

International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centers

also known as "Sivananda Yoga organisation", "Sivananda Yoga", "Sivananda Yoga centres"

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Entry tags: spiritual business, neo-Vedanta, yoga, New Age Religion, Hinduism, neo-Hinduism, Religious Group

The International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centers (ISYVC) are an organisation that operates yoga and retreat or training centres (ashrams) in the Americas, Europe, and Asia. These Centres are the trademark holder of 'Sivananda Yoga', which is, amongst practitioners, widely perceived as a distinct style of Hatha Yoga and they credit the ISYVC as the legitimate bearer of this tradition or 'lineage'. The organisation prides itself in teaching 'traditional yoga' and propagates neo-Hindu teachings, referencing the guru-parampara tradition (guru lineage) of Swami Sivananda (1887-1963) and Swami Vishnu-devananda (1927-1993). The main teachings concern the practice of the "4 paths of yogas" and the "5 points of yoga", as well as a sequence of 12 yoga asanas (postures) commonly referred to as 'Sivananda sequence' or 'Rishikesh series'. The four paths are: Bhakti Yoga (path of devotion), Karma Yoga (path of selfless action), Jnana Yoga (path of wisdom, study of Vedanta), and Raja Yoga (control of body and mind, which includes Hatha Yoga/postural yoga). The five points of yoga are: 1. Proper Exercise - Asanas 2. Proper Breathing - Pranayama 3. Proper Relaxation - Savasana 4. Proper Diet - Vegetarian 5. Positive Thinking and Meditation - Vedanta and Dhyana. According to ISYVC's self-published teacher training manual (Ch. 1.14), Vishnu-devananda was sent from India to the West in the late 1950s by his guru Sivananda, to teach yoga and Vedanta. Following prolonged international travel teaching yoga, Vishnu-devananda eventually settled in Montréal, Canada, where he established the first Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centre, and later, the Sivananda Ashram Yoga Camp in the Laurentian mountains, a retreat and training centre, which serves as the organisation's headquarters. By March 2022, the organisation is running 11 ashrams (retreat and training centres) in North America (3), the Caribbean (1), Europe (2), India (4), and Vietnam (1), as well as 27 yoga centres located in bigger cities around the world, according to ISYVC's website. Another 33 centres are registered as 'affiliated centres' and are run in a franchise system by adherents of the organisation and graduates of their yoga teacher training courses. The ISYVC runs three resident programs: the four-week Yoga Teacher Training Course (TTC) and the Advanced Yoga Teacher Training Course (ATTC), as well as a three-week practice programme called Sadhana Intensive (SI). These programs also constitute the organisation's main source of revenue, with prices ranging from approx. 1,500 USD (TTC in India, dorm accommodation) to 5,800 USD (TTC in the Bahamas, single accommodation) (prices valid in March 2022). During the Covid-pandemic, the organisation had to close most of its centres and retreat locations around the world and started to implement online courses for yoga classes and teacher training. From April 2022 until December 2022, the ISYVC programme calendar lists 36 TTCs that are due to start, with 3-5 courses of 4 weeks length starting each month, taught in a variety of languages. The model of a 4-week teacher training is an established standard in the yoga industry that is based on the 200h qualification recognised by Yoga Alliance. The ISYVC claims that the 4-week TTC method was first introduced by their guru-founder Vishnu-devananda in the 1950s/60s. According to the ISYVC, the organisation has trained around 50,000 yoga teachers since the implementation of their programme (as of March 2022, according to ISYVC website). Although widely perceived as a provider of yoga classes and trainings, the ISYVC organisation also operates as a religious group, upholding a monastic order, in which many full-time members are initiated. ISYVC commits to the aim to propagate Hinduism and the teachings of Sivananda. The organisation does not pay teachers in yoga or training centres and operates all their activities with volunteers (karma yogis) who work without remuneration for several hours per week (as non residents), or stay as volunteers for up to several months. Full-time residents are called 'staff' by the organisation, but are also unpaid and receive lodging, food and some access to the teaching programme in exchange for free labour. Many full-time residents are encouraged to take vows of renunciation, i.e. brahmacharya (novice status that requires celibacy) or sannyas (i.e. becoming swami: monk or nun). In 2019, a #metoo scandal shook the ISYVC community when several former adherents publicly made allegations of sexual abuse and other types of abuse against the guru-founder Vishnu-devananda and other senior leaders in the organisation. It later was established that allegations against the guru-founder had been known to the organisation's leadership since at least 2007 (see statement of the board members, Dec 16, 2019). Consequently, a community of former and current adherents of ISYVC formed a Facebook group and organised an independent investigation into allegations of sexual abuse and other types of abuse within ISYVC. This undertaking is called 'Project SATYA'. The Project compiled three reports that contain a counter-narrative to the hagiographical stories provided by the organisation and its devotees and documenting over several

allegations of sexual abuse and other abuses by the founder and others within leadership of ISYVC. . With only few etic and non-hagiographical accounts of the ISYVC and its history, the resources of Project SATYA are referenced throughout this entry. It should be noted that there is a lack of independent sources on the history of the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres and the biographies of its gurus. Even some academic work relies on hagiographical sources or inadvertently prioritises hagiographical accounts and reproduces admiration. Wherever this entry references resources of the ISYVC or other yoga organisations, it should be noted that they are likely hagiographical, even when not explicitly indicated. The organisation is not to be confused with Sivananda Ashram, Rishikesh (India) or its subsidies, which are operated by the Divine Life Society (DLS).

Date Range: 1957 CE - 2022 CE

Region: Americas, Europe, Asia

Region tags: Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, South Asia, Europe, Southern Europe, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Northern Europe, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Western Europe, North America, United States of America, South America, Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Himalayas, Central Vietnam, Japan, Germany, England, Bahamas, India, Canada, The Bahamas, China, Eastern Europe, Southwest Asia, Israel

All locations operated by the International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centers (ISYVC) as of March 2022.

Status of Participants:

✓ Elite ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

Sources

Print sources for understanding this subject:

– Source 1: Altglas, V. (2007). The global diffusion and westernization of Neo-Hindu movements: Siddha Yoga and Sivananda Centres. *Religions of South Asia*, 1(2), 217-237.

– Source 2: Newcombe, S. (2009). The development of modern yoga: A survey of the field. *Religion Compass*, 3(6), 986-1002.

– Source 3: Strauss, S. (2002). The Master's Narrative: Swami Sivananda and the Transnational Production of Yoga. *Journal of Folklore Research*, 39(2/3), 217-241. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3814692>

Notes: The above-mentioned sources are considered to comply with the basic requirements of academic research and quality. They do not, however, provide a full overview of the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres or their history. Several available secondary sources on this religious group are hagiographical or admiring, or are based on hagiographical accounts that repeat the group's own narratives uncritically. Reading such resources require careful interrogation of the author's motives, positionality and data sources.

Online sources for understanding this subject:

– Source 1 URL: <https://archive.macleans.ca/article/1974/12/1/swami-vishnu-devananda-is-not-like-you-and-me>

– Source 1 Description: 1974 article by Marci McDonald on her visit to the ashram in Canada.

Relevant online primary textual corpora (original languages and/or translations):

– Source 1 URL: <https://sivananda.org/>

– Source 1 Description: Official website of the International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres. All ashrams and centres operate their own websites. There are also websites for specific countries or regions.

– Source 2 URL: <https://articles.sivananda.org/>

– Source 2 Description: This is the organisation's own online blog with a collection of articles on yoga and related content.

– Source 3 URL: <https://sivananda.org/yoga-life/>

– Source 3 Description: This is the online archive of Yoga Life magazine, the organisation's own print magazine.

