

SRI SRI RAVI SHANKAR AND THE ART OF SPREADING AWARENESS OVER THE WORLD

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1. Introduction

During the Twentieth Century, either before or after the Independence, India produced several saints. Many of these saints have preached and still preach a religion of love and devotion, the *bhakti*.¹ Nowadays, many of the *bhakti* movements they have created are still active and other new movements are being born with the emergence of new saint-figures. Among all these modern movements, The Art of Living Foundation is the most recent one, and one of the most active today. Founded in 1982 by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar who is believed by his followers to be the embodiment of divine love, The Art of Living Foundation claims to possess the "keys" to a better living. Indeed, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's movement offers courses of yoga and meditation worldwide to share its precious wisdom with the widest public, regardless of walks of life, religions, societies and cultures of the aspirants. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's yoga techniques and main messages as "Life is sacred; celebrate life" attract an ever-growing public, be it in India, in America, or anywhere else. In spite of the fact that The Art of Living Foundation is present all over the world, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and his movement remain not very much known among the scholarly circles, especially outside the Indian subcontinent.

So, in this short study, we introduce Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and his movement in a critical way through a discussion spread among three different sections. First, we try to provide a biographical construction of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's holiness. Then, we come back to the spiritual

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¹Marine Carrin, "Saintes des villes et saintes des champs," *Terrain*, 24, March 1995, 108. See also note 35.

training of the young master in order to understand the person and the character Sri Sri Ravi Shankar has become and above all the ideological orientation of his movement. Afterwards we shall have a look at his teachings and practices. Finally, we shall conclude this essay by comparing The Art of Living movement with the other modern Hindu religious movements, highlighting and critiquing the salient features it tries to enshrine.

2. Biography of the Master and Construction of Holiness

The biography of the master is our first source of information. Generally, in the case of saint figures, a unique and eulogistic biography exists and as it is somehow difficult to prove, we call it hagiography. Nevertheless, it is an ethnographic source for our subject. Indeed, it is in the latter that we can distinguish the beginnings of a saint's life. In the case of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, an official biography exists, which can be found in the Art of Living, and on tracts, books, CDs, videos and websites of the movement. It is invariably the same. A French journalist, living in India for some thirty years, has recently published a book, *The Guru of Joy*,² dedicated to the Art of Living founder, in which he comes back to the life of the master, bringing up many biographic and anecdotal elements gathered from Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's father, sister, and some people from his circle. Beyond the stories and anecdotal details of some exceptional events of which Sri Sri Ravi Shankar could be the author, this biography confirms the broad outlines broadcast by the Art of Living.³

Even so, this short biography contains some clues on how to understand the holiness of the guru. The first interesting point is the master's birth. The biography tells us that Sri Sri Ravi Shankar was born on May 13th, 1956, in Papanasam (Tamil Nadu) in a brahmin family. That day is symbolically important for Hindus as it corresponds to *Shankara Jayanti*. We were told that he was named on the 11th day of his birth,

²Francois Gautier, *The Guru of Joy: Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and the Art of Living*, New Delhi: Books Today, 2002.

³For convenience, when we refer to the biographical source, we will base ourselves on the biographical elements from Gautier, *The Guru of Joy*.

which corresponds to *Ramanuja Jayanti*.⁴ The fact that this double coincidence is put forward by the biographic text is not completely accidental. It emphasizes the importance of the young master's birth, and places it under favourable skies in the eyes of Hindu believers. Furthermore, like many hagiographies, it puts emphasis on the predispositions and rare capacities shown by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar during his childhood. Indeed, among some predispositions told by the persons close to him, he was able, at the age of four, to recite the entire *Bhagavad Gita*.⁵ This is a characteristic feature of young saints' lives as it is described by Marine Carrin in her article on saints in India: "Since his childhood, he [the saint] shows an exceptional maturity."⁶ Other facts gathered by Francois Gautier from Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's parents illustrate and strongly confirm this recurrent characteristic of young saints' lives.⁷

As to what concerns the building of the master's holiness again, we have noticed three stories which go along with Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's biography and which are important for the justification of his holiness. These stories are orally spread around among devotees and we can find them related in *The Guru of Joy*. It recalls five great figures of the modern Hindu tradition. According to biographic information, when Ravi Shankar was still very young, the Shankaracharyas of Sringeri and Kanchi, as well as the Shankaracharya of Shivganga saw the divine in him.⁸ Later, as a young man and part of the Transcendental Meditation movement, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi used to say: "The sun (*Ravi* means sun in

⁴*Śaṅkara jayanti* is the birth anniversary of Ādi Śaṅkara, the great Indian philosopher of Advaita Vedanta (800 A.D.).

