

Eckankar

by Ron J. Bigalke Jr.

Founder: Paul Twitchell

Founding Date: 1965

Sacred Scriptures: *The Shariyat-Ki-Sugmad* (“Way of the Eternal”)

Primary Texts: *ECKANKAR—The Key to Secret Worlds* and *The Tiger’s Fang* by Paul Twitchell; *A Cosmic Sea of Words: The ECKANKAR Lexicon* and *The Spiritual Exercises of ECK* by Sri Harold Klemp.

Headquarters: Chanhassen, Minnesota

Unique Terms: Arahata, Chela, ECK, HU, Mahanta, Satsang, Soul Travel, Sri, Sugmad, Vairagi, and Wah Z.

HISTORY

Paul Twitchell (also known as Paulji or Peddar Zaskq) was born to Jacob and Effie Twitchell in 1908. He was raised in Paducah, Kentucky, where he attended Western State Teachers College and married Camille Ballowe. In 1942 (during the Second World War) he enlisted in the U.S. Navy, and served three years with the Navy before moving to New York City and later (1945) to Washington, D.C. In 1950, the Twitchells joined Swami Premananda’s Self-Revelation Church of Absolute Monism and edited the official publication, *The Mystic Cross*, of the Self-Revelation Church. Although he was always interested in religion from an early age, joining Premananda’s church was his first full-time experience with Eastern mysticism and the beginning of his spiritual quest for the most ancient religion. In 1955 Premananda asked Twitchell to leave the church. He left both the church and his wife.

Eckankar followers believe Tibetan monk Rebazar Tarzs appeared in spirit form to Twitchell in 1951 in the foothills of the Himalayas. Not only was he influenced by Tarzs, but also by Hindu guru Sudar Singh, who he claimed to have met in India in 1935. Singh provided Twitchell with the foundation of Eastern mysticism for the new religion of Eckankar. During the 1950s, he was initiated into *Ruhani Satsana*, the “Divine Science of the Soul,” and also began studying *The Path of the Masters*, which was written by Dr. Julian Johnson (a fellow Kentuckian) who studied the teachings of Sawan Singh in India. Suwan Singh systematized the yoga of the audible sound current (*Surat Shabd Yoga*), which is union of the soul with the divine sound.

In the early sixties, Twitchell wrote the manuscript *The Tiger’s Fang*, which was an account of his travels with Kirpal Singh (an Eastern guru) as his spiritual guide through the spiritual worlds of God. His manuscript was a plagiarism of *The Path of the Masters*. Kirpal Singh warned Twitchell not to publish *The Tiger’s Fang* when asked to validate it. In 1963 Singh moved to the United States and introduced Twitchell to his second wife, Gail Atkinson. They married in 1964, and Twitchell left Singh and denied ever having any association with him (for example, the 1967 version of *The Tiger’s Fang* did not mention Kirpal Singh and all accounts of him were replaced with Rebazar Tarzs). The continuance of his involvement with Eastern and occult practices, and independence from his spiritual guide (Kirpal Singh), led to the formation of Eckankar, which is simply a reworking of the Hindu sect Radhasoami.¹ Twitchell is responsible for bringing the popular occult religion of Eckankar as a distinct and independent movement to the modern world. By 1965, Twitchell had already begun conducting Soul Travel workshops in Southern California and initiating many into his teachings. In 1970 Eckankar was established as a nonprofit religious organization. A year later, Paul Twitchell died of a heart attack.

At the Fifth World-Wide Seminar of Eckankar, Twitchell’s wife claimed her deceased husband appeared to her in a dream and revealed to her that the new spiritual leader was Darwin Gross. In 1972, Gail Atkinson Twitchell married Gross. Their marriage ended in divorce after five years. Gross

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served from 1971-1981, until his advisory council (the Ancient Order of the Vairagi ECK Masters) recommended he cease service as Living ECK Master. In 1981 Gross was replaced by Harold Klemp, who is the current Mahanta, the Living ECK Master.² Klemp “is responsible for continuing the development of the Eckankar teachings. His mission is to help people find their way back to God.”³

Members of Eckankar can be found throughout the world. The average attendance at worldwide seminars is 10,000. In 2001, the Graduate Center of the City University of New York conducted “the first large-scale national survey of religious identification conducted among Americans in the twenty-first century.”⁴ The survey indicated that Eckankar members were 0.01% of the United States population and that membership increased by 30% from 1990 (18,000) to 2001 (26,000). Worldwide estimates of membership range from 50,000 to 3,000,000.⁵ Repeated requests for definite membership figures from Eckankar headquarters were ignored. Perhaps the 50,000 square foot “Temple of ECK” in Chanhassen, Minnesota is a good indicator of total adherents and the fact that members can be found in over 100 countries.

