SRF Uncorks a Winner!
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Paramahansa Yogananda Unlocks The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam

"Long ago in India I met a hoary Persian poet who told me that the poetry of Persia often has two meanings, one inner and one outer," wrote Paramahansa Yogananda in the 1930s. "One day as I was deeply concentrated on the pages of Omar Khayyam's Rubaiyat, I suddenly beheld the walls of its outer meanings crumble away, and the vast inner fortress of golden spiritual treasures stood open to my gaze." Thus was born a most unusual work by one of India's most famous yogis. The book itself is a work of art-literally, with 51 specially-commissioned paintings, each more rich than the last, adding grace and charm to an elegantly designed book. Everything about this work bespeaks the yogic teachings which it embodies and the yoga-in-action team that crafted it- hand calligraphy in Persian, masterful printing and binding. This didn't happen with the suddenness of satori, either. Yogananda started it in the early 1930s, nearly sixty-five years ago. The artwork, begun in 1975, took 19 years to complete. Seeing the results, one could never fault the Self-Realization Fellowship for being a year late in their goal to have it published for Yogananda's 1993 birthday centenary. Later we'll tell a bit about the dedicated and self-effacing band of monks, nuns and lay devotees of the Self-Realization Fellowship who produced Wine of the Mystic. But first, let's delve into this much-maligned Persian poem and Yogananda's unique perceptions of its message to man.

Omar Khayyam's Legacy

Almost every seeker and self-schooled philosopher in the West has stumbled on the Rubaiyat. In it they find, expressed in a mere seventy-five elegant and sometimes teasingly cryptic English quatrains, a virtual compendium of questions all thoughtful human beings ask themselves. What is life all about? Is there a greater reality beyond what we see? Will I survive death? What is my destiny? Do I have free will?

As in real life, Khayyam, an 11th century Sufi mystic, leaves much open-ended-questions asked and unanswered. In that process he provokes us to resolve our own dilemmas, solve our own mysteries. He intimates more than he declares, but he declares again and again that experience is ephemeral, everything passes. Much of his teaching comes from that one powerful truth and how humans may confront it.

Who has not read, enjoyed and pondered these famous verses? "Here with a loaf of bread beneath the bough, a flask of wine, a book of verse-and thou beside me singing in the wilderness-and wilderness is paradise enow."

"The moving finger writes; and, having writ, moves on: nor all thy piety nor wit shall lure it back to cancel half a line, nor all thy tears wash out a word of it."

But what do they mean? Hedonism or mysticism? Was Khayyam an inebriated pleasure-seeker or a God-intoxicated seer? There are verses to defend both. On its face he confesses to being a mere sot: "For 'is' and 'is-not' though with rule and line, and, 'up-and-down' without, I could define, I yet in all I only cared to know, was never deep in anything but-wine." Then he elucidates experiences not known to your garden-variety drunk: "There was a door to which I found no key: there was a veil past which I could not see: some little talk awhile of me and thee there seem'd-and then no more of thee and me."

Western scholars, including FitzGerald himself who did the translations in 1859, took the poems as expressions of fatalism, the embracing of pleasure and drink in the absence of deeper meanings and fulfillments in life. For example, the current edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica states, "Finding no acceptable answers to his perplexities, Khayyam chooses to put his faith instead in a joyful appreciation of the fleeting and sensuous beauties of the material world."

"Not so," proclaimed Yogananda in the 30s. "I have admired the beauty of the previously invisible castle of inner wisdom in the Rubaiyat. I have felt that this dream-castle of truth, which can be seen by any penetrating eye, would be a haven for many shelter-seeking souls invaded by enemy armies of ignorance. Profound spiritual treatises by some mysterious divine law do not disappear from the earth even after centuries of misunderstanding, as in the case of the Rubaiyat. Not even

in Persia [modern Iran] is all of Omar Khayyam's deep philosophy understood in its entirety, as I have tried to present it."

