

# 'EGG ON MY BEARD'

by RAM DASS

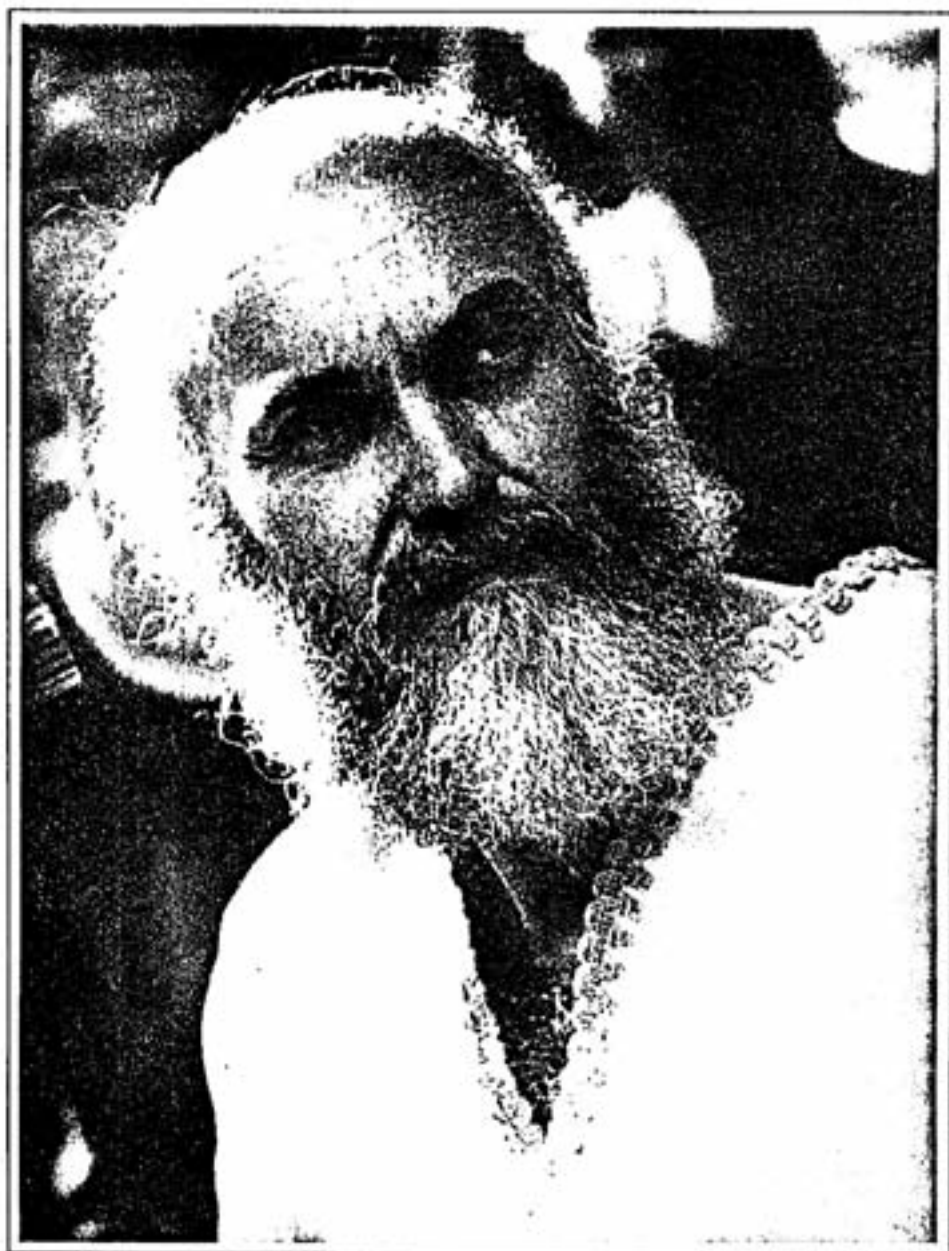


Photo by Peter Simon

In his book *The Way of Kabbalah*, Z'ev ben Shimon Halevi warns that one of the hazards of the spiritual path is that the seeker may mistakenly study with a false teacher, someone who is either self-deluded or an imposter. He also writes that of even greater danger—

