



Swami Vishnu-devananda with Ravi Shankar and George Harrison (c. 1969)

# Forty Years On...

by John Ittner

Swami Vishnu-devananda subtly influenced Western culture in many ways to integrate yoga and Indian philosophy. This year marks the 40th anniversary of The Beatles coming to America. Shortly after their arrival in February 1964, Swamiji took the opportunity to introduce The Beatles to yoga. Swamiji followed his intuition, never letting his own plans get in the way of destiny.

Swamiji was scheduled to give a lecture and yoga demonstration at the Royal Victoria Hotel on Paradise Island, in the Bahamas. But it was cancelled by the hotel because the Beatles were filming “Help”, their second movie, out at the airport. The story of the film involved a wacky chase around the world with spies and a special ring worn by Ringo. The journey eventually led to the Fab Four riding bicycles in the Bahamas.

Instead of getting angry about his talk being cancelled Swamiji went to the airport and enjoyed the filming of the movie. Swamiji intuitively felt that The Beatles would help awaken a generation of America’s youth to ideals of universal brotherhood and he wanted to meet them. So he left them a message that an Indian swami would like to see them. When The Beatles got the word, it turned out that they were curious about Swami Vishnu-devananda also. The day was February 25, 1964, George Harrison’s 21st birthday. George, the Beatle who was most influenced by Eastern philosophy, thought this was a very auspicious event. His birthday gift that year was Swamiji’s *The Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga*. Both he and John asked some serious questions about yoga and got to know Swamiji better. They stayed in touch and Swamiji later introduced them to the famous sitar player Ravi Shankar. Ringo quipped, “How can I learn to stand on my head when I can’t even stand on my feet?” Swamiji’s answer to this question is unfortunately unknown.

The Beatles’ well-documented adventures with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi happened some time later, but came to an abrupt end in April 1968. After nearly two months in India with the Maharishi, The Beatles came to feel they were being used for their fame and left suddenly.

In 1969, John and his new bride, Yoko Ono, began staging their famous “bed-ins” for peace. When they took their Vietnam War protest to Montreal, Swamiji met them there and lent his support to the cause. Never one to take himself too seriously, Swami Vishnu-devananda nevertheless took John and Yoko’s commitment to peace very seriously even though their protest was considered a joke by many observers. “We’re willing to be the world’s clowns,” John said, “if that is what it takes to promote peace. It was just our protest against violence. Everybody has their bag and this is ours.”

The moral of this story is not to let obstacles stand in your way. They may be signals of a higher plan about to unfold.



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