







# Spirituality 2.0

Yoga, tai chi and qi gong aren't what they once were – that much is clear to anthropologist **Peter van der Veer**. At the **Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity** in Göttingen, he has been studying the meaning of the spiritual and how it has changed in modern societies.

TEXT **BIRGIT FENZEL**

If people weren't aware of how much yoga had become a mass movement in the West, they certainly became aware of it by the time several thousand people stretched out to salute the sun on Times Square to mark the summer solstice. Peter van der Veer doubts, however, that events like this have much in common with the original concept of spirituality. "They lack the critical elements that could still be found embedded in the spiritual ideas at the start of the 20th century," explains the anthropologist.

As far as the Director at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity is concerned, spirituality, like all the other secular ideas of nations, equality, civil society, democracy and rights such as arose in the wake of the Enlightenment, is one of the central elements in the history of modernity that were directed against the traditional social order and moral values.

"The spiritual and the secular arose simultaneously in the 19th century as two interconnected alternatives to institutionalized religion in Euro-American modernity," is how van der Veer states one of his core theories.

## INTELLECTUAL INTERACTION BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

With those few words, the Max Planck researcher dismisses the widespread view of India as the cradle of spirituality as a modern myth. Nor was there any talk of Hinduism, Taoism or Confucianism in Asia before the region encountered Western imperialism. "They had the traditions, but they didn't have the suffix," says van der Veer. The traditions only became "isms" through the intellectual interaction with the West.

This lively intellectual exchange between East and West is, so says the researcher from Göttingen, a fundamen-

Worshipping the sun on Times Square: Thousands of modern yogis celebrate the longest day of the year in 2010.



The goddess Kali (left) symbolizes destruction and renewal in Hindu mythology. She inspired Swami Vivekananda (right) in the temple of his master Ramakrishna. Vivekananda modernized his master's philosophical ideas and practices and transported them to America.

tal element in the development of modernity in general and its spirituality in particular: "For me, it is part of what I call interactional history."

## LOOKING TO INDIA AND CHINA

Instead of placing the universalism of enlightenment at the center of a study on spirituality, one should rather focus on the universalization of ideas that evolved in the course of a history of interactions. It isn't that the rational concepts of enlightenment and progress arose in Europe and were then simply adopted elsewhere in the world. What really happened was that they evolved and spread with the expansion of European power, says van der Veer.

"If I put India and China at the heart of my study, I do so not only because the history of universalization in those societies is very different and therefore particularly fascinating, but also partly because it gives me important insights into the evolution of spirituality in Europe and the US," he says. Indeed, the exchange of new and revolutionary ideas was by no means restricted to the communication between the US and Europe.

In search of alternatives to the institutionalized religions, Western intellectuals, artists and other pioneers in society were quick to look to the traditions of the East. The list of those who made reference to Indian examples in their works or correspondence reads like a who's who of the European intellectual world: Voltaire, Herder, Humboldt, Schlegel, Novalis, Schopenhauer and Goethe, who incorporated, among other things, special theater techniques taken from ancient Indian literature into his tragedy *Faust*.

From India as a place of spirituality, mysticism and the cradle of old philo-

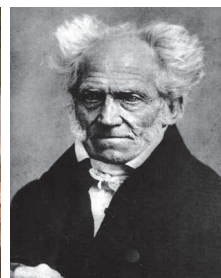
sophical traditions, notions circulated that filled the spiritual gaps that had opened up for many since the Enlightenment. "And these notions in turn came upon fertile soil in India itself," says the Göttingen-based anthropologist, commenting on how the stream of thoughts moved backwards and forwards. The religious movements in India particularly embraced the Western discourse on Far Eastern spirituality.

Soon the discussions became imbued with political undertones. "Many averred that Hindus were the real Indians, whose civilization was threatened with collapse under Muslim rule," says Peter van der Veer, describing the burgeoning sense of national identity that was dominating the debate. Others saw the West and particularly British colonial power as threats to Hindu culture and civilization, and looked to spirituality as a means of reclaiming or preserving their identity.

"The development of Swami Vivekananda into one of the most important Indian reformers of the 19th century is exemplary of these processes," says the researcher, who describes Vivekananda as "probably the first major Indian advocate of Hindu spirituality."

Born the son of a Calcutta lawyer in 1863, Vivekananda enjoyed the exquisite Western education conventionally afforded to the offspring of the upper classes in his home town. During his schooldays, he became acquainted with the ideas of Western philosophers and intellectuals, among which the social theories of Herbert Spencer – the first to apply evolutionary theory to society – surely played their part in his later criticism of Western civilization.

Great European minds who incorporated Indian philosophies into their own works: Johann Gottfried Herder, Alexander von Humboldt, Arthur Schopenhauer and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.



Photos: dpa Picture-Alliance (top left), OH (top right and bottom)



» The list of those who made reference to Indian examples in their works or correspondence reads like a who's who of the European intellectual world.