Yogananda's Interpretation

And just how did the great yogi present Khayyam's verses? His first decision was to use FitzGerald's extraordinary poetic translation. Yogananda initially employed a Persian scholar to help him translate the original into English, but, "After I compared that translation with FitzGerald's, I realized that FitzGerald had been divinely inspired to catch exactly in gloriously musical English words the soul of Omar's writings."

Khayyam was a Sufi, a term often and possibly inaccurately defined as a "Muslim mystic." Whether Sufism as a mystical tradition arose after Islam was founded (as some claim), or is a carry-over of pre-Islamic beliefs (as others believe), there is little mistaking the authenticity of its spiritual methods and goals. "The end of Sufism is total absorption in God," wrote the Persian Sufi al-Gazali, "the transport rises from the perception of forms and figures to a degree which escapes all expression, and which no man may seek to give an account of without his words involving error." Since the Sufi mystics often clashed with the orthodox Muslim clerics, a code was developed. According to scholar Edward Rice, "The ancient mystical teachings became the 'wine' of Sufi poetry; divine ecstasy was intoxication with that wine; the teacher was the 'wine bearer.' God became 'the Beloved,'and meeting with the Beloved was but union with God."

Keys in hand, provided him by that old Persian poet, Yogananda unlocked one quatrain after another of the mystical poem. His enormous personal spiritual attainment made it easy for him to see through the veil of Khayyam's metaphors.

Here is verse 31: "Up from Earth's Centre through the Seventh Gate I rose, and on the Throne of Saturn sate, and many Knots unravel'd by the Road; But not the Knot of Human Death and Fate." Yogananda interprets, in part, "Ascending the spinal highway, I had unraveled in each of the six lower chakras the knots of life and consciousness that had tied me to the body. Thus, when I entered the seventh center, the thousand-petaled lotus, I was momentarily free in cosmic consciousness.

But this experience in meditation did not completely liberate me. Because of my karma, the results of my past actions, I could not escape permanently into Spirit."

In similar fashion Yogananda offers his insight into each quatrain. In the process he creates a coherent interpretation of the work. Western writers who wanted to focus on the "worldly" side of the Rubaiyat could do so adequately with the "loaf of bread, jug of wine" verses, but were at a loss with the many purely spiritual verses, such as verse 31. This is our latest example of how a Hindu mystic can grasp the deepest spiritual import of any scripture.

Creating Wine of the Mystic

Forty years after Yogananda's passing, the organization he founded, the Self-Realization Fellowship, continues to grow-a tribute to his spiritual power and practical planning. Under the guidance of Daya Mata, SRF has created and sustained a monastic order of 350 monks and nuns, dozens of centers and tens of thousands of lay devotees. Philosophically, SRF does not consider itself a Hindu organization, nor its followers to be Hindus. The third of their "Aims and Ideals," is "To reveal the complete harmony and basic oneness of original Christianity as taught by Jesus Christ and original Yoga as taught by Bhagavan Krishna; and to show that these principles of truth are the common scientific foundation of all true religions." In the 1930s and 40s when Yogananda was teaching in America, any Hindu swami who appeared to be trying to convert Christians was summarily run out of the country-as in fact happened to several. SRF members are today aware of the Hindu origin of Yogananda and his teachings, but are focused on those teachings, rather than on the broader issue of religious allegiance. Members more or less remain of the religion they were born with.

SRF's publication center is our specific interest for this article-there is not space to describe all that this large organization does. The center has a full-time staff of 60 (25 monks, 35 hired SRF members, from 13 different countries), an IBM and Macintosh computer network, Linotron imagesetter and six presses, including a Heidelberg 2-color press (barely visible in the staff photo on page 14). They are responsible to keep 2,000 of Yogananda's books, courses and SRF material in print. Preeminent among their publications is Autobiography of a Yogi, kept available in 18 languages. As proven by Wine of the Mystic, they are among the most talented book designers, artists and editors anywhere in the world.

