



# All is Krishna – A Profile of Ravi Ravindra

Cynthia Overweg



*For decades, Ravi Ravindra has been a voice of compassion and hope. He has traveled the world speaking to diverse audiences about the need for a transformation of human consciousness. In spring of 2012, when Ravi was at the Krotona School of Theosophy in Ojai giving a seminar on the “Rig Veda,” he sat down for a number of interviews and talked about his life, his spiritual mission and his gratitude to those who have helped him on his inner journey. Ravi’s search led him to the teachings of G. I. Gurdjieff, J. Krishnamurti, Yoga, Zen, and into a deep immersion in the mystical teachings of the Indian and Christian classical traditions. He is the author of a number of books including, “Science and the Sacred: Eternal Wisdom in a Changing World;” “Krishnamurti: Two Birds on One Tree” (both published by Quest books); and “The Yoga of the Christ” and “The Spiritual Roots of Yoga.” The following is a synthesis of several hours of interviews.*

When Ravi Ravindra was a teenager, he was searching for his own way in the world, as most adolescents do. He doesn’t remember how it happened, but one day he found himself reading from the works of an Indian sage who made a deep and lasting impression on him. In the writings of Swami Vivekananda, the principle disciple of Shri Ramakrishna, Ravi discovered someone who spoke to his longing to understand the mystery and significance of life – a very tall order for a precocious teenager, or any adult for that matter. At the time, Ravi was struck by one particular statement made by Vivekananda: “I am a voice without a form.”

Vivekananda opened a door to a new dimension of understanding for a young man whose curiosity and energy were impossible to contain. “Vivekananda had a very big influence on me,”

He recalls. “He appealed to me because he said with clarity what I was vaguely feeling. Of course, he spoke from an inner authority; I was just a kid, but that’s how I felt.” Ravi was fifteen-years-old when he first encountered Vivekananda’s published essays and lectures. He resonated with what he describes as Vivekananda’s “religious fire.” Ravi is now seventy-four-years old and his admiration for Vivekananda is as strong as ever. “I’m still inspired by him more than any other religious figure.”

While he found a lasting connection to Vivekananda in his teens, Ravi’s spiritual search actually began long before he was old enough to appreciate the treasures of Indian philosophy. He was eleven when his father introduced him to a priceless gem. Ravi’s father loved poetry and often read poems aloud to anyone who happened to be passing by. “It was his idea of being on vacation – he’d sit outside in the sun with a pile of poetry books and read for as long as he could,” said Ravi.

On one occasion, his father read to him from the *Bhagavad Gita* (*The Song of the Blessed One*). “At the time, I had no interest in the *Bhagavad Gita*. I didn’t even know what it was and I didn’t care.” As his father read the nineteenth shloka of chapter seven, Ravi listened politely, never dreaming he was about to hear something

that would stay with him the rest of his life. He quotes the verse from memory, along with his father’s comments about it:

“What the shloka says is this: ‘At the end of many births, a wise person comes to me, realising that all there is is Krishna. Such a person is a great soul and very rare.’ Then with a seriousness that stays in one’s impressions deeply, my father turned to me and said, ‘You know Ravi, I can tell you what these words say, but I don’t know what it really means, and I wish for you that you will find a teacher or teaching that will assist you to understand its real meaning.’”

It’s been sixty-three years since Ravi heard that shloka for the first time and it focuses his attention on what is most important to him. “It’s my life’s project. My mission is to realise that ‘all there is is Krishna.’” Everything else – his books, workshops and seminars are all an expression of that one aim. Those cherished words from the *Bhagavad Gita* suggest the possibility of realising the Oneness of all there is, but to actually experience that Oneness is quite another matter. “It’s the central emphasis of the entire Indian tradition, especially in the Upanishads and Vedanta, but only the greatest sages, perhaps Ramakrishna or Ramana Maharishi could vouch for this from their own experience. The rest of us, myself certainly, can merely quote the sages and the texts,” Ravi points out. Yet one can try to approach this great mystery with sincerity and humility, and with the clear understanding that one is not the center of the universe, he suggests.

