute legal proceedings, and have taken a *laissez-faire* attitude towards internal problems. But the freedom enjoyed to members of the Ashram has allowed individuals to file civil and criminal cases against the institution, the trustees, and other members. This includes a case filed by a coterie of self-styled 'devotees' demanding the dismissal of the Trustees on the grounds that their inaction in a certain situation has allowed the devotees' religious sentiments to be outraged; this despite the fact that it has been legally established that the Ashram is not a religion.

Such incidents do not bode well for the institutions that Vivekananda and Aurobindo founded, but not necessarily for their acceptance and application of their teachings, which were meant primarily for individuals. 'Each individual has to work out his own salvation; there is no other way,' said Vivekananda. Institutions were necessarily imperfect. A true spiritual teaching was one that helped 'the individual to overcome his imperfections under whatever institutions he may live'. Aurobindo insisted that his ashram was not an institution, at least not a public one, and that the yoga done there was not a community matter but an individual one. The sense of community was created by individuals doing yoga in the same place. His opinion about the imperfection of institutions was similar to Vivekananda's. He once wrote of spiritual institutions in general that the fact of their existence often came to replace the purpose for which they were founded: 'The holding of an ideal becomes almost an excuse for not living according to the ideal; the existence of its institutions is sufficient to abrogate the need of insisting on the spirit that made the institutions.'⁹⁴

Ramakrishna once said that the seeds of the *vajrabantula* 'do not fall at the foot of the tree. They are carried by the wind far



off and take root in distant places.’ In the same way, he continued, ‘the spirit of the prophet manifests at a distance from his native home.’ This maxim generally is taken in the sense of the Biblical ‘a prophet is not without honour, save in his own country.’ But it may be understood in another way as well: The seeds that succeed in germinating are those that take root at some distance (inner or outer) from the tree, where they are less likely to be choked out by the overluxuriant growth of the faithful.

Notes

¹ In London in 1896 Vivekananda was asked whether he had given any attention to the Indian National Congress Movement. He replied, 'I cannot claim to have given much; my work is in another part of the field. But I regard the movement as significant, and heartily wish it success.' Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1989), Vol. 5, p. 199.

² In Peter Heehs, *The Bomb in Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 24-27, I look briefly at Vivekananda's attitude towards nationalism. In the same book and in several of the essays in Peter Heehs, *Nationalism, Terrorism, Communalism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), I look at the national movement from the point of view of Aurobindo and his colleagues.

³ See especially Gwilym Beckerlegge, *Swami Vivekananda's Legacy of Service* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁴ Dhar gives '1835?' as the birth year of Vishwanath Dutta. Krishna Dhun Ghose was born in 1844. Vishwanath completed his legal training in 1866, Krishna Dhun completed his medical training in 1865. Both died young, Vishwanath in 1884, Krishna Dhun in 1892. Shailendranath Dhar, *A Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekananda* (Madras: Vivekananda Kendra, 1975), Vol. I, pp. 4, 7; Peter Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo* (Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 5, 34.

⁵ Pavitrnananda, *Life of Swami Vivekananda* (CD-ROM edition), Vol. I, pp. 112; Aurobindo, *Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 1997), Vol. 36, pp. 106.

⁶ As reported by one of Vivekananda's brothers, reproduced in Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga* (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 91.

⁷ Vivekananda, *Op. Cit.*, Vol.7, pp. 468-9.

⁸ One of his contemporaries, a man named Mallik, was of the opinion that Vivekananda 'owed the beginnings of [his] spiritual culture to the pattern set by Keshab Chandra'; even his humanitarian work was, simply 'carrying out the *Seva Sadhan* that Keshab Chandra first introduced' (Mallik, cited in Banerji [1931], pp. 345-6, reproduced in De Michelis, *Modern Yoga*, pp. 109-10). One might question the motivation and accuracy of Mallik's account while conceding that the full story of Vivekananda's connection with the Brahma Samaj had not yet been told.

⁹ Vivekananda, Op. Cit., Vol. 7, p. 468.

¹⁰ Aurobindo, Op. Cit., Vol. 1, p. 116.

¹¹ Ibid., Vol. 35, p. 46.

¹² Ibid., Vol.1, p. 332. This was written in 1902 but is in line with Aurobindo's earlier ideas about the Brahmo Samaj and similar movements.

¹³ Ibid., Vol. 36, p. 98.