We asked them to share with us their experiences in producing this unusual work. Sri Daya Mata, president of SRF, took the original dictation from her guru. "In those early years Guruji was just beginning to write his spiritual interpretation of the Rubaiyat. As a young disciple in his ashram, I would bring a typewriter on a little rolling table into his study to type his commentary. Often while he was working, Gurudeva would pause silently for a time, his gaze uplifted and his body locked in motionless samadhi. Then the words would begin to flow-sometimes late into the night as he brought forth the sublime truths." Sri Mrinalini Mata, the Vice President of SRF, had the specific job of editing Yogananda's work. This was a substantial task, and not without its controversial aspects as discussed in the sidebar on page 6. Mrinalini was responsible for conceiving the remarkable art which accompanies many of the verses-a process begun way back in 1975.

Wine of the Mystic would have far less impact without its remarkable illustrations. We asked Mrinalini about their creation. "The biggest challenge was coming up with a visual concept that conveyed the very deep metaphysical truths Paramahansaji was expounding. Each illustration took a lot of time! My role was primarily to insure that the visual concepts represented, as purely as possible, the metaphysical truths in the commentaries. We were so blessed to work with such understanding, patient, and receptive devotees who put themselves and their preconceptions aside to tune in with Paramahansaji's inspiration."

"We tried to 'crystallize' the deeper meanings in the reader's mind by choosing phrases and imagery from the poem and illustrating them in terms of their spiritual meaning, rather than a literal depiction of the verse. Quatrain 31 is an example [upper left illustration]. We depicted a meditating devotee ensconced in the blissful illumination of the 1,000-petaled lotus-the 'seventh gate' through which man's consciousness passes."

Ultimately four artists were used, with the majority of paintings produced by Kevin Miller and Helen Marie, both members of SRF. Helen tells a miraculous tale of her challenges as the deadline approached. "I had to spend some time in the hospital, then I was forced to take medication that had the side effect of making my hands very unsteady! It was terrible! How could I paint the intricate details of the Rubaiyat in this condition? Then I made up my mind that no bad karma or obstacle of maya was going to stop me from completing these paintings for God and my guru. The sublime story of Lord Krishna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra came to mind. As I worked, inwardly I was praying to Him: 'Lord Krishna, just like You came to the aid of Arjuna in his time of weakness, guide me! Think of me like Arjuna's "little sister" safe with You guiding my chariot. Help me overcome!' My former

problems were just swept away. The paintings were finished on time." Yogananda had once warned his devotees, "When something is being done for the spiritual good, the forces of maya will work overtime to stop it."

A team of 22 at the SRF publication center focused full time on the book-and overcoming those very forces of maya-for the last two years. It was printed in Singapore just in time for release at the 1994 American Booksellers Association convention in Los Angeles. Reviews have been excellent, sales brisk and the staff is looking forward to a reprint soon.

Address: Self-Realization Fellowship, International Headquarters, 3880 San Rafael Ave, Los Angeles, California 90065, USA.

Rubaiyat Verses Rubaiyat: A Tale of Two Editors

There is a second version of Yogananda's Rubaiyat translation, edited by J. Donald Walters. Walters, as Swami Kriyananda, was a close disciple of Yogananda in the late 40s and early 50s. He parted ways with the Self-Realization Fellowship some time after Yogananda's death to set up the Ananda World-Brotherhood Village whose main center is in California. The Ananda community is a very successful spiritual community, combining "Mystical Christianity with the meditation tradition of the East." Eventually Swami Kriyananda abandoned his sannyas vows and married. He is a popular author in his own right.

Walter's edition is called The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam Explained. It is well conceived as a book, but pales in comparison to the lavish illustrations and graphics of the SRF edition. Both are priced at US$19.95. Graphics aside, these are not the same book at all. Their differences reveal as much about SRF's edition as Walter's. In both the original writing of Yogananda has been substantially edited. Both editors say they were commissioned to do this work by Yogananda himself.

It is a bit difficult to grasp just how extensively both Walters and SRF have edited Yogananda's words. Here is a partial example, from the first quatrain.