General Variables

Membership/Group Interactions

Are other religious groups in cultural contact with target religion:

– Yes

Notes: Due to the influence of New Age-ism and spiritual eclecticism, the ISYVC entertains interfaith or interspiritual relations with related and other (New Age) religious groups under the motto of 'unity in diversity'. The organisation propagates an understanding of Vedanta philosophy in which differences are created by the limited perception of the mind and religious concepts of other groups are embraced as part of a Vedantic universalised understanding of the world. Quotation from the article "UNITY IN DIVERSITY – FORMULA FOR WORLD PEACE" by Srinivasan (01 March 2017): "Christ taught to "Love thy neighbor as thyself." Vedanta asserts that our "neighbor" is no other than our true Self, or Atman. Once we remove all the filters created on our perception by the limited awareness of individual mind and senses, this unity becomes self-evident. Thus to "Love thy neighbor as thyself", is practical application of Vedanta philosophy." Source: <https://sivanandayogaranch.org/unity-diversity-formula-world-peace-by-srinivasan/> The Sivananda Ashram Yoga Retreat in the Bahamas, for instance, holds annual interfaith/interspiritual symposia for Easter/Passover and Christmas/New Years, featuring New Age elements from Jewish, Muslim, Christian, neo-Hindu/Vedanta, Buddhist and indigenous traditions, accompanied by wellness-themes related to yoga and Ayurveda and ecology-themes. For reference, see the movie produced by the Sivananda Ashram Yoga Retreat on the "Unity in Diversity Symposium: Let the Light Shine 2014": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OLrEYcNJSco> Further reference can be found in the program from the 2021 Easter & Passover Symposium: <https://online.sivanandabahamas.org/courses/yoga-and-sacred-healing-easter-and-passover-symposium/>

↳ Is the cultural contact competitive:

– Yes

Notes: The ISYVC uses the language of syncretism to promote the idea that "the paths are many but the truth is one". The Sivananda Peace Pillar located at the Sivananda Ashram, Rishikesh (India) (operated by Divine Life Society), represents this syncretic idea by attempting to summarise the essence of each religion in one phrase. The inscription reads: "OM - CARDINAL DOCTRINES OF THE MAIN RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD Know the Self and be free - Hinduism The Kingdom of Heaven is within you - Christianity There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is the prophet of Allah - Islam For the whole world this is the law: all is impermanent - Buddhism Non-injury is verily the only religion - Jainism Purity of thought, word and deed is the essence of religion - Zoroastrianism I am that I am - Judaism He who has overcome himself is mighty - Taoism Blame yourself as you would blame others. Excuse others as you would excuse yourself - Confucianism There is but one God and His name is truth; wonderful is the guru - Sikhism I am that Real - Sufism See no evil. Hear no evil. Speak no evil - Shintoism All religions are one. They teach a divine life. Love all. Serve all. Practise ahimsa, satya, brahmacharya. Be selfless. Seek the Immortal - Divine Life Heart of Religion God is love. The only true religion is the religion of love or the religion of the heart. Feel for others as you feel for yourself. This universal religion will bring world-peace and happiness." Source: https://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WMQ8VY_Sivananda_Peace_Pillar_Inscriptions_Sivananda_Ashram_Rishi Based on this, the ISYVC promote Vedanta as a universal way to practice religion, or as a universal religion itself. This is also reflected in the "Universal Prayer" by Sivananda, which is an important part in the ISYVC's devotional activities. The prayer is, according to its proponents, one that can be recited by practitioners of all religions simultaneously, as it does not refer to a specific God/deity. It should be noted, that the prayer does, however, incorporate ideas of Vedanta and is oriented within a Judeo-Christian understanding of religion. The prayer reads as follows: "Universal Prayer O Adorable Lord of Mercy and Love ! Salutations and prostrations unto Thee. Thou art Omnipresent, Omnipotent and Omniscient. Thou art Sat-Chid-Ananda. Thou art Existence, Knowledge and Bliss Absolute. Thou art the Indweller of all beings. Grant us an understanding heart, Equal vision, balanced mind, Faith, devotion and wisdom. Grant us

inner spiritual strength to resist temptation and to control the mind. Free us from egoism, lust, anger, greed, hatred and jealousy. Fill our hearts with divine virtues. Let us behold Thee in all these names and forms. Let us serve Thee in all these names and forms. Let us ever remember Thee. Let us ever sing Thy glories. Let Thy Name be ever on our lips. Let us abide in Thee for ever and ever". Source: <https://www.sivananda.eu/en/meditation/the-4-yoga-paths/universal-prayer.html>. In summary, the cultural contact of ISYVC is competitive in that the universal and embracing beliefs that are taught call for integration (and with that, subordination) of other beliefs and traditions under the umbrella of (Yoga) Vedanta. The high demand of the organisation's daily ashram schedule and mandatory participation in rituals also leaves little to no time for individual devotional activities, should someone wish to observe them. Instead, aspects from popular religions are incorporated into ISYVC practices. For instance, Jesus, Buddha, Guru Nanak and the Prophets Moses and Mohammed are revered as part of the (Hindu-derived) Aarati ceremony (waving of light), performed twice daily. The ISYVC's cultural contact is also market-competitive, as the organisation is a spiritual business dependent on running yoga classes and trainings for their income. Consequently, they appear and compete in the international and on national yoga markets.

↳ Is the cultural contact accommodating/pluralistic:

– Yes

Notes: Other beliefs and particularly other iconographies, deities and gods are integrated (and subordinated) into the group's model of universal spirituality, which is (vaguely) based on neo-Hindu and neo-Vedanta beliefs. This understanding of an umbrella structure promotes the neo-Vedanta model as a dominant framework that provides a ritualistic framework (e.g. to perform homa or puja, to convene for satsang) and some dominant ideas (e.g. reincarnation). The organisation nonetheless observes Christian and Jewish celebrations (e.g. Christmas, Passover).

↳ Is the cultural contact neutral:

– No

Notes: The ISYVC's guru-founder Vishnu-devananda has reportedly discredited other yoga gurus from competing traditions and organisations. See for example a TV interview from 1985, at minute 2:10, when asked about Rajneesh (Osho/Bhagwan): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5BtsZdF4Aww>

↳ Is there violent conflict (within sample region):

– No

↳ Is there violent conflict (with groups outside the sample region):

– No

Does the religious group have a general process/system for assigning religious affiliation:

– No

Notes: Membership or affiliation within the group is vague and hard to define. The organisation operates in different legal settings and structures across different countries. There is usually no formal affiliation required. Adherents interact with the organisation as consumers, unpaid volunteers (short-term) and unpaid staff (long-term, sometimes initiated into monastic order). It is difficult to operationalise membership or affiliation and to define at which stage an adherent would be considered a member (e.g., coming to a yoga class twice a week versus staying in an ashram for several months a year). Another, sociological issue in the membership category is that of religious affiliation. The ISYVC recruits internationally and from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. A large proportion of yoga practitioners and adherents in this organisation are first-generation practitioners, but there is no formal conversion process or requirement for such a process. As a consequence, some adherents, including initiated ones, might actually be Christian, or Jewish, for instance, whether they self-identify as such or not. Besides, through its teachings, the organisation encourages self-identification as 'spiritual but not religious' (SBNR) or as having preference for a 'universal' affiliation rather than any particular religious identification (cf. religious nones). Eventually,

self-identification is an emic category that is not necessarily congruent with etic descriptions. For instance, some adherents might self-identify as Hindu or Vedantic, whereas the ISYVC would be categorised as neo-Hindu and New Age. Listed below are the different statuses that adherents can achieve in this organisation. Note that this order is also a common way for the organisation to recruit new adherents, to generate revenue or to recruit free labour. 1) Yoga students in a yoga centre or ashram (fee-based); 2) Yoga vacation guests, participating in a non-formative programme (ayurvedic medicine, stress management, cooking course etc.) in a yoga centre or yoga ashram (fee-based); 3) Yoga TTC, ATTC or SI students who are participating in a formative programme in a yoga centre or ashram (fee-based) and are offered the opportunity to receive mantra diksha (initiation into a mantra, considered also initiation into the organisation's lineage) by a senior teacher. Initiates receive a spiritual name (Hindu or Sanskrit name) during their initiation and the group is expected to use the spiritual name exclusively; 4) Adherents who do unpaid volunteering work in a centre or ashram are called 'Karma yogis'. They often teach yoga or work in housekeeping and administrative roles, for several hours per week or in full-time as residents for a limited period. Guests in an ashram are also required to give free labour for an hour each morning, which is called 'karma yoga'. Resident karma yogis are sometimes asked to sustain themselves by contributing to accommodation and board during their unpaid volunteering. The karma yoga policies have been criticised by former adherents in Project SATYA. Asking volunteers to sustain themselves is a practice sometimes used in other contexts of international volunteering as well. It then serves to increase revenue and, supposedly, to bypass visa and work regulations when volunteers arrive in their country of deployment on tourist visa or visa-waiver agreements; 5) More long-term and resident unpaid workers within the ISYVC are called 'staff'. They work and live in a yoga centre or ashram in the organisation in exchange for accommodation and board. They do not receive remuneration but the organisation pays for their expenses. These long-term 'staff members' are often encouraged to take vows of renunciation and initiation into the Sannyas monastic order: a. Brahmacharya: celibate novice status. The addition "Chaitanya" is added to the spiritual name. Brahmacharyas are required to wear yellow clothing and to be obedient to their spiritual advisors. b. Swamis: initiation into sannyas (monk or nun). Sannyasins are recognised by their orange clothing and the honorific title 'swami' and an added 'ananda' to their name (meaning bliss), for instance 'Swami Durgananda'. Sometimes new names are given that are related to the previously used spiritual name, e.g. Shiva (spiritual name), Shiva Chaitanya (brahmacharya name), Swami Shivabhaktananda (sannyas name). If a long-term member of staff has not taken vows, they are considered a 'householder' (grihastha ashrama), in reference to the Hindu life stage (ashramas) as a student. These householders are allowed to live as residents (or in few exceptions as affiliates nearby an ashram) with a partner (and children) in an expected monogamous relationship. Weddings are encouraged and performed by the organisation's own resident priests in the organisation's temples. Further reading on the problem of affiliation and religious eclecticism: Altglas, V. (2014). *From yoga to kabbalah: Religious exoticism and the logics of bricolage*. Oxford University Press, USA.

