

“A Single Coherent Path”: The Yoga of the Bhagvat Gita

Jon Chapple

Email: jonchapple@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores the unique interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita* presented in *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*, authored by Sri Krishna Prem (Ronald Henry Nixon). The work, published in 1938, represents a complex synthesis of Indian spiritual traditions and Western esotericism. Unlike traditional Gaudiya Vaishnava interpretations, Krishna Prem's commentary treats the *Gita* not as a literal historical text but as a symbolic guide to a singular, coherent path of yoga that integrates various spiritual disciplines. His interpretation reflects a broad, non-sectarian approach, drawing upon influences from Buddhism, Hindu *Vedanta* and Theosophy, while also challenging conventional understandings of the *Gita*'s teachings on devotion, the nature of the divine, and the role of the *avatars*. This article seeks to illuminate Krishna Prem's distinctive contributions to *Gita* scholarship, analysing his background, his approach to the text, and the broader implications of his work for both historical and contemporary spiritual thought

Introduction

The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita, which has its origins in writings that are 100 years old as of 2025,¹ represents a complex and unorthodox interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, reflecting both the writer's myriad literary and religious influences and his ambivalence about the spiritual value of scripture. Though its author, Sri Krishna Prem (1898–1965), draws on the established Indian tradition of written commentaries on sacred texts (which in many cases are valued as 'original' works in their own right), his approach to the *Gita* is unique, reflecting a deeply personal spiritual odyssey that incorporated influences from Buddhism, Hindu *Vedanta*, classical yoga, analytical psychology and Western esotericism, as well as from the tradition of Krishna *bhakti* into which he'd been initiated.

First published in its current form in 1938 by John M. Watkins of London, *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita* remains an understudied treatment of that classic text on the various

yogic paths. While a handful of recent academic works, such as Georg Feuerstein's *The Bhagavad-Gītā: A New Translation* (which contains a brief mention of Krishna Prem's commentary as an "exceptional work"²) and, more substantially, Catherine A. Robinson's *Interpretations of the Bhagavad-Gītā and Images of the Hindu Tradition: The Song of the Lord*, which analyses various commentators' approaches towards writing about the Bhagavad Gita, go some way towards rectifying the situation, the current scholarship of Krishna Prem's *Gita* remains scant when compared to its outsize influence on subsequent generations of yogis. With this article, I hope to make a small contribution towards redressing this balance, first outlining the background to its composition, then analysing the text itself and Krishna Prem's relationship with the *Bhagavad Gita*, and finally reflecting on its legacy and lasting significance in the 21st century.

Becoming Sri Krishna Prem

A First World War veteran born Ronald Henry Nixon in Cheltenham, England, Krishna Prem in 1932 became the first Westerner to be initiated into the lineage of the Six Goswamis, the famous theologians of the Gaudiya Vaishnava sect, when his guru, Sri Yashoda Mai (Monica Chakravarti, 1882–1944), received *diksha* from Bal Krishna Goswami of the Radha Raman Temple in Vrindavan.³ Nixon likely first encountered the *Bhagavad Gita* at Cambridge University, where he read English and later the moral sciences (philosophy) from 1919 to 1921, and by 1923–24 – by which time he was living in India, teaching English at the University of Lucknow and involved with Theosophically influenced Buddhist organizations such as the Indian Buddhist Society and Maha Bodhi Society – it is clear that that he was at home with the text and what he considered its core import, happily discussing and quoting from its *shlokas* (along with the Vedas and Tantras), according to his friend, Dilip Kumar Roy.⁴

It was not, however, until the mid-1930s (by which time he could read the text in its original Sanskrit⁵) that Nixon (now Krishna Prem) set about producing his own analysis of the contents of the *Gita* – a text which, along with the *Bhagavata Purana* and the Goswami literature, provides the scriptural basis for the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition, and on which Hindu *acharyas* of note been producing commentaries, usually with a view to bolstering their own philosophical conclusions, for over a millennium. This he did initially in the pages of the Theosophical journal *The Aryan Path*, which published his commentaries on individual chapters under the title ‘The Song of the Higher Life’ from 1935 to 1937. These articles were then edited and compiled, with the help of Bertram Keightley (a prominent Theosophist who played an instrumental role in helping

Krishna Prem relocate to India⁶) and Moti Rani (Yashoda Mai’s daughter and Krishna Prem’s disciple), into *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*.

‘A single yoga’

Following the customary dedication to his guru, “to whom alone is due whatever truth its pages contain”,⁷ and a short preface outlining the book’s origins, Krishna Prem opens his commentary with a striking repudiation of the traditional view – held by, for example, by personalities as spiritually diverse as Paramahansa Yogananda, Sri Aurobindo and the founder of ISKCON, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami – that the *Bhagavad Gita* refers to literal, historical events. Taking the position that “we can scarcely adopt the orthodox view that it was, as we have it, spoken by the historical Krishna on the battlefield of *Kurukshetra*,”⁸ Krishna Prem interprets the text as purely allegorical, taking the famous dialogue between the warrior prince Arjuna and his charioteer, Krishna, “the inseparable friends”,⁹ as symbolic of the eternal relationship between “*Nara* and *Nārāyaṇa*, the human soul and the Divine Soul, the *jīva* and *Ātman*”¹⁰ described in the *Bhagavata Purana*. In Krishna Prem’s reading, the *Mahabharata* – the Sanskrit epic of which the *Gita* is part – is, like most great works of art, “filled with symbolism”,¹¹ from the warring Pandavas and Kauravas, who represent light and darkness respectively,¹² to Krishna’s role as charioteer, a symbol “that occurs in the *Upanishads* and also in the *Dialogues of Plato*”¹³ and which in the *Gita* represents Krishna as the “*manifested Ātman*”¹⁴ (the soul or Self). The Kaurava commanders Bhishma and Drona, meanwhile, are symbols “of blind faith and of established Law and Order and ancient Tradition”¹⁵ and the *Gita*’s narrator, Sanjaya, of conscience;¹⁶ the attributed author of the text, the sage Vyasa, is also symbolic – of “the power of inspiration, the power which

