

A Reader's Guide to the New Mysticism

by Joshu

This categorization of cults, religions and spiritual schools of the New Mysticism is in some ways a contradiction of the mystical process itself. Lao Tzu (via a translator, Wytter Bynner) warned:

*"Leave off fine learning! End the nuisance
Of saying yes to this and perhaps to that,
Distinctions with how little difference!
Categorical this, categorical that,
What slightest use are they!"*

There being no easy way out of that trap of explaining direct mystical experience in intellectual symbols, perhaps a way around is to make the categorization brief. Herewith, then, a short *selection* of chart-busting cults, growth stocks and consciousness-raising techniques that fall somewhere on the continuum from *getting-in-touch-with-body* to awakening the soul.

Ananda Marga: Although they have only about 3,000 active disciples in the U.S., the Ananda Marga society has received press coverage recently because their founder and spiritual leader, Shrii Shrii Anandamurti, is on trial in India. Anandamurti, also called Baba, is accused of murdering seven former disciples, a charge which his followers say was trumped up by the Indian government. In April, an Ananda Marga monk immolated himself to protest his leader's imprisonment, and two CBS newsmen filming the event were arrested by Indian police. Ananda Marga's practice in America mixes meditation and "good works"—recycling, disaster relief, day care, visiting the old, the sick, the imprisoned. In India they are considered a militant anti-government group, and they recently moved their world headquarters from India to Wichita, Kansas.

Arica: A body of techniques for cosmic consciousness-raising and an ideology to relate to the world in an awakened way. Arica was named after the city in Chile where its developer, Oscar Ichazo, lived and worked before emigrating to that

global energy center, New York. Arica draws heavily on Gurdjieff's categories of consciousness and ego, as well as concepts and methods in Sufism, Tibetan Buddhism, Yoga, Zen and various esoteric psychologies. Ichazo does not purport to be divine, nor is Arica a religion. Students take courses of various lengths at Arica Institutes around the country in order to awake from their sleepy consciousnesses. It is sophisticated, intellectualized, expensive and chic.

Divine Light Mission: The religious organization of the Satguru (Perfect Master) Maharaj Ji, an Indian adolescent who says He is God but is adulated more like a Brahmin Donny Osmond. The religion comes on to Western hippies as a psychedelic Hinduism or electric Yoga. But it is well-heeled, well-organized and surprisingly slick.

EST: Officially, the name is meant to connote the Latin for "it is," as well as to form an acronym for a number of phrases, such as Electronic Social Transformation, Eco-Strategy-Tactics, Environment Systems Theory, Equilibrium of Sensory Thresholds, Earth Survival Techniques, Exploration of Simulsense Totality, Ego Self Transcendence, and so on. Unofficially, it sometimes stands for Erhard Seminary (or Sensitivity) Training, after its conceiver, Werner Erhard. After going through an EST course, students are supposed to acquire the intellectual and cosmic tools necessary to understand and master planetary problems. The course is a mixture of Buckminster Fuller and Moral Re-Armament—which may not be much of a mixture at all. It is popular on the West Coast, and Jerry Rubin is an enthusiast—although he claims it is merely one of many such courses he has taken recently.

The Foundation: Stephen Gaskin is one of the few home-grown American freak gurus who are not apostles of a particular Oriental religion. Americans prefer import-gurus the way they prefer Third World knockoffs of fancy bou-

the British rock group The Who is into Him. (The rock opera *Tommy* is purported to be based on His life.)

Mind Control: There are various commercial and non-commercial operations that use machines or meditative techniques to teach clients how to regulate the electrical functions of their own brains so as to produce jets feel good. Biofeedback techniques may also allow subjects to control other functions of their body, including the autonomic nervous system. Silva Mind Control, a successful commercial version, uses no machines. Most mind control techniques do not fall into the category of cosmic cult, but they share many of the methods—and expectations—of cosmic psychology.

Sufism: Originally a Persian and Islamic mystical tradition, Sufi teachings are now studied and practiced throughout the world. Sufism is nothing if not trendy this year; it has been called the “chic of Araby.” The Sufi Dervishes used whirling and dancing to produce the state of ecstasy, and Sufi enthusiasts today similarly employ dancing, music and movement. The international Sufi heavy is Idries Shah, who lives and writes in England. Sufis like word games and practical jokes—so look out!

Tibetan Buddhism: A Himalayan form of Zen, currently an underground trend in some student and intellectual circles in America. The popularizer in America is Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who is said to be the former head abbot of a Tibetan monastery before he left when his country was liberated by the Chinese in 1959. He came here by way of England, and established two centers, the Tail of the Tiger in Vermont and Karma Dzong in Colorado. One important (and appealing) feature of Tibetan Buddhism is its wry cynicism: masters tell their students to “doubt,” rather than “have faith.”

Yogis: There are probably hundreds of Indians and others in America who have become gurus in the

Yogic tradition. Yoga is an Indian form of Buddhist mysticism, which involves physical exercise, breathing rituals and meditative processes to lightenment. There are scores of Yogic schools, centers and ashrams in the U.S., some of them well-established like the Self-Realization Fellowship, in California, founded by Paramahansa Yogananda (“The Autobiography of a Yogi”). There are also various yogis, gurus, babas and swamis, either in America or India, who maintain important followings here:

Yogi Bhajan, practitioner of Kundalini Yoga in his 3HO—Healthy Happy Holy Organization; Swami Satchidananda, who performed at Woodstock, and runs the Integral Yoga Institute; Swami Vishnudevananda of the International Sivananda Yoga and Vedanta Society; the Maharishi Mahesh Yoga, once the Fifth Beatle, subject of John Lennon’s vicious lyrics in “Sexy Sadie,” who conducts Transcendental Meditation; and Baba Ram Dass, a.k.a. Richard Alpert, the hottest American mystic these days, follower of an Indian guru.