Does the religious group actively proselytize and recruit new members:

– Yes

Notes: : Due to the spiritual universalism taught, the group does not have a clear understanding of proselytism. Moreover, the active recruitment of yoga students is an important pillar in the proselytising efforts of the ISYVC. The organisation also relies on yoga students for income and on unpaid volunteers for teaching yoga and other duties. In the incorporation files of the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centre in London, the purpose of the centre is stated as follows: "[...] to advance the Hindu religion by the propagation, practice and dissemination of the spiritual teachings and doctrines of the Indian saint, mystic and sage His Holiness Sri Swami Sivananda, founder of the Divine Life Society, Rishikesh, India". Source: Incorporation file, p. 12 <https://find-and-update.company-information.service.gov.uk/company/05091856/filing-history?page=4> See also the notes on membership and recruitment.

↳ Is proselytizing mandated for religious professionals:

– Yes

Notes: Due to the spiritual universalism taught, the group does not have a clear understanding of proselytism. Nonetheless, the active recruitment of yoga students is an important pillar in the proselytising efforts of the ISYVC.

↳ Is proselytizing mandated for all adherents:

– No

Notes: There is no formal requirement for recruiting new members, but the dynamics of proselytism are subtle and introducing new yoga students can sometimes be rewarded, e.g., with praise or discounts.

↳ Is missionary work mandated for religious professionals:

– Yes

Notes: The directors of the centres in the organisation are responsible for the recruitment of yoga students to fill courses.

↳ Is missionary work mandated for all adherents:

– No

↳ Is proselytization coercive:

– Yes

Notes: Proselytism becomes gradually coercive depending on the level of involvement and dependency. Typical entry points are a (free) yoga class, attendance at a (free) talk or satsang (community talk with mantra chanting and meditation). As in other similar groups, (former) members describe the initial experience of "love bombing" which invites further interest. Paying guests experience less coercion. Karma yogis (unpaid volunteers) or staff (unpaid full-time resident workers) are required to be obedient. Many former volunteers/staff members have reported immense workloads without proper breaks or days off. Adherents are also asked to follow the organisation's high demand schedule. See, for example, Project SATYA report #3, p..53ff. <http://www.projectsatya.org/Investigation-Interim-Report-3-Project-SATYA.pdf>

↳ Does the coercion take the form of physical force:

– No

↳ Does the coercion take the form of economic sanctions:

– No

Notes: Not routinely, but some members have reported becoming financially dependent on the organisation since they have given years of unpaid labour, without building an income outside of the group or making payments to social security insurance. Some members have donated significant amounts of their wealth to the organisation. In general, committed adherence to ISYVC would be high demand concerning costs (finances) and time. See, for example, Project SATYA report #3, p..53ff. <http://www.projectsatya.org/Investigation-Interim-Report-3-Project-SATYA.pdf>

Does the religion have official political support

– Yes

Notes: Some sort of political support is given through the promotion by the Indian Government's mission to propagate Yoga as a traditional cultural asset of India, for instance, through events during the annual International Day of Yoga (June, 21).

↳ Are the priests paid by polity:

– No

↳ Is religious infrastructure paid for by the polity:

– No

↳ Are the head of the polity and the head of the religion the same figure:

– No

↳ Are political officials equivalent to religious officials:

– No

↳ Is religious observance enforced by the polity:

– No

↳ Polity legal code is roughly coterminous with religious code:

– No

↳ Polity provides preferential economic treatment (e.g. tax, exemption)

– Yes

Notes: Religious organisations are tax-exempt in many countries or can register as not-for-profit organisations.

Is there a conception of apostasy in the religious group:

– Yes

Notes: The ISYVC entertain a strong ingroup/outgroup dynamic and perception of the "outside world" as being potentially obstructive on the spiritual path. Apostasy is principally understood as not following the guru's teachings or not being devout to the guru/other teachers and is used to enforce ingroup belief and mark critique as illegitimate. This has allegedly been the case for many who have left the ISYVC after criticising the organisation or reporting alleged abuse. See, for instance, Project SATYA investigation report #3, p.74ff.

↳ Are apostates prosecuted or punished:

– Yes

Notes: The ISYVC attempted to sue a group of former adherents that have supported those who publicly spoke about alleged abuse within the organisation in March 2022.

↳ Apostates are socially shunned and/or publicly vilified:

– Yes

↳ Wealth, civil rights, and/or social capital are taken by authorities:

– No

↳ Do apostates receive corporal punishment:

– No

↳ Do apostates receive divine punishment:

– No

Size and Structure

Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (estimated population, numerical):

– Field doesn't know

Notes: No estimate can be given due to the complex nature of affiliation (no affiliation problem). The organisation claims that it has trained nearly 50,000 yoga teachers since the 1960s in its Yoga teacher training course (TTC). Not all graduates are expected to stay connected to the organisation. See notes

on membership. Source: <https://sivananda.org/teachers-training/> [accessed 06 April 2022].

Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (% of sample region population, numerical):

– I don't know

Nature of religious group [please select one]:

– Small religious group (seen as being part of a related larger religious group)

Notes: The ISYVC consider themselves committed to Hinduism and the teachings of Sivananda and Vishnu-devananda (with a preference for interpretations by these teachers). The organisation also continues to operate Sivananda's monastic order of sannyas. Sivananda is considered to represent neo-Hinduism and neo-Vedanta. As Hinduism is not a monolithic tradition and the teachings of ISYVC are also impacted by their role as a yoga provider and provider of New Age thought, a direct reference to Hinduism remains controversial.

Are there recognized leaders in the religious group:

– Yes

Notes: Acharyas (spiritual masters) are considered the leaders of the organisation. They also serve as directors on the Executive Board since the founder-guru's passing in 1993. Each acharya supervises a region in which the ISYVC operates. Besides the acharyas, all swamis are generally considered respectable leaders by non-elite adherents.

↳ Is there a hierarchy among these leaders:

– Yes

Notes: There is no formal hierarchy amongst the acharyas (spiritual directors) who serve as Executive Board Members (EBM) in the organisation. Informal authority within the group is granted through years of service/age, initiation (chaitanya/swami), having personally studied with the founder Swami Vishnu-devananda (yes/no), and internal hierarchy. The organisation is steered by a group of seven leaders (March 2022), the Executive Board Members (EBM), or acharyas of the organisation. They are also the legal representatives of the organisation in most countries, whereas each acharya controls a specific region. There is no formal hierarchy amongst the seven acharyas, but it is likely that years of service (awe) or success in revenue impact the power dynamics informally.

↳ A single leader of a local community:

– Yes

Notes: For instance, a swami who is heading a local Sivananda Yoga Centre.

↳ Multiple religious communities each with its own leader, no hierarchy among these leaders:

– No

↳ "Regional" leaders who oversee one or more local leader(s) (e.g. bishops):

– Yes

Notes: These are called acharyas (spiritual directors), who oversee the organisation as a whole and each acharya oversees and controls a specific region. For more information, see: <https://sivananda.org/about/executive-board/>

↳ A single leader for the religious group that oversees all other leaders in the sample region:

– No

↳ A council or group of leaders for the religious group that oversees all other leaders in the sample region:

– Yes

↳ Estimate how many levels there are in the hierarchy of religious leadership:

– Number of levels [numeric value]: 3

↳ Are leaders believed to possess supernatural powers or qualities:

– No

Notes: Not by default, but adherents/devotees sometimes attribute such powers (siddhis) based on direct experience or hearsay (e.g. healing abilities, insight and supernatural access to knowledge, supernatural abilities such as needing to or very little sleep, purity etc.).

