

Swami Sivananda Radha

Swami Sivananda Radha was the first western woman who became a *sannyasin*, a spiritual leader who placed great emphasis in the belief of one's self and one's surroundings to enhance one's life. She had become a great *yogi* who taught for more than 25 years (Swami Sivananda, xxiii). Radha had been quoted as saying, "The main thing I try to do is have my students bring quality into their lives,]...[to me, people are not spiritual if this quality is not there in their lives-even if they meditate six hours a day. By quality I mean that which comes from deep inside and shows up in their actions, their treatment of others and the way they do their jobs"(Himalayan Academy, 1988).

Swami Radha's original name was Ursula Sylvia Hellman. Once she became a *sannyasin* her guru, Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh, gave her the name Swami Sivananda Radha. She would not be called this until later in life. She was born on March 20, 1911 in Berlin, Germany (Biography). She came from a well to do family and was very interested in the arts. In her early life she became a creative writer, photographer and a professional solo concert dancer (Biography). She made history by being the first woman admitted into the Berlin School of Advertising in 1939 but unfortunately her career was ended as World War II started (Radha, 1990: xxiii). Radha was married twice, first to Wolfgang who was killed in the Second World War by the Nazis in the Gestapo for helping Jewish people escape Germany. Her second marriage only lasted one year; she was married to Albert Hellman who was a violinist and a composer. Albert composed many pieces of music that Radha danced to. He unfortunately died suddenly in Radha's arms (Biography). When the Second World War ended Radha immigrated to Canada and lived in Montreal (Radha, 1990: xxiii).

Radha was not brought up in a religious house and questioned the meaning of life even from an early age. According to Radha's own account, she took up the practise of meditation and while meditating she had a vision of a *sage*. Taking this as an important sign Radha sought out to find where this *sage* was and began writing letters to him; where in a letter he eventually "told her to "come home" to his ashram in

Rishihesh, in the Himalayan Foothills” (Radha,1990: xxiii). She traveled to India in search for her *sage* and her life’s calling. She found what she was looking for in the guru Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh. Swami Sivananda took Radha under his wing and taught her the teachings of eastern living and religious practices. “He challenged her to remember who she was and to think deeply about the purpose of life. His message was that truth can be found in a balanced life and to use discipline to avoid extremes” (Biography). The Hindu religion believes that *Karma yoga* and selfless actions can assist towards making one divine; this became the most important teachings of Swami Radha’s work. She lived in a spiritual community where she was constantly surrounded by many spiritual students both beginners and advanced who collectively were masters of “various spiritual disciplines” (Radha,1990: xxiii). In the beginning of Radha’s schooling she was at first apprehensive as to how she would cope with the conditions and a new way of life. She had another student from another *sannyasin* tell her quite a few times that her *sannyasin* (Swami Sivananda) was not what she should be looking for in a spiritual leader. The first few months were the hardest for Radha but she persisted and learned a great deal from Sivananda. Swami Sivananda also taught her the Prayer Dance which she fully embraced with her dancing background. She taught her students this dance “as a means of safely directing emotional; and physical; energies into devotion” (Himalayan Academy, 1988).

After completing her spiritual education in less than a year Swami Sivananda told her to go back to Canada to spread the teachings she had learned to the Western people. She was extremely hesitant and nervous at first because she was worried as to where to begin when she arrived back in Canada. Who would accept her, and how would she come about finding the funds to establish an Ashram (Radha, 1990: xxiv)? According to one of Radha’s devotees, Barbra Huston, “Swami Radha came back to Montreal, with almost no money, and with the instruction not to take employment or speech lessons to moderate her German accent. She was to “live on

faith" and "speak from the heart". Though they were difficult years she was always provided for. Bags of groceries would unexpectedly be delivered, [and] clothing would be offered”.

Radha had developed many unique and creative innovative approaches for psychological spiritual development. She created the Life Seal which is a very powerful form of self exploration through the development of one’s own *mandala*, using drawn symbols that represent different levels of personality (Radha, 1990: xxiv). Radha also created something called the Straight Walk which was adapted from an ancient Buddhist practice designed to purify and clarify thinking and perception of one’s thoughts (Radha, 1990: xxiv). Her Ideals Workshop is said to be very still very sought after by her students; this is a type of training in dream understanding.

In 1962 Radha founded (Himalayan Academy, 1988) Yasodhara Ashram which is located in Kootenay Bay, British Columbia, Canada. This Ashram is her legacy. This site is considered by her followers as the best of the east and west because it incorporates real eastern teachings with a slight modified twist so that western people will be able to understand the teachings and apply them to one’s own everyday life (Swami Sivananda, xxiv). Yasodhara Ashram is still in the Kootenay Bay area and it is still taking new students who are interested in learning the art of eastern practices. Radha passed away on November 30, 1995(Biography) and the Ashram has been taken over by Radha’s student Swami Radhananda who has been the Ashram’s head spiritual director since 1995. Radha also created a printing company called Timeless Books (located at her Yasodhara Ashram) and through this printing company she has written quite a number of books, a lot of them deal with different teachings and spiritual practises she has learned like “*Kundalini Yoga for the West*,” “*Hatha Yoga: The Hidden Language*,” “*The Divine*

Light Invocation,” and “*Mantras: Words of Power.*” She has written books about her personal experiences such as “*Radha: Diary of a Woman’s Search,*” and “*In the Company of the Wise*” these are just a few of the book she has written. “These books are popular and distinctive because they clarify the sometimes enigmatic Eastern teachings in a way that can be understood and applied in western daily life” (Biography). She also had contributed a few articles to new age medical journals and gave many speeches around Canada and the US about what she did and believed in.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING

Biography; Swami Sivananda Radha. Retrieved February 17, 2010, from Swami Sivananda Radha

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Swami Sivananda Radha (1990) Radha Diary of a Woman’s Search. *Palo Alto, CA*: Timeless Books

Swami Sivananda Radha (1991) In the Company of the Wise: Remembering My Teachers, Reflecting The Light. *Palo Alto, CA*: Timeless Books

Interviewed Barbra Huston, a student from the Yasodhara Ashram

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Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic

http://www.yasodhara.org/wp-content/themes/naked/swamiradha_bio.html

<http://www.hinduismtoday.com>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swami_Sivananda_Radha

<http://www.banyen.com/INFOCUS/RADHA.HTM>

<http://www.yasodhara.org>

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