

Carried by a Promise – A Life Transformed Through Yoga by Swami Radhananda. Timeless Books, 2011.

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Carried by a Promise – A Life Transformed Through Yoga is a simply and elegantly written memoir of a woman. She starts the intimate and forthright account of her spiritual journey in 1977 as Mary-Ann McDougall, a wife, mother and school teacher living in Lethbridge, Alberta. She completes it in 1995 as Swami Radhananda, the President and Spiritual Director of Yasodhara Ashram Society and the successor to her own spiritual teacher, Swami Sivananda Radha (also a woman, known as Swami Radha), living at the Ashram in Kootenay Bay, British Columbia.

Yasodhara Ashram is a yoga retreat and study centre in the Kootenays. As Swami Radhananda demonstrates in *Carried by a Promise*, this uniquely Canadian approach to yoga is much more expansive than the stereotypic yoga classes that connote merely doing physical exercises to become more physically fit, flexible and relaxed.

This approach to yoga incorporates individual students discovering their own insights through spiritual practices and written reflection. Swami Radhananda is intrigued as she first learns one of the foundational practices in this yogic tradition, the Divine Light Invocation (see *The Divine Light Invocation* 2001), a standing meditation that promotes constructive use of imagination:

Closing my eyes, it is quiet beyond quietness, bright beyond brightness. ... We invoke light and it fills us, making itself part of me, the whole space, and everybody in it. The dark, dingy church basement is transformed.

So this is yoga – it must be something extraordinary! (page 15)

She then provides an account of her own experience that is, indeed, extraordinary. On one level, this is the story of an ordinary woman overcoming personal challenges to devote herself to her guru, achieve a more purposeful life, and accept a position of leadership in doing so. At another level, this advanced spiritual teacher is encouraging the reader to take responsibility for her or his own journey of evolution through yogic practices.

Swami Rahananda follows directly in the footsteps of Swami Radha, who wrote *Kundalini Yoga for the West* (2004). The *Kundalini* book is a classic, highly respected yoga text which contains a series of exercises, questions and

reflections to help students gain their own insights about their own minds. The extensive research for the *Kundalini* book and the practice of Kundalini Yoga as Swami Radha conducted it was an integral part of her promise to her own guru, who was a male yoga master - Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh, India. In the 1950s, long before women were seen as capable spiritual teachers in their own right, he initiated Swami Radha into sanyas (renunciation). He asked her to update the ancient yogic teachings and make them accessible to the western mind. This is the lineage from which Swami Radhananda comes as she describes her experience of a workshop based on the *Kundalini* book:

The *cakras* look complex, with many-headed gods and goddesses and fierce weapons; the mantras seem esoteric, sprinkled with Sanskrit. I decide to follow what Swami Radha's guru, Swami Sivananda, did to clear the air and his mind – chant *Om* loudly three times. Then I will write... I ... just (let) whatever is there come through. (page 45)

This description encapsulates this paradoxically simple Canadian approach to Kundalini Yoga. The approach is empowering because each student taps into her or his own inner wisdom, guided by personal symbolism, memories and thought associations.

The approach to yoga described in *Carried by a Promise* does include the physical poses or asanas; once again, the emphasis is on each student understanding her or his personal symbolism. Students observe their minds as they do the poses and write about what arises (see *The Hidden Language of Hatha Yoga* (1987) and *The Inner Life of Asanas* (2007)). Swami Radhananda teaches by example by sharing her insights that arise doing the Eagle and Corpse poses, amongst others. She relates her observations to her daily life and the workings of her own mind, demonstrating the practical value of this yogic tradition.

Both Swami Radha and Swami Radhananda also used another form of yoga, dream yoga, to inform their lives. In *Realities of the Dreaming Mind* (1994) Swami Radha presented a method of working with one's personal symbolism to investigate one's dreams. Swami Radhananda in turn uses this methodology to illustrate its usefulness in her own life, commenting that her dreams show her many different facets of herself: "They help me make choices and question whether the way I am acting is the way I really want to be." (page 23).

Carried by a Promise presents a compelling and expansive approach to the ancient discipline of yoga. This female yoga master in a western Canadian setting offers a valuable contribution to the body of yogic literature. Although there are numerous western spiritual leaders of American, French, British, and other nationalities in various eastern traditions (see *The Book of Enlightened Masters: Western Teachers in Eastern Traditions*, Rawlinson, 1997), there

are no other directly comparable Canadian yoga leaders. The Radha lineage is unique in its approach and presentation of the yogic teachings.

Carried by a Promise is an excellent resource for courses in Women's Studies and Eastern Philosophy, and for anyone open to expanding their concepts and broadening their understanding on many levels.