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J.D. Salinger & Vedanta

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INFLUENCE

How the influence of Sri Ramakrishna spread to and then through J.D. Salinger

In 1965 J.D. Salinger, one of the world's best-selling, most influential and popular authors, stopped publishing and went into deep seclusion in New Hampshire. For 45 years reporters and fans stalked the man, snapping photos from behind bushes, trying to find out if he was still writing, and why he dropped out and went into hiding – a life-style choice not unlike the ambitions of Holden Caulfield, the iconic hero of his best-selling novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*. After going into seclusion, he allowed only one novel and 13 short stories to continue in print (less than half of his published writing). He sued anyone who threatened to publish his letters or invaded his privacy. He wanted nothing to do with the outside world.

Salinger, a new [documentary film](#) (see [Official Trailer](#) at source <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJAHLgdfqmA>) by Shane Salerno and a companion book of the same name by David Shields and Shane Salerno about J.D. Salinger (January 1, 1919 - January 27, 2010) were recently co-released. The film is currently screening in theaters, on Netflix, and is scheduled to air on [PBS's American Masters](#) in January 2014. Unfortunately, the film only briefly mentions Salinger's relationship to Vedanta. This paper deals with the book, which handles the Vedanta connection very differently. Unlike previous biographies or the film, this book heartily acknowledges Salinger's deep commitment to Ramakrishna/Vivekananda Vedanta:

From the late 1940s onward, Salinger became increasingly committed to Eastern philosophy and religion, especially Vedanta. Visiting the Ramakrishna/Vivekananda Center of New York, going on retreats in upstate New York, and reading sacred Hindu texts, he bases virtually every decision of his life on Vedanta's tenets. [Page 319]

To further reiterate the import of Vedanta's influence on Salinger, the book is structured on Hinduism's four stages of life. The table of contents headings read: Part I – *Brahmacharya* (Apprenticeship); Part II – *Garhasthya* (Householder Duties); Part III – *Vanaprasthya* (Withdrawal from Society); Part IV – *Sannyasa* (Renunciation of the World). This perspective allows the authors to offer a plausible explanation for Salinger's withdrawal from public view based on the principles of renunciation and self-abnegation as

laid out in the *Bhagavad Gita*, which Salinger read daily.

The book tracks the path of Vedanta's influence on Salinger, and presents a brief, but basically correct, history of the modern Vedanta movement, based on the life and teaching of [Sri Ramakrishna](#), a nineteenth century holy man who lived in the Bengal district of India:

Ramakrishna died in 1886. His student, [Swami Vivekananda](#), popularized Vedanta in the West in the late nineteenth century. Tolstoy called Vivekananda "The most brilliant wise man. It is doubtful in this age that another man has risen above this selfless, spiritual meditation." [Page 401]

We must also acknowledge the contribution of other direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna and the further dissemination of Vedanta teachings through the English translations of Vedanta texts by [Swami Nikhilananda](#) and [Swami Prabhavananda](#) for Western audiences. The book continues:

Other adherents of Vedanta were [Jung](#), [Gandhi](#), [Santayana](#), [Henry Miller](#) (a lifelong devotee), [Aldous Huxley](#) (who called Vedanta, "The most profound and subtle utterances about the nature of Ultimate Reality"), and [George Harrison](#), according to whom Vedanta has one goal: "The realization of God." [Page 401]

We mustn't leave out the works of [Christopher Isherwood](#), [Erwin Schrödinger](#), [Joseph Campbell](#), [Gerald Heard](#), and [Huston Smith](#) whose works directly or subtly introduced Vedanta themes and teachings.

These luminaries influenced a broader circle of friends and associates, most notably [W. Somerset Maugham](#), who wrote *The Razor's Edge*, the book that set Salinger on the path leading to Vedanta. Anyone who reads Salinger finds explicit references to Ramakrishna and Vivekananda and the expression of Vedantic ideas in virtually all his short stories that are still in print. As many of these Western intellectuals are fading from the public's memory, so is the knowledge of the source of their spiritual inspirations. This book might change that trend.