Zen: Japanese Buddhist mysticism, comprising sects and subsects. Teachings and meditative systems are designed to lead a student to enlightenment, or *satori*. Zen is an austere, ascetic and pure system that most Americans find difficult to penetrate, although those who do find it enormously meaningful. An entire Zen culture flourishes in Japan, and a small one is growing in the U.S. There are many Zen centers, including a Zen community in Maine directed by an American *roshi* who spent many years in Japan. There exists a rich Zen literature of stories, sayings, poems and parables. One of the great masters was Hakuin (18th century), who devised the *koan*, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” He also wrote the frequently used chant:

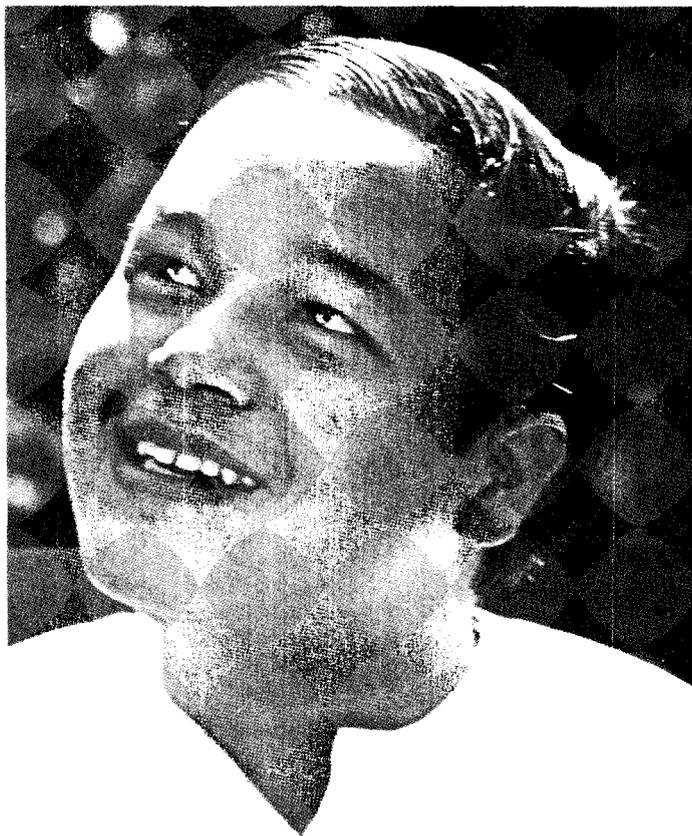
*“Sentient beings are intrinsically
Buddha. . . .
This very place is the Lotus land,
this very body the Buddha.”*

BLISSSED OUT WITH THE PERFECT MASTER

“This is the real thing, not a wax banana”

For an entire week, Berkeley buzzed in anticipation of the return of Rennie Davis. The incredible story of his conversion to the divine prodigy, Satguru Maharaj Ji, had been revealed in a 40-minute interview on the local FM rocker KSAN. Not only was he dedicating his entire life to Maharaj Ji, but by 1975 Mao Tse-tung himself would be bowing in homage before the teenage theomorphic guru. The reaction ranged from sympathy to Paul Krassner's insistence that the entire enterprise was a CIA plot. In between were those who felt that Davis was bummed out by the abuse heaped on him as an active, white, male Movement heavy, disappointed by the disintegration of the anti-war movement and therefore open to the love-vibes and Telex technology which form the core of the Satguru's appeal. Whatever the explanation, everyone was curious, and they itched to see the new Rennie Davis and hear him explain it all in the flesh.

He chose Pauley Ballroom on the U.C. campus to make his stand, a site which overlooks the famous Sproul Plaza. There, some eight years earlier, Mario Savio and his fellow students had marched to shut down the university, thereby unloosing a flood of campus protest which did not subside for five years. Rennie Davis had played a crucial role in that Movement. He had raised money, mapped strategy, given speeches, negotiated permits, written pamphlets—in short, he had done everything that the Movement had done and more. When others had grown tired and cynical, he had



worked on and on, and it was only in recent months that he had begun to slacken his pace.

People had come to view Rennie Davis as better, more dedicated than the rest of us, and now, suddenly, he was telling us to surrender our hearts and minds to a barely pubescent self-proclaimed Perfect Master from India and waltz into Nirvana. It was as if Che Guevara had returned to recruit for the Campfire Girls: the anomaly was as profound as the amazement.

And so they packed the ballroom to hear Rennie Davis, and one sensed curiosity, a certain amount of hostility, and an undercurrent of fear. As he stood before the assemblage, the vultures descended. “Kiss my lotus ass.” “All power to the Maharajah, huh?” He took it in with smiles and good

humor. “I’m really blissed out with a capital ‘B,’” he proclaimed in the vernacular of his new calling. “I’m just here to make a report, and if you don’t want to check out what I’m saying, that’s cool. Sooner or later you’ll find out that we are operating under a new leadership, and it is Divine, that it’s literally going to transform the planet into what we’ve always hoped and dreamed for.” This is what the Hindu mystics call *satsang*—literally, truthgiving. It plays the role in Eastern religion that street-corner rapping did back in the old days when Rennie Davis was the guiding light of the JOIN community organizing project in Chicago.

Now Davis, all cosmic dimples, ignored the slings and

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