

The Meeting of

Oh, East is East and West is West
and now the twain shall meet.

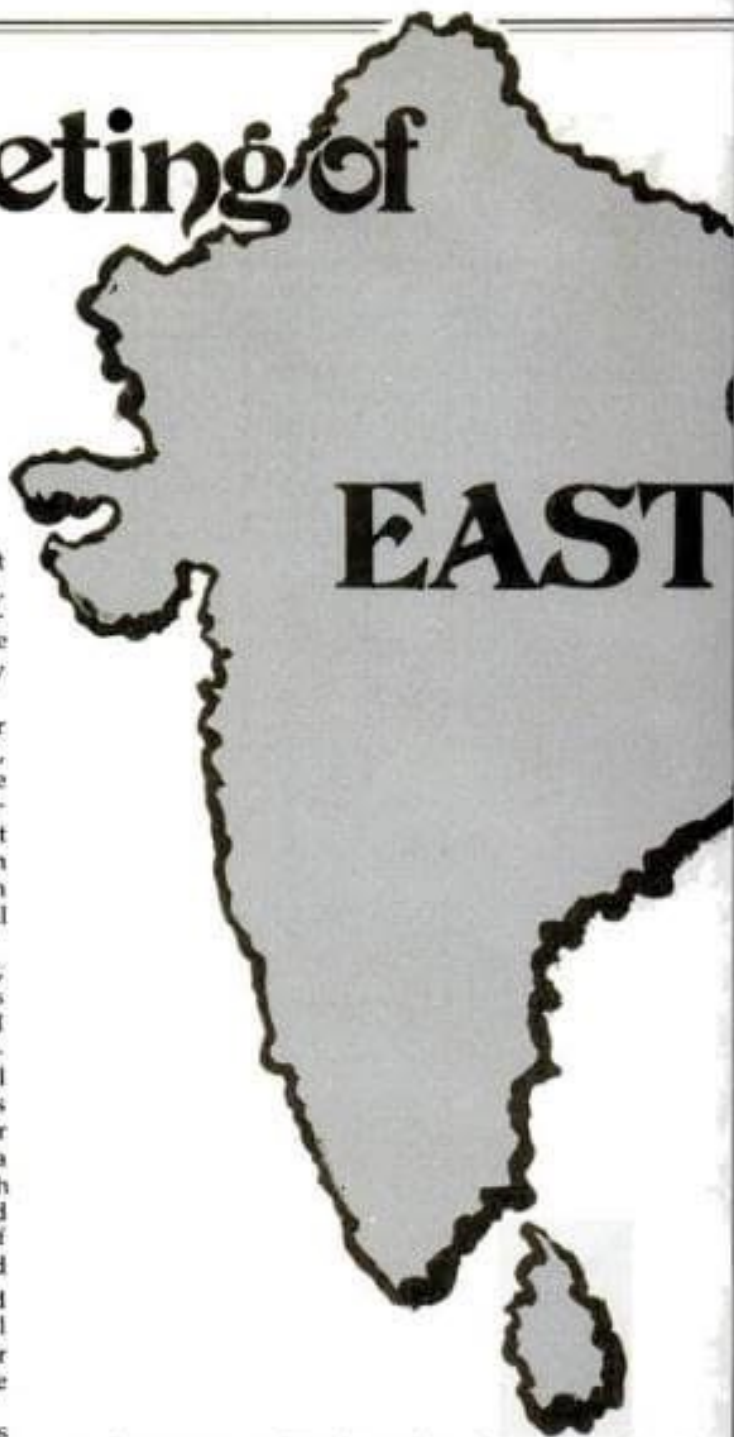
By STEVEN PAULL

It was in 1893 that Swami Vivekananda, the first Indian yogi to popularize Hinduism in the West, arrived in Chicago to teach the basic tenets of Vedanta philosophy. In the time that has elapsed since then, Indian philosophy and religion have broadly permeated Western society.

The impact of India is now being felt in various major areas of life including religion, psychology, medicine, and education. Our task has become to understand the full implications of this cross-cultural interchange, integrating what we can in a constructive and intelligent way. With a receptive attitude, keen intuition, and an analytical mind, we may learn what we need to know in order to solve the many social, political, and spiritual problems facing our Western society.