Salinger's literary celebrity is immense, which is astounding given how little he published – one novel (*The Catcher in the Rye*) and a series of short stories originally published in popular magazines of the time, principally *The New Yorker*. Literary critic Michiko Kakutani wrote,

Some critics dismissed the easy surface charm of Mr. Salinger's work, accusing him of cuteness and sentimentality, but works like "Catcher", "Franny and Zooey", and his best known short stories would influence successive generations of writers... [his characters] would emerge as avatars of adolescent angst... [Page 552]

Catcher in the Rye was published in 1951 to rave reviews and has sold over 65 million copies and counting. It still sells over half a million copies a year. During the 1950s and early 1960s, it was simultaneously the most assigned novel in high schools and the most censored book in high schools. Teachers were fired for suggesting that their students read the book. It marked the beginning of a new post-war America and foresaw the coming of the Beat Era, Hippies, New Age, and the interest in Eastern religions that took hold in Western culture.

There was a coast to coast buzz whenever a new Salinger story was published. One popular magazine's all-time record high circulation was the issue that featured a new Salinger story. *Life*, *Newsweek*, and *Time* magazines did stories about him (a cover story by *Time*), sending reporters and photographers to his cabin in the woods of New Hampshire only to be shunned and often sued.

The New Yorker, in 1965, ran his last published story, *Hapworth 16, 1924*. In it, the main character, 7-year old Seymour Glass, writes to his parents from summer camp:

Raja-Yoga and Bhakti-Yoga, two heartrending, handy, quite tiny volumes, perfect for the pockets of

any average, mobile boy our age, by Vivekananda of India. He is one of the most exciting, original and best equipped giants of this century I have ever run into; my personal sympathy for him will never be outgrown or exhausted as long as I live, mark my words; I would easily give ten years of my life, possibly more, if I could have shaken his hand or at least said a brisk, respectful hello to him on some busy street in Calcutta or elsewhere.”

Of Salinger’s objective as a writer, Salerno and Shields report:

The one constant in Salinger’s life, from the early 1950s until his death in 2010, was Advaita Vedanta Hinduism, which transformed him from a writer of fiction into a disseminator of mysticism... [Page 395]

He also continues to surface as a cultural icon, being cited as an inspiration by the likes of writer/director [Quentin Tarantino](#) or appearing in the works of indie rock group [Green Day](#); W.P. Kinsella's novel [Shoeless Joe](#), upon which the film *Field of Dreams* was based; and *The Colbert Report*, which dedicated the entire September 10th, 2013 episode to Salinger ([watch episode here](#), or see [transcript](#), or excerpts [Appendix C below](#)), to name just a few. In 2010, the National Portrait Gallery put Salinger’s portrait on permanent display.

For the last 45 years of his life, he wrote constantly but not for publication in his lifetime. He was following the instructions of the *Bhagavad Gita* as taught to him by his guru, Swami Nikhilananda, of the [Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York](#) (aka the East Side Center): We must do our duty and work, but should not let the rewards be our goal.

To work, alone, you are entitled, never to its fruit. Neither let your motive be the fruit of action, nor let your attachment be to non-action.

*The Bhagavad Gita - Chapter 2 Verse 47,
translated by Swami Nikhilananda*

In 1965, at the peak of his career, he abruptly stopped publishing, would not give interviews, took aggressive legal actions to guard his privacy, and dropped out of sight for the rest of his life with only himself and God as his audience and critic.

In his absence his legend only grew.

LIFE

A biographical sketch

Jerome David Salinger was born on January 1st, 1919 in New York to a life of privilege on Park Avenue on the Upper East Side. His family was fairly affluent and was in touch with high society. His father was Jewish and his mother was Catholic. He had a Bar Mitzvah and his family celebrated both Christmas and Chanukah.

Catcher is semi-autobiographical. Salinger went to several uppercrust prep schools, was rebellious and had been kicked out of most if not all of them. The attitude of his first-person protagonist was all Salinger and would influence the attitudes and behavior of generations of youth in the decades since its publication.