¹⁴ See for example Vivekananda, Op. Cit., Vol. 1, p. 358 and Aurobindo, Op. Cit., Vol. 36, p. 178.

¹⁵ In one place, Vivekananda mentions the 'great words, which are always quoted and referred to' (Vivekananda, Op. Cit., Vol. 9, p. 238), and he cites each of the three utterances listed in my text several times in his works. Aurobindo cites all three together in *The Life Divine* (Aurobindo, Op. Cit., Vol. 21, p. 74) and *The Synthesis of Yoga* (Aurobindo, Op. Cit., Vol. 23, p. 342), and also cites them individually in other places in his works. Neither Aurobindo nor Vivekananda cites 'Consciousness is Brahman', the final *mahāvākya* in the conventional list of four (one belonging to each of the four Vedas). According to Stephen Phillips there are a total of twelve *mahāvākyas* (Stephen Phillips, *Aurobindo's Philosophy of Brahman* [Leiden: Brill, 1986], p. 61).

¹⁶ Vivekananda, Op. Cit. Vol. 8, p. 6; Vol. 5, p. 318.

¹⁷ Ibid., Vol. 7, pp. 40, 117.

¹⁸ Aurobindo, Op. Cit., Vol. 17, p. 377; Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, III Vols.(Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1970), p. 44.

¹⁹ Vivekananda, Op. Cit., Vol. 3, p. 25.

²⁰ *Buddhiyoga* (*Gita* 2.49; 10.10, 18.57); *jñānayoga* (3.3, 16.1); *karmayoga* (3.3, 3.7, 5.2, 13.24); *sāmkhyayoga* (13.24); *bhaktiyoga* (14.26). (I omit the 'yogas' that occur in the colophons of each of the text's eighteen chapters.) It would be possible to argue that *buddhiyoga* and *sāmkhyayoga* are the same as *jñānayoga*, thus reducing the five to three; but the *Gita* nowhere groups the 'three paths of yoga' together.

²¹ *Gita* 3.3; 13:24.

²² The three yogas are mentioned in *Yamunacharya, Gitartha-samgraha* (in Advaitananda, ed., *Śrī Rāmānuja Gītā Bhāṣya*, trans. Swami Adidevananda [Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, n.d.], pp.1-8). See also Bunki Kimura, 'Rāmānuja's Theory of Three Yogas: The Way to Moksa', in S. Hino (ed.),

Three Mountains and Seven Rivers (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004), pp. 645-666.

²³ The word *trimārga* occurs in the *Shwetashwatara Upanishad* (1.4), but there it is usually understood to mean the paths of *dharma*, *adharmā*, and *jñāna*.

²⁴ See for instance Klaus Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), pp.151-305, and Warren Matthews, *World Religions* (N.P.: Cengage Learning, 2011), p. 81.

²⁵ *Hathayoga-Pradipika* 1.1-3; *Shiva Samhita* 5.12. (Mallinson, ed., 107).

²⁶ Vivekananda, Op. Cit., Vol. 1, p. 160; Aurobindo, Op. Cit., Vol. 23, p. 537.

²⁷ Vivekananda, Op. Cit., 1: 42; Aurobindo, Op. Cit., Vol.1, p. 778 (this page reproduces a footnote that Sri Aurobindo later cut from the text of one of his book reviews); Duncan J. Derret, 'A Juridical Fabrication of Early British India: The Mahanirvana Tantra', in *Essays in Classical and Modern Hindu Law* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), Vol. 2, pp. 197-242.

²⁸ His most famous condemnation of left-hand Tantra came in a speech delivered in Calcutta soon after his return from America (Vivekananda, Op. Cit., Vol. 3, pp. 340-1). He later explained that in that speech he was condemning only the 'corrupt and horrible practices' of the Vamachara, and he did not object to the worship of women as 'the living embodiment of Divine Mother' (Vivekananda, Op. Cit., Vol. 7, p. 216). For other positive references see Vivekananda, Op. Cit., Vol. 3, p. 112; Vol. 4, p. 336; Vol. 5, p. 506.

²⁹ Aurobindo, Op. Cit., Vol. 23, p. 23.