⁵This detail can be found in all the different official biographies of Ravi Shankar's life as well as in Gautier, *The Guru of Joy*, 40-41.

⁶Carrin, "Saintes des villes et saintes des champs," 107.

⁷Gautier holds that Ravi Shankar showed from an early age a lot of devotion and a keen interest for the learning of sanskrit (*The Guru of Joy*, 41-42) and of *pujas* (*The Guru of Joy*, 46-47; 59-60). He also felt very concerned about the well-being of living creatures (*The Guru of Joy*, 58) and had already revolted against the caste system and the servitude of some men (*The Guru of Joy*, 42-43). This type of a response can be found in many saints, mainly among Hindu *bhakti* saints, as D. A. Swallow points out in his article on Sathya Sai Baba (Swallow D. A., "Ashes and Powers: Myth, Rite and Miracle in an Indian God-Man's Cult," *Modern Asian Studies* 16, 1 [1982], 127).

⁸Gautier, *The Guru of Joy*, 58.

sanskrit) rises and there will be light everywhere.”⁹ Finally, the last story puts forward the Hindu saint Ma Ananda Moyi. Maharishi Mahesh Yoga brought Ravi Shankar, still a teenager, to Vrindavan in order to meet the Bengali saint. When she saw Ravi Shankar, she exclaimed: “Ah, you have brought me the Ganges” meaning that he would purify the world.¹⁰ All these stories refer to established and recognized saint figures¹¹ within the Hindu tradition. Thus, they help establish the master’s charisma. Indeed these saints accept themselves the divine trait which inhabits young Ravi Shankar. They root and legitimize implicitly Sri Sri Ravi Shankar’s holiness.

To deal with the question of charisma and holiness, it would be interesting to have a look at what Sri Sri Ravi Shankar himself says on these points. He doesn’t explicitly claim his holiness, or his enlightenment. He doesn’t appreciate being presented as an enlightened master. However, a large majority of his devotees believe in his enlightenment. In 1982, he withdrew for ten days of silence, today he says it is then that he received the *Sudarshan Kriya* technique. Many disciples think that he became enlightened during this period, but nothing in the official biography confirms this, and he himself doesn’t talk about it. However, Ravi Shankar remains ambiguous on this matter. He doesn’t claim it clearly but does make implicit allusions to this when he talks about his mission: “Masters don’t need any favour from you. They just take off that anguish hand garbage which you cannot lift off yourself. All enlightened masters on this planet are garbage collectors.” He also says: “Many can cross with the help of One who has crossed.” So, doubt is maintained about his realization, creating thus a mysterious aura in reinforcing his charisma.

3. The Journey of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar: Tradition, Masters, Influences

Little is known about Sri Sri Ravi Shankar’s youth, about his university years or the training he received from some masters. When he is asked

⁹Gautier, *The Guru of Joy*, 69.

¹⁰Gautier, *The Guru of Joy*, 68.

¹¹Even if Maharishi was and still is a controversial character in India and in the West, nevertheless, he remains a great master of meditation, especially from the contemporary perspective.

questions on these topics, he remains discreet. However, among the available biographical information, two important details seem worthy of attention and we would like to come back to them. According to us, they could help us better understand the character Ravi Shankar has become and above all better comprehend the ideological path of his movement.

Young Ravi Shankar, without any doubt, was in contact with the reforming ideals of the Arya Samaj through Sudhakar Chaturvedi, his master at the time. He may have drawn his inspiration from this when he founded the Art of Living Foundation in 1982. Indeed, like Swami Dayananda Saraswati, the founder of the Arya Samaj, Ravi Shankar advocates monotheism, teaches the Vedanta, and denounces the caste system as a wrong interpretation of the Vedas, but he uses the concepts of *dharma*, *karma* and *saṁsāra*.

