

George Harrison – Beatle, Seeker, Lover of God

First Published in *Hinduism Today*

“The people of India have a tremendous spiritual strength, which I don’t think is found elsewhere. The spirit of the people, the beauty, the goodness—that’s what I’ve been trying to learn about.”

-- George Harrison, 1966

In 1969, devotees from the London Radha Krishna temple invited me to take part in an album of mantras and prayers that George Harrison was producing at Apple Studios. Meeting him for the first time, I was struck by his humility, by his understated humor, and by his excitement over the music we had gathered to make. Recording these ancient songs was his way of letting people know “there’s more to life than boogying,” as he put it. At that time, the Beatles were dissolving but George’s solo career was growing thanks in large measure to his daily meditations and yoga practice. For the next thirty-two years, until his death from cancer at age fifty-eight, George would continue to produce recordings of *Nada Brahma*, God in sacred sound.

It was astonishing to see how this world-renowned artist distanced himself from stardom to better cultivate his inner self. How many celebrities have ever done that? His dedication meant even more since he wasn’t just any celebrity. He was a Beatle. Not only were the Beatles the most successful pop group in history, they were also the postwar generation’s wise men. If a Beatle said chanting Sanskrit names of God was okay, a lot of people around the globe were inclined to at least give it a try.

It may be difficult for someone who did not grow up in the sixties to understand the significance of a Beatle committing to India’s spiritual teachings. A large percentage of baby boomers, as the generation born after World War II came to be called, took their cues about beliefs, behavior, and politics, as well as wardrobe and hairstyle, from what

the Beatles did and sang. In 1964, when the Beatles first came to New York to appear on the popular Ed Sullivan television show, yoga played no role in American life. Only a handful of people were vegetarians, and even educators who should have known better commonly confused Hinduism with Buddhism. If Americans had any impression of Hinduism at all, it was usually distorted by British missionary prejudice. By publicly declaring his appreciation for yoga, meditation, karma, dharma, reincarnation, and other concepts identified with India, George helped reverse nearly three hundred years of anti-Hindu ignorance and bias.

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There was a trajectory to George's spiritual life, which began and ended with music. In 1966, he met maestro Ravi Shankar and thrilled to the sound of a sitar, to the lull of its sympathetic strings and the way it could stretch a single note to imitate the yearning of a heart in love. Later that year, George continued his sitar lessons in Srinagar, an extended village at the foot of the Himalayan Mountains surrounded by fields of golden saffron flowers. In this idyllic setting he practiced music and spent hours reading about India's millennial teachings. As a boy, George had been an indifferent student, but during that visit he was rarely without a book in his hands, including Swami Vivekananda's *Raja Yoga* and Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi*.

What he learned of India's spiritual culture amazed him. Unlike institutional religions that barely tolerate one another, here was a worldview that encompassed everyone and everything. All living beings are eternal souls, part and parcel of God, the texts declared. Our job is to manifest that divinity. This, the Hindu tradition said, is *sanatana-dharma*, the eternal religion, which dwells in all beings. "Through Hinduism I feel a better person," he told a reporter. "I just get happier and happier."

A few weeks later, he returned to London inspired by a vision of himself not as a working class boy from Liverpool who had become a superstar, but as an eternal soul who, if he applied himself, could see God face to face. Being merely a Beatle had lost its appeal.

Still, John, Paul, and Ringo were his closest friends, and in 1968 he induced his fellow Beatles and their partners to join him and his then wife, model Patty Boyd, on a

retreat to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's ashram in Rishikesh. The group arrived in Delhi at three o'clock one morning in February 1968, and by noon their hired cars were weaving down Rishikesh's dusty streets crowded with cows and bullock carts. They got out and climbed a path leading to a bluff above the river's eastern bank. Before them, stone huts and wooden bungalows mushroomed out from groves of teak and guava trees. Looking out over the bluff, the group traced the Ganges River flowing from a source high in the mountains.

The Beatles' days in Rishikesh consisted of a casual breakfast, morning meditation classes until lunch, leisure time in the afternoons, and sometimes as many as three more hours of meditation in the evenings. George and his friends found their creative energies heightened in the peaceful atmosphere of the retreat: in Rishikesh, the Beatles composed more than forty songs. Many were recorded on the *White Album*, and others would appear on their final LP *Abbey Road*. Too much time spent writing, though, struck George as a distraction from their purpose in coming to India, and he said as much.

"We're not here to talk music," he told the others. "We're here to meditate."