³⁰ Many scholars apply the term Neo-Vedanta to all non-traditional nineteenth and twentieth century interpretations of Vedanta beginning with that of Rammohan Roy, a usage which is too broad to be useful. Some academics apply the term to the work of professional philosophers such as S. Radhakrishnan and Krishna Chandra Bhattacharyya, but this gives it a rather narrow focus. More commonly, intellectual historians use the term 'Neo-Vedanta' for the approaches of Vivekananda, Rama Tirtha, Aurobindo, Radhakrishnan, and a few others. The interpretations of these men share a number of characteristics, but differ from one another in important respects. Recently, the term 'Neo-Adwaita' has come to be applied to teachers inspired in one way or another by Ramana Maharshi (Phillip Charles Lucas, 'When a Movement Is Not a Movement'. *Nova Religio* 15 [2011], pp. 93-114); in the marketplace of contemporary spiritual teachers, the same term,



differently defined, is one of four or five categories of modern teachers who have some sort of connection with Advaita Vedanta (see Advaita Vision, <http://www.advaita.org.uk/index.html>). It would be possible to call every version of Vedanta since Shankara, or since the Brahmanas, a ‘neo-Vedanta’.

³¹ See for instance R. S. Srivastava: ‘The metaphysics and disciplines of Vivekananda do not deviate an inch from the standpoint of *Advaita Vedānta* of Śankārachārya’ (cited by Anantanand Rambachan, *The Limits of Scripture* [Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 2005], p. 3). Rambachan also provides a similar quotation from T. M. P. Mahadevan, and in a note (p. 139, n. 4) cites works by Sarma, Kingsley, Zaehner, and Dhar as ‘other examples of the uncritical identification of Vivekananda with Sankara’.

³² Vivekananda, *Op. Cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 220; Vol. 7, p. 97; Vol. 1, pp. 150, 180, 188, 184.

³³ Aurobindo, *Op. Cit.*, Vol. 9, p. 279; Vol. 8, pp. 270-1; Vol. 1, pp. 204-6.

³⁴ Vivekananda, *Op. Cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 324; Vol. 2, p. 382; Vol. 6, p. 696 (cf. Vol. 1, p. 24); Vol. 3, p. 250 (date and place in <http://www.vivekananda.net/Lectures.html>).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, pp. 125-7.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 124.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. 7, p. 227; Vol. 2, pp. 385-6.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. 7, pp. 496, 277 (in the first quotation, ‘Yoga’ is a synecdoche for ‘Rajayoga’). Cf. Vol. 2, p. 388.

³⁹ Michael Comans, ‘The Question of the Importance of Samādhi in Modern and Classical Advaita Vedānta’, *Philosophy East and West*, 43 (1993), p. 22.

⁴⁰ Phillips, an admirer of Aurobindo and a believer in the primacy of experience, concluded, after a very thorough survey of the texts: ‘The Upanishads... do not so explicitly or unambiguously state whether an extraordinary “experience” has much or anything to do with the ideas they express’ (Phillips, *Op. Cit.*, p. 57). For a more aggressive take on the question, see Rambachan, *Op. Cit.*, and Comans, *Op. Cit.* Much has been written on the subject in recent years. Halbfass, *India and Europe* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), pp. 378-402, provides a useful survey.

⁴¹ See especially, Shankaracharya, *Brahma Sutra Bhashya*, on 1.1.2. See also his *Kena Upanishad Bhashya*, on KU 2. 1.

⁴² At the end of a review of Rambachan's *Accomplishing the Accomplished* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), in *Philosophy East and West*, 43 (1994), Arvind Sharma, who takes the position that Shankara sometimes regarded *anubhava* as a *pramāṇa*, concedes that Rambachan's 'thesis that modern scholars of Advaita have *directly* placed an emphasis on experience not found in the same measure in Śankara seems valid' (742). Sharma and Rambachan's controversy on this point stretched over four volumes of *Philosophy East and West* (1992-1995).

⁴³ Ramakrishna Puligandla, *Essentials of Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: DK Printworld, 2008), pp.228, 200-201. Puligandla points out (p. 228) that in later Vedanta three more *pramāṇas* were added: comparison, postulation, and non-cognition. Shankara refers only to perception, inference, and testimony.

⁴⁴ Maha Upanishad 6.72; <http://www.sanghparivar.org/about-rss>

⁴⁵ Pavitrnananda, Op. Cit., Vol. I, pp. 80, 96, 177-8.

⁴⁶ Ramakrishna, *Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, n.d.), p. 58.

⁴⁷ Ramakrishna, Op. Cit., pp. 130-32; Mahendranath Gupta, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, n.d.), Vol. 1, p. 467.

⁴⁸ Vivekananda, Op. Cit., Vol. 7, pp. 412, 496; see also Vol. 1, p. 108; Vol. 2, pp. 277, 388.