The other movement which undoubtedly seems to have influenced the young master is the Transcendental Meditation (TM)¹² of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar was indeed associated with the TM movement in his youth. Even though we hardly know anything about this period of the young master's life, it seems that he may have been close to Maharishi and that he may have taken great part in the TM activities during several years. He may have met Maharishi in 1975 during a conference in Bangalore, after having finished his traditional studies, including an advanced degree in modern science which he had completed by the age of seventeen. Then Ravi Shankar followed him. He is said to have travelled a lot for Maharishi, mainly in Europe, and dealt with the organisation of important TM meetings as well as *yajñas*.¹³ He is also said to have spent a lot of time teaching Vedic Pandits in Delhi. According to some TM ex-members, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar was considered as Maharishi's "favourite." The break from TM would date back to 1980,

¹²The Transcendental Meditation is a new religious movement born of the Hindu tradition, founded by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in the nineteen fifties. To use Yvon Ambroise's classification, it is a movement which belongs to the category of post-independent period movements (Yvon Ambroise, "Hindu Religious Movements: A Sociological Perspective," *Journal of Dharma* 7, 4 (October-December 1982), 358-359). The aim of TM is the spiritual regeneration of mankind thanks to the meditation technique taught by Maharishi (Ambroise, "Hindu Religious Movements," 372).

¹³*Yajña* is a Vedic ceremony.

according to Francois Gautier,¹⁴ and it is two years later, in 1982, that he founded The Art of Living Foundation. A lot of similarities can be found between the two movements. First, TM and Art of Living are both guru-centric spiritual movements and within their internal structure, we can notice that in TM as well as in Art of Living teachers are trained to go out as missionaries and teach the different techniques throughout the world. It is also interesting to note that the name Sri Sri Ravi Shankar has given to his movement bears a strange resemblance to the title of one of Maharishi's major writings: *Science of Being and the Art of Living*.¹⁵ As far as the taught techniques are concerned, the Art of Living meditation technique, *Sahaj Samadhi*, looks very much similar to the TM technique: they both use a *mantra* as meditation support. Like Maharishi, Ravi Shankar refers to science and medicine to show the efficiency and the positive effects of its techniques on human body. Of course, both of them formally deny having founded religious movements but prefer to speak of spiritual movements. Finally, it can be noted that in the Art of Living as well as in TM, the blessing *Jai Guru Dev* is frequently used which can be understood as "I give salutation to Guru Dev" (the Divine Master, or Swami Brahmananda Saraswati in the case of Maharishi). In a wider sense, it is a way to pay tribute to all the Holy Masters. The disciples use this blessing in all their discussions, and to an extent replaces the "hello," "goodbye" and "thank you" like expressions. All these similarities (the listed entries being incomplete) tend to make us think that Sri Sri Ravi Shankar must have drawn his inspiration from TM when he founded his movement and make some observers say that the Art of Living "seems poised to become the Transcendental Meditation of the next generation."¹⁶

Although Sri Sri Ravi Shankar claims not to belong to any special tradition or religion, we can, even so, link him to the holy tradition of Vedic masters.¹⁷ Sometimes he speaks about this unbroken tradition of

¹⁴Gautier, *The Guru of Joy*, 73-74.

¹⁵Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, *Science of Being and the Art of Living*, New Delhi: Allied Publishers (Private) India, 1963.

¹⁶Anne Cushman and Jerry Jones, *From Here to Nirvana: The Yoga Journal guide to Spiritual India*, New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1999, 138.