The initial spark of spiritualism in Vivekananda's life came from his contact with the mystic Ramakrishna, who was a simple priest in a temple to the goddess Kali and who practiced and taught an ecstatic form of tantric yoga. After some initial reluctance, Vivekananda became his favorite student. Later, he developed a modern, modified version of the religious ideas and practices of his master Ramakrishna, transforming them into a new Hindu spiritualism.

### AN EARLY ADVERTISEMENT FOR INTELLECTUAL TOLERANCE

As a light version cleansed of all elements believed to be disturbing, this was more easily accessible to the rather Western-oriented members of the Indian middle classes and to the Western public overseas than his guru's original version with the goddess Kali at its center, dancing with outstretched tongue and a chain of skulls around her neck on the body of the goddess Shiva. Kali's main characteristic in Vivekananda's representation is her openness. She allows, for instance, all of the classic paths to salvation in Hinduism to exist side by side and promotes intellectual tolerance in general.

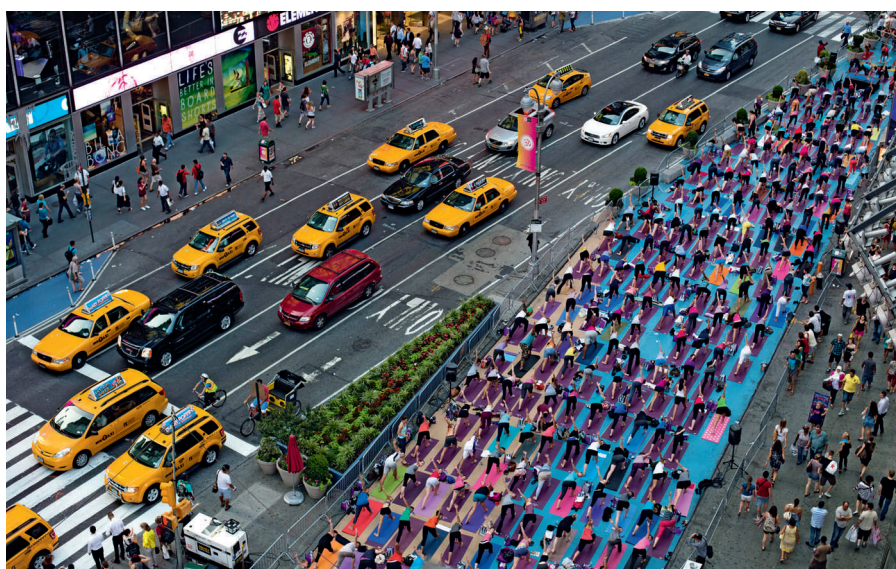
Swami Vivekananda achieved real pop star status in the Western world with his appearance at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, which he attended as part of a reading tour. In his speech, he proclaimed his pride at belonging to a religion that teaches the world tolerance and universal acceptance in equal measure. His lectures compared his homeland, as the cradle of spirituality and religious devotion, with the civilization of the West, which he said had become a slave to materialism despite all of the technological advances.

"This appearance, combined with his subsequent reading tour around the US, is in all probability the start of the



Yoga in the office: Is this where spirituality and materiality come together? Or is a movement originally directed against capitalism achieving exactly the opposite of its aim?





Convergence of cultures: With the district of Pudong in view, women in Shanghai start their day the traditional way with a round of tai chi (top). In New York (bottom), thousands of yoga followers refuse to let even a heat wave stop them from practicing in Times Square.

first Hindu missionary movement,” says Peter van der Veer, describing the impact of Vivekananda’s words. The researcher has no doubt that Vivekananda’s concept of spiritualism had an influence on Hindu nationalism in all its variants, as well as on the global understanding of spirituality. It also turns up in the ideas of two other famous protagonists of Indian history: Mohandas Gandhi and the Bengali poet and win-

ner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, Rabindranath Tagore.

Tagore firmly believed that Asia was united by a unique spirituality. On the basis of this idea, he endeavored, during his various reading tours through China and Japan, to win the support of local intellectuals for a pan-Asian movement – with the aim of constructing a common civilization in Asia.

However, van der Veer notes that the Nobel laureate was highly critical, if not hostile, to all forms of excessive nationalism: “The fact that his poems feature today in the national anthems of India and Bangladesh strikes me as the irony of history.”

Gandhi, on the other hand, found a way of linking the notions of universal spirituality with nationalistic projects. “He did so by saying that no one born into a certain tradition and civilization should missionize or convert others,” explains van der Veer. Rather, each individual should seek the truth in his or her own traditions. Along these lines, Gandhi was able to argue for a spiritual nation that overcomes international religious differences.