"Calm down, man," Paul replied. "Sense of humor needed here, you know."

George argued that they needed to make best use of their time. This is a land of yogis and saints, he reminded them, and people hundreds of years old. "There's one somewhere around," he said, "who was born before Christ—and is still living now" and then went looking, climbing paths that snaked high into the mountains.

George's commitment to communing with these mystic beings impressed his friends. "The way George is going," John said with admiration, "he'll be flying a magic carpet by the time he's forty."

Apart from musical inspiration and mystic yogis, there was something else George discovered in Rishikesh: Nature. Perfected creation. Around him, flowering herbs opened their leaves each morning. Medicinal plants such as *primula*, *sausaurea*, and *aconitum* grew green and yellow with the rising sun. Purple Ipomea, blue and yellow Himalayan poppies, and downy white thistle colored his view of steep gorges, overhanging cliffs and vast stretches of forests and meadows. The area abounded with wildlife, and every so often a Musk deer or Indian porcupine would poke out its snout from under a bush or from behind a tree.

Whatever other gods there were, however many more he would meet on this magical journey, the goddess of nature spoke to him in commanding tones, a goddess of magnificent things as large as a mountain and small as a leaf. She was called by many names: Bhumi, Goddess of the Earth; Maha-Shakti, the Divine Mother; Kali-Ma, the Personified Universal Energy. Everyone in Rishikesh, from the Maharishi to the truck driver who delivered the daily produce, paid her homage. They wore garlands made of her flowers, burned incense made of her fragrant woods, and lit candles in her honor. The goddess of nature would follow George into his later years, when gardening became an important part of his meditations.

At day's end, John, Paul, and Ringo joined George on the roof of his bungalow. They sat quietly listening to the swoosh of Ganges water as it blended with a whisper of wind blowing through gnarled trees and across ancient valleys in the distance. They all appreciated their time in India, but it was George who took away a lasting impression that this was his real life's work, to go deeper into India's millennial teachings and realize his eternal relationship with the Divine.

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On return to London, he met disciples of A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, founder-*acharya* of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. George identified with the American devotees, young people his own age who had rejected materialism for higher ground. In their company, George began to chant the Hare Krishna mantra daily and to read the *Bhagavad-gita*.

George held India's sacred texts in high regard, but his realizations were experiential rather than academic. In his post Beatles songs, he only occasionally referred to philosophical terms and preferred writing simple, sing-along lyrics. In "Living In The Material World" (1973), for instance, he declared "Senses never gratified/Only swelling like a tide/That could drown me in the material world." The lines offer a terse rendering of several verses from Gita chapter two, which describe "While contemplating the objects of the senses, a person develops attachment for them, and from such attachment lust

develops...then anger...then delusion...then bewilderment of memory...then loss of intelligence...[after which] one falls down again into the material pool.”

Inspired by the Gita’s injunction that the divine energy animating all life has no material name, George called himself spirit soul rather than Hindu. Perhaps it was because of this deep respect for God’s universality that he never took formal initiation into any one tradition. “The *guru-shishya* (teacher-disciple) relationship is an exceptionally powerful one,” he wrote in Ravi Shankar’s autobiography *Raga Mala*. “In order to gain the benefits of the received wisdom of the ages, the student must yield completely to the demands of the guru in a submission of the ego [and] must accept without question what he is taught.” If he’d learned anything as a Beatle it was to question authority, and pledging himself exclusively to one teacher, it seems, was a step he never felt prepared to take.

Still, George appreciated those who had sincerely dedicated themselves to God, and as often as his busy life allowed, he spent time with his fellow chanters. On several occasions, after a day of recording, he invited us to his home in Friar Park north of London. We’d arrive at Henley-on-Thames, a quiet town thirty-six miles west of London, and George and Patty would greet us at the gates of their sprawling property with a wave and a smile. When devotees visited, George flew an Om flag from the tower of his gothic manor.

Signs of George’s devotion to yoga and meditation filled his home. Incense sweetened the air. A small altar sat on the mantle of the fireplace. Pictures of favorite teachers and paintings of deities from India’s scriptures decorated the walls: Lakshmi, the Goddess of Fortune; elephant-headed Ganesh; Krishna playing with his friends in the cowherd village of Vrindavan. George found Indian theology exciting and sensual, filled with meditative music, tasty food, fabulous stories of eternal worlds, and all the satisfactions a newcomer to the spiritual journey could ever hope to find.