There are, I believe, two essential dangers, or traps, which Westerners fall into when looking at a culture as foreign to our own as India. First, there is what I would call the "swallow-it-whole" syndrome. This uncritical, unquestioned, total embracing of Indian cultural forms and ideas is obvious among members of various spiritual communities who have integrated into their lifestyle the entire rituals, images, and symbols of a culture quite foreign to Western consciousness, which has its own roots in the Graeco-Roman, Biblical, and Egyptian worlds. C.G. Jung was aware of the dangers of the "swallow-it-whole" syndrome. In an article entitled "Yoga and the West," written in 1936, he cautioned Westerners about over-involvement in Eastern spiritual disciplines which, he pointed out, were created under very different psychological conditions than those of the West.¹

The second danger, or trap, to which Westerners succumb is what I would call the "dissect-it-in-little-pieces" syndrome. In the West we have developed our intellectual, analytical faculties extremely well. The tendency of our minds is to dissect and compartmentalize, hoping to understand the totality by understanding the component parts. This approach, as we have discovered, works well with making cars, airplanes, freeways, and spaceships to Mars, but when looking at a holistic, unitive view of mind/body such as yoga, it's easy to miss the whole point. Yoga is a holistic system, and must be understood in its totality. The danger we are subject to falling into is picking up on two or three



yogic concepts and isolating them from the totality of yoga.

For example, take the concept of *prana*. Prana is the vital force of life, both within the individual and within the universe as a whole. Pranic energy has often been equated with the psychological concept of libido, as developed by Freud, or psychic energy, as developed by Jung.² However, when we look at prana within the context of the yogic system, a number of other concepts automatically come into focus, for example: chakras – energy centres; kundalini – the storehouse of energy located at the base of the spine; and the subtle body –



an energy layer surrounding the physical body, upon which the chakras are located. In the unified yogic system, one concept implies numerous others. To see prana simply as libido is a reductionistic and fragmentary view. It is essential to look at yoga in a holistic, organic way, not becoming isolated in specific concepts, ignoring others, and thereby failing to see the total yogic system and its manifold implications.

Thus, there exists a spectrum of possibilities between the two polarities of the "swallow-it-whole" syndrome and the "dissect-it-in-little-pieces" syndrome. In the first instance we deny our Western heritage and the reality of the Western psyche. In the second instance, we do an injustice to Indian thought, ignoring the totality of a worldview which has assumptions about the nature of consciousness and its relation to the universe, a worldview radically different from our own. In our attempts to integrate and synthesize Eastern and Western knowledge, we must continually remain aware of the two dangers and avoid them with honesty and integrity.

We are in a time of synthesis and syncretism. The process of cross-cultural interchange which began with Max Mueller, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Swami Vivekananda has gained great momentum in recent decades, and will undeniably continue to do so. Our total view of macrocosm and microcosm is being affected by various classical and contemporary Indian traditions. Now, we must be prepared to meet the challenge demanded by an era of synthesis. Accepting, under-

standing, and integrating the depth of Indian thought must not be done by denying our historical heritage in the West. Rather, as is now becoming apparent, it is through contact with the spirituality of the East that we will be able to revitalize and nourish the source of our Western spiritual traditions. In this way, we will be guided towards the psychological, spiritual, and political unification of the planet. The planetary consciousness envisioned by prophets like Sri Aurobindo and Dane Rudhyar will become a reality when we are most fully in tune with the totality of our being, both Eastern and Western. It is in the spirit of wholeness - individual and collective - that we will manifest the planetary psyche of the Aquarian Age.

References

1. C.G. Jung. "Yoga and the West" in *Psychology and Religion: West and East*. CW Vol. 11. Trans. R.F.C. Hull, pp. 529-537. New York: Pantheon Books, 1963.
2. Swami Rama, Rudolph Ballentine, and Swami Ajaya (Allan Weinstock, M.D.). *Yoga and Psychotherapy: The Evolution of Consciousness*. (Glenview, Ill.: The Himalayan Institute, 1976) p.50.

Steven Pfull, M.A., is a teacher of humanities and religion, a writer, photographer and editor. He is currently moving from Montreal, Quebec to San Francisco, where he will enter a doctoral program at the California Institute of Asian Studies.