¹⁷Even though the word 'Holy' is employed to qualify this tradition, it seems that this *guru-parampara* has to be seen more like a philosophical tradition than a religious one.

masters (*guru-parampara*) who have transmitted Vedic knowledge since the dawn of time. On rare occasions, it is possible to see a great pictorial representation on a platform, next to the master. On it, we can see the painted faces of the great masters of the Advaita Vedanta tradition, from Narayana to Swami Brahmananda Saraswati and to Shankara and his disciples.¹⁸ In fact, this pictorial depiction of *guru-parampara* represents all masters in the advaitic tradition.¹⁹ The noticeable aspect of the *guru-parampara* to which Ravi Shankar refers is that it stops at Swami Brahmananda Saraswati (Guru Dev), who can be easily recognized at the bottom of the representation,²⁰ although Ravi Shankar has never met Guru Dev physically. Nevertheless, Maharishi was one of his disciples, and if there is any link between Ravi Shankar and Guru Dev in the *guru-parampara* it is through Maharishi. What is astonishing then is that Maharishi does not appear on the *guru-parampara*, and that Ravi Shankar links himself directly to Guru Dev. Thus, he links himself directly to Swami Brahmananda Saraswati, Shankaracharya of Jyotirmath, and by the same token to the Holy Tradition but without referring to Maharishi.²¹ This link can be explained from a doctrinal point of view by the fact that Ravi Shankar claims to go back to the philosophical tradition of the advaitic masters. As far as the link between Guru Dev and Ravi Shankar is concerned, it might be said that Ravi Shankar goes beyond the teachings of Guru Dev, attempting to synthesise varied Hindu traditions. Indeed, as Swami Rama puts it: "One thing very attractive about his [Swami Brahmananda Saraswati] way of teaching was his combination of the

¹⁸The *guru-parampara* from the advaitic tradition begins with the *daiva-parampara* which includes Lord Nārāyaṇa and Brahma (Padmabhūva) followed by the *ṛṣi-parampara* which includes Vasiṣṭha, Śakti, Parāśara, Vyāsa, and Suka. Then *mānava-parampara* which includes Gaudapāda, Govinda Bhagavatpada and Śaṅkarāchārya and his four disciples: Padmapada, Hastamalaka, Totaka and Sureśvara.

¹⁹Moreover, Ravi Shankar uses the blessing *Jai Guru Dev* in order to pay tribute to all the divine masters of the tradition.

²⁰Contrary to the representation of the *guru-parampara* used in the TM where Maharishi can be seen respectfully bowing before Swami Brahmananda Saraswati, on the Art of Living one, Maharishi does not appear at all.

²¹If Ravi Shankar doesn't place Maharishi on the line of the Vedic masters, it may be because the latter was born a *ksatriya* (and not a *brāhmin*) and from the traditional point of view, only *brāhmins* can be *Gurus*.

bhakti and Advaita systems.”²² We can notice that Ravi Shankar’s teachings are based on the same doctrinal combination, although as an advaitic master, he teaches not only non-duality (*advaita*) but also *bhakti* in terms of devotion and self-surrender to God or to himself.

4. Teachings and Practices

The central aspect of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar’s teachings is a breathing technique, which is otherwise known as the *Sudarshan Kriya*.²³ He says that he “received” this breathing technique during a ten days period of silence in 1982. After this event, he founded The Art of Living Foundation to spread the *Sudarshan Kriya* technique around the world. At the beginning, and during the first five years, courses were held by Ravi Shankar himself. Quickly he trained people to teach the technique, and now he doesn’t teach the *Sudarshan Kriya* anymore even if he is present. Ravi Shankar says about this breathing technique that it is an ancient potent technique, which he has just reintroduced it today. According to him, it “triggers the mind and body to release stress.” But the *Sudarshan Kriya* is not the only technique taught by The Art of Living. Some teachers, trained by the master in person,²⁴ also teach a meditation technique called *Sahaj Samadhi*.²⁵ It is a mantra-based meditation technique which is said to be easy to learn and effortless to practise. The aim of this technique is to bring peace to the mind.

To teach these techniques, Ravi Shankar has set up different course programmes. The first course, stretched over four or six days, formerly known as the Basic Course and recently re-christened as The Art of Living

²²Swami Rama, *Living with the Himalayan Masters: Spiritual Experiences of Swami Rama*, Honesdale, Pennsylvania: Himalayan Institute Press, 1980, 260.

²³*Sudarshan* can be translated as “true vision” or “right vision” and *Kriya* by “purifying action.”

²⁴I have noticed that lots of *Sahaj Samādhi* teachers are former teachers of Transcendental Meditation.