Nonetheless, working only for his own salvation did not appeal to George. He was more a doer than a talker, and he looked for opportunities to put his convictions to work. Producing records with spiritual messages provided an ideal way for him to make use of both his musical skills and his influence with the record industry. In 1970, he released “My Sweet Lord,” inspired by the Edwin Hawkins Singers’ “Oh Happy Day,” a

gospel classic that featured a chorus repeating the song's title over and over. George wrote a choral line using the word "Hallelujah" as the refrain, and then switched mid-way to the phrase "Hare Krishna." At the end of the song, he included an entire prayer in honor of those teachers who bring wisdom into the world:

*gurur brahma, gurur vishnu, gurur deva maheshwara
gurur sakshat, parabrahma, tasmai shri gurave namah.*

"I offer homage to my guru," the prayer says, "who is as great as the creator Brahma, the maintainer Vishnu, the destroyer Shiva, and who is the very energy of God." Devotees and scholars familiar with ancient mantras were stunned to hear one chanted to a Ringo drumbeat.

Mantras with a gospel rhythm proved to be an inspired combination. "My Sweet Lord" skyrocketed to number one on both the UK and US charts and stayed there for months. As a result, letters addressed to George Harrison poured into the London temple from all parts of the world. It seemed a lot of people had been waiting for someone to validate their own search for God, and from the day "My Sweet Lord" was released thank you letters started coming and never stopped.

"I still get letters from people," he said in the 1980s, "so I know by the Lord's grace I am a small part in the cosmic play."

Another opportunity to put his spiritual energies to work came along in 1971. East Pakistan had recently declared independence from West Pakistan and renamed itself Bangladesh. War between the two states broke out and hundreds of thousands of civilians lay dead. Millions more were fleeing into India, where lack of food and facilities had transformed refugee camps into infectious open-air graveyards. Among the refugees were members of Ravi Shankar's family.

"Something should be done," George told Ravi. The result, which took place at Madison Square Garden in August 1971, was history's first rock charity concert and one of the greatest music spectacles of all time. The Concert for Bangla Desh featured Eric Clapton, Billy Preston, Ringo Starr, other pop notables, and most astonishingly Bob Dylan, who had not played a public performance in more than two years. As the second show came to an end, the audience yelled and screamed and begged for more. The musicians crowded around center stage for final bows. Cheers washed up in waves from

the audience, and even Dylan was swept up in the euphoria. Backstage, he picked George up and squeezed him.

“God,” Dylan said, “if only we’d done *three* shows.” George beamed like a schoolboy. For him, this was even better than the Ed Sullivan Show in 1964.

Eventually, the album and movie of the concert grossed several million dollars for the people of Bangladesh. The concert also demonstrated George’s conviction that spirituality should make a tangible difference in the world. How could people call themselves spiritual if they just stood by while others killed each other? Where was the enlightenment in that?

Still, he harbored no illusions about a pop concert bringing peace to a war-torn nation. It was sufficient to “do his bit,” knowing that over time little drops of water could wear away a mountain.

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George’s spiritual journey was not an easy one. His wife Patty left him, in large measure because his commitment to God grew stronger than his commitment to their partnership. Fans derided him for taking his faith onstage and exhorting them to “Chant Krishna! Jesus! Buddha!” when it was rock’n’roll they wanted. The press was occasionally cruel in its judgment of his post Beatles music. And for a while, some bad habits from his rocker days—in particular alcohol and drugs—returned to haunt him.

Salvation from the material world can come in many forms. For George, struggling with depression after the Dark Horse debacle, it came in the form of Olivia Arias, a fellow yoga practitioner who nursed him back to health and later became his loving wife. It came in the form of their son, Dhani, a gentle, talented boy who in time became George’s closest friend.

On visits to Los Angeles, George spent time at the Self-Realization Fellowship estate in Encinitas, overlooking the Pacific Ocean and only three miles from Ravi Shankar’s home. Ravi had met SRF founder Yogananda in the 1930s and had given his first U.S. concert at the Encinitas retreat in 1957. The organization strictly honored its members’ privacy, a privilege George appreciated after the notoriety of his affiliation

with Krishna devotees. The quiet ambience of the Encinitas estate and the organization's focus on achieving heightened awareness through Kriya-Yoga had a calming effect.

