

The Trouble with Gurus

Mary Garden issues a travel warning for seekers of spiritual enlightenment.

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"No amount of evidence, nor the quality of it, will serve to un-convince the true believer. Their belief is something they not only want, they need it." (James Randi)

My conversion to Eastern mysticism was sudden and unexpected. One morning I was a non-believer; that night I was a believer. And yet it took me years to wake up. The dramatic turnabout in my life happened during a ceremony of worship conducted at a yoga ashram 30 years ago. This ashram on the outskirts of Auckland was the first of its kind in New Zealand and the Hindu swami that led the ceremony was also the first to visit that country. I still can't understand fully what happened to me that night.

It was as if I was transported into another world during the hour or so that I sat there. I remember there was incense burning, candles lighting up the darkened room, some very strange pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses on the altar at the front of the room. There was no restless chatter or movement among the small group of people assembled there. The swami was chanting prayers to the gods, and perhaps there were some pictures of various holy men as well, but I don't remember. The chants and prayers seemed strangely familiar. Within minutes my mind seemed to "explode" into ecstasy and bliss. I felt the region of my heart grow warmer and warmer and then it was as if it was opening and all these feelings of love were pouring outwards. My forehead felt ablaze with white light. I had dropped acid once before and in many ways this experience was similar, except that here I felt in complete control and this enormous sense of peace came over me.

As I drove home I decided to quit my postgraduate studies at Auckland University and go to India as soon as possible. Maybe for the rest of my life.

I was not alone. The hippy movement - its pot and flower power - had left some of us jaded and more lost than ever and so we embarked instead on a spiritual search. In the 1970s, tens of thousands of us went to India: Eastern mysticism was new and exotic to Westerners and we were in the vanguard. We traipsed from guru to guru unable to see that we would have been better to give up on them altogether - at least until we had sorted ourselves out psychologically. But there had been no exposés or warnings of the damage that could be done to our minds and our bodies when we surrendered our critical thinking (and our hearts) to gurus. We were young, gullible and susceptible.

While making preparations to leave, I stayed at the yoga ashram and became part of an "instant" community. I also picked up "instant" answers to the meaning of life. I began to learn about chakras and the kundalini fire that was meant to move slowly up the spinal cord purifying "blocks" in its wake. I read books such as Paul Brunton's *A Search in Secret India* and Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* and was blown away. It was as if I had entered an enchanted kingdom, so different from the dreary Christianity of my childhood. It never occurred to me to question or doubt their stories. I had become a "true believer": in reincarnation, karma, meditation, chanting, Siva, Krishna and Hanuman (the monkey god) and Ganesha (the elephant god) and in the need to have a guru. I was on what seemed to be a permanent high: the depression and loneliness that had hovered over my life for the previous few years had vanished (we didn't talk about these things back in those days). Plus I didn't have to think about sex again: I was going to be celibate like a true Hindu sadhak or renunciate. What a relief to no longer need romantic relationships with men.

I heard of Sathya Sai Baba a few weeks before I was due to leave. I met some Sai Baba devotees and was captivated by what they told me. Tales of Baba healing the sick, curing the lame, resurrecting the dead, transporting himself great distances, manifesting in many places and bodies simultaneously. Also,

of drawing necklaces, bracelets and rings from thin air and a sacred ash called vibhuti from the palm of his hand. (Millions of people all over the world, including the present and former prime ministers of India, believe that Sai Baba is the Avatar, a direct incarnation of God. He himself has said "his coming" was predicted by Jesus Christ.) Perhaps it was Sai Baba who was behind all the strange and remarkable changes in my life? I was not going to miss out. I'd go to Bangalore, surrender my life to Him. I changed my travel destination to South India instead of the Himalayas as planned.