²⁵In yoga tradition, there are four states of consciousness (*Samādhi*) generally admitted: *Yoga Samādhi*, *Tāntrika Samādhi*, *Nirvikalpa Samādhi* and *Sahaj Samādhi* (some masters distinguish more states of *Samādhi*). One can reach these different states through meditation practice. We can translate *Sahaj Samādhi* by effortless transcendence. This state is seen as the highest state of consciousness in which one is above everything, and in unity with God and the entire universe.

Course Part I, teaches how to practise the *Sudarshan Kriya*. During this course, using both theory and practice, people learn different kinds of *pranayamas*: the three-part breathing yogic technique, the *bhastrikas*,²⁶ and the *Sudarshan Kriya*.²⁷ They are also initiated, in a practical way, to some basic points of Vedic philosophy through some "keys" easily applicable in day to day life. At the end of the course the new practitioner should do "his *Kriya*" everyday, preferably in the morning. In fact, the initiation course of *Sahaj Samadhi* technique is a little bit different from the *Sudarshan Kriya*. The course is spread over four days, and it requires less self-investment than for The Art of Living Course Part I. To be initiated to the *Sahaj Samadhi* technique, one has to bring a white handkerchief, a few flowers and fruits in order to perform a *puja* (ceremony).²⁸ After the ceremony, a personal *mantra* is given by the teacher to each student who is not supposed to reveal it to anyone else. Then the new practitioner should meditate twenty minutes twice a day, morning and evening. There is also another common programme called The Art of Living Course Part II, opened to people who have completed the Part I. This course is a residential course (generally held in an Art of Living centre) over four or six days. During this course the investment asked from participants is maximal. The day is scheduled by the teacher. The course alternates among *pranayamas*, some basic *asanas*, Vedic philosophy, *Sudarshan Kriya*, meditation, *seva*,²⁹ *satsang*,³⁰ and also some workshops and group training on personal development.

²⁶These two kinds of *prāṇāyāmas* are well known by people practising yoga.

²⁷Some observants (See Altglas, "Living in Harmony," *Revue Française d'Ethnologie* 30,4 (2000), 547) say that the *Sudarshan Kriya* looks like the *kapalabhati*. I don't subscribe to this point of view. It seems to me that this technique is really different from *Kapalabhati*. Pretending that *Sudarshan Kriya* may be a kind of *kapalabhati* tends to neglect two central points of Ravi Shankar's technique. This point of view cannot be developed here.

²⁸According to the teachers, this *pūja* is performed in order to pay homage to the Masters of the Holy Tradition which kept the knowledge of this technique intact and alive for thousands of years.

²⁹*Seva* means selfless service. Concretely, during the course people have to work in the centre: cleaning the different rooms and the toilets, preparing the meals, washing up, caring of plants, etc.

³⁰*Satsang* can be translated by "in association with Truth, or with the wise." During *satsang*, students are seated with the teacher or sometimes with Ravi Shankar.

These three are common courses; there are other courses,³¹ though they won't be dealt with here. The originality of the training set up by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar resides in the way it is proposed. Indeed, the Art of Living spreads Vedic knowledge together with ancient yogic techniques in the form of training accessible to anyone for a financial participation. This method of functioning, especially in imparting wisdom, is opposed to the one applied in traditional ashrams, as it drastically alters the traditional guru-disciple relationship.³² It can be said, in a way, as Anne Cushman has put it, "Art of Living repackages traditional yogic techniques and Vedic philosophy into a simple, nonsectarian system."³³

Ravi Shankar's teachings, strictly speaking, are based on traditional Hindu texts. As a scholar of Vedic literature, he has a perfect knowledge of the texts, and the comments he makes upon them are available to his disciples as audio CDs, videos or books. He uses a language which is simple and accessible to many. Thus, he has commented upon the *Yoga-Sūtras* of Patañjali, the *Yoga Sara Upaniṣad*, the *Aṣṭavakra Gīta*, and the *Śiva Sūtras*. Among all the commentaries of the Vedantic scriptures made by Ravi Shankar, we wish to point out one in which there is a uniqueness in his teachings. It is the commentary of Nārada's *Bhakti Sūtras*, which is the classical treatise of *Bhakti* tradition.³⁴ *Bhakti Sūtras* expounds the path of spiritual devotion (also called *Bhakti Yoga*)³⁵ and places it above all other paths. It is written with simplicity and clarity, and the modern and simple commentary of Ravi Shankar allows a deeper understanding to a wider audience. After yogic practices (breathing techniques and

Generally, *satsangs* are held during evenings after dinner, questions and discussions on main philosophical topics (death, life, love, happiness, war, etc.) coupled with devotional chants (*bhajans*).