... is the man who has reached some level of realization. His quality is usually enigmatic, and he often possesses remarkable powers which he uses to intrigue and manipulate people who are not so evolved as himself... Alas, such men have the ability to fascinate and imprison people by their personal charisma, which is the exact reverse of Kabbalah, whose object is to free men from bondage... Such a man can leave the path and descend to the ego, where he exercises all the powers and skills he has acquired nominally for the sake of spiritual work, but in actuality for the glorification of his ego. To such people the image of themselves is most important, and with it comes clothes and mannerisms, all of which suggest that they know about the next and upper World... The phenomenon occurs on the edge of all Traditions... Temptation is possible all the way up Jacob's Ladder. Lucifer was among the highest of archangels before he fell. Only God is perfect.

To come in contact with a dark or fallen Teacher is often part of a seeker's training. Many dead ends will present themselves; but all will teach him something, if only... how to extract himself from the subtle net that a false teacher weaves around his followers so that his ego may feed on them.

Halevi's warning fits the latest chapter in my spiritual journey. I'd like to share it with you to make my own position known, and in order that you might be forewarned of a more than questionable teaching. Whatever there is to be learned from this is, I think, of importance to the spiritual community as a whole.

Let me bring you up to date. My guru, Neemkaroli Baba (better known as "Maharaj-ji"), died in 1973. Since then I had been with a few other teachers, but none could begin to replace him. I was also lecturing and teaching on a full schedule, but I found I was getting caught in more worldly play, and I felt more and

more depressed and hypocritical. By the end of the summer of 1974 I decided to return to India. I didn't know what I'd find, but I'd go anyway. I knew I was different than I had been ten years before but I was still not cooked.

Driving East, I stopped overnight in Pennsylvania at a motel where I was planning to watch the House Judiciary Committee Hearings on television, but a storm put out the electricity. It was too early to go to sleep so there was nothing left to do but meditation. After Maharaj-ji came to me in a vision. He looked just like he always had looked.



He laughed and spoke to me. It's interesting—he had always spoken in Hindi, and my Hindi was very bad. In India there was always somebody translating. But on these other levels, the transmission is in thought forms, and then it comes out in whatever language you think in. So he said to me, in very good English, "You don't have to go to India. Your teachings will be right here."

It was so valid, and so real that at that moment I decided not to go to India. I decided to go to New Hampshire, meditate a month or so in a cabin, clean out my head, and see what would happen next.

On the following day passing through New York City, I called Hilda Charlton, a spiritual teacher, to say hello. She told me there was a woman in Brooklyn who I should meet. When I resisted because I

wanted to be alone, she told me this woman said my Guru was sitting in her basement. Of course I decided to stay one more night, and the next day I went with Hilda to see a lady named Joya. We went down into the basement of her home and there she was, sitting in what Hilda said was samadhi. I checked; I could find no breath or pulse. She was like a rock. She was a very unusual looking woman; she had long false eyelashes, heavy mascara, and a low cut dress. Maharaj-ji was an old man in a blanket, but I'd given up having models about what packages the next message was supposed to come in.

Finally she came out of it, looked at me, and said, "What the fuck do you want?" Hilda said, "Oh, dear, this is Ram Dass," which didn't seem to make any impression on her at all. She said, "I don't care who the hell he is. Does that old man over there belong to you?" I looked and there was a blanket with nothing on it. So I said, "I don't know." She said, "He's buggin' me; get him the hell out of here."

Then her consciousness seemed to shift just a little bit as she went into a very light trance, and suddenly I felt Maharaj-ji was speaking to me through her. He was talking about things that he and I had been discussing in India when I had seen him last, little matters about maintenance of the temples in India and all kinds of very picayune  
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stuff that she probably could not know and I hadn't even remembered. She came back from that plane but, as she explained, she was not conversant across planes so she didn't know what had just happened.