diffuses and extends downwards the higher knowledge.”¹⁷

Krishna Prem’s treatment of the text, as well as in his view that it is fundamentally a “textbook of Yoga, a guide to the treading of the Path”,¹⁸ may have been influenced by Annie Besant, later the president of the Theosophical Society, whose 1905 translation focuses on its symbolic significance (whereby “Arjuna represented the aspiring soul, Kurukṣetra the soul’s battlefield, Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s sons [the Kauravas] the soul’s enemies and Kṛṣṇa the divine word within”¹⁹) while similarly emphasising the “oneness of the spiritual path, ‘though it has many names’”²⁰ (cf. Krishna Prem’s “The Path is not the special property of Hinduism, nor indeed of any religion. It is something which is to be found, more or less deeply buried, in all religions...”²¹). He also recommended Besant’s translation to his own disciples.²² In turn, Besant likely drew her inspiration from her one-time guru, Gyanendra Nath Chakravarti, who urged readers to “take Krishna as the symbol of the immanent God, the inner Godhead.”²³ (Chakravarti, husband to Monica – Yashoda Mai – is described by Besant’s biographer, Geoffrey West, as a “mysterious Brahmin” who “for a number of years ... hovers mysteriously in the background of Theosophical history”;²⁴ he was an early student of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society, and a member of the Theosophical delegation to the Parliament of the World’s Religions in 1893.)

By arguing that the Krishna of the *Bhagavad Gita* reveals “a single, coherent Path, a [single] Yoga, which must be progressively trod”,²⁵ Krishna Prem breaks with other Gaudiya Vaishnava commentators, for whom the *Gita* is primarily a *bhakti* text which establishes the primacy of devotional service over the yogas of action/work (*karma*) and knowledge (*jnana*),²⁶ as well as the

scholarly view of the text as a “meaningful synthesis” which combines “the Upanisadic speculations about *Brahman-atman* relation, the theism of the *Bhagavata* [Krishna] cult, and the [eightfold] *Yoga* systems”.²⁷ Though he “attached great importance to [the yoga] of devotion”²⁸ (*bhakti*), Krishna Prem subsumes the three classical yogas identified by Krishna under one unified yogic path:

By Yoga is here meant not any special system called by that name, not *jñāna yoga*, nor *karma yoga*, nor *bhakti yoga*, nor the eightfold *yoga* of Patañjali, but just the Path by which man unites his finite self with Infinite Being. It is the inner Path of which all these separate yogas are so many one-sided aspects. It is not so much a synthesis of these separate teachings as that prior and undivided whole of which they represent partial formulations.²⁹

He explained elsewhere that the *Gita*, “if we free our minds from the influence of one-sided commentators, clearly sets forth ... a harmonious blending of head, heart and hands” – ie *jnana*, *bhakti* and *karma* – “in which all shall be transformed into an instrument of the Divine Lila.”³⁰

In support of this theory – that “the Yoga as originally taught by the eternal Krishna ... was a single, unitary and all-comprehensive Yoga” which was later “split up into parts” as it passed down the *parampara* (succession of gurus and disciples) – Krishna Prem cites verse two of chapter four of the *Gita*,³¹ which in Besant’s translation has Krishna telling Arjuna (‘Parantapa’):

“This yoga by great efflux of time decayed in the world, O Parantapa.”³²

In his personality and example, Krishna Prem embodied the same balance between yogic disciplines, according to his disciple, Narendranath Kaul. “Some time one felt that the *bhakta* in him was predominant, but

he maintained an exquisite balance between the two [*bhakta* and *jnani*],” Kaul explains.³³ Similarly, the anthropologist Michael D. Jackson, who visited Uttar Brindaban, the Himalayan ashram founded by Krishna Prem and Yashoda Mai at Mirtola, in modern Uttarakhand, in 1948 and 1951, remembers Krishna Prem as “a scholar and a religious devotee [*bhakta*] rolled into one”.³⁴

The *avatar* issue

In his commentary, Krishna Prem is also critical of those – including “enthusiasts for ... devotion to a personal God”³⁵ – who are more concerned with propounding the views of their own philosophical school than with “straight-forward inquiry into the real meaning of the text.”³⁶ Krishna Prem’s audience, as he sees it, are spiritual aspirants of every stripe – “the Race that never dies” – whether *bhakta* or *jnani*, Indian or European, Hindu or *mleccha*:

To anyone who has eyes to see, the Gita is based on direct knowledge of Reality, and of the Path that leads to that Reality, and it is of little moment who wrote it or to what school he was outwardly affiliated. Those who know Reality belong to a Race apart, the Race that never dies, as Hermes Trismegistus puts it, and neither they nor 'those who seek to be born into that Race concern themselves with the flummeries of sects and schools.’³⁷

Indeed, for the author of *The Yoga of Bhagavat Gita*, “Hinduism did not seem to be much of an issue,” observes Robinson. “In his view, all religions rested on the same truth...”³⁸

Krishna Prem expounds upon this idea – which resembles the Theosophical teaching that all religious traditions contain a common inner ‘great Truth’ – in the essay ‘Initiation into Yoga’ (1939), writing that “there does actually exist a Path the treading of which leads to full knowledge

of the Truth. It is a Path that has existed in all ages and in all countries, though the names by which it was known have differed widely. The Quest of the Holy Grail, the Search for the Elixir of Life or the Philosopher’s Stone, the *Devayāna* or Pathway of the Gods are all terms for the same Path, the knowledge of which has always existed...”³⁹ A striking example of Krishna Prem’s famous non-denominationalism, apparent even at this early stage of his spiritual ‘career’, ‘Initiation into Yoga’ references the ideas of a plethora of thinkers, including Shankara, the Buddha, Christ, the Western philosophers Kant, Bergson and William James, the psychologists Freud and Jung, Socrates, the Christian mystics Meister Eckhart and William Blake, and the Theosophical ‘Master’ St Germain, as well as Buddhist scriptures including the *Dhammapada* and *Dīgha Nikāya* and non-Vaishnavite Hindu texts such as the *Katha* and *Maitri Upanishads* – yet not a single Vaishnava *acharya* makes the cut.