My first impression of India was that at last I had come home. Within days of arriving I began to wear a sari as well as a red spot (kumkum) on my forehead and began learning Hindi. With my black hair and olive skin, I was often mistaken for an Indian woman. But the honeymoon lasted only three months. By that time I was disillusioned if not bored by a life revolving around "darshans". This meant sitting for hours on the dusty ground in the compound of a palatial residence waiting for "God" himself to appear each morning and afternoon. We were supposed to be blessed and purified by being in such a holy presence. I was also disturbed by the groupthink - even the most trivial and banal things were attributed to Sai Baba as if "He" was omniscient and omnipresent. There was a language that went along with all of this: "He's cleansing me"; "It's all His Grace", etc. I was also a bit freaked out (to put it mildly) by the rumours I heard in the nearby town that Sai Baba was a "sex maniac" preying on male disciples during private interviews. I fled convinced that Baba was the devil himself or at least something dark and sinister. Thankfully no-one came to track me down and change my mind as had happened with members of other groups such as the Moonies or the Hare Krishnas. But it was some time before I could shake the spell that had been cast over me. Images of the orange-robed god-man darted across my mind from time to time, as did the odd phrase and melody of some of the hypnotic bhajans (devotional songs) that had been sung at the ashram. As I had not met any ex-devotee there was the odd moment on the long dusty train ride to Delhi when I wondered, "What if I am wrong and have blown it, thrown away the chance to be with God himself?"

In spite of this initial disillusionment I did not give up on my search and spent six more years in India. Most of these were with an enigmatic yogi called Swami Balyogi Premvarni whose isolated ashram was nestled in the jungle near Rishikesh, in the Himalayas. During the times I ran away from him I checked out other yogis and swamis, spent time with the Hare Krishnas in Vrindaban, stayed a year in the ashram of the controversial Bhagwan Rajneesh and did a number of Buddhist Vipassana meditation retreats. The latter were conducted by a very respected teacher (and deservedly so) called Goenka (no claims here of being a god-man or enlightened).

Many readers may find it difficult to understand why these gurus are so powerful? We first need to look at the concept of the guru itself, which is an essential component of Eastern mysticism. There is no parallel in other spiritual traditions. Guru is a Sanskrit word; "gu" means darkness and "ru" means light. Hence guru means one who can lead you from darkness to light. Hindus consider that if one chooses a spiritual path in life (note that this is traditionally the path recommended when one's duties as a parent or a householder etc have been fulfilled - in the latter part of one's life), then it is essential to find a guru.

Some gurus are considered the living manifestation of God (Bhagwan) here on earth. As God is seen as too powerful to make contact directly, these gurus are conduits to channel his energy. Premvarni (we used to call him Swamiji) would say: "God will blow your fuse; you need me as a transformer."

As God in human form, these gurus (very few are women) become the absolute authority who cannot be questioned or challenged by disciples. Even doubting them is seen as "resistance", a lack of faith and too much reliance on the intellect. Hence the measure of our spiritual superiority became our openness and complete acceptance not only of our guru's teachings but also his behaviour, no matter how bizarre, cruel or even unethical. Most of the gurus I met taught the need to give up all thinking and to surrender totally. At the entrance to Rajneesh's ashram in Poona was even a sign: "Leave your minds and your shoes outside the gate."

If the guru is seen as infallible, then the disciples are always to blame: it is their karma. On the other hand, what the guru does is a divine lila (game) or "test". There were times we would call Swamiji "Rudra" (the god of destruction in the Hindu pantheon). In this way we could rationalise his outbursts and acts of cruelty. He himself used to call it his "teaching nature" - he claimed he used it intentionally to wake us up. One seeker who spent several months there a few years ago recently wrote to me: "I was in constant internal agitation about whether his behaviours were tests or mere emotional abuse." (This person has still not fully resolved his experience there). Now, looking back, Swamiji's behaviours were

acts of violence and abuse, if not those of a madman; this discernment is unavailable to devotees who believe their guru is perfect.

In the beginning I found Swamiji's dramatic mood swings unnerving. He would be seductive and charming one minute and vile the next - for no apparent reason. He would scream, yell profanities (often in Hindi) and even beat one of the Indian servants. Sometimes he would attack a Western disciple (usually male) who regarded this as part of their spiritual discipline and welcomed it. I'd be shocked at his outbursts, chuck my possessions in my backpack and get ready to leave. By the time I'd front up to Swamiji to get my money and passport out of his safe he'd have turned on his charming, seductive self and I'd be sucked back in, even blaming myself for doubting him. However after a few months, his "teaching nature" scarcely bothered me.