In the Winter of 1974 I moved to New York City where, for 15 months, I studied intensively with Joya. These teachings had a bizarre intensity that is difficult to convey. From 5 a.m. until 1 or 2 a.m. each day, it was like being in a tornado—or a clothes dryer. One had either to get out or surrender. The realities one was forced to accept went against much of what is common sense, but each time I railed against the system, Joya would talk me out of it. For example she let me know that my lack of trust in her was killing her. The women who surrounded her abetted this emotional blackmail by making desperate phone calls with ghastly reports of how badly Joya was bleeding due to my resistance.

So it was that I surrendered more and more deeply to those teachings. As I did so, I reported in interviews and lectures that Joya was, as she professed to be, an enlightened being. Many factors contributed to my surrender to her reality.

1) The intensity of the confrontation (often twenty hours a day) forced my subtle ego defenses to the surface. And Joya, in a Kali-esque way, pounced on these impurities and magnified them until I had to let them go or get out. I let them go as fast as I could and hung in. This was just the fire of purification that I, with my chronic case of unworthiness, was seeking.

She represented herself not only as the actual Kali taken form, but as a number of other cosmic identities as well, including Athena (played to Hilda as Artemis); Sri Matabrahma (the Mother of the Universe, played to Hilda as Lazuma, the Goddess of light); and Tara, the Tibetan Goddess of Tantras (played to an astral Padmasambhava). As hokey as all this seems, while I was in the teaching the intensity arid brilliance of the staging and props created a reality which made me ready to believe the bizarre assertion that a Jewish housewife and mother of three, who was married to a fine Italian Catholic man in

Brooklyn, was in fact Ms. Big, the creative force of the Universe. I and several hundred others were seduced into this fantasy by her combination of powerful charisma and chutzpaha and by such things as her seeming to go into deep trance states (with cessation of bodily function), and her claim to have manifested the stigmata. In our greed for spiritual materialism we wanted to believe it.

2) At the outset, Joya spent much

poetry that poured forth for hours at a time. I was breathless with the richness of these moments. Because it was only through total loving surrender by those around her that these teachings could come forth, I was led to surrender to the reality of the entire scene more and more. She told me that some of my teachers at that time were such august spiritual figures as Jethro (Moses' father-in-law), Padmasambhava, Lao Tsu, as