## MOHANDAS GANDHI RECONCILES CONTRADICTIONARY CONCEPTS

“In view of the fact that the tensions between Muslims and Hindus are among the Indian subcontinent’s biggest problems, the notion of such a universal, all-embracing spirituality was of extraordinary political significance,” says van der Veer. For him as a researcher, Gandhi’s interpretation of spirituality is also very interesting in another respect, given that its fundamental nature is representative of the idea as a whole: “The fact that it can be seen as universal and appears at the same time to be connected with concepts of national identity is a central contradiction in the concept of spirituality.”

The Max Planck scientist considers Gandhi to be a good example of the fact that spirituality is by no means the opposite of secularity. “His spirituality was deeply bound up with secularity when he argued that all religions should be treated the same and that the state should be impartial toward them.”

Peter van der Veer also sees this special spirituality in the political ideas of Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first Prime Minister; Nehru worked for a secular and democratic India. As van der Veer sees it, this spirituality is behind the concept of non-alignment that Nehru presented to the world for

the first time in 1954 and that made him a leader of the block-free states as an alternative to capitalism and communism: “These spiritual principles still apply in India and demonstrate continuity between the colonial and post-colonial situation. It could be called Indian secularism.”

For van der Veer, spirituality and materiality are not mutually exclusive – in fact, they frequently depend on each other, as he has observed in what’s been happening in China and India. It was only with the liberalization of the economy under the influence of global capitalism that China – a country that replaced Confucianism with an aggressive form of secularism that seriously attacked the religions, temples and priests – became a place where traditional spiritual notions and practices like tai chi, feng shui and qi gong are now once again socially acceptable.

In India, too, van der Veer has watched this connection between spirituality and materiality play out in the wake of economic globalization. In this case, he says, the impulse came principally from the highly educated members of India’s middle classes who went to the US in the 1970s and 1980s to find jobs in medical or technical professions.

“There they found themselves confronted with the aggressive marketing of Indian spirituality, which was being offered in the markets for healthcare, sports, management training and so on,” explains the researcher. And, as he notes, it didn’t take long for this practice to also be imported into India. On the one hand, representing a return to the old values that created a sense of identity, it fit very well with the Hindu nationalism that was just then spreading and that spurned the earlier secular and multicultural efforts of the Indian state. Particularly the modern, urbane form of religiosity was interested in yoga and nationalism in equal measure.

On the other hand, this urbane religiosity also lent itself to meeting the needs of a newly invigorated middle class – a phenomenon that can now be

observed in China, too. However, the modern versions of the spiritualities had only a tenuous connection with the old traditions passed down through the ages. Nevertheless, they were extremely creative in their response to new opportunities and fears brought by globalization.

### A MOVEMENT RENDERS ITSELF POINTLESS

As economic globalization proceeded, spirituality and materiality entered into an alliance many considered enriching in every sense. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the liaison with neoliberal capitalism, says the researcher in Göttingen, were the global business practices in which spirituality was a means to the end of profitability improvement. Though China’s isolation between 1950 and 1980 did serve to delay the launch of Chinese spirituality on the world market, tai chi, qi gong and feng shui have now almost caught up with the mass global success of yoga.

Meditation techniques and spiritual experiences are evidently an excellent fit for the lifestyle and outlook of the modern worker on the path of self-optimization for the market and the economy. Moreover, experimental styles of spiritual life present an alternative to the secular and religious life that feels empty to many.

“Seen from the outside, they enable people within disciplining institutions to pursue their professional and life goals without suffering excessive stress or depression,” comments Max Planck scientist Peter van der Veer. Instead of facing the challenges of their own lives, they make themselves comfortable with the spiritual experience, however obtained.

But if yoga, tai chi or qi gong – as products of the wellness industry – serve a physical culture that aims to boost the efficiency of disciplined, well-balanced workers in a capitalist society, the movement that, in its early days, was directed against the establishment or against colonialism or capitalism would seem to have changed itself into its opposite. ◀

### TO THE POINT

- Spirituality as a universal concept has an international career behind it and is one of the key elements in the history of modernity. Contrary to popular opinion, its origins lie, not in India, but in 19th century Euro-American modernity.
- Today, researchers observe a connection between spirituality and materiality. In China, for instance, under the influence of global capitalism, traditional spiritual notions and practices like tai chi, feng shui and qi gong are now socially acceptable again.
- Meditation techniques and spiritual experiences are evidently an excellent fit for the lifestyle and outlook of the modern worker on the path of self-optimization for the market and the economy. Spirituality is thus taking on a different meaning.

### GLOSSARY

**Confucianism:** Umbrella term for philosophies and political notions in the tradition of Confucius (believed to have lived from 551 to 479 BC) and his students. Confucianism – the name dates back to Christian missionaries in the 17th century – has shaped Chinese culture and society for many centuries.

**Secularity:** A social ideology resulting from the separation of religion and state, it focuses on the empirical world and disregards the transcendental.

**Spirituality:** A very broadly defined term relating to intellectual or transcendental notions or experiences of all kinds, which needn’t be of a religious nature only.