↳ Are religious leaders chosen:

– Yes

Notes: The currently seven spiritual directors (acharyas) of the organisation (constituting the Executive Board Members) claim to be personally chosen by the founder-guru Vishnu devananda, who passed in 1993. Whereas a reconstruction of the board's history shows that since its installment until today (2022), all but one of its members have been replaced. Many former members have left the organisation. The board of directors votes its members in/out and selects leaders on other leadership levels. Each acharya controls a specific region within the sample. The most recent update in the leadership of the ISYVC's Executive Board happened in 2020 when the organisation had to launch an investigation into allegations of sexual abuse against one of its board members in Canada. The accused board member was, according to a ISYVC statement, relieved of his duties in February 2020 and has not been reinstated since. In March 2022, the executive board issued another statement confirming this decision and saying that "[h]is resignation has been accepted by the EBM, and he has not been reinstated in any of his functions within the organisation." Source: <https://sivananda.org/ebm-statements/>

↳ Are leaders considered fallible:

– Yes

Notes: Leaders are not considered infallible per se, but their reputations are often protected by devotees' admiration, dependency and by spiritual bypassing, as well as by the organisation's efforts to uphold its image and hagiographies. Further, it is difficult to discern whether repeated (public) remarks by leaders about their own failures and struggles are genuine or performative, as humility is considered a fundamental virtue. Generally, adherents are asked not to question their teachers and gurus. Many follow this principle. In December 2019, former adherents made public allegations of sexual abuse against the guru-founder Vishnu-devananda (deceased in 1993), as well as one former and one (at that time) current member of the board (since relieved of his duties). These allegations became known to the wider public after a #metoo Facebook post by a former high-ranking member. Since then, about 2800 (former) adherents have formed a group to support survivors (Project SATYA), resulting in a controversy about the safeguarding within the organisation, and the ethical/moral tenets of the executive board, who allegedly have been aware of the allegations for several years. It became known then (in 2020), that one other board member had been removed from the board in 2013 due to several allegations of sexual abuse, but the organisation claimed that he "retired", allegedly in an attempt to protect the image of the organisation. The "retired" former director received a life-long stipend from the organisation, whereas survivors/victims did not receive any compensation. The wider public and ISYVC community had not been aware of this before 2019/20. In 2020/21, after pressure from the Project SATYA community and numerous media outlets, the organisation commissioned an external workplace investigator to investigate one of the people accused publicly of wrongdoing, and subsequently removed this member from the board. The investigation report was not made public. An investigation into allegations against the guru-founder Vishnudevanda was initiated, then discontinued soon after by the organisation, claiming a lack of funds. See for more infirmation: Project SATYA reports #1-3, <http://www.projectsatya.org/satya-investigation-reports/> <https://sivananda.org/ebm-statements/>

↳ Are close followers or disciples of a religious leader required to obediently and unquestionably accept the leader's pronouncements on all matters:

– Yes

Notes: Sivananda says: "The duty of a soldier is to obey implicitly the commands of the commander. He must not question anything. Even so, the duty of an aspirant is to obey implicitly the orders of his Guru. Then only he can grow quickly in the spiritual path." Source: https://www.sivanandaonline.org/?cmd=displaysection§ion_id=365 This is also demonstrated in the above-described #metoo scandal. Former adherents reported that staff of the organisation was not allowed to interact with the abuse allegations. Some former adherents who were critical of the leadership's standpoint reported attempts from the ISYVC to coerce their continuous loyalty (e.g. by not following social media or news reporting on the matter of the abuse allegations).

Scripture

Does the religious group have scriptures:

Scripture is a generic term used to designate revered texts that are considered particularly authoritative and sacred relative to other texts. Strictly speaking, it refers to written texts, but there are also "oral scriptures" (e.g. the Vedas of India).

– Yes

Notes: The ISYVC generally refer to a number of authoritative texts of Hindu tradition and yoga tradition, with a strong preference for interpretation by their own gurus, such as the Bhagavad Gita with commentary by Sivananda, the Hatha Yoga Pradipika with commentary by Vishnu-devananda, the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali with commentary by Vishnu-devananda etc. Other authoritative texts are published by the organisation itself and include The Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga by Swami Vishnu-devananda, Meditation and Mantras by Vishnudevananda, Vishnudevananda Upanadesha - a hagiographical collection of pictures and short talks given by Vishnudevananda, Yoga Life - a collection of short talks given by Vishnudevananda, and Sivananda Upanishad, a hagiographical collection of pictures and handwritten letters by Sivananda to his students. Elite members would also likely consider additional Hindu scriptures or Vedic scriptures as authoritative, such as the Mahabharata, the Srimad Bhagavatam etc.

↳ Are they written:

– Yes

↳ Are they oral:

– Yes

↳ Is there a story (or a set of stories) associated with the origin of scripture:

– Yes

Notes: There is no particular narrative on the scriptures the used by the organisation specifically, such as the writing of Vishnu-devananda or Sivananda. The respective narratives of each text apply to other authoritative texts such as the Bhagavad Gita, which are derived from Hindu teachings.

↳ Revealed by a high god:

– Yes

↳ Revealed by other supernatural being:

– No

↳ Inspired by high god:

– Yes

↳ Inspired by other supernatural being:

– Yes

↳ Originated from divine or semi-divine human beings:

– Yes

↳ Originated from non-divine human being:

– No

↳ Are the scriptures alterable:

– No

↳ Are there formal institutions (i.e. institutions that are authorized by the religious community or political leaders) for interpreting the scriptures:

– No

↳ Is there a select group of people trained in transmitting the scriptures:

– No

↳ Is there a codified canon of scriptures:

– No

Architecture, Geography

Is monumental religious architecture present:

– No

Are there different types of religious monumental architecture:

– No

Is iconography present:

– Yes

↳ Where is iconography present [select all that apply]:

– At home

– All public spaces

Notes: Iconography is present in all spaces within the organisation's premises.

↳ Are there distinct features in the religious group's iconography:

– Yes

↳ Eyes (stylized or not):

– Yes

Notes: Third Eye.

↳ Supernatural beings (zoomorphic):

– Yes

Notes: Such as Ganesh, the elephant-headed God.

↳ Supernatural beings (geomorphic):

– Yes

Notes: In some contexts, "Mother India" or "Ma Bharat" is itself considered to represent a deity.

↳ Supernatural beings (anthropomorphic):

– Yes

Notes: Hindu deities, for example, Lord Krishna

↳ Supernatural beings (abstract symbol):

– Yes

Notes: For instance, Shivalingam.

↳ Portrayals of afterlife:

– No

↳ Aspects of doctrine (e.g. cross, trinity, Mithraic symbols):

– Yes

Notes: Such as the OM symbol.

↳ Humans:

– Yes

↳ Other features of iconography:

– No

Are there specific sites dedicated to sacred practice or considered sacred:

– Yes

Notes: Temples and shrines. Altars are also present in other rooms, for example in yoga rooms.

↳ Are sacred site oriented to environmental features:

"Environmental features" refers to features in the landscape, mountains, rivers, cardinal directions etc...

– Yes

Are pilgrimages present:

– Yes

Notes: Many adherents want to travel to India, see the river Ganges, the Indian ashrams of the organisation or visit the Sivananda Ashram in Rishikesh (run by Divine Life Society).

Beliefs

Burial and Afterlife

Is a spirit-body distinction present:

Answer "no" only if personhood (or consciousness) is extinguished with death of the physical body. Answering yes does not necessarily imply the existence of Cartesian mind/body dualism, merely that some element of personhood (or consciousness) survives the death of the body.

– Yes

↳ Spirit-mind is conceived of as having qualitatively different powers or properties than other body parts:

– Yes

Notes: The ISYVC teach a non-dualist understanding (Advaita Vedanta) of spirit, body and mind. Identification with body and mind is considered illusionary, as both are part of the illusory world (maya). Atman (individual soul) and Brahman (cosmic soul) are one. Knowledge of that is said to lead to self-realisation.

↳ Spirit-mind is conceived of as non-material, ontologically distinct from body:

– Yes

↳ Other spirit-body relationship:

– Yes [specify]: Body is believed to have physical and metaphysical components (sheaths; Sanskrit: koshas). Identification with physical body is considered illusionary.

Belief in afterlife:

– Yes

↳ Is the spatial location of the afterlife specified or described by the religious group:

– No

Notes: Belief in reincarnation via 'transmigration of the soul' (metempsychosis) and karma laws, as based on Hindu tradition. Hindu traditions suggest the existence of seven upper and seven lower worlds that represent transitional spaces for the individual soul (atman) between former and next life, but these are not commonly taught in ISYVC.