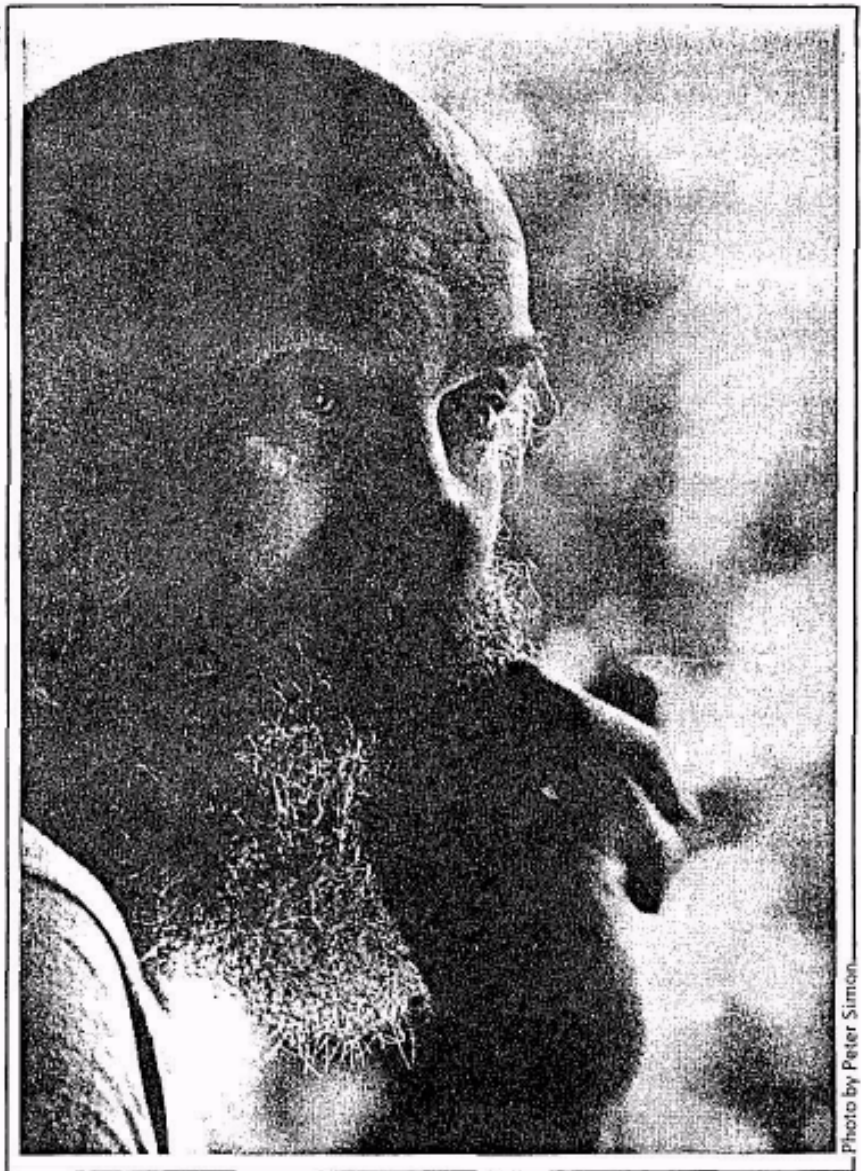


Photo by Peter Simon

of our time together in trance states in which she seemed to function as a medium. Through her came many seductively rich teachings—supposedly from Biblical, Hassidic, Hindu and Buddhist wise men and women of the past, or from beings on other planes. Her voice and language would shift from unschooled Brooklynese to exquisite

well as Ramakrishna, Christ, Mary Nityananda, an early Kaballah teacher, Kali and Durga. This all impressed me because I had never been around people in trance states.

3) Many people for so long had reinforced a model in which I was someone special. Even Maharaj-ji often

said "Ram Dass is a great saint," or "Ram Dass— Isha" (Christ), or "I am not your Guru, Ram Dass is your Guru." When most people asserted my specialness I saw it as their lack of perspective. When Maharaj-ji said it, I saw it as his forcing my power trip to the surface so we could see the absurdity of it. But now when all these incredible figures of the past appeared to speak through Joya just to prepare me for higher work, it fit in perfectly with this grandiose model. With my intellect I knew this model was just another "trip", and had said so time and again, for I felt myself more and more each day becoming nobody special. Yet my ego thirst for power, by no means fully eradicated, made me vulnerable to this model that I was somebody special, all the more so in the face of such strong reinforcement. For Joya kept reiterating that she had come to earth only to be an instrument for my preparation to be a world spiritual leader and that ultimately she would sit at my feet. All of the people who were now around her, she said, were being prepared to support me in my later work. I easily let myself be convinced.

Those who are familiar with the life story of Krishnamurti will recall that Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater of the Theosophical Society proclaimed the youthful Krishnamurti as the new world leader. He too bought into it for many years before he announced in 1929 the dissolution of the Order of the Star, which had at the time more than 50,000 members. In doing so, he expressed an anti-spiritual materialism line to which he has adhered for the last 45 years:

I do not want followers and I mean this. The moment you follow someone, you cease to follow truth.

...I desire those who seek to understand me to be free, not to follow me, not to make out of me a cage which will become a religion, a sect. . . You think and hope that another can, by his extraordinary powers — a miracle — transport you to this realm of eternal freedom which is happiness . . . You have the idea that only certain people hold the key to the Kingdom of Happiness. No one holds it. No one has the authority to hold that Key.

But Joya said she held the key.

4) There was even a powerful vision I had had a few years earlier

which further played into Joya's reality. In the vision, I was being brought into a large amphitheatre in which many hundreds of beings in white robes were gathered. At the far end, on a dias stood a lone figure, a woman also clad in a white robe. Although I could not see the figure who guided me at my elbow, I felt it was a man who wished to sponsor me for membership into this august body. Then the woman on the dias raised her arm pointing at me, said, "Take him out. He's not yet ready." In the vision I seemed to understand and agree perfectly and left with my sponsor. So now, sitting at the feet of one who professed herself to be the Divine Mother of the Universe, I felt that I was, in fact, finally being made ready for membership.