³¹Some of these are: *Divya Samajka Nirmaan* commonly called DSN, Breath Water Sound also known as the *Nav Chetna Shibir* in India, Art Excel & Young Adults' Course, Corporate Course, College Campus Course, etc.

³²This way of doing things can be found in the TM. For example, traditionally, the master himself transmits the mantra to the disciple. At the Art of Living as in the TM, a teacher gives the *mantra* to the future meditation adept.

³³Cushman and Jones, *From Here to Nirvana*, 138.

³⁴*Bhagavad Gīta* is also central in his teachings on devotion.

³⁵According to the *bhakti* philosophy, one can reach the Divine (seen as a universal divinity) through adoration and constant offerings to a personal deity.

meditation) and Vedantic knowledge, devotion (*bhakti*) is the third, and the central, mainstay of Ravi Shankar's teachings. The following passages from him reflect *Bhakti* philosophy in the teachings: "The blossoming of devotion is fullness in life;" "When devotion has flowered in you, every step is led by the Divine."³⁶ Although Ravi Shankar teaches devotion through self-surrender to God, he is also an Advaita Vedantin like Ramakrishna or Swami Brahmananda Saraswati as the next quote shows: "In fact, surrender is a joke. You have nothing to surrender. Everything anyway belongs to the Divine. But if you think you have something, the enlightened say, *Okay, you surrender it*. It makes your mind free."³⁷ His monistic philosophy can be illustrated by the next excerpts: "God can never be separate, because everything is in God – this entire universe is made up of God."³⁸ He continues: "God is the Seer himself. Who sees ... *that is God*"³⁹ and "God is devotee, devotee is God."⁴⁰ In the master's teachings, devotion or worship is not necessarily directed to a particular deity, but to the attributeless and formless Absolute, also called "the Divine"⁴¹ or to make it more graspable to western devotees, God. It is interesting to notice that although Ravi Shankar strongly denies that Art of Living is strictly religious, the path of *bhakti* (with its constant reference to God or the "Divine") he teaches, it has the definite nature of a religious practice both in the traditional and modern understandings. Of course, in a way, we can say that this kind of religious message and practice is universalist in character.

Let us now to see how *bhakti* arises concretely in the movement. Like in other *bhakti* traditions, *satsang* gives concrete expression to *bhakti*. During *satsang* people sing classical Hindu chants (*bhajans*) directed to gods like Śiva, Gaṇeśa, Kṛṣṇa, Durgā, Kālī, etc., and also to the *Guru* himself. Sometimes, devotees create their own devotional songs or sing

³⁶Sharmila Murarka, comp. and ed., *Quotes from SRI SRI*, Bangalore: Publications Division of Vyakti Vikas Kendra India, 2003, 48.

³⁷Murarka, *Quotes from SRI SRI*, 163.

³⁸Murarka, *Quotes from SRI SRI*, 74.

³⁹Murarka, *Quotes from SRI SRI*, 75.

⁴⁰Murarka, *Quotes from SRI SRI*, 42.