Ravi was born in 1938 in the Punjab region of what was then British India. He is the sixth of seven children and grew up in an upper middle class household where multiple languages were often spoken at the dinner table. His father, Dalip Chand Gupta, was a well-known and highly respected lawyer, who knew Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu, English, Sanskrit and Farsi. His father encouraged a free exchange of ideas through animated discussions often centered on British constitutional law, a topic of great interest as India inched ever closer to independence from the British Empire. His mother, Puma Devi Goel, devoted her life to her

family and like many Indian women of her generation, she was illiterate. It was typical of the time because educating women and girls was not seen as either necessary or important, not only in India, but in much of the world. Women in British India were not granted universal voting rights until 1929, a feat Annie Besant, the great social reformer and theosophist, played a role in accomplishing when she worked for India's emancipation from British rule while president of the Theosophical Society. "Annie Besant was just remarkable. In addition to everything else she accomplished, she founded the first Hindu college in Benares (now Varanasi)," said Ravi. "I feel I owe a cultural debt to the Theosophical Society and its founders. It was the first Western group to speak up on behalf of India's religious and spiritual traditions, and today it's the only organisation I know where one can explore any serious tradition of substance."

In keeping with Indian custom, Ravi's parents had an arranged marriage which he remembers as caring and stable. Most of his childhood was happy and content, but in 1947, the partition of India opened Ravi's eyes to the scourge of religious intolerance. He was just nine-years-old when Colonial India was undergoing the agony of being split into two separate and independent countries — India with a Hindu majority; and Pakistan with a Muslim majority. The partition triggered the largest migration in human history, forcing approximately ten million people to move across newly defined and bitterly disputed borders. Hundreds of thousands of Hindus and Muslims were killed when massive violence erupted throughout India.

In the midst of this tragic and historic event, Ravi stood on the veranda of his two-story childhood home in the Punjab town of Sunam as angry mobs gathered in the streets below. And then the unthinkable happened — it's a memory he recalls with difficulty. "I saw a young kid being thrown into a burning fire and a woman who was pregnant being pierced through her stomach," Ravi said quietly. "It drowned out most of my previous childhood memories and it's the reason I never had an interest in religion. I was a card carrying member of the Communist Party when I was a boy because I was against the priests. But Vivekananda freed me from the notion that priests are relevant to spiritual concerns. Religion has almost nothing to do with spiritual practice or discipline."

To illustrate his point, Ravi compares religion and spirituality to love and marriage. They can co-exist, but at the same time, they can be separate. "I don't think one needs to be against religion as I used to be, but the problem is that religious belief interferes with inquiry." He is quick to acknowledge that some religious organisations provide much needed social services, like caring for homeless families or providing food and shelter during natural disasters, and for that he is grateful. "But if one wishes to nourish a spiritual body, not merely an intellectual inquiry, but to undergo a quest or a search, I am persuaded that religions have nothing to do with it."

When Ravi first came to North America in 1961, he was a twenty-two-year old post-graduate student with a Master's Degree from the Indian Institute of Technology. Showered with academic invitations most students only dream of, he was offered doctoral scholarships at Caltech, MIT and the University of Toronto. He chose to study in Canada because he wanted to study with Professor J. Tuzo Wilson, a well-known geophysicist who was in Toronto, and also because the Commonwealth Scholarship from Canada offered to pay his travel expenses.

While his academic achievements were swift and impressive, (he holds an M.S. and a Ph.D. in Physics from the University of Toronto, as well as an M.A. in Philosophy), what he needed for his inner life could not be found by accumulating knowledge in academia. Ravi put it this way: "Philosophers always talk about knowledge. Aristotle said, 'a man by nature wishes to know,' but the need for meaning is just as strong. There can be no meaning without a relationship — what is my relationship with myself, with nature, with God? And the heart of any relationship is love. Knowledge isolates one more and more. In analysis, you can break down anything into smaller and smaller parts and so your attention is isolated from everything else."

What Ravi was searching for was a higher level of consciousness and he wanted to meet someone who could point him in that direction. He was lucky enough to have his wish fulfilled. He was thirty-years-old when he met the woman he describes as his spiritual mother. The meeting came about through a friend who had introduced Ravi to P.D. Ouspensky's seminal book, *In Search of the Miraculous*. The book illuminates what the twentieth-century spiritual teacher G.I. Gurdjieff called the Fourth Way or the Work. The Gurdjieff Work can briefly be described as a practical approach to self-inquiry which can awaken the possibility of inner freedom.

In 1968, Ravi met sixty-three-year-old Louise Welch, a senior member of the Gurdjieff Work in New York. He saw in her a higher level of being, a finer quality of energy that he wished to develop in himself. She became his teacher, and her husband, Dr. William Welch, a cardiologist, treated Ravi like a son. "Mrs. Welch is one of the most influential people in my life. She was less interested in what a person manifests at present because she could speak to what a person could be or needed to be," said Ravi. She suggested that he read *The Voice of the Silence* by H.P. Blavatsky. At the time, Ravi was not familiar with Theosophical literature. "I cannot say that I understand *The Voice of the Silence*, then or now, but something in me resonates with it deeply," said Ravi. "Mrs. Welch was very appreciative of *The Voice of the Silence* and it may also be relevant that her first teacher in the Work was Alfred R. Orage, who had been the general secretary of the Theosophical Society in England for a while."