Krishna Prem’s *Gita* also appears to reject the notion that Krishna, as the supreme person, is the ultimate form of the divine and the source of all *avatars* and incarnations – a fundamental tenet of Gaudiya Vaishnava belief. Instead, Krishna Prem describes an impersonal “One Eternal, the *Parabrahman*, Rootless Root of all” that lies beyond even the spiritual world: “Beyond all Gods, beyond all time and space, beyond all being even, flames Its dark transcendent Light.”⁴⁰ From that “unthinkable abyss”, a footnote explains incredulously, “some have tried to make a personal God!”⁴¹

Krishna Prem’s conception of Krishna, as he is said to have appeared some 5,000 years ago, as an *avatar* or enlightened human teacher comparable to the Buddha or Christ runs contrary to the mainstream Krishnaite view, which considers that “statesman, warrior, friend [and] lover” to

be *Svayam Bhagavan*, the supreme truth and source of all reality. In Gaudiya Vaishnavism, Krishna as Govinda – the adolescent, flute-playing “cowherd-Cupid”⁴² of Vrindavan – is regarded as the source of the impersonal (*Nirguna*) *Brahman* from which all else derives, whereas for followers of classical, Upanishadic (700–500 BC) Hinduism, and Adi Shankara’s later *Advaita Vedanta*, the “One True Reality (*Brahman*) is primary and original, while the many real things are derivative from *Brahman*.”⁴³ As is evident from other contemporary writings and correspondence, Krishna Prem continued to hold to his position even after his initiation into Krishnaite Vaishnavism; see, for example, his letters to Roy in the 1930s, in which he distinguishes between the ‘human’ Krishna and the eternal ‘One’ who may be referred to by the same name: “Knowledge of Him [God] alone gives immortality. Know Him through Christ, through Krishna or through Buddha, *but know Him somehow or other*.”⁴⁴ This distinction is also evident in ‘The Yoga of the Gita’, a 1935 essay which precedes the similarly named book, in which Krishna Prem differentiates between “the eternal Krishna”⁴⁵ and the Krishna who “appeared on earth in a human form and wore a yellow Dhoti” at the “end of Dwapara Yuga”⁴⁶ (3,102 BC).

Krishna Prem is even more explicit about his unorthodox nondualist leanings in *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*, rejecting what he calls the “orthodox” view – “that Vishṇu [or Krishna], conceived as a personal God, from time to time takes birth among men”⁴⁷ – in favour of a novel theory that effectively makes Krishna (along with the other *avatars*, of whom Rama, the Buddha and, for “the more liberal-minded, Christ”, are listed⁴⁸) into a Bodhisattva: a perfected man who has chosen to stay in the material

creation in order to assist others on their journey towards enlightenment.

While acknowledging that this theory is likely to “repel ... the emotions of the devotee”⁴⁹ (*bhakta*), Krishna Prem holds, in an appendix dedicated to the topic of the *avatars*, that “the real Krishna, Buddha, or Christ is not the outer form which, *like all other forms*, is illusory, but the birthless and invisible *Ātman* within, known to Buddhist tradition as the *Dharmakāya*.” He elaborates:

The best way of stating the position seems to be as follows. When after countless lives of suffering followed by the mystical seven lives of effort⁵⁰ a man has climbed the ladder and stands upon the edge of the Goal, two possibilities exist. If his past struggles have been motivated only by the wish for his personal salvation then he may, and in all probability will, merge himself within the white eternal Light and vanish for ever from the world of men. If on the other hand his efforts have been dominated by love and compassion for his fellows, instead of merging in the Light he may manifest that Light through his perfected but still existing lower vehicles of mind and body, thus bringing about a “descent” of that Light into the world of men. Thereafter “he” is no more a man as we understand the term but a mere vehicle for the manifestation of the Eternal. This is the true meaning of the *avataraṇa*, or descent.⁵¹

A Buddhish commentary?

The strong influence of Buddhist thought, and in particular the Bodhisattva doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism, on the author of *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita* has been noted by both contemporary and modern scholars. Professor Gerald T. Carney, in his 2007 chapter-by-chapter analysis of the text,⁵² observes that in chapter 17, Krishna Prem again describes, in a way reminiscent of the appendix quoted above, how a person who “has won to the Goal”, instead of

withdrawing his Light from the world and merging it in the unmanifested Brahman, [may] stay and serve the One, crucified in the countless suffering forms within the bitter Sea. Therefore the *Gita* adds that ... he who maintains his life of Sacrifice and offers up his dearly bought Salvation as a great Gift of Light to those who walk in darkness has no less attained than he who goes beyond to the other Shore.⁵³

Krishna Prem's interest in Buddhism appears to have been reignited in earnest by a 1936 trip to Burma in the company of Sri Yashoda Mai and Moti Rani, which provided the trio with much cultural stimulus and the ashram with plenty of Buddhist bric-a-brac. Yashoda Mai brought back to India a large brass sculpture of the Buddha, and Moti Rani some decorative bells, which adorned a Burmese-style *stupa*, modelled on a photograph, that she had built near her house at Uttar Brindaban. Krishna Prem for his part commemorated the trip to Burma by adopting the clothing worn by Buddhist monks of Rangoon – home of the spectacular Shwedagon Pagoda temple complex – a city in which, as his disciple and successor Sri Madhava Ashish notes, he had “found all his old enthusiasm for Buddhism returning”.⁵⁴

This renewed passion for the teachings of the Buddha is evident from contemporary correspondence with Bal Krishna Goswami, in which Krishna Prem is warned by his *param* guru against trying to syncretise Buddhist and Vaishnava beliefs,⁵⁵ as well as the rest of his writing throughout the 1930s: *Yoga of the Kathopanishad* (1940) and *Initiation into Yoga: An Introduction to the Spiritual Life* (a collection of pre-war articles published posthumously in 1976) both contain numerous references to Buddhist thought and scripture, while standalone articles such as ‘Love in Buddhism’ (originally published in *Sankirtan* and included in 1938's *The Search for Truth*) and ‘The

Kinsman of the Sun’ (published in the September–October 1939 issue of *Buddhism in England*⁵⁶) build on the earlier essays which pre-date his initiation into Vaishnavism.