From his teenage years, he longed to be a writer with the ultimate goal of being published in *The New Yorker*. He was first published in 1940 at the age of 21 in a monthly magazine called *Story*. In the summer of 1941, he was living with his parents in Manhattan when he met and started dating [Oona O’Neill](#), the daughter of the Nobel Prize laureate playwright [Eugene O’Neill](#). She was stunning and sophisticated

beyond her years. At the age of 16, she would hang out with her friend Gloria Vanderbilt at the Stork Club, having drinks and hobnobbing with celebrities. Salinger was in love; but for Oona, he was just one in a long line of celebrities that she would date, including [Orson Wells](#), [Peter Arno](#) (*The New Yorker* cartoonist) and, finally, [Charlie Chaplin](#).

When America first entered World War II, Salinger tried to enlist; but physical problems made him ineligible for military service. However, as the war effort grew, the standards were lowered, and he was finally drafted. Because of his linguistic skills (he spoke French and German), he was trained to be in military intelligence, interrogating prisoners and locals for information about what US troops were facing. While this may sound like a “behind the lines” office job, actually he was in the thick of combat, immersed in death and destruction.

He rose to the rank of Staff Sergeant in the 12th Infantry Division, which saw some of the most brutal fighting of the war. He landed on Utah Beach on D-Day and was in the middle of the worst fighting, including the Battle of the Bulge, as the Allies drove from the beaches towards Germany.

In the midst of his time in the European War Theater, Salinger carried pictures of the love of his life, Oona O’Neil, and bragged about their relationship; but then he read in the newspapers that Oona had married Charlie Chaplin on her 18th birthday. Salinger was devastated.

The Battle of Hurtgen Forest was particularly nasty. US troops were freezing to death in their foxholes, or dying from the concussion caused by artillery shells, or dying in hand to hand combat. He was also in the first group of American soldiers to liberate a death camp that was part of Dachau.

Initially, Salinger thought the war would provide him with real-life experience, which would make him a better writer. He carried the first six chapters of *Catcher* with him when he landed on Utah Beach and would work on the novel and new stories between the battles. But by the time he saw the death camps, he no longer felt that the war was “won” or that the soldiers were heroes riding to the rescue. Rather, he had the sickening feeling that the Allies were just too late to stop the real horrors of the war. The impact of the death and destruction he witnessed in the battles and the death camps shook him to the core. This realization, combined with the heartbreak of losing the dream of Oona, resulted in a nervous breakdown. Shortly after the war ended, while still in Germany, he checked himself into a civilian hospital for what was then called “Battle Fatigue,” now known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

There was a short marriage to a German woman, but after coming to the US, Salinger discovered she had been a student informant for the Gestapo during the war. Without discussion, Salinger left her a plane ticket back to Germany on the breakfast table one morning. It would be years before he would marry again, and even then he claimed on the marriage license that he hadn’t been married before.

He knew he was damaged after the war and tried to deal with it by first checking into the hospital in Germany, then attempting self-development through philosophy and religion. He began a search for answers.

After *Catcher*, Salinger became increasingly devoted to and influenced by Advaita Vedanta Hinduism, the religious and philosophical teachings that Swami Vivekananda brought to the West in 1893. Salinger’s discovery of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (translated by Swami Nikhilananda and Joseph Campbell and published by the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York) was a major event in his life, second only to the war. The damage the war wrought compelled him to seek not only transcendence but erasure. [Page 396]

He divided his work into stories written before encountering Vedanta and those written after embracing Vedanta. He wouldn’t allow any of his pre-Vedanta work to be re-published, which is why there are so few Salinger stories currently in print – less than half of what was originally published in magazines.

His writing became more exclusively focused on the Glass Family. To understand Salinger's Glass Family, you should read all the Salinger stories that are still in print in the order they were written. The progression reflects Salinger's deepening understanding of Vedanta and how it changes and impacts the lives of the Glass family. Here is a list of his publications after his exposure to Vedanta which are still in print: *A Perfect Day for Bananafish* (1948); *Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut* (1948); *Just Before the War with the Eskimos* (1948); *The Laughing Man* (1949); *Down at the Dinghy* (1949); *For Esmé with Love and Squalor* (1950); *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951); *Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes* (1951); *De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period* (1952); *Teddy* (1953); *Franny* (1955); *Raise High the Roof-Beam, Carpenters* (1955); *Zooey* (1957); *Seymour, an Introduction* (1959).