⁴⁹ See especially Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

⁵⁰ Roy, quoted in Rambachan, Op. Cit., 16.

⁵¹ Tagore, quoted in Rambachan, Op. Cit., 22. Rambachan's full discussion of Tagore's views (pp. 20-24) contains useful supporting material.

⁵² David Kopf, *The Brahma Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 67.

⁵³ For Ramakrishna's contact with Keshab Sen, see Gupta, *Gospel*, passim; for Vivekananda's, see *Swami Vivekananda in The West – New Discoveries*, II (CD Rom edition): p. 424. See also De Michelis, Op. Cit., pp. 97-99.

⁵⁴ Sen, in *Sunday Mirror*, October 23, 1881, reproduced in J. N. Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India* (n.p.: Kissinger Publishing, 2003), pp. 57-58.

⁵⁵ De Michelis, Op. Cit., pp. 12, 112-14.

⁵⁶ Vivekananda, Op. Cit., Vol. 1, p. 122.

⁵⁷ See De Michelis, Op. Cit., pp.178-79. The traditional Hathayoga/Rajayoga dichotomy was known to the leaders of the Theosophical Society, who alluded to it in their publications (see for example the Theosophical journal *Lucifer*, September 1890 to February 1891, p. 425). In his text and English translation of the *Yoga Sutra*, published in 1890, scholar and Theosophist M.N. Dvivedi did not equate *rājayoga* and *pātāñjala yoga*. In his introduction he noted only that ‘the Sutras of Patanjali leaned more to the former [*rājayoga*] than to the latter [*hathayoga*].’ He also mentioned a fourfold division of yogic paths: *rājayoga*, *hathayoga*, *mantrayoga* and *layayoga*. For *rājayoga* he referred the reader to his earlier translation of two texts that he attributed to Bharatitirtha and Shankaracharya, to which he gave the editorial title *Rajayoga* (M. N. Dvivedi, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* [Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 2001], p. xxii).

⁵⁸ Vivekananda, in Margaret E. Noble [Sister Nivedita], *The Master as I saw Him* (n.p.: Kissinger, 2010), p. 304. Aurobindo twice recounted an anecdote about Vivekananda and a ‘Madras pandit’ in this form: When the pandit objected to a statement of Vivekananda’s, saying ‘But Shankara does not say so,’ Vivekananda replied: ‘No Shankara does not say so, but I, Vivekananda, say so’ (Aurobindo, Op. Cit. Vol. 32, p. 113; see also Vol. 17, p. 336). In fact no anecdote involving a ‘pandit’, ‘Shankara’, and the declaration ‘I, Vivekananda...’ occurs in any of Vivekananda’s works. Aurobindo was undoubtedly thinking about the anecdote Nivedita recorded in *The Master as I Saw Him*, a book he asked his disciple Motilal Roy to obtain for him shortly after it was published (Aurobindo, Op. Cit., Vol. 36, p. 184 [letter dated February 1913]).

⁵⁹ Aurobindo, Op. Cit., Vol. 21, pp. 16, 63.

⁶⁰ Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, pp. 1143, 95.

⁶¹ Ibid., 1622 (emphasis mine). This is from a letter of the 1930s. It is worth noting that Aurobindo does not speak of four paths of yoga anywhere in the text of *The Synthesis of Yoga*. In the Introduction he speaks of the triple path of *jñāna*, *karma* and *bhakti*, as well as other systems which do not figure in his synthesis, such as *rājayoga* and *hathayoga*. In the first three parts, he mentions the yoga of self-perfection only when he says he will postpone consideration of a certain subject until he reaches the part devoted to the yoga of self-perfection.

⁶² Aurobindo, Op. Cit., Vol. 23, pp. 42-43; Vol. 24, pp. 611-12.

⁶³ Ibid., Vol. 36, p. 39.



⁶⁴ Ibid., Vol. 23, p. 7; Vol. 21, p. 75.

⁶⁵ Ibid., Vol. 18, p. 96; Vol. 23, pp. 55, 53.