Krishna Prem's enduring fascination with both Buddhism and Theosophy, both of which reject the concept of a personal creator (H.P. Blavatsky scoffed at what she called “the absurd idea of a *personal* God”⁵⁷), is incongruous in view of his then recent initiation into a tradition which holds dear the concept of a supreme person. Regarding *The Secret Doctrine*, Andrew Rawlinson, in his *The Book of Enlightened Masters: Western Teachers on Eastern Traditions*, observes: “It is surely very odd that a committed Gaudiya Vaishnava should make use of such an unorthodox source.”⁵⁸ Robinson contrasts Krishna Prem with A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami, noting that the while the latter's “association with this tradition [Gaudiya Vaishnavism] was generally orthodox, Krishna Prem's was not”,⁵⁹ Swami was a fierce critic of those who denied or minimised God's personhood and attacked, in his essay ‘Theosophy ends in Vaishnavism’, the Theosophical view of “Sree Krishna [only] in His Impersonal Aspect Brahman” rather than as “the Personality of Godhead ‘Bhagwan’”.⁶⁰

According to Madhava Ashish, Krishna Prem even wore his new Buddhist garb (which comprised “a sort of vest which, according to the monastic rule, is supposed to be made of a patchwork of bits of waste cloth, but is actually whole cloth with seams put in by sewing machine [to] make it look as if patched”⁶¹) to Vrindavan – the holiest city of Chaitanya Vaishnavism, considered the external manifestation of the ‘hidden’ (*gupta*) spiritual Vrindavan described in scripture – where he offended many of the *Goswamis* with his tactlessness.⁶²

The extent to which *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita* diverges from what would be normally be expected of a Vaishnava commentary is illustrated by a contemporary review of the book in *The Bombay Chronicle*. While the author praises Krishna Prem, an “earnest European lover of Eastern culture and student of Eastern lore”, for “expound[ing] the message of the Gita in language which breathes earnestness and eloquence”,⁶³ they are unable to detect allegiance to any philosophical school; by contrast, a translation by Swami Bhakti Hridaya Bon of the Gaudiya Math is clearly identified as “an exposition of the Gita from the standpoint of the Bhakti school founded by the great Bengali Vaishnavite saint of the fifteenth century, Sri Krishna Chaitanya”.⁶⁴ Krishna Prem’s commentary, with its relativisation of the path of *bhakti*, might instead be compared to Buddhist thought, which holds that “pure *bhakti* without knowledge (*dharma*) and work (*karma*) will simply bring attachment which will not bring joy and salvation but will bring pain at separation”, as well as the Vaishnavism of the state of Assam, which “prescribes ... three *vastus* (jewels) together: *Guru* (*bhakti*), *Nam* (knowledge) and *bhakat* (*karma*)”.⁶⁵

For the French Theosophist Gabriel Monod-Herzen – a sometime visitor to Uttar Brindaban – *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*’s real unorthodoxy lay in Krishna Prem’s idiosyncratic scholarship. “[I]ts literary form, its style, its flashes of English humour salted with good-natured irreverence for academic scholarship – these traits place the author in the best tradition of writers from across the [English] Channel,” he says.⁶⁶

Carney, meanwhile, detects that Krishna Prem’s treatment of the *Bhagavad Gita* was shaped both by his own experience of the Great War and the spectre of another war in Europe. He writes:

While he makes no explicit references to his own experience in war, the compassion directed toward suffering humanity by the disciple who serves the “All in all” would be a response to the varied sufferings of modern society. He draws extensively from the Upanishads, Plato and Plotinus, the Hermetic literature and Theosophical works, and the teachings of the Buddha from both Theravada and Mahayana; and also from Christian scripture, the British Romantics, Jung’s studies of Chinese classics, and modern psychology.

On every level, Krishna Prem’s commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* offers his personal teaching of a practical devotional path to Krishna against the tragic background of modern life. Written by one who fled the wasteland of post-World War I Europe to an audience facing the terrors of the Second World War, this text reprises the battlefield scene of Kurukshetra and Krishna’s teaching there against the background of a world of suffering. Led by the *buddhi*, the enlightened mind, beyond the self to a vision of Krishna as the All in each and all, the disciple joins with Krishna in the selfless battle on behalf of his suffering brothers and sisters.⁶⁷

A New Age

Along with *The Yoga of the Kathopanishad*, *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita* served as an effective, if unintentional, recruiting tool for Uttar Brindaban. The Indian historian Shripad Rama Sharma writes that his “pilgrimage” to Almora in the 1950s was inspired by *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*, “which reinforced the lure of the Himalayas”,⁶⁸ while Karan Singh, who would go on to accept *diksha* from Madhava Ashish, read *The Yoga of the Kathopanishad*, *Initiation into Yoga* and the “luminous commentary” of *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita* before his first visit to the ashram.⁶⁹ “What was particularly

impressive about his writings was the banner in which he drew on the Western mystical tradition—Plotinus, Hermes Trismegistus, Meister Eckhart [*sic*—to show that the spiritual quest was a universal one and not confined to any particular religious tradition,” Singh recalls.⁷⁰ Frank Baines, a British ex-serviceman who joined the ashram in 1946, developed an interest in Krishna Prem and Uttar Brindaban after buying *The Yoga of the Kathopanishad* from a bookstall in Lucknow; the book, he explains, “was full of tantalising glimpses and seductive insights, some thwarting and some titillating, about spiritual life. It contained some really fascinating comparisons between the ancient Greek, Christian and Hindu traditions. It became virtually my *vade mecum* and bible.”⁷¹ Baines later also read *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*.⁷²