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***"I plunged headlong into the tornado, casting caution and doubt to the winds."***

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5) In the past five or six years I have received literally hundreds of grateful letters from people who report how I came to them in a vision or a dream at a time of need and reassured or guided them. While I personally have rarely experienced such astral comings and goings, I must conclude that either there are a lot of hysterical people creating fantasies about me because I am a public figure, or that I have a secret psychic life and am very active in my subtle or astral body. Joya convinced me that the latter was true, telling me that 80% of my teaching was on other planes.

6) Perhaps what had concerned me most in the period just before I met Joya was that I was not yet free of my attachments to sexuality. After a long and intense bisexual history, I still found that my perceptions were colored by my sexual desires. I could afford to be patient about my own purification from sexual clinging, but in view of my public role, I was uneasy that any sexual preoccupations on my part would subtly contaminate those to whom I lectured or with whom I worked individually and thus reinforce their own attachments and suffering. Despite the fact that Maharaj-ji had said, "I would never let Ram Dass do anything wrong in America." The persistence of these sexual preoccupations led me to doubt

Maharaj-ji, or at least to yearn to clean up my sexual act. In view of how many years I had been trying to get free of these sexual clings, including offering lust into the sacrificial fires of India, I had given up hope of ever knowing freedom in this lifetime. The sexual karma just seemed too heavy.

I had read of the transtic in certain Tibetan sects for just this purpose. The monk would go through a series of ritual openings working with a dakini, or God-woman. Mostly these were young women who had been prepared from childhood to serve in these rituals without any personal involvement or clinging to the sensual aspect of the ritual. In my fantasies I was hoping that at some point I too would be introduced to such teachings, and through such conscious rituals with a disciplined guide, I would once and for all be free.

And now I was presented with a woman teacher who within a few months after the commencement of the training, began to focus on my sexuality. As I opened more and more, assured by her of her total perfect non-attachment to any desire systems, I felt a new hope that my dream for purification was finally manifesting through this teaching. I plunged headlong into the tornado, casting caution and doubt to the winds.

7) Maharaj-ji had again and again said to me, "See the world as the Mother and you will know God." He often was heard to be repeating the word "Ma" over and over again. He had several temples built to Durga, an aspect of the Mother. And all of this Mother devotion made me feel like an outsider, for my own feelings about the Mother were too colored by the relationship with my mother and by my training as a Freudian theorist and therapist. To be in love with a Universal Mother just wasn't happening for me. And yet I knew that the aspect of devotion for the Mother, just as much as devotion to the Monkey-God Hanuman for whom I had overwhelming love, was a part of the lineage of my Guru. Sooner or later I would have to find a way to appreciate a devotional relationship with the Mother. Then I came to New York City and started to study with Joya and enter her matriarchal reality. She professed to be the Divine Mother, and I felt that at last I would open up to this form of devotion.

8) And finally there was the  
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experience in the Pennsylvania motel with Maharaj-ji. The fact that Joya continually spoke about Maharaj-ji and implied his presence by seeming to carry on conversations with an astral Maharaj-ji whom I could not see, fed into my secret wish that though Maharaj-ji had left his body, he would return somehow to guide my spiritual journey.

There were a few people around Joya who appeared to have third eye vision. I knew that though there is often merit in such higher "seeing", the third eye can be as vulnerable a suggestion as the other two. Nevertheless these reports did strengthen my belief in Joya.

Each of these pieces fed the reality of the whole system.

There were of course many disquieting aspects in life with Joya. But I had to relinquish my doubts, for with each doubt Joya would provoke incredible guilt in me, telling me that I was causing a severe pain in her head. This pain originated, so she said, with an analine dye test on her brain. This pain plus the fact that she freaked and went stiff at the sound of sirens, she attributed to having been taken in a straight jacket by ambulance by doctors engaged by her husband who thought she was going insane. She said that neurologically the lobes of her brain had come together. The doctors failed to understand the spiritual significance of this phenomenon, as did I, and diagnosed her as having a brain tumor. We were never allowed to talk to the doctors and were required to stand by helplessly and watch the well-meaning husband and the medical profession destroy the greatest saint of our time. At another time Joya reported that the doctors had found her body riddled with malignant cancer which she told us she had taken on for another person. In large groups we prayed night and day to heal her, and she finally reported a miraculous cure.