DOCTRINES

Eckankar claims to be the most ancient teaching known to man since it alleges to address what always was and always will be. Sri Harold Klemp, the current leader of Eckankar has stated, “There are many routes we can take to heaven . . . the Spiritual Exercises of ECK will help you to find your own custom-made approach to the Kingdom of God.”⁶ However, Twitchell had previously written, “It is not possible to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven except through the teachings of ECKANKAR.”⁷

Monism: Monism means “all is one.” It is an explanation of experiences resulting in an altered state of consciousness. The idea is dissolution of any distinctions between the individual and the experience.⁸ Since only one Reality (see “Sugmad” below) is believed to exist, then any good or evil manifestations all belong to the same Reality. Faith is in an all-encompassing Reality. “All roads lead to Rome,” since there is one ultimate Reality. Hinduism refers to this as *Sat-Chit-Ananda*, which is the “ecstasy of consciousness aware of itself.” Since there is only one Reality, man is not under a moral law. Man ignores his sinful condition and any awareness of personal sin. To believe in good or evil is a dualistic concept that is repulsive. Since “all is one,” everything not part of God is an illusion. The material relationship to God is a manifestation that, in a sense, denies the reality of matter.

God: The sacred name of God is “Sugmad.” The Sugmad is nothing more than a sleeping mass of energy that exploded into billions and billions of individualized parts of consciousness. It does not manifest as a personality and is neither assumed to be male or female, but is the everlasting ECK. The ECK (also called Divine Spirit or Holy Spirit) sustains all life.⁹ ECK is always emanating from beyond creation to creation, and connects the chelas (spiritual students) to the heart of the Sugmad. The ECK manifests in two aspects: “Inner Light” (“a reflection of the atoms of God moving in space”) and “Inner Sound” (“the Audible Life Current that carries Soul back home to God”).¹⁰ Therefore, another name for ECK is the “Religion of the Light and Sound of God” and also means “Co-worker with God.”¹¹

Humanity: The individualized parts of consciousness resulting from the exploding Sugmad became souls entering the material world. Sometimes called the “true self” or “Tuza,” the soul is the inner, most sacred part of a person. It exists before physical birth and lives after the death of the physical body. The soul is the creative center of its own world. The soul has a spark of divinity, which allows it to know, perceive, and see all things. The soul can exist and travel apart from both the body and mind, which are part of the illusionary world. By entering various planes in Eckankar, the soul is able to understand itself as pure spirit.

Karma/Reincarnation: Karma is “the spiritual law of cause and effect.”¹² Good karma will lead individuals on an upward evolution toward perfection, whereas bad karma brings regression to a lower state of life. As in almost all monistic eastern religions, bad Karma is accumulated through enslavement to any of “the five passions of the mind: lust, anger, attachment, greed, and vanity.”¹³

Reincarnation (sometimes called “the wheel of transmigration”) is the belief that people have lived hundreds or thousands of prior lives and that they will continue to live hundreds or thousands of lives until the soul reaches a state of perfection. Multiple lives are required to rid oneself of bad karma so the ECKist (chela) can achieve enlightenment. It is a cyclical process that is the result of people’s karma. The Mahanta’s mere presence can remove ages of karmic debt. It is claimed that through his divine power, the Mahanta can break the process of reincarnation in a life of complete submission.

Enlightenment: Man does not understand the relationship between the Sugmad and the material world due to a faulty consciousness. Hence, a person needs to seek enlightenment (also called God consciousness, God-realization, and self realization). This can be obtained through the teachings and spiritual exercises of ECK (such as dreams, past lives and soul travel). The purposes of spiritual exercises are to allow a person to experience the light and sound of God. One spiritual exercise is singing (chanting a mantra) the word HU (the holy name of God). Through these teachings and spiritual exercises, enlightenment with the one Reality (i.e. monism) and the illusion of the material world, can be obtained.

Further enlightenment through utilization of spiritual exercises makes man capable of creating his own reality by manipulating the progress of his own evolution toward godhood. Anything real is composed of consciousness, therefore, man learns to control and master reality by deepening his consciousness.

