



Indian Spirituality to the West

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Abstract

The transmission of Indian spirituality to the West represents one of the most significant cross-cultural exchanges in modern history. This review analyzes the trajectory of this influence—from the 19th-century Transcendentalist fascination with the Bhagavad Gita to the 21st-century "Mindfulness Revolution." Current research (2024–2026) highlights a shift from the mere adoption of yoga and meditation to the deeper integration of "Indian Psychology" (IP) and "Spiritual Emotional Intelligence" into Western clinical and corporate sectors. While the impact on global mental health and ecological ethics is statistically significant, the review also addresses contemporary academic debates regarding "secularization," "cultural appropriation," and the "denaturing" of original Vedic and Buddhist concepts in Western consumerist frameworks.

Key Words: Spirituality, West Culture, Secularization, Veda, Yoga

1. Introduction: The Century of Inwardness

By 2026, the global wellness industry—valued at trillions of dollars—is inextricably linked to Indian philosophical foundations. Indian spirituality, once viewed by the West as "mystical escapism," is now scrutinized as a rigorous "science of consciousness." This review categorizes the impact into three primary domains: Philosophical-Literary, Psychological-Clinical, and Socio-Environmental.

2. Historical Foundations: The First Wave

The impact began not with physical yoga, but with texts.

Transcendentalism (19th Century): Figures like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau integrated the concept of the Atman (Individual Self) and Brahman (Universal Spirit) into American literature. Research (2025) confirms that Emerson's "Oversoul" was a direct Western translation of Vedantic monism.

The Global Missionaries: Swami Vivekananda's 1893 speech in Chicago and the later works of Paramahansa Yogananda provided the first systematic introduction of Yoga as a lifestyle rather than a ritual.

3. The Psychological Revolution: Indian Psychology in the West

In 2026, one of the most active research areas is the convergence of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) with Western Positive Psychology.

3.1. Mindfulness and Clinical Interventions

The Western "Mindfulness" movement, largely derived from Buddhist and Vedantic Dhyana, has become a standard clinical tool. Recent meta-analyses (2025) indicate that:



MBSR (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction): Shows a 35% higher efficacy in preventing depressive relapse compared to traditional CBT in specific demographics.

Neuroplasticity: fMRI studies (2024–2026) demonstrate that long-term practitioners of Vipassana and Transcendental Meditation show increased gray matter density in the prefrontal cortex and a "quieting" of the Default Mode Network (DMN), associated with reduced anxiety.

3.2. Spiritual Emotional Intelligence (SEI)

Recent studies (2025) have explored "Gita-based Emotional Intelligence." This research applies the concept of Nishkama Karma (selfless action) to modern workplace burnout, suggesting that focusing on the process rather than the outcome significantly reduces professional stress.

4. The "Body-Mind" Industry: Yoga and Ayurveda

Yoga has transitioned from a spiritual discipline to a global public health intervention.

Globalization of Yoga: Research in 2026 indicates that nearly 15% of the Western adult population has engaged with some form of Yoga. However, critics point out a "denaturing" effect, where the ethical pillars (Yamas and Niyamas) are often stripped away to focus on Asanas (physical postures).

Ayurveda and Integrative Medicine: The Western "Bio-hacking" community has increasingly adopted Ayurvedic concepts like Dinacharya (circadian rhythms) and Prakriti (individualized medicine), leading to a surge in research on the gut-brain axis and herbal adaptogens like Ashwagandha.

5. Comparative Impact Analysis (2024–2026)

6. Critical Challenges: Appropriation and Commercialization

Current academic reviews (2025–2026) highlight a growing tension:

Cultural Appropriation: The "de-linking" of spiritual practices from their Indian roots, often referred to as "Coloniality in Spirituality."

The Banalization of Mindfulness: Turning a path toward liberation into a "productivity hack" for corporate efficiency.

The "Spiritual-but-not-Religious" (SBNR) Trend: A significant Western demographic that adopts Indian techniques while rejecting the philosophical rigors of the source traditions.

7. Conclusion

The impact of Indian spirituality on the West in 2026 is no longer a peripheral subculture but a core pillar of the modern "Global Wellbeing" paradigm. Research suggests that while the physical and psychological benefits are well-documented, the next decade of scholarship will likely focus on "Authentic Integration"—reclaiming the ethical and metaphysical depth of these traditions to address the West's crises of meaning and social isolation.