Joya seemed to have great difficulty staying in her body and would, at the slightest provocation go stiff as a board. Efforts to keep her in her body consumed much of our time together. There was a jewel that Joya wore around her neck that Hilda had invested with a mantra to bring her down. When Hilda touched the stone Joya usually came down, but with the pain so she said, of a thousand razor blades cutting through her. This was in turn very painful to all of us. We therefore

went to great lengths to surrender to Joya's every whim so as not to cause this painful drama.

Another way in which Joya could be kept down on earth was with gold bracelets. Soon both her arms were covered practically up to the elbows with these bracelets, gifts of concerned devotees. She said that impurities burned her so the gold had to be of at least 18 karats. In my zeal to save her, at one point, I purchased a \$1200 bracelet for her. But in the back of my mind I kept remembering a time with Maharaj-ji back in 1971. At that time he would call me to him

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when I was at the temple. As often as ten or fifteen times in one day he would point at me and say in Hindi, "Women and Gold." I never fully understood why he was saying, this. At the time I knew that Ramakrishna had often cautioned devotees to beware of women and gold, and I assumed that this was a way of warning me about the traps of sex and money. But now as I found myself purchasing this costly gold for this incredible lady, it dawned upon me that perhaps Maharaj-ji had meant his warning in a more literal way than I had appreciated.

Another costly trinket was an \$800 ring which Joya needed for protection from a group of Tibetans who were coming from a secret Shangrila deep in Tibet to kidnap her and return her to her throne as the true Tara whom they worshipped. For the ring we found an old lapis lazuli scarab. When Joya saw it, she said that what we thought was just a pretty scarab was, in fact, a sacred stone from northern Afghanistan that had been taken down into Egypt after having served in ancient rituals among ancient Aryans who later migrated to Tibet.

While this story seemed unlikely, research did corroborate that lapis lazuli was in fact mined only in northern Afghanistan in ancient times, and a scholar of Asian religious history confirmed that the Aryans had indeed brought Buddhism to Tibet from, among other places, northern Afghanistan. It was such bits and pieces that kept together the fragile web of reality

that Joya created.

Mixed with the melodrama were hours of the most incredible meditations, much discipline and practices pranayama, great outpourings of devotion in prayer and song, and lectures in which Joya appeared to read from an invisible blackboard and share great truths. While all her teachings were probably available in various books that anyone could have read, the intensity and context of the presentations gave them the quality of living original truth. And there was no rest: I got only two or three hours sleep a night. The combination of fatigue and the incredible energy surrounding Joya kept my emotions at the very edge. This made the drama all the more volatile, and the hysteria more pronounced and the reality more tenaciously adhered to.

During my time with Joya, a number of people, many of whom were devotees of Maharaj-ji, came to take teachings. After a time, a few left. My involvement led me to look upon these few as unfortunate in that their ability to surrender was insufficient for them to receive these precious teachings. But then my own doubts started to grow faster than I could consume them. Joya had changed a great deal in the year. She came to resent having beings speak through her and refused to serve as a medium. Thus while she still had great shakti (power) and charisma, her lectures became merely the reflections of the culture in which she had grown up, sprinkled with spiritual homilies. In her new feeling of power she also cast aside Hilda. As Joya's compatriot. Hilda, with her astral carryings-on, had generated the necessary climate of hysteria to support Joya's melodrama. Joya had said time and again, "If you want my truth, you must also take my insanity." Slowly I came to be unwilling to make that bargain.

For example, one day Joya and I were hanging out and the telephone rang. She picked up the receiver and in a pained whisper said, "I can't talk now, I'm too stiff," and let the receiver drop. The phone was hung up and without hesitation she resumed our conversation as if nothing had happened. I realized how many times I had been at the other end of the phone.

