

An Undergraduate's Spiritual Journey

By Rajiv Ramdeo

I cannot begin to talk about myself without describing the roots/routes that brought me to my current endeavors. First of all, my mother has been the most inspiring person in my life. From a young age, she strictly followed the teachings of Jesus Christ. Although my family is from Trinidad and Tobago, we are ethnically Indian so our upbringing involved a great deal of exposure to the Hindu tradition. Exposure to both faith traditions helped my mother to develop a deep sense of spirituality. After I was born, she began to follow the teachings of Paramahansa Yogananda, a yogi from India who traveled to the Western world to teach about Eastern philosophies and practices such as meditation. Since I was old enough to learn, my mother has invoked in me a passion for and understanding of spirituality through Yogananda's teachings. I am grateful to her for a wonderful life filled with spiritual understanding and compassion for others.

I must admit that I did not acquire a firm grasp of Eastern spiritual philosophies and practices until recently when I began reading the teachings of Paramahansa Yogananda from a critical perspective. I have accepted Yogananda as my guru through the Self-Realization Fellowship (S.R.F.), an organization that he founded in the United States to disseminate his Eastern teachings. I have found truth in Yogananda's teachings and confirmed the authenticity of his ideas through my life experiences. I often am bewildered when I come across a section of his writings and find that it applies to my recent thoughts and questions. His writings are from the early 1900's, and I am astounded at how relevant his teachings are to modern life.

I also was inspired by the XIV Dalai Lama when he came to speak at U.C. Irvine in 2004. The way he captivated the audience with his spiritual messages really impressed me. In my experience, people tend to be close-minded about spiritual discussions, but the XIV Dalai Lama's wit, humor, and charm helped him to connect to the audience. Before long, listeners were captivated by his words. I was happy to observe that many other young people embraced the ideas expressed by the XIV Dalai Lama, especially since the ideas coincided with some of the teachings from S.R.F. It was not until I heard the XIV Dalai Lama speak in person that I realized I need to make more of an impact on the world around me.

At the same time, I understand that the karma and life experiences of others may not lead them down a faith-based path. I believe it is up to the individual to choose their own path. Through exposure to different philosophies and ways of thinking, I have concluded that many religious practices and constructs are strikingly similar, just with different names. In my estimation, heaven can be likened to nirvana or enlightenment. Moreover, most major faiths encourage people to be good. There may be different rituals involved, but the bottom line is the same: *be good to one another*. I'm appalled by the violence that occurs between religions because of a preoccupation with difference and division, instead of a focus on being good to one another. Among spiritually-minded people, my realizations are not novel, but they inspire me to educate others.

There is a lot to be learned from the general principles of the world's major religions. I believe it is important to behave in ways that match our belief systems. The world that we live in is in great turmoil. There is a great deal of violence in the United States, and it is matched by a great deal of worldwide violence. I feel that there is inner violence against each other, too, because violence isn't necessarily physical. It includes the constant hurt we cause each other every day.

I recently took a trip to Japan. Things are very different there. The Japanese are known for their longer life expectancies -a fact that interests me because I am a pre-med student. Research reflects multiple influences on a person's life expectancy, e.g., diet, family history, exercise, etc. For Japan, I believe the kindness of the culture affects the general population's longevity. Coming from the states, it was noticeable how much politeness and respect is shown in Japanese culture. Unfortunately, things are changing as more and more Japanese business executives adopt Western practices. A Japanese person explained to me that in Japan politeness is an expression of compassion. This is interesting to me because many faiths and spiritual traditions encourage and value compassion. The XIV Dalai Lama even ties compassion to the root of lasting happiness. I believe that if we are kind to others, we will find lasting happiness and consequently lead long, prosperous lives.

I also have found that meditation is an excellent tool for developing compassion, as well as self-understanding, creativity, patience, and many other human qualities encouraged by both Yoganada and the XIV Dalai Lama. Like these spiritual figures (both of whom I respect highly), I also would like to share with the world what I've learned about meditation and Eastern philosophies. As a result, I started a student-operated organization at U.C. Irvine, the Association of Undergraduate Meditators (AUM), which teaches others the importance of principles like compassion. I founded A.U.M. last fall, and it has flourished to more than one hundred members on its mailing list. Each week, members come to the meetings and discuss various topics. On some occasions, we have scientists or monks share their perceptions of and experiences with meditation. During each meeting we have a meditation session. Most people come to the club knowing very little about meditation, but after a single session, many are impressed with the results.

Leading and maintaining a student organization is no easy task, especially when I also have a full schedule. I have many classes, work, and conduct integrative medical research. It also was difficult to start A.U.M. because people tend to be unfamiliar with meditation, but my efforts feel worthwhile when I see people leave meetings with greater understanding and a better sense of what meditation is. For me, that is rewarding so I strive to continue to serve the group as much as possible.

In the process of looking for ways to improve the club, I investigated various sources of funding -everything at that point was coming out of my own pocket. You can only imagine the dearth of funds aimed at spiritual projects. If I may say so, by some *miracle*, I happened to stumble across the XIV Dalai Lama Endowed Scholarship application. Even more miraculous, it was the first year of the scholarship. I really was excited that the first year of the scholarship coincided with the first year of my meditation club. I was hopeful, but since I had never applied for anything similar, I was nervous. Weeks later when I'd practically forgotten about the application, I received an email offering me a primary interview. I was elated! From then on, things went well, and I made it through the final interview. Imagine my joy when I was selected as one of the first two XIV Dalai Lama Scholars at U.C. Irvine - definitely a pinnacle in my life!

I feel greatly honored to have been selected to pass on the XIV Dalai Lama's teachings of peace, ethics, and responsibility. I plan to use the funds to bring spirituality to the U.C. Irvine campus in a major way during the next year through campus-wide seminars and events. My hope is that this will catalyze other spiritually-minded activities (especially those involving meditation) and unite various spiritual groups around campus. I don't necessarily want more members in A.U.M.; instead I feel that it's important for people to learn more about meditation and the importance of developing a spiritual lifestyle. Beyond that, I hope they are better equipped to make totally personal choices about their spiritual beliefs and behaviors.

I would love to see more meditation groups formed at other campus because I think that students are overly stressed by their academic and social lives -sadly, often at the expense of their spirituality. My studies and experiences show me that balance is the key to everything. My hope is that I bring meditation to people as an option. It is a powerful tool for obtaining a sense of balance, and I welcome what it means to be part of bringing a healthy sense of balance to people's lives.

Rajiv Ramdeo is an undergraduate entering his fourth year at the University of California, Irvine. He majors in biology with a minor in African American Studies. He is one of two recipients of the university's first annual XIV Dalai Lama Endowed Scholarship. Ramdeo submitted this reflective piece to the newsletter to share his spiritual trajectory, interest in meditation, and feelings toward being the recipient of such a unique and important scholarship. In the future, Ramdeo would like to become a physician and work with a nonprofit group focused on improving health care policy for underserved populations. For additional information about the Association of Undergraduate Meditators (AUM) at U.C. Irvine, please email him at aum@uci.edu.