FitzGerald said: "... puts the Stars to Flight."

Yogananda interpreted to mean: "...put the starlike, pale, mock-lustred material desires to flight."

SRF edited to: "...putting to flight the pale stars of mock-lustered material desires."

And Walters to: "put to flight the paling stars of earthly desire."

It was startling to this reader to learn that in neither edition is one even offered the original writing of Yogananda. SRF explained that all of Yogananda's writings had been so edited, under his explicit instructions. Walters says he was specifically assigned by Yogananda to edit his Rubaiyat and explains the changes as required for clarity. Perhaps in both editions the reader should have been left to judge the editing for himself.

Fighting for "Self-Realization"

The coincidence of the two editions of Rubaiyat falls in the context of a larger legal dispute between SRF and the Ananda community. According to Ananda, $1,000,000 has been spent by them on this lawsuit and $4,000,000 by SRF. SRF counters that their expenses have been a "fraction" of that amount. But the stakes in this lawsuit are indisputably high. At issue is the use of the term Self-Realization, plus the rights to the entire collection of life writings by Paramahansa Yogananda. Presently these are mostly held by SRF, though the copyrights are gradually expiring, allowing, for example, Ananda to publish its own edition of Autobiography of a Yogi. To date the courts have ruled in favor of Ananda. SRF's third appeal is now under review in Fresno, California.

The suit was sparked, says SRF, by Ananda's changing its corporate name to "Church of Self-Realization." SRF sued, saying this was too close to their full legal name, "Self-Realization Fellowship Church," and that the public would confuse the two organizations. They are not attempting to claimk, according to an SRF spokesperson, what is called "service mark" rights to the term Self-Realization, which would restrict other's use of the term in advertizing (and other situations).

"The injunction we seek in this litigation in federal court," SRF told Hinduism Today, "is specifically to disallow Ananda-and Ananda only-from using Self-Realization in their new corporate name. Our concern, is only with the use of the term by individuals or organizations in a way that is likely to mislead the public, creating the false impression that they represent, or are in some way connected with, our Guru's society."

So far the courts haven't agreed with them. One reason may be that similar church names are not uncommon in America. There are a variety of independent Catholic Churches. The pope's Roman Catholic Church has no exclusive claim to the term "Catholic Church," even though they are the original one.

Selected Verses and Yogananda's Interpretation

Up from Earth's Centre through the Seventh Gate I rose, and on the Throne of Saturn sate, and many Knots unravel'd by the Road; But not the Knot of Human Death and Fate. Verse 31

The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ, Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line, Nor all thy Tears wash out a word of it. Verse 51

And lately, by the Tavern Door agape, Came stealing through the Dusk an Angel Shape Bearing a Vessel on his Shoulder; and He bid me taste of it; and 'twas -the Grape! Verse 62

One Moment in Annihilation's Waste, One Moment, of the Well of Life to taste-The Stars are setting and the Caravan Starts for the dawn of Nothing-Oh, make haste! Verse 37

Paramahansa Yogananda explains Verse XI: Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough, a Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse-and Thou beside me singing in the Wilderness-and Wilderness is Paradise enow.

In this Quatrain the devotee is describing the deep state of God-communion attained through pranayama, control of mind and life force (prana). "Sitting in the deep silence of meditation, with my mind concentrated on the cerebrospinal tree of life and spiritual consciousness, I rest in the shade of peace. Nourished by the life-giving 'bread' of prana, I quaff the aged wine of divine intoxication brimming the cask of my soul. Unceasinly my heart recites the poetic inspirations of eternal divine love. In this wilderness of deepest innermost silence-whence all tumult of thronging desires has died away-I commune with Thee, my Supreme Beloved, the Singing Blessedness. Thou dost sweetly intone to me the all-desire-satisfying music of wisdom. Ah, wilderness, free from the clamor of material desires and passions! in this aloneness I am not lonely. In the solitude of my inner silence I have found the paradise of unending Joy."