The surrender to such a guru-figure can result in the disintegration of personality and individuality. Joshua Baran, a former Zen Buddhist monk, remarks: "Devotees lose their natural alarm systems, which tell them when things aren't right. This is usually a gradual process." In effect what happens is brainwashing, a subtle process of thought reform. And so, instead of the promise of increased spiritual awareness and humility, what can often take place is increased robotism. In my own case, over the years I became more and more indecisive, since most major decisions were made for me. Eckart Flother, a well-known German journalist, spent some months as a sannyasin in Poona in the late 1970s and wrote of the dehumanising effects of life with Rajneesh: how a person can become like a puppet; almost an apathetic creature trying to satisfy his basic needs while the rest of his energy is being used to glorify the master.

Contributing to the marked personality changes of devotees are the new names they are given, an essential part of the initiation process. These new names have tremendous significance - they signify a rebirth, a cutting off of the past, as if what devotees were before needs to be somehow obliterated, forgotten. Swamiji bestowed on me the Sanskrit name Archana which means "adoration of the divine", or worship, and explained that was my true spiritual path. Years later when I became a Rajneesh sannyasin I was given another name, Ma Prem Sagara, meaning "ocean of love". These names fed our delusions of somehow being divine or spiritual.

What really trapped us were the blissful states of mind achieved through meditation or chanting. We all had the most extraordinary experiences for which I have no explanation to this day. But what we didn't realise is that just because we experienced peace and ecstasy and maybe had various visions, this did not mean that emotional difficulties or psychological problems had been cured or transcended. These mental states had little to do with spiritual growth.

There were several reasons why it was so hard for many of us to leave or to give up our search altogether. Not only had we lost our sense of reality but also our defence mechanisms. We had become too frightened or paranoid to leave. While in Poona we were constantly reminded that if we lost faith, we would miss out on this rare opportunity to be with an enlightened master - Bhagwan Rajneesh. In the Himalayas, we were encouraged to develop a phobia of the outside world: that world out there, outside the ashram, was in some way evil, samsara, non-spiritual. If we left, it would mean that we had not only failed but had also been in error. And we would have to return to the West, now a foreign place; many of us had no jobs to go back to and had broken ties with old friends and past social networks. Most of all, we lacked the insight to leave!

Sometimes our virtual imprisonment could have dire consequences. Even though Swamiji claimed to be celibate, within weeks I had become a consort and - shortly after - his chief consort. He insisted it wasn't sex; it was just raising my kundalini and getting rid of all those lowly vibrations from years of sleeping with worldly men. I learnt that within Hinduism there is a rare tradition of tantra in which there is a place for legitimate coupling by spiritual partners for a kind of mystical union. So I felt special, even flattered.

My fantasy came to an end when I fell pregnant: that was not meant to be part of the divine drama. Swamiji had assured me that he was in control of my destiny and when I became sick he pronounced that my body was "cleansing itself". Finally (after several months) I persuaded him to let me see a doctor. At first I thought, "what a miracle, a holy child!"; it never occurred to me to have an abortion but that's exactly what Swamiji ordered: it was my fault and my "bad karma".

I almost changed my mind, alone in a noisy Delhi hospital, but when my passport and all my money was stolen, I fell into a state of utter confusion and distress. I also feared being rejected by Swamiji and cast out of his holy abode.

When I returned to the ashram, things were never the same. I was no longer subservient and became defiant and enraged at times. On one occasion I charged into the meditation room and confronted him, screaming, "You're a murderer, Swamiji. You killed my baby. You're a sex maniac." It was then I knew I had to leave this place before I went completely insane.

My last year in India was spent in Poona with the Bhagwan Rajneesh. Life there was in many ways refreshing and in strong contrast to the rigidity and repression found in many of the traditional Hindu ashrams I had visited. Unless one was part of the "inner circle" and lived within the confines of the ashram itself, one was free to do as one pleased. Nothing was forbidden - sex, dancing, alcohol, drugs, partying. The ashram also offered a wide range of workshops and retreats: from tantra sex to Gestalt therapy and Zen meditation. It was here that I had my first experience of Western psychotherapies and these helped me. I lived outside the ashram in a comfortable apartment and even began earning an income from various projects including the compilation of a book called Bhagwan's Neo-Tantra. I slowly began to recover from Swamiji and was no longer drawn back to him.