Throughout his life, Ravi has been blessed with the good fortune of learning directly from spiritual visionaries. In 1979, when he was forty-one-years old, he had developed a rapport with two revered spiritual icons — Kobori-roshi, a Zen master, and J. Krishnamurti. Kobori invited Ravi to study with him in Japan, and at the same time, Krishnamurti invited him to come to Ojai to direct some aspects of his foundation. As a result, Ravi found himself in crisis and sought advice from Mrs. Welch. He recalls what she told him: "Before you decide about these things, I want you to work with Madame de Salzmann."

A few months later in February of 1980, Ravi met Jeanne de Salzmann, the woman who had been the head of the Work since Gurdjieff's death in 1949. From that point forward, Madame de Salzmann, who was then ninety-one-years-old, became his spiritual mentor. He later wrote *Heart without Measure*, a book in which he painstakingly and lovingly describes his experience under her guidance until she passed away in 1990. "If you found yourself wanting to tell a lie, however subtle and indirect, you would find the lie becoming more audible to you in her presence," said Ravi.

While his relationship with Krishnamurti remained close, Ravi does not characterise it in a student/teacher context, largely because Krishnamurti never encouraged that type of relationship, but also because he didn't feel that way himself. "I always had questions about his teaching. I couldn't believe that the traditions were all wrong, that no effort was needed; that there is no teaching, no teacher. I just don't agree with all these formulations. Maybe I'm too influenced by the Gurdjieff Work, but it has helped me, and Krishnamurti helped me too."

For decades, Ravi has balanced and synthesised what he has learned from his own experience and from the spiritual traditions of East and West. He often points out that while the great philosophical ideas of India depict various levels of consciousness, the same can also be said of Christianity, when one explores its inner dimensions as the Gnostics did. "We're not appreciating the Buddha or Christ because they had some nice theories about Reality, but because of the kind of persons they were. I am persuaded that truth cannot be known, but it can be embodied."

He is drawn to Christian mystics like Teresa of Avila, Meister Eckhart and Saint John of the Cross, and although he is not a Christian, he is frequently invited to speak to Christian groups about the mysticism and beauty hidden beneath literal interpretations of Christian texts. He can quote chapter and verse from the *New Testament* by heart, and then just as easily find something in the *Upanishads* which corresponds to it. Both the

Indian and Christian traditions coexist happily in him. He explains it this way: "I wish to search for subtler and subtler levels within the tradition of my birth as well as other traditions. The subtler levels can be perceived only by subtler organs of perception, which need to be developed. As Saint Paul said, 'The eyes of the flesh see the things of the flesh and the eyes of the spirit, the things of the spirit.'"

To be able to see with eyes of the spirit suggests there may be an alchemical process involved in the spiritual evolution of a human being and if that is true, where does one begin?

For Ravi, the state of not knowing is its own beginning. "I feel a sense of mystery that I don't know all there is to know, and in fact, cannot know all there is to know," he offers as something to ponder. "Mystery is openness to what may come – a willingness to be surprised, a sense of wonder. To me, a sense of wonder is real food for the spiritual body. If open to this, the mind can be blown over."

Ravi has had his mind blown more than once. On one such occasion, he remembers hiking on Mount Tamalpais, north of San Francisco, in an area surrounded by redwood groves and spectacular views of the sea and the Marin County hills. He became quiet as he looked at the scene before him. "The sun was setting and I was so touched by the beauty, I literally could not keep standing. Only two or three times in my life have I had that feeling of other-worldly beauty," he recalls. "These types of experiences or impressions are spiritual food."

In the spiritual traditions of both East and West, what we feed ourselves, not just physically, but also spiritually is regarded as a special type of nourishment. On the physical level, one can choose to eat junk food soaked in grease or organic healthy food and the body will respond differently to the type of nourishment it gets. "But spiritual nourishment belongs to a dimension in which language is not adequate," Ravi said. "It can invite the inquiry, 'why am I here? Was everything designed to produce me? Why is humanity here? Why is the planet here?' This is food for the spiritual body because these questions nourish the aspect of myself that wishes to relate to the vastness – for me, this is food."

And perhaps it is also a step along the way to realising that "all there is is Krishna."

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