Salinger finally gave an interview to *The New York Times* titled, [J. D. Salinger Speaks About His Silence](#), November 3, 1974 by Lacey Fosburgh. Here are some excerpts from that interview:

Discussing his opposition to republication of his early works, Mr. Salinger said they were the fruit of a time when he was first beginning to commit himself to being a writer. He spoke of writing feverishly, of being "intent on placing [his works] in magazines."

"I'm not trying to hide the gaucheries of my youth. I just don't think they're worthy of publishing."

Did he expect to publish another work soon?

There was a pause.

"I really don't know how soon," he said. There was another pause, and then Mr. Salinger began to talk rapidly about how much he was writing, long hours, every day, and he said he was under contract to no one for another book.

"There is a marvelous peace in not publishing. It's peaceful. Still. Publishing is a terrible invasion of my privacy. I like to write. I love to write. But I write just for myself and my own pleasure."

The new biography reveals that some in the media and his legions of fans thought Salinger was a recluse, a sort of literary Howard Hughes. Those Vedantists who would go to retreats or classes that Salinger attended at the [New York City Vedanta Center](#) or Thousand Island Park would keep his attendance secret, so much so, that his 55+ year connection with Vedanta was virtually unknown to the public.

People who knew him respected his privacy and wouldn't talk about him. But those few who did talk, or were suspected of talking, were shunned by Salinger. In a conversation, celebrated Vivekananda scholar [Marie Louise Burke](#) (aka Gargi) confirmed a theory that Salinger's disposition of Seymour Glass was premature, a mistake in his own eyes. Her source was a statement of his in part of a long correspondence with Salinger. Salinger, however, got it into his head that she was somehow attempting to use his letters to benefit herself. In disgust, Burke destroyed the letters. The friendship was over.

Salinger craved the privacy of a normal man, an ordinary citizen. After he died in 2010, a few townspeople opened up and said he was just that – an ordinary man, talking about commonplace things, going to high school games. Every day he walked to the post office and store, sometimes chatting with neighbors over coffee. We also heard a reminiscence from [Wolfgang Smith](#) who, as a young man, was a disciple of Swami Nikhilananda and part of the East Side Center spiritual community. He encountered an amiable man outdoors at the Thousand Island Park retreat. They had a relaxed conversation about cars. Smith later discovered it was Salinger.

Oddly, he never allowed the last story he wrote for publication, *Hapworth 16, 1924*, to be re-published in book form. He only allowed 13 of his short stories, all originally published in magazines, to be re-published in book form in addition to his only novel, *Catcher*. Today we have only four Salinger books in print: *The Catcher in the Rye*; *Nine Stories*; *Franny and Zooey*; and *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and*

Seymour an Introduction.

This only represents about half of what was originally published in magazines. At the end of this paper there is a complete list of all the stories he published. While one used to have to go to large public libraries to search their microfilms for copies of the stories that were no longer in print, now you can find copies on the internet. Reading his material chronologically paints a perfect picture of Salinger's spiritual evolution and the sudden change in content and style that happens after his commitment to Vedanta.

The Salinger family and estate has been notoriously rigid, prohibiting any of Salinger's personal letters to be published in any form, not even paraphrased. But, as part of the 150th anniversary of Swami Vivekananda's birth celebrations, they did allow the New York East Side Vedanta Center to release letters written by Salinger to the Swamis of the Center. Those letters give us an insight into the extent of Salinger's devotion and dedication to his guru, Swami Nikhilananda; the *Gospel*; the *Gita*; and Vedanta philosophy. Here is one excerpt from Salinger's letter quoted in the book. When Salinger heard that Swami Nikhilananda had been confined to a wheelchair and had had to cut back his lecture schedule, he wrote:

It may be that reading to a devoted group from The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna is all you do now, as you say, but I imagine the students who are lucky enough to hear you read from the Gospel would put the matter rather differently.