However some disturbing things went on around the Bhagwan both inside and outside the ashram. Increasingly I found myself in a questioning or doubting state of mind - that "monkey" mind of mine, which had hounded me throughout my odyssey. At the end of the year I received a note, ostensibly from Rajneesh but presumably from one of his secretaries. It said I was resisting him and it was time to go back to the West (many other sannyasins received similar notes at this time). I took that as my cue.

I returned to worldly life, settled in Brisbane and have never wanted to return to India. My dream of finding some kind of enlightenment through Eastern gurus was finally over and I had started to wake up. I also realised that I had lost a large chunk of my life. In those seven years away I had read no newspapers, watched no television, listened to no Western music and read no books that were not religious tracts. I had been oblivious to what had been going on in the wider world.

It took me years to make sense of what I had experienced. It was difficult because in those days cult counsellors did not exist except for a few evangelical Christians who, in my experience, dished out more of the same "mind control". I also knew of no ex-devotee of any guru. Perhaps I was the only one, the only one who could not stand up to the rigours of spiritual life? I wrote a book based on my journey, *The Serpent Rising: A Journey of Spiritual Seduction*, which helped resolve some of the ambivalence I had been struggling with. I experienced some good things in India. As well as the strength to survive, I gained some recipes for a simpler life. And I still practise Vipassana (albeit in small doses): sitting still, watching my breath, calming my mind. But essentially my entanglements with gurus had been dangerous and destructive. They had all abused their power.

It was only in the late 1980s that sensational stories began to appear in print: articles and books by ex-devotees of Sai Baba, Ron Hubbard (Scientology), the Hare Krishnas, Muktananda, Sun Myung Moon, Rajneesh, Guru Maharaji, Krishnamurti and other Hindu gurus, plus various Zen masters and Buddhist lamas.

Hugh Milne's book, *Bhagwan, The God that Failed*, documents the hypocrisy that surrounded Rajneesh. A few years after I left, bizarre events began to unfold in that group. They relocated to Oregon and hit worldwide media attention when Rajneesh bought scores of Rolls-Royces and the ashram began stockpiling weapons. The group also tried to influence local county elections by making large numbers of people ill on election day so their own candidates would be elected. This led to the first large-scale biological attack in history when 751 people dining at restaurants in the small city of Dalles were poisoned with salmonella (grown in the commune). Two sannyasins pleaded guilty to charges of food poisoning. And 35 others pleaded guilty to other charges such as conspiracy to murder public officials. Bhagwan renamed himself Osho when he returned to India. According to those close to him, he became more and more dependent on prescription drugs such as Valium as well as nitrous oxide (laughing gas) and died in 1990 from heart failure. His closest disciple and companion, Vivek, had committed suicide in Bombay a few months before. Despite all the controversy, Osho groups still function here in Australia.

Tal Brooke first spilled some of the "beans" on Sai Baba with Lord of the Air, in which he claimed that this so-called avatar was in fact a deviant con man who preyed on his followers, especially male disciples. His accusations were dismissed for decades and it is only in recent years with the help of the internet that his claims have been corroborated. More allegations have been added; there is a flourishing internet controversy.

Yet people still go on pilgrimages to Bangalore. Devotees, because of their unconditional belief in Sai Baba as God, find it easy to dismiss any accusations as false, without even reading them. Some vocal devotees simply rationalise the widespread allegations of sexual abuse. An American devotee named Ram Das Awle says on his website: "I'm inclined to think some of the allegations about Baba are probably true. It appears likely to me that He has occasionally had sexually intimate interactions with devotees." He says that Sai Baba touches men to awaken their kundalini energy or to remove previous bad sexual karma, and that "any sexual contact Baba has had with devotees - of whatever kind - has actually been only a potent blessing, given to awaken the spiritual power within those souls. Who can call that 'wrong'? Surely to call such contact 'molestation' is perversity itself".

The whole "cult" phenomenon has been under close scrutiny for many years now, and one prominent researcher, Margaret Singer, remarks that what she finds astonishing is that most people don't realise how all humans can be influenced. She has interviewed more than 3000 former members from groups with vastly different ideologies, from the Rajneeshes to the members of Jim Jones's People's Temple, and concludes, "they are all extended con games". Philip Zimbardo (former president of the American Psychological Association) points out: "Whatever any member of a cult has done, you and I could be recruited or seduced into doing - under the right or wrong conditions. The majority of 'normal, average, intelligent' individuals can be led to engage in immoral, illegal, irrational, aggressive and self-destructive actions that are contrary to their values or personality - when manipulated situational conditions exert their power over individual dispositions."