The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita also influenced a younger generation of spiritual seekers. The American *kirtan* singer Krishna Das (Jeffrey Kagel) recalls that his godbrother, the hippie-era “spiritual celebrity”⁷³ Ram Dass (Richard Alpert) – a former Harvard psychology professor who had studied the religious use of psychedelics with Timothy Leary before becoming a disciple of the Indian guru Neem Karoli Baba (c. 1900–1973) – “read that out every day, out loud, [when] we were up in the mountains on a long retreat in the winter of ’68–69, or ’69–70 maybe. And every day we’d read out from that book. It was life changing.”⁷⁴ Alpert also quotes from chapter two (“The Soul flees just at the very moment when we seem to hold its gleaming splendour in our hands and all we are left with is one more dead butterfly to add to our mouldering collection”) in his 1971 countercultural bible *Be Here Now*,⁷⁵ and the commentary is said to have been a favourite among the “Neem Karoli *satsang*”⁷⁶ (community of

disciples), which also includes the American-born yogis Bhagavan Das (Kermit Michael Riggs) and Ram Rani (Yvette Rosser) and the *kirtan* performer Jai (Douglas) Uttal. (Kagel, a *Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita* collector, revealed in 2022 that he owns “about eight” hardcover copies of the book, including a first edition.⁷⁷)

The circle of young Westerners clustered around Neem Karoli (who called him ‘Maharaj-ji’), and especially Ram Dass, were later recognised as pioneers of the so-called New Age, and the Mirtola teaching – with its “hotchpotch of Vaishnavism, Advaita, Buddhism, Sufi mysticism, Theosophy, Gurdjieffianism [and] ‘this dream business’”⁷⁸ – particularly in the years following the passing of Yashoda Mai, may also be considered an proto-example of the kind of eclectic, syncretistic thinking, “distilled from ingredients collected from regions far and wide”⁷⁹ and influenced by the hippie counterculture, that later flowered into the New Age movement in the West.

Leary, another herald of the New Age drawn in by Krishna Prem’s writing,⁸⁰ visited Uttar Brindaban in January–February 1965⁸¹ in the company of his then wife, model Nena (Nanette), and fellow psychologist and psychonaut Ralph Metzner. Though rarely referenced after the fact by Krishna Prem, Leary apparently attached great significance to the time he spent with the author of *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*, finding room for the story of his meeting with Krishna Prem – the “wisest man in India” – in four of his books (*Jail Notes*, *Starseed*, his autobiography *Flashbacks*, and the collection *The Delicious Grace of Moving One’s Hand*) and finding inspiration in the guru’s advice to continue his own spiritual journey in the West.

A historical Krishna?

Despite his rejection of a literalist reading of the *Gita*, it is clear that Krishna Prem did believe Krishna was a historical figure. Writing to Roy in 1936, he explained that “although all the accounts we have, even the *Mahabharata* account, are shot through with symbolism and the *Bhagavat*[a] Krishna is symbolic from beginning to end”,⁸² Krishna did descend to Earth in Braj some 7,000 years ago, while another letter to his disciple Narendra Nath Kaul asks, rhetorically: “Do you think that He isn’t pulling all the strings of the world just as efficiently as He did long ago at the time of Mahabharata?”⁸³ ‘The Birth of Sri Krishna’, from *The Search for Truth*, announces that is “now more than five thousand years since the Supreme Lord manifested Himself with all His powers in the prison of Kansa in Muttra [Mathura].”⁸⁴

At the time of his writing *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*, as the scholar of Vaishnavism David Haberman notes, the way in which Krishna Prem presented Hindu philosophy depended on his intended audience. In his books, Krishna Prem “tends to present Hinduism either in terms of a Vedantic discourse or in a symbolic fashion” suitable for Westerners more “attracted to an intellectualized form of Vedantic Hinduism” than the “culturally specific mythology and the worship and service of concrete images” central to Krishna *bhakti*.⁸⁵ This is confirmed by the same letter to Roy, in which Krishna Prem reveals he does “not think it at all feasible to present Krishna’s life to modern educated people otherwise than as a symbol”;⁸⁶ by contrast, in private he would write lovingly of the “curves of [Krishna’s] body, [which] are worth more than all the Infinites and Eternals and Absolutes. All the worlds are within the pores of His skin, and yet there He remains, no shadowy cosmic figure, but the eternal cowherd, in yellow *dhoti*, peacock feathers, maddening the soul with the melody from a bamboo flute.”⁸⁷

Ultimately, though, for Krishna Prem the search for the historical Krishna is an unimportant one: Whether or not the butter-eating infant in Gokul, the amorous youth in Vrindavan, the friendly charioteer at Kurukshetra, or the divine protector in Dwarka described in scripture reflect a historical personage (or personages) should be of little interest to the sincere seeker. This is because, as he explains to Roy, “What Krishna as a man may have done thousands of years ago is not what will give us ‘the thing’: what He is doing in our hearts *now* is what we must know and that will not be found by concentrating entirely on His human aspect ages ago. If He wasn’t in our hearts *now* the *lilas* of ages ago would be quite insignificant.”⁸⁸ He attributes this focus on a historical figure at the expense of the inner message as being the reason why Christianity is “tottering so – at least among the educated”: “because the Christians have pinned their faith on historical events and a historical Person. Modern knowledge has shown that we cannot be certain of those events or that Person ... and therefore the bottom is falling out of the whole thing.”⁸⁹

Nor is the ‘thing’, called the “*mṛtasañjīvanī vidyā*” (the life giving knowledge)” in the ‘The Birth of Sri Krishna’,⁹⁰ to be found in books, Krishna Prem’s or otherwise. In his review of Sri Aurobindo’s *The Riddle of the World*, originally published in *The Aryan Path* in 1934, Krishna Prem explains that the method by which one realises the nature of God and the soul may only be learnt from a qualified teacher, and cautions against those who would set out on the ‘path’ alone, armed only with book learning:

It is characteristic of this age of popular education that many people suppose that anything can be learnt by a patient study of books. But there are some things which can never be learnt in this manner and *yoga* (in any form) is one of them. *Yoga* is the art of

the soul and it can never be learnt without the living contact with a master. All attempts to practise *yoga* without a *guru*, and a real *guru* at that, end either in disappointed failure, trivial psychism, ill-health or madness. The present writer has seen cases of all of the above occurring to uninstructed or ill-instructed would-be *yogis*.⁹¹

According to Madhava Ashish, this principle (that the mere studying of sacred texts, even great ones such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, is not enough to lead one to the ‘goal’) was illustrated by an incident in 1945 that both challenged his guru’s belief in the Vaishnava doctrine, drawn from the *Gita*, that one’s consciousness at the time of death determines the destination of the soul and helped him along to the “final stage” on his spiritual journey:

[I]t was after the monsoon in [1945] that he fell ill in Brindaban and found his famous mind to be uncontrollable on account of the fever. And then he reasoned to himself: Since most people are ill when they die, and if illness disturbed the mind in this manner, what could be made of the teaching that the person’s state of mind at death determines his after-death experience? If this were true, then the outlook for himself would be bad.

It was only then that he fully understood that what has to be found is totally beyond the thinking mind. Thus he set foot upon the final stage of the inner path.⁹²

Enduring influence

Sri Madhava Ashish, who took over as head of the Mirtola ashram on Krishna Prem’s death in November 1965, is of the opinion that the two *Yoga* books came from the pen of an inspired, but not yet realised, man. “Many people will feel that a disciple should not dare to question his Guru’s status in this fashion. My personal feeling is that it damages our perceptions of the Spirit if we portray a man as a mahatma before he is

one,” he explains. “I had the inestimable privilege of living with Krishna Prem for nineteen years [from 1946 to 1965] while he changed from being an inspired, dedicated and very remarkable man to something approaching the complete or ‘Perfected’ man.”⁹³

Despite this, and given his well-known hostility to being written about⁹⁴ and ambivalence about the value of the written word (it being “quite impossible for us to understand in any real sense the meaning of what is written in any book” – a collection of “black marks on white paper” whose meaning “depends on the ideas in our own minds” – “no matter who the author may have been”⁹⁵), it is books such as *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita* which represent perhaps his greatest legacy today and continue to attract modern spiritual seekers to the personality behind them.

“He never wanted his letters to be published. He didn’t want to be remembered. How could Gopalda, who did away with his personal will to serve the will of Thakur, have a will of his own in this matter?” asks a latter-day Mirtola convert, Promila Chitkara, who believes that his “Thakur’s will prevailed through Dilip Roy[’s 1966 book *Yogi Sri Krishnaprem*]. Devotees of Krishna whose hands Gopalda’s letters reached began looking for his books.”⁹⁶ Similarly, the author of the present article ‘discovered’ Sri Krishna Prem indirectly through Roy’s writing. Chitkara observes:

After half a century of his passing away, seekers from different geographical locations, of different backgrounds, and yet a common goal are coming to Mirtola to ‘experience’ the Uttar Brindaban that Gopalda and Ma created, to find more about him, to get more of his teachings, his life.⁹⁷

She senses a divine hand in the recent flurry of interest in his life and philosophy, which led to the publication, in 2019, of a detailed

account of Krishna Prem's 1948 visit to Ramana Maharshi's Sri Ramana Ashram and a new ebook edition of *Yogi Sri Krishnaprem*,⁹⁸ as well as the inauguration of a permanent memorial to 'Professor Nixon' at Lucknow University around the 55th anniversary of his death, in November 2020. (Speaking about the memorial, Ranu Uniyal, the university's current head of English, said: "We are happy and proud that the department of English was blessed by his presence, and it was in Lucknow that he found his spiritual guide and mentor, who opened the path of self-realisation for him through *bhakti* and selfless service to God."⁹⁹) In 2023, the Theosophical Publishing House in Adyar announced new editions of *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita* and *The Yoga of the Kathopanishad*.

In conclusion, *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita* by Sri Krishna Prem offers a distinctive and unorthodox interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita* that challenges traditional views within the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition. By emphasising a symbolic and allegorical reading of the text, Krishna Prem synthesises elements from diverse spiritual traditions, presenting the *Gita* as a comprehensive guide to a singular path of yoga. His approach, which integrates insights from Hinduism, Buddhism, and Western esoteric thought, reflects a broad, inclusive vision of spirituality that transcends sectarian boundaries. The work has had a significant impact on subsequent generations of spiritual aspirants and continues to offer valuable insights into the universal nature of the spiritual journey.

References

- ¹ The first of the articles that comprise the majority of *The Yoga of Bhagavat Gita* was published as 'The Song of the Higher Life: I. The General Setting' in *The Aryan Path* of September 1935 (vol. 6, no 9, pp534–539).
- ² Georg Feuerstein with Brenda Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā: A New Translation*, Boston, Shambhala, 2011, p72.
- ³ As described in my forthcoming book, the first full-length biography of Krishna Prem (provisionally titled *Sri Krishna Prem: A Wing and a Prayer*), which will be published by Blazing Sapphire Press in the second half of 2024.
- ⁴ Roy, *Yogi Sri Krishnaprem*, p8.
- ⁵ Sri Madhava Ashish, 'Sri Sri Krishnaprem Vairagi', in Jyotsna Singh (ed.), *Letters from Mirtola (Written by Sri Krishnaprem and Sri Madhava Ashish to Karan Singh)*, Mumbai, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 2004, p89.
- ⁶ See Chapple, *Sri Krishna Prem*, chapter 3 ('Kingsman').
- ⁷ Sri Krishna Prem, *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*, London, John M. Watkins, 1938, pXIII
- ⁸ Krishna Prem, *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*, pXIII.
- ⁹ Krishna Prem, *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*, pXXII.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ Krishna Prem, *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*, pXX.
- ¹² Krishna Prem, *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*, pXXII.
- ¹³ Krishna Prem, *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*, pXXIII.
- ¹⁴ Krishna Prem, *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*, pXXIV.
- ¹⁵ Krishna Prem, *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*, ppXXVIII–XXIX.
- ¹⁶ Krishna Prem, *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*, pXXIX.
- ¹⁷ Krishna Prem, *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*, p219.
- ¹⁸ Krishna Prem, *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*, pXIV
- ¹⁹ Catherine A. Robinson, *Interpretations of the Bhagavad-Gītā and Images of the Hindu*

Tradition: The Song of the Lord, paperback edn, Abingdon, Routledge, 2013, p108.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Krishna Prem, *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*, pXV.