“Eckankar teaches that our destiny is to become a Co-worker with God.”¹⁴ Seeking enlightenment is finding the balance between the inner (soul) and the outer (body). Until there is balance, one cannot become a Co-worker with God. The soul, the true self, becomes the Co-worker with God. Ultimately, reincarnation can be escaped by heeding the light and sound of God, which is enlightenment. Eckankar is described as being a “Co-worker with God” in the sense that one makes the personal journey home to God by raising self and God consciousness.

The Living ECK Master alone has the ability to act as both the Inner and the Outer Master for chelas. An initiation is “an invitation from the Living ECK Master to take the next step on the way home to God.”¹⁵ There are, at least, fourteen levels of initiation. The Fifth Initiation is the most significant since it indicates achieving the Soul Plane, and therefore allows the chela to become a Mahdis (Higher Initiate) and ECK clergy member.

Soul Travel: According to Klemp, enlightenment is best achieved through soul travel. Eckankar is “the ancient science of soul travel,” which is “the projection of the inner consciousness which travels through the lower states into the ecstatic states in which the subject feels that he possesses the awareness of the religious experience of being.” Projection “is done through a series of spiritual experiences known only to the followers of this science.”¹⁶

The soul can transcend both body and mind, and enter into the pure positive worlds of spirit and soul. Soul travel is not merely astral projection since there are eleven planes which the soul can travel to reach the Sugmad. The planes are levels of existences, such as astral, causal, etheric, mental, physical, and soul. Each plane has a chant, ruler, and sound. The planes and the sound are: 1) Physical Plane (sound of thunder); 2) Astral Plane (sound of the roaring sea); 3) Causal Plane (sound of tinkling bells); 4) Mental Plane (sound of running water); 5) Etheric Plane (sound of buzzing bees); 6) Atma Lok (sound of a single note of a flute); 7) Alakh Lok (sound of wind); 8) Alaya Lok (sound of humming); 9) Hukikat Lok (sound of a thousand violins); 10) Agam Lok (sound of woodwinds music); and, 11) Anami Purusha (sound of HU: the most ancient, secret name for God). The etheric plane is the last boundary between the lower (physical or material) worlds and the spiritual planes; it is the source of intuition.

Atma Lok, (level six, sometimes called “the soul plane”) is where self-realization is achieved. “The Soul Plane is the only plane in the higher worlds where Soul is still cloaked with a form or body. . . . The ECK continues to flow outward from the heart of God, even to the far reaches of the lower worlds.” The planes are “the journey from Self- to God-Realization.”¹⁷

Soul travel through dreams is “a teaching tool,” which allows practitioners to “look into the heavenly worlds.”¹⁸ The Mahanta is the Dream Master and can guide chelas through their dreams. Dream journals are maintained for study since it “provides a bridge between the inner and outer worlds.”¹⁹ Prayer and meditation are inferior to the spiritual exercises of Eckankar because they allow the ECKist to join actively “in a higher state of consciousness rather than passively waiting to receive it.”²⁰

BIBLICAL RESPONSE

Monism: The “all is one” proposition (which is so common to Eastern religions) confounds the *imago Dei* (image of God) with the *essentia Dei* (essence of God). The *imago Dei* does not mean that man possesses even an ember of divinity nor the *essentia Dei*. Peter did write that Christians are “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet.1:4), but his statement is referring to the transformation of the Christian to reflect the attributes of God not union with the *essentia Dei*.

Mantra: Scripture never encourages one to stop thinking and concentrate on a mantra, such as singing of the word HU. On the contrary, the exhortation is to be sober and alert, actively resisting the wiles of the devil (1 Pet. 5:8-9). Eckankar's underlying premise is that man needs to be united with the divine principles through enlightenment and the use of meditative techniques. In contrast, Christian meditation focuses not on the vain repetition of a mantra, but on the solid foundation of God's Word (e.g. Ps. 1:1-2; 19:7-14).

Reincarnation: Scripture teaches that there people have one like one earth followed by judgment: "And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27). By its own definition, reincarnation is an impersonal law that creates pain and suffering. For instance, bad karma would result from someone abusing, murdering, or inflicting some other offense upon another in this present life. Therefore, when that person dies they must regress to someone who is also mistreated. According to the law of karma, any evil that is done to another must also be reciprocated upon the one inflicting the harm. In other words, if someone does wrong in this life then there has to be someone who reciprocally treats him or her wrongly. The cyclical process of reincarnation perpetuates evil rather than solving the problem.