⁶⁶ Ibid., Vol. 23, p. 57. The passage in Vivekananda's works to which Aurobindo refers is apparently this one: 'Now, if we all thought alike, we would be like Egyptian mummies in a museum looking vacantly at one another's faces - no more than that! Whirls and eddies occur only in a rushing, living stream. There are no whirlpools in stagnant, dead water. When religions are dead, there will be no more sects; it will be the perfect peace and harmony of the grave. But so long as mankind thinks, there will be sects. Variation is the sign of life, and it must be there. I pray that they may multiply so that at last there will be as many sects as human beings, and each one will have his own method, his individual method of thought in religion.' (Vivekananda, Op. Cit., Vol. 2, p. 363).

⁶⁷ Vivekananda, Op. Cit., Vol. 5, p. 318.

⁶⁸ Aurobindo, Op. Cit., Vol. 35, p. 307.

⁶⁹ Vivekananda, Op. Cit., Vol. 2, pp. 389, 459.

⁷⁰ Aurobindo, Op. Cit., Vol. 23, p. 24.

⁷¹ Ibid., Vol. 35, pp. 264-65; Vol. 36, p. 24. See also Vol. 36, pp. 98, 179.

⁷² Vivekananda, Op. Cit., Vol. 6, pp. 456-6; Vol. 1, pp. 212-3.

⁷³ Aurobindo, Op. Cit., Vol. 24, pp. 613-14.

⁷⁴ Vivekananda, Op. Cit., Vol. 1, pp. 63-71.

⁷⁵ Aurobindo, Op. Cit., Vol. 23, p. 211; Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, p. 527.

⁷⁶ Aurobindo, Op. Cit., Vol. 23, p. 542.

⁷⁷ For example he discussed the 'psychic *prāṇa*', a term much used by Vivekananda in *Rājayoga*, in the chapter of 'The Yoga of Self Perfection' called 'The Instruments of the Spirit'.

⁷⁸ Aurobindo, Op. Cit., Vol. 24, p. 612.

⁷⁹ Ibid., Vol. 7, p. 496.

⁸⁰ Vivekananda, Op. Cit., Vol. 7, p. 261.

⁸¹ Ibid., Vol. 7, p. 262; Aurobindo, Op. Cit., Vol. 23, p. 41.

⁸² Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 7.

⁸³ I. P. Singh, 'Narendra Modi finds Poll Mascot in Vivekananda', *Times of*

India September 13, 2012 http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-09-13/india/33815996_1_vivekananda-yuva-vikas-yatra-gujarat-chief-minister-gujarat-government . The Jaisalmer shop and Bhubaneswar cramming house are things I stumbled across during a recent trip. Pondicherry, where I live, has any number of Vivekananda schools, etc.

⁸⁴ See Peter Heehs ‘The Uses of Sri Aurobindo: Mascot, Whipping-Boy or What?’. *Postcolonial Studies*, 9 (2006): p. 151–64.

⁸⁵ Aghananda Bharati, ‘The Hindu Renaissance and its Apologetic Patterns’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 29 (1970), pp. 278, 276, 286. Compare Bharati’s statement to this one from Ninian Smart: ‘Not only did he [Vivekananda] interpret Hinduism to the West so eloquently, but he also interpreted it to India itself’ (Ninian Smart, *Ninian Smart on World Religions: Selected Writings* [Aldershot : Ashgate, 2008], p. 60.

⁸⁶ Bhitika Mukerji, ‘Neo-Vedanta and Modernity’ (reprinted at <http://www.anandamayi.org/books/Bithika2.htm>); Rambachan, Op. Cit.; Comans, Op. Cit.; De Michelis, Op. Cit.; Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Joseph S. Alter, *Yoga in Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁸⁷ S. Radhakrishnan, *The Idealist View of Life* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1937), p. 84; *The Hindu View of Life* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1927), pp. 17, 23.

⁸⁸ Swami Nikhilananda, *Hinduism: Its Meaning for the Liberation of the Spirit* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, n.d.), pp. 22, 186.

⁸⁹ Rambachan, Op. Cit., p. 137.

⁹⁰ Rambachan, Op. Cit., pp. 93, 98, 111.

⁹¹ De Michelis, Op. Cit., p. 49.

⁹² <http://www.dlshq.org/teachings/yogasynt.htm>; <http://www.sivananda.org/teachings/fourpaths.html#karma>; Mark Singleton, ‘Patañjali and Constructive Orientalism’, in Singleton (ed.), *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp.77-86.

⁹³ Alter, ‘Yoga Shivir’, in Singleton (ed.), Op. Cit., 36.

⁹⁴ Vivekananda, Vol. 5, p. 416; Aurobindo, Vol. 35, pp. 559, 593, 596, 634; Vol. 25, p. 262.