Meaning that I've forgotten many worthy and important things in my life, but I have never forgotten the way you used to read from, and interpret, the Upanishads, up at Thousand Island Park.

In a 1975 letter to Swami Adiswarananda, who succeeded Swami Nikhilananda as head of the New York East Side Center, Salinger writes:

I read a bit from the *Gita* every morning before I get out of bed, Swami Nikhilananda's annotated version. (It seems such a reasonable pleasure to imagine that Shankara would have approved unreservedly of Swami's inspired intelligence, devotion, and authority. How could he not?)

And here is an extended portion of one of Salinger's letters to Swami Adiswarananda. A shorter segment was quoted in the book:

Part XVI of "Vital Steps Toward Meditation" is beautifully saturated with Vivekachudamani. That marvellous and incomparable book. It was one of the first books Swami Nikhilananda recommended to me, many years ago. Almost every sloka speaks volumes. "In the forest-tract of sense pleasures there prowls a huge tiger called the mind. Let good people who have a longing for Liberation never go there." I suspect that nothing is truer than that, and yet I allow myself to be mauled by that old tiger almost every wakeful minute of my life.

I think the Center is most fortunate to have you, Swami, and I feel in my bones that your presence there must have been a great comfort and relief to Swami Nikhilananda.

I thank you most warmly for your prayers for my family and me.

I hope so much to see you again.

Sincerely yours,
J. D. Salinger
J. D. Salinger

INCONCLUSION

Did Vedanta ruin Salinger's writing?

The authors, Shields and Salerno, seem to have done a great job in finding new details that many Salinger fans had not known before. And their assessment of Vedanta and the effect it had on Salinger's life is very positive. But, their opinion of the effect Vedanta had on Salinger's writing is suspect. They claim that it ruined Salinger's writing. But, without having access to the unreleased hoard of unpublished stories and books, they have no basis for such a claim.

According to the book, the first stories to be published in 2015 will extend the Glass family saga.

The... story deals with Seymour's life after death. The stories... are saturated in the teachings of the Vedantic religion... Salinger has also written a 'manual' of Vedanta—with short stories, almost fables, woven into the text; this is precisely the form of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, which Salinger called, in 1952, 'the religious book of the century.' Salinger's 'Manual' is the explicit fulfillment of his stated desire to 'circulate,' through his writing, the ideas of Vedanta. [Page 575]

Salinger's early crisp writing in the first two decades of his career had an instant appeal. The deliberately minimalist approach to the stories allowed the reader to create their own mental image of the scene, unspoiled and unaffected by what decade the reader happened to be in. For instance, here's the first paragraph from *The Young Folks*, his first published story, which appeared in *Story* magazine in 1940,:

ABOUT eleven o'clock, Lucille Henderson, observing that her party was soaring at the proper height, and just having been smiled at by Jack Delroy, forced herself to glance over in the direction of Edna Phillips, who since eight o'clock had been sitting in the big red chair, smoking cigarettes and yodeling hellos and wearing a very bright eye which young men were not bothering to catch. Edna's direction still the same, Lucille Henderson sighed as heavily as her dress would allow, and then, knitting what there was of her brows, gazed about the room at the noisy young people she had invited to drink up her father's scotch. Then abruptly, she swished to where William Jameson Junior sat, biting his fingernails and staring at a small blonde girl sitting on the floor with three young men from Rutgers.