⁴¹This kind of devotion is called *Nirguna bhakti*. See Carrin, "Saintes des villes et saintes des champs," 108.

chants of their own religious background.⁴² People do not only sing, occasionally they may stand up and dance. *Satsang* awakens the emotion of love and redirects it to the "Divine." In other words, *satsang* is the expression of the experience of divine love among the devotees. The practice of *satsang* occurs daily in the Art of Living centres, be it in India, in Europe, or in America. Ravi Shankar insists on the fact that people must gather as often as possible when outside the centres to do *satsangs*. The main expression of *bhakti* in the movement, however, remains the devotion to the *Guru*. The master teaches the surrender to God or the "Divine," but he also teaches the surrender to himself. As we have noticed, during *satsangs* some *bhajans* praise the *Guru*. Devotion to the master is also maintained by Hindu traditional practices like *Darshan*⁴³ or *Guru Seva*.⁴⁴ We can also see signs of this *guru* devotion on some special occasions. For example, *Guru Jayanti* (birth anniversary of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar) on May 13th is celebrated in every Art of Living centre all around the world. During the celebration of *Kriṣṇa Jayanti* (also called *Janmāṣṭami*), Ravi Shankar is clearly identified with Kriṣṇa by his devotees. Moreover, we can notice that the *Guru Pūrṇima*⁴⁵ is also celebrated at the Art of Living Foundation. During this celebration, devotees worship Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, they sing *bhajans* for their master. For many devotees, he is believed to be an embodiment of divine love. Very often, they liken their *guru* to great religious or philosophical leaders. He is frequently presented by his devotees as "as compassionate as Jesus, as playful as Lord Kriṣṇa, and as erudite as Ādi Śaṅkara." Through all these examples, we can say that in the Art of Living, *bhakti* ultimately serves the cult of the *Guru*.

Finally, it may also be pointed out that another Hindu concept taken up by Ravi Shankar, i.e., the concept of *seva*, the selfless service to the "Divine," has a special dimension. The *guru's* message is very clear about

⁴²I have observed these both in the European centre and in the Indian centre in Bangalore.

⁴³The Sanskrit word *darśan* can be translated by vision, sight of the divine. *Darśan* is a central act of Hindu worship, it is to see and be seen by the deity (in our case, deity is *guru*).

⁴⁴*Guru Seva* is service to the *guru*.

⁴⁵*Guru Pūrṇima* is the full moon day in the Hindu month of Ashād (July-August). On this day, all devotees worship their respective spiritual masters.

this: "Serve in whatever possible manner you can." In the Art of Living, however, the concept of *seva* is integral to the practice of *bhakti*.⁴⁶ These two main concepts of the Hindu tradition are exploited by Ravi Shankar to promote the humanitarian and educational activities of the various international programmes he has set up.⁴⁷ The Art of Living, in a way, extends the religious definition of *seva* to a social dimension. In this manner, *bhakti* and *seva* lead to social work worldwide, as one of the Art of Living slogan suggests it: "We care for the world, We care for you."

5. Conclusion and Perspectives

Through this brief survey of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's Art of Living movement, we find not only some similarities with other modern *bhakti* movements but also some specificities. As we have seen it before, Ravi Shankar must have drawn his inspiration from Arya Samaj's ideals with which the Art of Living shares main doctrinal points. At the same time, the Art of Living, however, seems to follow, in some way, the orientation of the Ramakrishna Mission which emerged in the pre-independent period like the Arya Samaj itself. Indeed, some doctrines of Ravi Shankar follow directly from the neo-vedantic philosophy mostly developed by Swami Vivekananda. Like him, the founder of Art of Living advocates the unity of the human soul with the "Divine," the bringing together of the different religious traditions, and social service to humanity as a service to God. Lastly, Ravi Shankar, like Swami Vivekananda, wants to use Vedic traditional values to play a role in the spiritual awakening of the West. Also, the Art of Living movement shares many similarities with modern religious movements of the post-independent period. As we have already pointed it out, the internal organization of the Art of Living is very similar

⁴⁶Pascale Lepinasse, *De la dévotion à l'ordre moral mondialisé. Profils et offensive de trois mouvements indiens transnationaux. Etude sur la vitalité hindoue contemporaine*. Ph.D. Thesis in preparation, Paris, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales.