Reincarnation in this world:

– Yes

↳ In a human form:

– Yes

Notes: It is considered difficult to get a human birth. See, for reference, the "Song of Admonition" sung by Swami Sivananda. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2MsbUoJtnE&list=PLcBI8RAEyafMclTPxbMii_t6Tyl7JZRZb&index=3 The Lyrics below are taken from www.yoga-vedanta-aalst.be "Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare. Is there not a nobler mission than eating, drinking and sleeping? It is difficult to get a human birth, therefore try your best to realise in this birth. Fie on that wretch, woe to that man Who wastes all his life in sensual pleasures. Time sweeps away, kings and barons, Where is Yudhishtira? Where is Ashoka Where is Shakespeare? Where is Valmiki? Where is Napoleon? Where is Shivaji? Where is Gandhi, where is Jinnah? Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare. Be up and doing in Yogic Sadhan, you will enjoy Supreme Bliss. Be up and doing in Brahma Vichar, you will attain Immortality Kaivalya Moksha Can you expect real Santi

if you waste your time in idle gossiping? Can you enjoy Supreme Peace if you waste your time in novels newspapers? In fights and quarrels? In scandal, backbiting? Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare. Am I not Thou? Art Thou not I? One alone is, therefore true. When the mind melts in the silence, you will have Self-realisation. What have you learnt, tell me frankly from the Bihar and Quetta earthquakes? Have you got now real Vairag? Do you practise Japa and Kirtan? Here is a challenge to non-believers of the Hindu theory of transmigration: Have you not heard the thrilling narratives of Santi Devi, of her past life? Can you expect real Santi if you waste your time in cards and cinemas cards and smoking? When your throat is choked at the time of death, who will help you for your salvation? Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare.”

↳ In animal/plant form:

– Yes

↳ In form of an inanimate object(s):

– No

↳ In non-individual form (i.e. some form of corporate rebirth, tribe, lineage. etc.):

– No

↳ Reincarnation linked to notion of life-transcending causality (e.g. karma):

– Yes

↳ Other form of reincarnation in this world:

– No

Are there special treatments for adherents' corpses:

– Yes

Notes: Yes, but they are not regularly performed and it would depend on the status of the adherent. The guru-founder Vishnu-devananda is considered to have attained Mahasamadhi (leaving his body without returning into cycle of rebirth) in 1993 and a Jalasamadhi (water burial) was performed as per his wish in the river Ganges. A hagiographical photo slideshow of the Jalasamadhi can be found here: *content warning: shows dead corpse* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oNUZbP5_d24&t= The organisation reports having performed water burial in the Ganges river for some of their swamis (monks/nuns), but it is not clear whether this is a regular procedure for deceased swamis. For most other adherents, it is likely their families who are responsible for burial according to the practices they prefer. Unless the family is also adherent to ISYVC, this would be unrelated to ISYVC practice.

↳ Cremation:

– No

↳ Mummification:

– No

↳ Interment:

– No

↳ Cannibalism:

– No

↳ Exposure to elements (e.g. air drying):

– Yes

↳ Feeding to animals:

– No

↳ Secondary burial:

– No

↳ Re-treatment of corpse:

– No

↳ Other intensive (in terms of time or resources expended) treatment of corpse :

– No

Are co-sacrifices present in tomb/burial:

– No

Are grave goods present:

– Yes

Notes: Flowers.

↳ Personal effects:

– No

↳ Valuable items:

– No

↳ Other grave goods:

– Yes

Notes: Flowers.

Are formal burials present:

– Yes

↳ As cenotaphs:

– No

↳ In cemetery:

– No

↳ Family tomb-crypt:

– No

↳ Domestic (individuals interred beneath house, or in areas used for normal domestic activities):

– No

↳ Other formal burial type:

– Yes [specify]: A respected leader's body (master/guru) will be buried in a samadhi mandir (shrine) or will be given water burial (jalasamadhi) in Ganges river.

Supernatural Beings

Are supernatural beings present:

– Yes

Notes: It is important to note that ISYVC does not have a distinct position on supernatural beings but refers to Hindu tradition with neo-Hindu and New Age elements. Additionally, non-elite participants may hold their own beliefs from New Age or other religious traditions, e.g. the traditions they grew up in. These are not necessarily discouraged but are included under Vedanta and the idea that "the names are many but God is one".

↳ A supreme high god is present:

– Yes

Notes: The Sivananda Yoga Teacher's Training Manual (2013) knows of Brahman, "the Infinite, Uncaused, Eternal, Supreme Reality of vedanta philosophy". This Brahman does not have any qualities. Brahman is considered a supreme high God without qualities. If Brahman is associated with qualities it is called Ishvara. Ishvara has three aspects: creation (Brahma), preservation (Vishnu) and destruction (Shiva). The Teacher's Training Manual also makes a reference to Meister Eckhart, pointing to a similarity in Christianity. It quotes Eckhart with the following words: "There is God (Isvara) and above this is the Godhead (Brahman)" [...] "God acts; Godhead does not." Source: Sivananda Yoga Teacher's Training Manual (2013) Chapter 2.6 "Brahman, Brahma and the Three Gunas".

↳ The supreme high god is anthropomorphic:

– Yes

Notes: The supreme high god with qualities (Ishvara) can be represented in many forms, including anthropomorphic ones, for example, Vishnu, Durga, or Krishna.

↳ The supreme high god is a sky deity:

– No

↳ The supreme high god is chthonic (of the underworld):

– No

↳ The supreme high god is fused with the monarch (king=high god):

– No

↳ The monarch is seen as a manifestation or emanation of the high god:

– No

↳ The supreme high god is a kin relation to elites:

– No

↳ The supreme high god has another type of loyalty-connection to elites:
– Yes [specify]: Reference of such exist in Hindu mythology but are not significant in daily practice.

↳ The supreme high god is unquestionably good:
– Yes
Notes: In fact, the quality 'good' is transcended and loses its relevance. Destruction, for example, is considered a necessary prerequisite for creation. Following this logic, 'goodness' is measured via an action's commitment towards relieving the affected individual soul from suffering (i.e. free from cycle of reincarnation) - even if this would cause suffering in the short-term (i.e. living/burning karma).

↳ Other feature(s) of supreme high god:
– Yes [specify]: shortcomings and limitations
Notes: Abstract representations of the supreme high god (Brahman) have no distinct qualities. Other representations have more characteristic qualities (Ishvara). In Hindu mythology which is widely used within ISYVC, anthropomorphic representations also have character and shortcomings, for example, Krishna, who is tempted by sweets as a baby and seduced by the gopis (milkmaids) as an adult.

↳ The supreme high god has knowledge of this world:
– Yes
Notes: The world is considered an illusion (Maya). Brahman, the supreme high god without qualities "is the screen onto which the cosmic drama (Maya) is projected". Everything in the illusionary world and nature (Prakriti) consists of and is impacted by, three qualities (gunas) that form the Divine Play (Lila). These are: purity, activity, and inertia. Consequently, the supreme high god has infinite knowledge of this world. Brahma is "the upholder of the drama (creation), but it remains unaffected by it". Source: The Sivananda Yoga Teacher's Training Manual, Chapter 2.6f. "Brahman, Brahma and the Three Gunas".

↳ The supreme god's knowledge is restricted to particular domain of human affairs:
– Field doesn't know

↳ The supreme high god's knowledge is restricted to (a) specific area(s) within the sample region:
– No

↳ The supreme high god's knowledge is unrestricted within the sample region:
– Yes

↳ The supreme high god's knowledge is unrestricted outside of sample region:
– Yes

↳ The supreme high god can see you everywhere normally visible (in public):
– Yes

Notes: Sivananda makes a direct reference to this in his bhajan "The Song of

Brahma", referring to Brahman as "eyes of all eyes" and "silent itness". Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ictmtDWRHJA>

↳ The supreme high god can see you everywhere (in the dark, at home):

– Yes

Notes: see above

↳ The supreme high god can see inside heart/mind (hidden motives):

– Yes

Notes: Swami Sivananda makes a direct reference to this in his bhajan "The Song of Brahma", referring to Brahman as "mind of all minds". Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ictmtDWRHJA>

↳ The supreme high god knows your basic character (personal essence):

– Yes

Notes: In fact, the idea of an individual basis character is subject to the qualities (gunas) which are responsible for the happenings in the illusionary world (may). As such, the basic character of one person is part of this illusionary world, which is projected onto Brahman of which the latter has infinite knowledge (but remains unaffected).

↳ The supreme high god knows what will happen to you, what you will do (future sight):

– Yes

↳ The supreme high god has other knowledge of this world:

– No

↳ The supreme high god has deliberate causal efficacy in the world:

– Yes

Notes: Brahman, the supreme high god without qualities, remains unaffected by the happenings of the world as they are considered illusionary. Ishvara, the supreme high god with qualities, represents the three forces creation, preservation and destruction. The deliberate causal efficacy plays a significant but abstract role in everyday life through the belief that life is 'the divine play' (lila) and everything happens 'by God's will'.

↳ The supreme high god can reward:

– No

Notes: Similarly to goodness, the idea of reward and punishment are antagonistic to the idea of the illusionary world, its qualities and the individual soul's task to reunite with the cosmic soul - even if this causes temporary suffering. While there are references to reward and punishment in Hindu mythology, this is not relevant in the teaching/belief of ISYVC as the primary focus lies in the practice of the 4 paths of yoga (Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Raja Yoga, Jnana Yoga) to become independent of illusion-bound perception and "to identify with the Supreme Spirit, or God". Source: The Sivananda Yoga Teacher's Training Manual (2013), Ch. 2.18 "The Philosophy and Aim of Yoga".