God: God has personality, such as emotions (Numb. 11:1; Deut. 5:9; 28:63; Isa. 1:12-15; Jer. 2:10-13; 5:30-31; Hos. 11; 1 Jn. 4:8), intellect (Isa. 40:13-14; 55:8-9; 1 Jn. 3:20), and will (Exod. 20:1-18; Isa. 14:24; Acts 14:16). He is good (Ps. 31:19; Mt. 5:45; Rom. 2:4); eternal (Gen. 21:33; Exod. 3:14; Rev. 1:8), holy (Ps. 99:9; Isa. 6:3), immutable (Ps. 102:25-26; Mal. 3:6; Jas. 1:17); infinite (1 Kgs. 8:27), omnipotent (Gen. 17:1; Mt. 19:26; Eph. 1:11; Phil. 2:7; Heb. 6:18), omnipresent (Ps. 139:7-10); omniscient (Ps. 139:1-4; Isa. 46:9-10; Acts 2:23; Heb. 4:13; 1 Pet. 1:1-2), and true (2 Sam. 7:28; Ps. 31:5; Jn. 1:14).

Enlightenment: Instead of enlightenment, mankind needs salvation. God is our holy Creator and righteous judge and mankind has rebelled against Him. The result is alienation from God resulting in death in the world because all sinned (Rom. 5:12). Although man believes he is a little god on earth, the true God said, "you will die like men" (Ps. 82:7). Salvation is not enlightenment for Roman 3:12, Psalm 39:5, and Isaiah 64:6 teach that man's true nature is total depravity; there is no good in man. Therefore, the Father draws men unto Himself by the by the agency of the Holy Spirit and by the power of the Gospel.

Though Eckankar embraces the lie that "there is nothing in the universe that is not the SUGMAD," and all points of consciousness belong to that same reality, Jesus declared there is only one Truth, Way, and Life (Jn. 14:6). It is the lie that takes many forms. The broad road has many paths leading to destruction and the narrow road has one way that leads to eternal life: Jesus Christ.

Notes

- ¹ "Eckankar: A Hard Look at a New Religion," *SCP Journal* 3 (September 1979).
- ² Often he will use the title "Sri," which is similar to pastor and reverend, and used for those who have attained the Kingdom of God.
- ³ *About ECKANKAR: An Overview of Eckankar and Its Teachings* (Chanhassen, MN: Eckankar, 2003), 2.
- ⁴ Barry A. Kosmin and Egon Mayer, "American Religious Identification Survey" [online] (The Graduate Center, CUNY, 2001, accessed 14 July 2006) available from http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_briefs/aris/introduction.htm.
- ⁵ William J. Petersen, *Those Curious New Cults in the 80s* (New Canaan, CT: Keats Publishing, 1982), 286.
- ⁶ Sri Harold Klemp, as quoted by *Eckankar: Ancient Wisdom for Today*, 2nd ed., comp. Todd Cramer and Doug Munson (1993; Minneapolis: Eckankar, 1995), 1.
- ⁷ Paul Twitchell, *The Shariyat-Ki-Sugmad* (San Diego: Illuminated Way Press, 1971), 1:83.
- ⁸ Eckankar does differ from Buddhism and Hinduism, since it does not teach dissolution of the individual. Although there is *this* point of disagreement with standard monism, Twitchell was a monist as evident

- in his teaching: "There is nothing in the universe that is not the SUGMAD, the everlasting ECK" [Paul Twitchell, *The Eck Satsang Discourses*, 2nd series, no. 8 (Las Vegas: Eckankar ASOST, 1970-1971), 6]. Furthermore, even the lowest forms of life are believed to flow from the Sugmad.
- ⁹ *Eckankar: Ancient Wisdom for Today*, 58.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *About ECKANKAR*, 6.
- ¹³ ECKANKAR Center of Portland, "Living the Five Virtues," *The ECK Star*, public edition (May-June 2006): 1.
- ¹⁴ *Eckankar: Ancient Wisdom for Today*, 22.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.
- ¹⁶ Paul Twitchell, *ECKANKAR: The Key to Secret Worlds* (San Diego: Illuminated Way Press, 1969), 237.
- ¹⁷ *Eckankar: Ancient Wisdom for Today*, 58-59.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.



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