In later years, George retreated from his pop celebrity into the life of a humble gardener. He took great pleasure in tilling the earth, in planting jasmine bushes, in freeing a magnolia tree from wild brambles, and bringing his neglected Friar Park grounds back to a state of beauty. In India, he had seen people worshiping nature. The Gita calls the earth God's "Universal Form." Trees are the hairs on that divine form, mountains and hills are its bones, clouds form the hair, and rivers are the blood flowing through its veins. Gardening from that vantage point takes on holy dimensions, a caressing of God's body.

Gardening, caring for his family, and meditating became the focus of his life. "The best thing anyone can give to humanity is God consciousness," he told Mukunda Goswami, a devotee friend, in 1986. "But first you have to concentrate on your own spiritual advancement. So in a sense, we have to become selfish to become selfless."

In April 1996, he flew to Madras, South India to record an album of traditional Indian songs and mantras with Ravi Shankar. Taking advantage of his proximity to Vrindavan, he met up with devotee friends and they set out for the village where Krishna appeared five thousand years ago. In the sixteenth century, followers of the saint Chaitanya Mahaprabhu had developed the holy town and restored its many places of pilgrimage to rustic dignity. By the time of George's visit, the population had reached 35,000 full-time residents, and more than 5,000 temples filled the village's twenty square miles. Some of these temples were five stories tall and featured ornate architecture. Others were barely larger than a hole in the wall, with only enough room for one attendant and a small deity.

On the second day of their pilgrimage, George and his friends walked by a group of singers seated roadside. The lead singer stretched his hand toward heaven. The Gopis—cowherd women—hear Krishna's flute, he sang in Braj, the local language, and run to him in the dead of night. Krishna multiplies himself into an equal number of Gopis so that each Gopi may be happy believing she alone dances with her beloved. In that moment of pleasure, the Gopis become proud and Krishna disappears from their sight and the cowherd women go mad from separation.

George did not speak Braj, but he understood the gist of what the man was singing—sorrow and yearning were universal. Yet there was nothing irreconcilable about the man’s sadness, for in the next moment the group broke out into rapid drums and joyous chorus. People stood and danced, hands above their heads, then swooped down executing slow turns, then rose up again with a jump. No one led: the waxing and waning rhythms and spontaneous dance came from intuition. There seemed to be no logical sequence to their actions. This was a display without notation or orchestration and, in that sense, not performance at all—simply hearts drifting on waves of devotion, a song that would never be repeated exactly the same way again.

George and his friends moved down the road. It was a long time before anyone spoke. They passed one kirtan then another. Temple bells mingled with drums and bells, clappers and clapping. The world seemed afloat in music. Spirit for the people of Vrindavan was not a weekly class or weekend retreat—they breathed it in at every moment and breathed it out in song.

“How magnificent this feeling is,” George told his friends.

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The album of traditional songs and mantras was released in 1997. George considered *Chants Of India* one of his most important works, as it allowed listeners to “turn off your mind, relax, and float downstream, and listen to something that has its roots in the transcendental...beyond intellect. If you let yourself be free...it can have a positive effect.”

George never stopped making music or trying to put a spiritual message out into the world. But these callings seemed less urgent to him in his later years than they had as a young man. He once described himself as someone who had climbed to the top of the material world, then looked over to find that there was much more on the other side. There, on the other side of the material mountain, was the call of his eternal self and his relationship with the Divine. As he approach death, with his missionary years behind him, that vision became all that mattered. “Now I understand about ninety-year-old

people who feel like teenagers,” he said less than a year before his death. “The soul in the body is there at birth and there at death. The only change is the bodily condition.”

George’s life started in music and ended in music. In Los Angeles, surrounded by family and friends and the chanting of God’s holy names, his soul left its body on November 29—only a few weeks after the tragedy of 9/11. For those of us who had been inspired by his example, it was impossible to avoid seeing these two events in macabre orbit around one another: the terrible consequences of turning away from the light, and the miracles that can come when we put the light of spirit at the center of our lives.

In August 1966, a reporter had asked George to describe his personal goal. “To do as well as I can do,” he replied, “whatever I attempt, and someday to die with a peaceful mind.” He was twenty-three years old when he set that goal for himself. He never gave it up.

“You know, I read a letter from him to his mother that he wrote when he was twenty-four,” his son Dhani said. “He was on tour or someplace when he wrote it. And it basically says, ‘I want to be self-realized. I want to find God. I’m not interested in material things, this world, fame—I’m going for the real goal. And I hope you don’t worry about me, mum.’ And he wrote that when he was twenty-four! And that was basically the philosophy that he had up until the day he died. He was just going for it right from an early age—the big goal.”

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