↳ The supreme high god can punish:

– Yes

Notes: see above

↳ The supreme high god has indirect causal efficacy in the world:

– Yes

Notes: Brahman, the supreme high god without qualities, remains unaffected by the happenings of the world as they are considered illusory. Ishvara, the supreme high god with qualities, represents the three forces creation, preservation and destruction. The deliberate causal efficacy plays a significant but abstract role in everyday life through the belief that life is 'the divine play' (lila) and everything happens 'by God's will'.

↳ The supreme high god exhibits positive emotion:

– Yes

↳ The supreme high god exhibits negative emotion:

– Yes

↳ The supreme high god possesses hunger:

– Yes

Notes: Some of the representations of Ishvara (high gods with qualities) possess hunger in their anthropomorphic forms. This is important in the preparation of "prasad", usually sweets/sweet food offered after worship ceremonies. For ceremonies devoted to Krishna, these are according to the liking of Krishna (e.g. honey). When preparing prasad for such a purpose, tasting the offering during preparation or before its offering is prohibited as the first taste is left for Krishna.

↳ Is it permissible to worship supernatural beings other than the high god:

– Yes

Notes: The worship of saints and sages, gurus and religious masters, as well as abstract representations, is permissible and practiced within ISYVC. Guru worship and iconography is a central aspect of all devotional activities and is directed towards Adi Shankaracarya, Sivananda and Vishnu-devananda. Sivananda and Vishnu-devananda are considered to have attained mahasamadhi (leaving the body after death without reentering cycle of reincarnation, i.e. enlightenment). They are considered to be guiding the organisation. Mention of Jesus, Mary, Moses, Buddha, Guru Nanak and others regularly appear in devotional activities.

↳ The supreme high god possesses/exhibits some other feature:

– No

↳ The supreme high god communicates with the living:

– Yes

Notes: References to such communication can be found in mythology. More relevant to the everyday beliefs of ISYVC is the idea that regular practice and evolution on the spiritual path can lead to insights and understanding. Gurus and religious masters are considered to have particular insight or connection to (specific forms of) God. In everyday practice, individuals can also recognise certain happenings or circumstances as a message from God, or feel a presence, receive a message in waking, dreaming or meditation, and so on.

↳ In waking, everyday life:

– Yes

↳ In dreams:

– Yes

↳ In trance possession:

– Yes

Notes: This is not actively taught by the group, but there is evidence that the founder Vishnu-devananda has encouraged trance-like states for the channelling of messages, especially from his guru, Sivananda. Such references can be found in the first edition of the book *Meditation and Mantras*, by Vishnu-devananda.

↳ Through divination practices:

– Yes

↳ Only through religious specialists:

– No

↳ Only through monarch

– No

↳ Other form of communication with living:

– Yes [specify]: Insight achieved through spiritual discipline, devotion, meditation.

↳ Previously human spirits are present:

– Yes

Notes: For instance, the spirit of a (deceased) guru who has attained mahasamadhi (leaving the body without being reborn).

↳ Human spirits can be seen:

– Yes

↳ Human spirits can be physically felt:

– Yes

↳ Previously human spirits have knowledge of this world:

– Yes

↳ Human spirits' knowledge restricted to particular domain of human affairs:

– I don't know

↳ Human spirits' knowledge restricted to (a) specific area(s) within the sample region:

– I don't know

↳ Human spirits' knowledge unrestricted within the sample region:

– I don't know

- ↳ Human spirits' knowledge unrestricted outside of sample region:
– I don't know
- ↳ Human spirits can see you everywhere normally visible (in public):
– I don't know
- ↳ Human spirits can see you everywhere (in the dark, at home):
– I don't know
- ↳ Human spirits can see inside heart/mind (hidden motives):
– I don't know
- ↳ Human spirits know your basic character (personal essence):
– I don't know
- ↳ Human spirits know what will happen to you, what you will do (future sight):
– I don't know
- ↳ Human spirits have other form(s) of knowledge regarding this world:
– I don't know
- ↳ Human spirits have deliberate causal efficacy in the world:
– Yes
Notes: The ISYVC believes that experiences and worldly happenings are due to "Guru's Grace".
- ↳ Human spirits can reward:
– Yes
Notes: Reward and punishment are not relevant categories used by the ISYVC: unpleasant experiences are considered to be necessary to burn karma and proceed on the spiritual path, and pleasant experiences can be considered rewards but also pose threats for pitfalls.
- ↳ Human spirits can punish:
– Yes
Notes: see above
- ↳ Human spirits have indirect causal efficacy in the world:
– Yes
- ↳ Human spirits have memory of life:
– Yes
- ↳ Human spirits exhibit positive emotion:
– I don't know

- ↳ Human spirits exhibit negative emotion:
 - I don't know
- ↳ Human spirits communicate with the living:
 - Yes
 - ↳ In waking, everyday life:
 - Yes
 - ↳ In dreams:
 - Yes
 - ↳ In trance possession:
 - Yes
 - ↳ Through divination processes:
 - Yes
 - ↳ Only through specialists:
 - No
 - ↳ Only through monarch:
 - No
 - ↳ Communicate with living through other means:
 - No

- ↳ Non-human supernatural beings are present:
 - No

Notes: Hindu mythology knows of demons and angels, but these or other non-human supernatural beings are not relevant in the practices of ISYVC. Relevant non-human supernatural beings are deities, for instance Hanuman.

- ↳ Mixed human-divine beings are present:
 - Yes

- ↳ Does the religious group possess a variety of supernatural beings:
 - No

Supernatural Monitoring

Is supernatural monitoring present:

This refers to surveillance by supernatural beings of humans' behaviour and/or thought particularly as it relates to social norms or potential norm violations.

– No

Notes: There is no specific mention of supernatural monitoring, however, actual monitoring of

participation in events and activities is strictly applied. This could lead adherents to also believe in supernatural monitoring, i.e. the conviction that a Guru knows whether s/he is participating in an activity or not, and that s/he should not lie about it, or that grace comes from adhering to the social norms.

Do supernatural beings mete out punishment:

– No

Do supernatural beings bestow rewards:

– No

Notes: All rewards are believed to result from regular practice of the 4 yogas and the 5 points of yoga.

Messianism/Eschatology

Are messianic beliefs present:

– No

Notes: To some extent, Hindu mythology as taught by ISYVC provides similarities to messianic beliefs, for example, the role of Krishna as a Jagat Guru (world teacher) in the Bhagavad Gita. The ISYVC hagiography also deploys messianic elements towards its guru Vishnu-devananda as having been "sent to the West" to teach yoga by his teacher Sivananda as "people are waiting". The hagiography also includes several references to so called 'peace missions' that Vishnu-devananda is said to have undertaken to conflict zones in an attempt to build peace or mediate between conflict parties. For example, see this video in which Vishnu-devananda is shown in the Golden Temple in Amritsar (1984), reportedly trying to mediate between a group of Sikhs and Indira Gandhi in Delhi: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HemEZXJgpeE&t=> One of these "missions" was undertaken in an ultra-light plane flying from West into East Berlin: <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/09/16/world/around-the-world-a-swami-flies-over-the-berlin-wall.html?searchResultPosition=1>

Is an eschatology present:

– No

Notes: There are competing ideas present within the population of ISYVC proposing a need for socially engaged practice (although these could be critiqued as self-serving assertions), eschatological views of a transformation that is coming or needs to be worked toward, and rather dystopian beliefs. Generally, New Age groups have in recent years seen a tendency toward the eschatological belief that there is a turn of time coming. Some adherents, for instance, consider the growing popularity of yoga as evidence of an awakening, thus motivating them to spread yoga further. In accordance with Hindu mythology, ISYVC also teaches the world is currently in Kali Yuga, the age of destruction, in which the practice of yoga or general discipline and goodness is difficult. In an address given at the graduation of an Advanced Teacher's Training Course (ATTC) in 2011, the former acharya (spiritual director) of ISYVC for Canada and India, Swami Mahadevananda says: "Try to find your peace. This is the most important thing. It does not matter how the world goes, this way or that way, up and down... At this stage, nobody can do anything. Nobody on this planet can do anything. Nobody has got that power, and nobody has got that knowledge to do really something for this planet. So what we can do: find your own inner peace. It does not matter what happens [...]." He adds that, " [...] If on the way, someone wants to know a little bit about peace, if someone asks questions about yoga, about Vedanta, then at that particular time, you can give a good word. But do not become a missionary. Try to remain a practitioner [...]"
Source: from minute 17:30 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMEpdI7B2Cc>

Norms and Moral Realism

Are general social norms prescribed by the religious group:

– Yes

Is there a conventional vs. moral distinction in the religious group:

– Yes

Notes: Moral tenets of Raja yoga taught by ISYVC include 8 limbs: yama, niyama, asana, pranayama, prathyahara, dharana, dhyana, samadhi. Yamas are self-restraints/abstentions: ahimsa: non-injury (e.g. call for vegetarianism) satya: truthfulness; asteya: not stealing; brahmacharya: continence (e.g. call for celibacy); aparigraha: non-acquisitiveness. Niyamas are observances: saucha: cleanliness; samtosa: contentment; tapah: austerity; svadhyayesvara: self-study; pranidhanani: self-surrender. Source: Meditation and Mantras, by Swami Vishnu-devananda (third edition: 1995), p. 175 ff.