²² Narendra Nath Kaul, *Writings of Sri Krishna Prem: An Introduction*, Bombay, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1980, pX.

²³ Georges Van Vrekhem, *The Mother: The Story of Her Life*, Site of Sri Aurobindo's & Mother's Yoga, 2014, part 2, ch. 4, https://www.aurobindo.ru/workings/other/van_vrekhem-mother.htm (accessed 30 November 2022).

²⁴ Geoffrey West, *The Life of Annie Besant*, new edition, London, Gerald Howe, 1933, p183.

²⁵ Gerald T. Carney, 'Sri Krishna Prem and the Gita's Yoga', *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, vol. 16, no 1, 2007, p91.

²⁶ The influential Chaitanyaite commentators Krishnadas Kaviraj (c. 1520–c. 1616) and Vishvanath Chakravarti (c. 1638–c. 1708) both consider "work and knowledge to be effective at all only when mixed with some devotion." In the Gaudiya tradition, "[d]evotion receives the central position in the *Gītā* because it is the most secret, the most respected (since it gives vitality to the other two disciplines), and because it is the most rare." See Joseph T. O'Connell, 'Caitanya's Followers and the *Bhagavad-gītā*: A Study in Bhakti and the Secular', in Bradwell L. Smith (ed), *Hinduism: New Essays in the History of Religions*, photomechanical reprint, Leiden, Brill, 1982, p43.

²⁷ Dr Rajen Barua, 'Buddhism and Bhakti', *Boloji*, Houston, author, 2018, <https://www.boloji.com/articles/50353/buddhism-and-bhakti> (accessed 6 May 2023).

²⁸ Robinson, *Interpretations of the Bhagavad-Gītā and Images of the Hindu Tradition*, p128.

²⁹ Krishna Prem, *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*, pXIV.

³⁰ Sri Krishna Prem, 'Letters from Sri Aurobindo' (review of *Lights on Yoga*), *The Aryan Path*, vol. 6, 1935, p521.

³¹ Shri Krishna Prem Bhikhari, 'The Yoga of the Gita', *Kalyana-Kalpataru or The Bliss (Gita Number)*, vol. 2, no 1, 1935, sec. 'The Yoga of the Gita', para. 11, <https://gitaseva.org/kalyanskalpataru/gita-number-year-2-part-1> (accessed 13 August 2023).

³² Annie Besant and Bhagavân Dâs, *The Bhagavad-Gītâ*, London, Theosophical Publishing Society, 1905, p77.

³³ Kaul, *Writings of Sri Krishna Prem*, pV.

³⁴ Michael Jackson, *Between One and Another*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2012, p42.

³⁵ Krishna Prem, *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*, pXIII.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Krishna Prem, *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*, pXIV.

³⁸ Robinson, *Interpretations of the Bhagavad-Gītā and Images of the Hindu Tradition*, p127.

³⁹ Krishna Prem, *Initiation into Yoga*, p40.

⁴⁰ Krishna Prem, *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*, p100.

⁴¹ Krishna Prem, *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*, p101.

⁴² Dr GP Bhatt (ed.), *The Padma-Purāṇa*, part VI, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 2013, p1,996.

⁴³ Loyal Rue, *Religion is Not About God: How Spiritual Traditions Nurture Our Biological Nature and What to Expect When They Fail*, Piscataway, Rutgers University Press, 2005, p256.

⁴⁴ Roy, *Yogi Sri Krishnaprem*, p179.

⁴⁵ Shri Krishna Prem Bhikhari, 'The Yoga of the Gita', *Kalyana-Kalpataru or The Bliss (Gita Number)*, vol. 2, no 1, 1935, sec. 'The Yoga of the Gita', para. 11, <https://gitaseva.org/kalyanskalpataru/gita-number-year-2-part-1> (accessed 13 August 2023).

⁴⁶ Krishna Prem, 'The Yoga of the Gita', para. 16.

⁴⁷ Krishna Prem, *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*, p199.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Krishna Prem, *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*, pp199–200.