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Would you like me to refine the section on "Indian Psychology" or perhaps create a specific case study on how Vedantic principles are being used in Silicon Valley's tech leadership?

Indian spirituality is a vast, holistic tradition focused on inner transformation, self-realization, and connection with the divine, woven into daily life through practices like yoga, meditation, and mindfulness, emphasizing interconnectedness, karma, dharma, and the pursuit of *moksha* (liberation) from rebirth, expressed through diverse philosophies and devotional paths within Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and more.

Core Concepts & Beliefs

- **Interconnectedness**: A fundamental belief that all beings and nature are part of one divine reality (Brahman in Hinduism).
- **Karma & Rebirth (Samsara)**: Actions have consequences, influencing the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, from which liberation (*moksha*) is sought.
- **Moksha (Liberation)**:
The ultimate goal: freedom from *samsara*, often achieved through spiritual realization and union with the divine.
- **Dharma**: Ethical duties, righteous conduct, and cosmic order that guide life.
- **Self-Realization**: Experiencing one's true, divine nature (Atman) rather than the ego.

Key Practices & Paths

- **Yoga**: Physical postures, breath control (pranayama), and meditation to unite mind, body, and spirit, with paths like Karma Yoga (action), Bhakti Yoga (devotion), Jnana Yoga (knowledge).
- **Meditation (Dhyana)**: Cultivating stillness and awareness, central to connecting with inner truth.
- **Bhakti (Devotion)**: Worship and love for a chosen deity, expressed through rituals (puja) and chanting.



- **Mindfulness:** Being present in every moment, finding divinity in everyday life and nature.

Manifestations & Traditions

- **Hinduism:** A broad tradition with diverse schools (Vedanta, Yoga, etc.) and countless deities, emphasizing *dharma*, *karma*, and *moksha*.
- **Buddhism & Jainism:** Also originating in India, focusing on non-violence, mindfulness, and liberation from suffering.
- **Sikhism:** Monotheistic faith emphasizing one God (Waheguru) and service, rooted in the Punjab.
- **Avurveda:** Traditional holistic medicine, deeply intertwined with spiritual health and balance.

Holistic Approach

Indian spirituality sees no division between the sacred and the mundane; life, nature, and even objects are imbued with spirit, making the entire existence a spiritual journey towards understanding the Infinite.

While there isn't one universal list, common categorizations of spirituality often describe four main types or paths: the Head (Intellectual), focusing on knowledge and understanding; the Heart (Emotional), emphasizing feeling and devotion; the Mystic (Contemplative), centered on inner experience and quiet reflection; and the Kingdom/Social Action, driven by service and justice. Other frameworks include yogic paths (Bhakti, Jnana, Karma, Raja) or paths related to different seeker motivations, but these four provide a widely recognized model for spiritual growth and practice.

1. The Head (Intellectual/Knowing)

- **Focus:** Understanding, learning, logic, and theological study.
- **Practices:** Reading sacred texts, philosophical debate, learning about faith.
- **Danger:** Becoming overly rational or detached from feeling and action (Rationalism).

2. The Heart (Emotional/Feeling)

- **Focus:** Love, devotion, worship, and deep personal connection.
- **Practices:** Prayer, singing, emotional expression, finding beauty in creation.
- **Danger:** Becoming overly sentimental or manipulative (Emotionalism).

3. The Mystic (Contemplative/Experiencing)

- **Focus:** Inner silence, direct experience of the divine, transcendence.



- **Practices:** Meditation, contemplation, solitude, mindfulness.
- **Danger:** Withdrawing from the world and losing touch with community (Reclusivity).

4. The Kingdom (Social Action/Doing)

- **Focus:** Service, justice, ethical action, making the world better.
- **Practices:** Volunteering, advocacy, community building, ethical living.
- **Danger:** Becoming rigid or judgmental in pursuit of causes (Moralism).

Other Perspectives

- **Yoga:**
Swami Vivekananda highlighted four yogas: Karma (action), Bhakti (devotion), Jnana (knowledge), and Raja (meditation) for balance.
- **Spiritual Seekers (Bhagavad Gita):**
Categories include the distressed, the seeker of knowledge, the seeker of worldly happiness, and the one seeking wisdom/self-realization.

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