↳ What is the nature of this distinction:

– Strongly present and highlighted

↳ Are specifically moral norms prescribed by the religious group:

– Yes

↳ Specifically moral norms are implicitly linked to vague metaphysical concepts:

– Yes

↳ Specifically moral norms are explicitly linked to vague metaphysical entities:

– No

↳ Specifically moral norms are linked to impersonal cosmic order (e.g. karma):

– Yes

↳ Specifically moral norms are linked in some way to an anthropomorphic being:

– No

↳ Specifically moral norms are linked explicitly to commands of anthropomorphic being:

– Yes

Notes: Yes, for instance commands by Guru or God.

↳ Specifically moral norms are have no special connection to metaphysical:

– No

↳ Moral norms apply to:

– All individuals within society

Are there centrally important virtues advocated by the religious group:

– Yes

↳ Honesty / trustworthiness / integrity:

– Yes

Notes: Satya: truthfulness, as part of yamas in Raja Yoga

↳ Courage (in battle):

– Yes

Notes: According to the interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita, which calls for courage in battle, the idea of battle is transcended and the battlefield is understood as an individual's battle with the mind.

↳ Courage (generic):

– Yes

Notes: Sivananda calls adherents to "roar like a lion of Vedanta": See below an excerpt of the article "Thus Spoke Sivananda" published on the Divine Life Society website: "Don't say: "Karma, Karma. My Karma has brought me like this". Exert. Do Purushartha. Do Tapas. Concentrate. Purify. Meditate. Don't become a fatalist. Don't yield to inertia. Don't bleat like a lamb. Roar OM OM OM like a lion of Vedanta. See how Markandeya who was destined to die at his sixteenth year became a Chiranjivi, an immortal boy of sixteen years, on account of his Tapas. Also note how Savitri brought back to life by her Tapas her dead husband, how Benjamin Franklin and the late Sir T. Muthuswami Aiyer of the Madras High Court elevated themselves. Remember, friends, that man is master of his destiny [...]" "Rely on your own Self, your own inner spiritual strength. Stand on your own feet. [...]" Source: <https://www.dlshq.org/download/thus-spake-sivananda/> Swami Swaroopananda, acharya (spiritual director) for Israel & Bahamas of ISYVC speaks on courage in a Q&A video: Swami Swaroopananda: Q&A How Do we Develop Courage to Face the Unknown? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dpxl2ROI5Cc>

↳ Compassion / empathy / kindness / benevolence:

– Yes

Notes: "Be Good Do Good Be Kind Be Compassionate" is a bhajan by Swami Sivananda, popular in ISYVC. Lyrics below: "Serve, Love, Give, Purify, Meditate, Realize Serve, Love, Give, Purify, Meditate, Realize, Be Good, Do Good, Be Kind, Be Compassionate Adapt, Adjust, Accommodate Bear Insult, Bear Injury: Highest Yoga. Bear Insult, Bear Injury: Highest Sadhana Enquire 'who Am I?' Know Thyself And Be Free Om Tat Sat, Om Tat Sat, Om Tat Sad Om, Om Shantih, Om Shantih, Om Shantih Om Brahman Is The Only Real Entity. Mr. So-and-so Is A False Non-entity Chidanand(a) Chidanand(a) Chidananda Hum Har(a) Hal(a) Mē Almast(a), Satchidananda Hum" For example, see a version sung by Vishnu-devananda <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6vNr1BupZw> Another version of the song: track #11 (English) and #12 (Hindi) <https://soundcloud.com/sivanandaindia> The words "BE GOOD DO GOOD" are also written above the shrine of Swami Sivananda at Sivananda Ashram Rishikesh, India. See image: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Interiors_of_the_Sivananda_Temple,_Divine_Life_Society,_Muni_Ki_Reti,_R

↳ Mercy / forgiveness / tolerance:

– Yes

Notes: "Be Good Do Good Be Kind Be Compassionate" is a bhajan by Swami Sivananda, popular in ISYVC. It also calls to bear insult and injury. Lyrics see above.

↳ Generosity / charity:

– Yes

Notes: Swami Sivananda summarises this in a song called "Song of Eighteen 'ities". Lyrics below: "Serenity, regularity, absence of vanity, Sincerity, simplicity, veracity, Equanimity, fixity, non-irritability, Adaptability, humility, tenacity, Integrity, nobility, magnanimity, Charity, generosity, purity. Practice daily these eighteen 'ities', You will soon attain immortality. Brahman is the only real entity, Mr. So and so is a false non-entity. You will abide in eternity and infinity; You will behold unity in diversity; You cannot attain this in the university. You can attain this in the Forest University." Source: <https://www.dlshq.org/teachings/the-eighteen-ities/>

↳ Selflessness / selfless giving:

– Yes

Notes: This is part of the 4 Yogas: Karma Yoga is selfless service (unpaid labour to the ISYVC).

- ↳ Righteousness / moral rectitude:
– Yes
Notes: The Bhagavad Gita is deployed to teach righteousness, the application of dharma or Sanatana Dharma (Hinduism).
- ↳ Ritual purity / ritual adherence / abstention from sources of impurity:
– Yes
Notes: The three qualities (gunas) are sattva (purity), rajas (stimulation), and tamas (inertia). This applies, for instance to food, but also to thoughts, media, conversations, topics etc. Rajas and tamas are to be avoided.
- ↳ Respectfulness / courtesy:
– No
- ↳ Familial obedience / filial piety:
– Yes
Notes: Mostly impacted by Indian social norms, elderly people are to be respected. This applies also to senior teachers or members of ISYVC.
- ↳ Fidelity / loyalty:
– No
- ↳ Cooperation:
– No
- ↳ Independence / creativity / freedom:
– No
- ↳ Moderation / frugality:
– Yes
Notes: Patanjali calls for moderation in yoga, e.g. brahmacharya (continence).
- ↳ Diligence / self-discipline / excellence:
– Yes
Notes: The Teacher Training Course (TTC) is considered a test of spiritual discipline and self-discipline. The organisation's schedule requires high self-discipline with little time for leisure and sleep.
- ↳ Assertiveness / decisiveness / confidence / initiative:
– No
- ↳ Strength (physical):
– No
- ↳ Power / status / nobility:
– No

- ↳ Humility / modesty:
 - Yes

- ↳ Contentment / serenity / equanimity:
 - Yes
 - Notes: Santosha is one of the 5 niyamas in Raja Yoga.

- ↳ Joyfulness / enthusiasm / cheerfulness:
 - No

- ↳ Optimism / hope:
 - Yes

- ↳ Gratitude / thankfulness:
 - Yes

- ↳ Reverence / awe / wonder:
 - Yes

- ↳ Faith / belief / trust / devotion:
 - Yes

- ↳ Wisdom / understanding:
 - Yes
 - Notes: Svadhyaya (self-study) is one of the 5 niyamas in Raja Yoga.

- ↳ Discernment / intelligence:
 - Yes
 - Notes: Patanjali calls for viveka (discernment, discrimination) in order to be able to distinguish between avidya (absence of knowledge) and vidya (knowledge). The practice of the 8 limbs of Raja Yoga is said to lead to discernment.

- ↳ Beauty / attractiveness:
 - No

- ↳ Cleanliness (physical) / orderliness:
 - Yes
 - Notes: Sauca is one of the 5 Niyamas in Raja Yoga.

- ↳ Other important virtues advocated by the religious group:
 - Yes [specify]: Vairagya: dispassion.