Brian Steel, a former devotee of Sai Baba, speaks for many when he writes on his website of how his "serious doubts about the truth of the Divinity claims (together with collateral damage to my faith from the accumulating sexual allegations) have forced me to recover my critical judgement, anaesthetised for so long by my belief in Sai Baba's special self-proclaimed divine nature, and to organise the niggling doubts which I had collected (but conveniently hid away) into a more coherent pattern. As for naivety and gullibility, I shared these attributes with other devotees for many years".

Some may ask: What's wrong with groups that bring solace and a sense of belonging to so many people? Author Wendy Kaminer replies: "That's a bit like asking what's wrong with a lobotomy, [or] a steady diet of happy pills. The rise of charismatic authority figures is always disconcerting, especially when they malign rationalism and exhort us to abandon critical thinking in order to realise spiritual growth. Pop gurus prey on existential anxieties and thrive when our fear of being alone and mortal in an indifferent universe is stronger than our judgement. No-one who seeks worship, however covertly, deserves respect. Argue with them, please."

Another author, Mariana Caplan, says that seekers should aim for a "conscious discipleship that is fully empowered, intelligent". She argues that disciples need to understand their own "complicity in the corruption that sometimes arises in the student-teacher relationship". But when in 1997 a woman was awarded \$US1.8 million from the Himalayan Institute in Honesdale, Philadelphia, her attorney described the sexual exploitation of his client as "spiritual incest", and worse than rape because she and other devotees viewed the swami as "a person approaching divinity". Using his position as spiritual guru to gain their trust, the swami had convinced young women to submit to sexual demands.

The Dalai Lama was shocked when he heard that Tibetan lamas were liaising with Western female students and said the only remedy for such a situation was for the culprits to be "outed", mentioned by name publicly and no longer considered as teachers. But he also pointed out that in the final analysis, the authority of a guru was bestowed by the disciple. The guru doesn't go looking for disciples. The Dalai Lama's recipe is to "spy" on the guru for at least 10 years. Listen, examine, watch, until you are convinced the person is sincere. In the meantime treat him or her as an ordinary human being and receive their teaching as "just information".

What was thought to be a passing fad of the 1960s and 1970s has not disappeared as many commentators assumed. In the following decades and even today people still go to India and elsewhere

to surrender their minds to gurus - even to those that have been exposed as frauds, charlatans, liars and hypocrites. In addition, many self-styled false messiahs have emerged in the West. Increasing numbers of New Age teachers and leaders of groups, workshops and seminars who claim "this is it", "this will change your life", "here is the way", continue to mushroom across Australia. They are not all harmful, of course, but what seekers need to be wary of are those groups that rely on charismatic leaders (with potentially manipulative control over disciples), where there is an authoritarian structure that requires unquestioning obedience and where there are in-out group attitudes - they, the chosen ones, alone hold the "truth".

Jack Kornfield, a well-known American teacher of Vipassana meditation, is a strong advocate for psychotherapy as part of spiritual life: "Because the issues of personal life are often our greatest source of suffering and neurosis, of our deepest attachments and delusion, we fear them and may unconsciously use spiritual practice to avoid dealing with them." This is what I was lucky enough to realise at Poona and it has been a cornerstone of my life ever since.

The guru-disciple relationship is probably the most authoritarian of all in its demands for total surrender and obedience. Hence it can also be the most destructive. And far from achieving the freedom and enlightenment that many of us wannabe spiritual pioneers of the 1970s sought (and were promised), we experienced mental imprisonment and confusion. We were seduced by yogis and swamis telling us what we wanted to hear: that we were special and that they were God incarnate. Our need was our downfall. (Other "spiritual" relationships can also be damaging - eg the widespread abuse by some Catholic and Anglican priests, the details and serious consequences of which have been surfacing of late.)

From time to time I look back on those years in India and it seems like a strange dream. Was that really me?

**** Mary Garden is the author of *The Serpent Rising: A Journey of Spiritual Seduction*, a second edition of which has just been published by Sid Harta Publishers (Melbourne, 254pp, \$19.95).*

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