- ⁵⁰ Probably a reference to the Buddhist idea that the one who has achieved the first stage of enlightenment, known as a *sotapanna* ("stream-winner"), will attain *Nirvana* after no more than seven rebirths.
- ⁵¹ Krishna Prem, *The Yoga of the Bhagavat Gita*, p200.
- ⁵² Gerald T. Carney, 'Sri Krishna Prem and the *Gita*'s Yoga', *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, vol. 16, no 1, 2007, pp91–119.
- ⁵³ Carney, 'Sri Krishna Prem and the *Gita*'s Yoga', pp114–115.
- ⁵⁴ Sri Madhava Ashish, *Where'er Love's Camels Lead: Sri Krishna Prem Remembered* (unpublished), Mirtola, Sri Dev Ashish, 2015, p123.
- ⁵⁵ Patlolla Niroop, email to the author, 9 July 2021.
- ⁵⁶ Sri Krishna Prem, 'The Kinsman of the Sun', *Buddhism in England*, vol. 13, 1939, p72.
- ⁵⁷ AT Barker (ed.), *The Letters of HP Blavatsky to AP Sinnett and Other Miscellaneous Letters*, London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1925, p80.
- ⁵⁸ Rawlinson, *The Book of Enlightened Masters*, p381.
- ⁵⁹ Robinson, *Interpretations of the Bhagavad-Gītā and Images of the Hindu Tradition*, p127.
- ⁶⁰ A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami, 'Theosophy Concluded', *Back to Godhead*, vol. 1, no 9, 1952, <https://www.backtogodhead.in/theosophy-concluded-2> (accessed 24 April 2023).
- ⁶¹ Madhava Ashish, *Where'er Love's Camels Lead*, p123.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*
- ⁶³ 'The Riddle of the Gita', *The Bombay Chronicle*, 30 October 1938, p44.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁵ Dr Rajen Barua, 'Buddhism and Bhakti', *Boloji*, Houston, author, 2018, <https://www.boloji.com/articles/50353/buddhism-and-bhakti> (accessed 6 May 2023).
- ⁶⁶ Gabriel Monod-Herzen, Appendix C: 'On Sri Krishnaprem', in Dilip Kumar Roy, *Yogi Sri Krishnaprem*, 3rd edn, Bombay, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1992, p310.
- ⁶⁷ Carney, 'Sri Krishna Prem and the *Gita*'s Yoga', p118.
- ⁶⁸ S.R. Sharma, *Wisdom Beyond Reason*, Agra, Lakshmi Narain Agarwal, 1957, p27.
- ⁶⁹ Raghav Verma (ed.), *Essays and Reflections by Karan Singh*, ebook edn, Noida, HarperCollins, 2019, part 4 ('Essays'), ch. 2, para. 20.
- ⁷⁰ Karan Singh, *Autobiography*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1995, p206.
- ⁷¹ Brian Mooney, *Frank Baines: A Life Beyond the Sea*, London, Thorogood Publishing, 2011, p155.
- ⁷² Mooney, *Frank Baines*, p158.
- ⁷³ Gary Scott Smith, 'Das, Bhagavan (1945 –)', in Gary Scott Smith (ed), *American Religious History: Belief and Society through Time*, Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO, 2020, p143.
- ⁷⁴ 'Call and Response special edition: Conversations with KD July 18 2020', *Call and Response with Krishna Das* [podcast], Q&A with Krishna Das, New York, Kirtan Wallah Foundation, 18 July 2020, <https://www.krishnadas.com/podcasts/call-response/call-and-response-special-edition-conversations-with-kd-july-18-2020> (accessed 4 October 2022).
- ⁷⁵ Ram Dass, *Be Here Now*, Anselmo, Hanuman Foundation, 1978, p498.
- ⁷⁶ Sharon Gannon and David Life, *Jivamukti Yoga: Practices for Liberating Body and Soul*, New York, Ballantine Books, 2002, p280.
- ⁷⁷ *Krishna Das Workshop and Chanting – Recorded live at Garrison Institute, NY April 2022* [online video], presenter Krishna Das, New York, Krishna Das Music, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LtIZHQxYdLg> (accessed 17 October 2023).
- ⁷⁸ Ginsbury and Pandey, 'Introduction', pXII.
- ⁷⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁰ He did, however, prefer *The Yoga of the Kathopanishad*, writing in his *Jail Notes*, of that "thin deep book", which he felt to be a labour of love when compared to the *Bhagavad Gita*, a commentary on which "every student of the path must write".
- ⁸¹ Leary's *Flashbacks* places the visit in March; this conflicts with a letter from Krishna Prem to Jagdish Shah, dated 29 January 1965, in which the former writes about his "latest visitors":

“three Americans [*sic*] (two professors of Harvard) interested very seriously in the use of new drugs (L.S.D.) for inducing ecstatic states”.

⁸² Dilip Kumar Roy, *Yogi Sri Krishnaprem*, 3rd edn, Bombay, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1992, p178.

⁸³ Kaul, *Writings of Sri Krishna Prem*, p104.

⁸⁴ Sri Krishna Prem, *The Search for Truth*, Calcutta, Ganesh Chandra Bose, 1938, p14.

⁸⁵ David L. Haberman, ‘A Cross-cultural Adventure: The Transformation of Ronald Nixon’, *Religion*, vol. 23, no 3, 1993, p223.

⁸⁶ Roy, *Yogi Sri Krishnaprem*, p178.

⁸⁷ Roy, *Yogi Sri Krishnaprem*, p166.

⁸⁸ Roy, *Yogi Sri Krishnaprem*, p178.

⁸⁹ Roy, *Yogi Sri Krishnaprem*, p179..

⁹⁰ Krishna Prem, *The Search for Truth*, p14.

⁹¹ Sri Krishna Prem, ‘A Modern Yoga’ (review of *The Riddle of the World*), in Dilip Kumar Roy, *Yogi Sri Krishnaprem*, 3rd edn, Bombay, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1992, p300.

⁹² Sri Madhava Ashish, *Where ’er Love’s Camels Lead: Sri Krishna Prem Remembered* (unpublished), Mirtola, Sri Dev Ashish, 2015, p146.

⁹³ Madhava Ashish, *Where ’er Love’s Camels Lead*, pp145–146.

⁹⁴ See, for example, Roy, *Yogi Sri Krishnaprem*, p13: “O Dilip, why did you write about me and, if at all, why so much? ... I begged you not to write about us but you just print my request and leave it at that! You are incorrigible and if you were anyone else I should hate you, but I can’t!”

⁹⁵ Krishna Prem, *Initiation into Yoga: An Introduction to the Spiritual Life*, p32.

⁹⁶ Promila Chitkara, instant message to the author, 9 March 2023.

⁹⁷ Chitkara, instant message to the author, 9 March 2023.

⁹⁸ Dilip Kumar Roy, *Yogi Sri Krishnaprem*, 1st ebook edn, Mumbai, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 2019, p6.

⁹⁹ Ronald Henry Nixon (later known as Swami Krishna Prem) – *the Unsung Hero of Department of English, LU* [online video], presenter Ranu Uniyal, Lucknow, University of Lucknow, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vigOj9wspiM> (accessed 21 March 2023).