Practices

Membership Costs and Practices

Does membership in this religious group require celibacy (full sexual abstinence):

– Yes

Notes: Celibacy is required for chaitanyas (novices) and swamis (monks/nuns), although sexual activity is generally undesired in an ashram or yoga centre. Allegations of sexual abuse against the founder-guru and other senior leaders justify further interrogation of the actual implementation of moral tenets, such as non-violence and sexual celibacy. Some survivors/victims of alleged sexual abuse reported that they idealised or justified the coerced sexual activity/violence as tantric practice. Note: If sexual abuse is alleged in contexts in which celibacy is prescribed, the consequential discourse on abstinence as a possible cause for sexualised violence often bypasses the essential recognition of the suffering and the needs of survivors/victims. In a similar manner, some religious groups tend to deal with acts of sexual abuse mainly as matters of breaking celibacy, focusing their outrage and disappointment on this lesser misconduct, rather than recognising the harm and acknowledging these acts of sexual abuse for what they actually are: a sexualised form of violence. This is ultimately belittling these acts of violence and is harmful to survivors/victims as it creates a dangerous fallacy, considering sexual abuse as a form of sexual activity. This fallacy inevitably assumes perpetrator standpoints (for instance: speaking of pleasure, desire, or fulfilment of sexual needs). Nonetheless, allegations of coerced sexual activity and sexualised violence against the founder-guru and others in ISYVC cast reasonable doubt on how celibacy is taught and adhered to, both practically and as a moral teaching.

Does membership in this religious group require constraints on sexual activity (partial sexual abstinence):

– Yes

↳ Monogamy (males):

– Yes

Notes: So-called "householders" (grhastha ashrama) are allowed to have/build a family with one partner, thus implying a necessity of monogamy and marriage. This is widely coherent with the Indian concept stages in Hindu traditions (ashramas). The organisational policy asks that sexual activity and physical affection are avoided when on premises of the organisation, e.g. in an ashram.

↳ Monogamy (females):

– Yes

Notes: So-called "householders" (grhastha ashrama) are allowed to have/build a family with one partner, thus implying a necessity of monogamy and marriage. This is widely coherent with the Indian concept stages in Hindu traditions (ashramas). The group asks that sexual activity and physical affection are generally avoided when on premises of the organisation, e.g. in an ashram.

↳ Other sexual constraints (males):

– Yes

Notes: The ISYVC sometimes encourages and performs weddings for (young) devotees, thus actively managing their intimate lives, including sexual activities (e.g. monogamy required).

↳ Other sexual constraints (females):

– Yes

Notes: While menstruating, women are discouraged from participating in certain rituals, including visiting the temples. The ISYVC sometimes encourages and performs weddings for (young) devotees, thus actively managing their intimate lives, including sexual activities (e.g. monogamy required).

Does membership in this religious group require castration:

– No

Does membership in this religious group require fasting:

– Yes

Notes: Fasting is not required but encouraged as part of ayurvedic medicine, on religious holidays, for example, Ekadasi (11th moon day of vedic moon calendars), or as a cleansing technique and preparation for the practice of shat kriyas (purification techniques). As part of their programme calendar, the religious group also offers ayurvedic juice fasts.

Does membership in this religious group require forgone food opportunities (taboos on desired foods):

– Yes

Notes: The prescribed diet is lacto-vegetarian. Food items are categorised, according to Bhagavad Gita, as sattvic (pure), rajasic (stimulating), and tamasic (stale). Tamasic and certain rajasic foods are to be avoided. These include: meat, fish, eggs, onions, garlic, mushrooms, eggplant/aubergine, coffee, caffeinated (black) tea, tobacco, alcohol and drugs.

Does membership in this religious group require permanent scarring or painful bodily alterations:

– No

Does membership in this religious group require painful physical positions or transitory painful wounds:

– Yes

Notes: Sitting cross-legged on the floor, for several hours for meditation.

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of adults:

"Adults" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition of a human who is 18-years-old or older and who is legally responsible for his/her actions, then please specify that difference in the Comments/Sources: box below.

– No

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of children:

"Children" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition, please specify that different in the Comments/Sources: box below.

– No

Does membership in this religious group require self-sacrifice (suicide):

– No

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of property/valuable items:

– Yes

Notes: Some former adherents report having been financially dependent on the organisation or in difficult financial position after leaving or being asked to leave due to non-compliance, as they have given full-time work without building an income outside of ISYVC. Some reported that they had also donated money to ISYVC. See, for example, Project SATYA Report #3 pp. 65ff & pp. 100ff.

↳ To other in-group members:

– No

↳ To out-groups:

– No

↳ Destroyed:

– No

↳ Other:

– No

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of time (e.g., attendance at meetings or services, regular prayer, etc.):

– Yes

Notes: The daily schedule is identical at all ashrams (retreat centres) of the ISYVC. Daily schedule: 5:30 am Wake up, 6:00 am Meditation, mantra chanting and lecture, 8:00 am Asanas and pranayama 10:00 am Brunch, 11:00 am Karma Yoga (helping out with chores), noon Bhagavad Gita or Kirtan, 2:00 pm Main lecture on philosophy or anatomy, 4:00 pm Asanas and pranayama, 6:00 pm Dinner, 8:00 pm Meditation, mantra chanting and lecture, 10:00 pm Lights out Source: <https://www.sivananda.eu/en/yoga-teacher-training/daily-schedule.html>

Does membership in this religious group require physical risk taking:

– Yes

Notes: Not routinely.

Does membership in this religious group require accepting ethical precepts:

– Yes

Does membership in this religious group require marginalization by out-group members:

– Yes

Notes: There is a notion of "the outside world" and its dangers/distractions. Resident volunteers and staff are discouraged to entertain strong relationships with out-group members.

Does membership in this religious group require participation in small-scale rituals (private, household):

– No

Notes: Small-scale rituals are not required but encouraged.

Does membership in this religious group require participation in large-scale rituals:

I.e. involving two or more households; includes large-scale "ceremonies" and "festivals."

– No

Notes: Most large-scale rituals would be performed by the organisation itself on its premises, and not in private.

Are extra-ritual in-group markers present:

E.g. special changes to appearance such as circumcision, tattoos, scarification, etc.

– Yes

↳ Tattoos/scarification:

– No

↳ Circumcision:

– No

↳ Food taboos:

– Yes

↳ Hair:

– I don't know

Notes: Certain preferable hairstyles can be observed amongst the group and sub-groups, but not exclusively prescribed.

↳ Dress:

– Yes

Notes: White pants and yellow shirts are the default dress for yoga teachers in ISYVC. This outfit is also required for ritualistic group activities, such as satsangs or classes, especially during teacher training courses. Brahmacharyas/Chaitanyas are dressed in yellow, swamis (monks/nuns) are dressed in orange. Indian-style clothing (saris for women, dhotis or lungis for men) is sometimes worn by adherents for religious festivals, but not required.

↳ Ornaments:

– No

↳ Archaic ritual language:

– Yes

Notes: Rituals are performed at "auspicious" times. Sanskrit is widely used during rituals.

↳ Other:

– No

Does the group employ fictive kinship terminology:

– Yes

Notes: There is a notion of a "Sivananda family".

↳ Fictive kinship terminology universal:

– No

↳ Fictive kinship terminology widespread:

– Yes

↳ Fictive kinship terminology employed but uncommon:

– No

Society and Institutions

Levels of Social Complexity

The society to which the religious group belongs is best characterized as (please choose

one):
– A state

Welfare

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized famine relief:
– No

Is famine relief available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:
– No

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized poverty relief:
– No

Is poverty relief available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:
– No

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized care for the elderly and infirm:
– No

Is institutionalized care for the elderly and infirm available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:
– No

Education

Does the religious group provide formal education to its adherents:
– No

Is formal education available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group:
– No

Bureaucracy

Do the group's adherents interact with a formal bureaucracy within their group:
– No

Do the group's adherents interact with other institutional bureaucracies:
– No

Public Works

Does the religious group in question provide public food storage:
– No

Is public food storage provided to the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Does the religious group in question provide water management (irrigation, flood control):

– No

Is water management provided to the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Does the religious group in question provide transportation infrastructure:

– No

Is transportation infrastructure provided for the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Taxation

Does the religious group in question levy taxes or tithes:

– No

Are taxes levied on the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Enforcement

Does the religious group in question provide an institutionalized police force:

– No

Do the group's adherents interact with an institutionalized police force provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized judges:

– No

Do the group's adherents interact with an institutionalized judicial system provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Does the religious group in question enforce institutionalized punishment:

– No

Are the group's adherents subject to institutionalized punishment enforced by an

institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Does the religious group in question have a formal legal code:

– No

Are the group's adherents subject to a formal legal code provided by institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Warfare

Does religious group in question possess an institutionalized military:

– No

Do the group's adherents participate in an institutionalized military provided by institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Are the group's adherents protected by or subject to an institutionalized military provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Written Language

Does the religious group in question possess its own distinct written language:

– No

Is a non-religion-specific written language available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Is a non-religion-specific written language used by the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Calendar

Does the religious group in question possess a formal calendar:

– No

Is a formal calendar provided for the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Food Production

Does the religious group in question provide food for themselves:

– No

Is food provided to the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

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