His later work seemed to ramble. Many say this is a sign that Salinger went off the rails. On the other hand it could be a first example of a whole new style of a prose-poem. Here's the first paragraph of Seymour's letter in *Hapworth*:

I WILL write for us both, I believe, as Buddy is engaged elsewhere for an indefinite period of time. Surely sixty to eighty per cent of the time, to my eternal amusement and sorrow, that magnificent, elusive, comical lad is engaged elsewhere! As you must know in your hearts and bowels, we miss you all like sheer hell. Unfortunately, I am far from above hoping the case is vice versa. This is a matter of quite a little humorous despair to me, though not so humorous. It is entirely disgusting to be forever achieving little actions of the heart or body and then taking recourse to reaction. I am utterly convinced that if A's hat blows off while he is sauntering down the street, it is the charming duty of B to pick it up and hand it to A without examining A's face or combing it for gratitude! My God, let me achieve missing my beloved family without yearning that they miss me in return! It requires a less wishy-washy character than the one available to me. My God, however, on the other side of the ledger, it is a pure fact that you are utterly haunting persons in simple retrospect! How we miss every excitable, emotional face among you! I was born without any great support in the event of continued absence of loved ones. It is a simple, nagging, humorous fact that my independence is skin deep, unlike that of my elusive, younger brother and fellow camper.

Concerning the ongoing controversy about the direction of Salinger's writing after such a promising start, author John Updike eloquently weighs in (['Franny and Zooey,' by J.D. Salinger, New York Times 10/17/61](#)):

Perhaps these are hard words; they are made hard to write by the extravagant self-consciousness of Salinger's later prose, wherein most of the objections one might raise are already raised. On the flap of this book jacket, he confesses, "There is a real-enough danger, I suppose, that sooner or later I'll bog down, perhaps disappear entirely, in my own methods, locutions, and mannerisms. On the whole, though, I'm very hopeful." Let me say, I am glad he is hopeful. I am one of those -- to do some confessing of my own -- for whom Salinger's work dawned as something of a revelation. I expect that further revelations are to come.

The Glass saga, as he has sketched it out, potentially contains great fiction. When all reservations have been entered, in the correctly unctuous and apprehensive tone, about the direction he has taken, it remains to acknowledge that it is a direction, and that the refusal to rest content, the willingness to risk excess on behalf of one's obsessions, is what distinguishes artists from entertainers, and what makes some artists adventurers on behalf of us all.

And here's author and literary critic Eudora Welty's concise take ([Threads of Innocence – New York Times 4/5/1953](#)):

...[Salinger] has the courage--it is more like the earned right and privilege--to experiment at the risk of not being understood.

Did Vedanta ruin Salinger's writing? The question assumes that Salinger's writing was, in fact, ruined, which is a premature judgment absent the last 45 years of his work, as compared to the mere 25 early years available to us. But if Shields and Salerno are correct about the writing, was Vedanta necessarily the culprit? Perhaps there's another option – that the writing took the course it did regardless of, not because of, Vedanta. If we examine the productive arc of most creative minds, not just artists but also scientists, or anyone thinking outside the box, we find that even among geniuses, few are able to keep evolving creatively over the course of an entire lifetime, Beethoven or Rembrandt being examples of those who did successfully sustain their creativity. Sri Ramakrishna was one such in the spiritual realm.

There's more commonly a limited creative window after which the creative persons either quit or repeat themselves. Those who attempt continued growth venture into undiscovered realms of expression, often inaccessible to the layman, and are not always artistically successful. A prime example of a work of this phase of artistic aspiration is Beethoven's *Grosse Fugue*, which was entirely rejected when he presented it in 1826 but is now regarded with awe, a prophetic work that has enshrined him in the highest realm of genius. In 2006, 180 years later, Alex Ross wrote in [The Rest Is Noise](#) (*The New Yorker*, Feb. 6, 2006): "...the Great Fugue is more than a piece; it's a musicological Holy Grail, a vortex of ideas and implications. It is the most radical work by the most formidable composer in history..." (Watch a performance of the Grosse Fugue: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEZXjW_s0Qs)

But most importantly, we must keep in mind that it was liberation and not his artistic legacy that was Salinger's motivation for embracing Vedanta and retreating from the world.

While not well-crafted, nor tightly edited, nor beautifully written, and according to some reviewers, insufficiently vetted, *Salinger* is a very interesting read for those who love Vedanta or Salinger, or both. And kudos to Shields and Salerno for letting *Salinger* be Salinger.