⁴⁷Sri Sri Ravi Shankar is behind humanitarian programs like "5H" (Houses, Health, Hygiene, Human Values, Harmony in diversity), "Care for Children," "Prison Smart" (Free courses for prisoners and jailers), "Emergency Relief" (provide help in crisis: war, flood, earthquake, etc.), "Breath, Water and Sound Workshops; he is also behind the NGO called IAHV (International Association for Human Values) based in Geneva.

to the TM one, and like the Maharishi's movement, Ravi Shankar's movement is a *guru*-centric one. Besides, it shares this characteristic with other modern movements led by *Amma* (Mata Amritanandamayi) or Satya Sai Baba. All these movements share the same ethic of social service through various philanthropic activities and social work keeping an international dimension to it. Besides Ravi Shankar, *Amma* and Satya Sai Baba as well put the emphasis on the practice of *bhakti*, too.

However, even if the Art of Living looks like many other movements, we can notice some discrepancies. First, unlike *Amma's* and Satya Sai Baba's movements, the Art of Living offers simple and concrete yoga practices through packages taught worldwide by teachers trained in Ravi Shankar's international centres. The strength of his teaching also resides in the clarity with which he makes the Vedantic philosophy accessible to all. He offers teachings (yoga breathing techniques, meditation, vedantic philosophy) outside of their Hindu religious context. He is, thus, able to combine traditional vedic knowledge with a very modern way of teaching. In a way, we can say that he reinterprets the traditional wisdom of the *Vedanta* to suit the modern challenges of the world today. In other words, he adapts ancient Vedic values to modern situations by reintroducing a Vedic way of life traditionally reserved exclusively to brahmins. In this manner, he attempts a rejuvenation and regeneration of the Vedic tradition in the modern world.

Exactly twenty years ago, when Hummel was finishing his study on *gurus*, Satya Sai Baba's movement was enjoying growing success in the Indian subcontinent as well as at international level.⁴⁸ Today, the same phenomenon is occurring for Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's Art of Living. Indeed, the Art of Living is in full expansion. The movement is rapidly expanding, not only in India, but all over the world. Due to the work of the Art of Living teachers and devotees, Ravi Shankar's message reaches a wider public everyday. As for Ravi Shankar, he travels all around the world to encourage peace and at the same time to promote the Art of Living courses. In India, he comes across really well in the media, and he is a key figure in the country. He regularly appears on the Hindu religious channel

⁴⁸Reinhart Hummel, *Les Gourous*, Collection BREF, Paris : Les Editions du Cerf, 1988, 44.

Samskar, and he is omnipresent in the high circulation dailies. The movement is currently present in 142 countries.

In a way, we can say that Sri Sri Ravi Shankar runs a compagny of yoga courses worldwide. Consequently, and thanks to generous donors, the Art of Living seems to handle a lot of money. The Art of Living's courses seem to be a very profitable business as is shown by the recent addition of a gigantic hall of meditation constructed in view of welcoming an ever-growing public at his Foundation. Spanning

The wealth of the Art of Living Foundation can also be seen mainly through funds given to support its numerous humanitarian reliefs.⁴⁹ The humanitarian side of the Art of Living Foundation is really important and increasing due to the constant affluence of new devotees/volunteers. Pascale Lepinasse remains careful about the finality of this strong humanitarian orientation which might be, according to her, implemented by Ravi Shankar in order to emphasize a universalist moral.⁵⁰ At the same time, however, we must remain vigilant on Ravi Shankar's universalist conception of religious belief and on the way he wants to "globalize the [vedic] wisdom."⁵¹ Indeed, like the neo-vedantin Swami Vivekananda, Ravi Shankar wants to bring all the religious traditions together, by using traditional vedic values to contribute to the spiritual awakening of the world, especially the West. So it might be justified to wonder if this project of globalization is not, in fact, a project of "Vedantisation" of the world religious traditions. However, as the Art of Living Foundation is still a young movement, it is too early to answer these questions which nevertheless could be the aim of future researches.

⁴⁹According to official facts of the movement, thanks to the 5H program, 1000 homes for the urban homeless were built, about 1700 medical camps for providing primary medical care were held, 21,000 free Breath, Water, and Sound Workshops were conducted this year covering over 1 million people, and finally 5H program is active in 20,000 villages spread over 21 states.

⁵⁰Lepinasse, *De la dévotion à l'ordre moral mondialisé*.

⁵¹In an interview given to an Indian Magazine, Ravi Shankar said: "We have no objection taking food from every part of the world, listening to music from every part of the world. So, we need to globalize wisdom too."