No matter how I rationalized, my doubts grew. With doubt came

boredom. The tantric exercises no longer seemed productive. I began to experience Joya as just another person with attachments. I entertained the possibility that these feelings were cues that I was finished with this teaching and should leave. But there was anger in me, and Maharaj-ji had warned us that no matter what we did, we should never put another person out of our heart. So I waited until my love was strong and then I tried to bow out gracefully.

But Joya would have no part of it. She treated this withdrawal as resistance which had to be overcome for my own good. To this end she enrolled her entourage to persuade me through messages, pleas, threats, badgering and general disruption of my life. For almost four months, I had to live as if in a state of siege: refusing to answer the telephone, which rang day and night, and often keeping someone posted at the door. If a call happened to get through, I would be told by one of her well-meaning devotees that Joya lay bleeding and dying because of my infidelity.

At times Joya would show up in person to tell me that I was afraid of love or unwilling to surrender. I was told that the astral Maharaj-ji was crying because I had defected. And on and on. The drama got so heavy that in one early morning episode she and her followers were sighted climbing over the roof of an eighteen story building in an attempt to break into the apartment where I lived. The police were summoned by the management to remove Joya, who by then was trying to pick the lock and kick my door in. This foiled her attempt to bring me to my senses and to save me from the evil influence of the people with whom I was associating, all of whom had left her teachings.

The reality had crumbled.

I began to see the similarities between these events and stories about other movements such as the so-called Jesus Freaks, Reverend Moon's group, and the Krishna Consciousness scene. Once you are in them, they provide a total reality which has no escape clause.

My leaving Joya was part of a large exodus of disillusioned followers, including some who had served as servants in her home. And as the refugees who left the front

lines exchanged stories, the incredible tapestry of half truths and lies started to unravel.

By all reports there had been no doctors nor dyes, no straight jackets, no cancer riddled body, no stigmata and no Tibetans, Her incredible energy came not solely from spiritual sources, but were enhanced by energizing pills. Her closest confidants now confessed that many times they were ordered to call me to report a terrible crisis they knew to be an outright lie. They complied because she convinced them that it was for my own good. Stories of such deceptions came thick and fast. Finally, I had to admit I had conned myself.

What is the lesson from all this? Is it a study in gullibility, fed by greed



and spiritual materialism? Is it Maharaj-ji's lila or cosmic joke? Is it a study of paranoid schizophrenia or psychopathy? Is it a case of the misuse of spiritual powers? Perhaps it's all of these. Or could it just be a tantric teaching that defies judgment? I don't know the answer. I can label this phenomenon a dozen different ways and build a supportive case for each reality. But enough realities have been built—and crumbled—in this story.

These teachings have a positive side. Through them and the leaving of them, many of us have gained strength, compassion, openness, and an ability to allow the movement to be as it is. For all of this I am deeply grateful. However, while I and others profited from these teachings, not everyone did. Some seemed to have been hurt in that they came away with more despair cynicism, and paranoia than they had before. If Joya's is not a pure tantric teaching, it is heavy karma indeed! Lies used to enhance one's personal power do not liberate.

There is an aura that surrounds tantric teachings which implies that the ends justify the means. For a liberated tantric teacher, such a morality *may* be possible. For a teacher with any attachment, it is not.

Since I now see that things I said previously about this teaching are just not true. I come away with egg on my beard. But of more significance than my embarrassment is the issue of truth. Maharaj-ji insisted that I tell the truth no matter how embarrassing. For he said, and I believe, that truth will make you free. During the period of Indian protest against the British, Mahatma Gandhi had initiated a large, protest march in which many thousands were involved. After the first day of the march, Gandhi called his lieutenants

and cancelled the protest. They objected strongly saying that after all this effort he couldn't do this. He answered, "My commitment is to truth not to consistency."

There is one final point to be made. Is there reason to fear taking teachings out of concern as to whether the teacher is pure? Perhaps not, for all that can ever trip us up is our own impurities. Which is not to say that discrimination is to be abandoned, for indeed it remains an invaluable protection on the path. I got caught because of my spiritual greed and insufficient faith in Maharaj-ji. You too may get caught and suffer deep disappointment and confusion. But I hope that you may learn something from my example and save yourself a big detour, if your longing for God is pure, this is your strength. Then though you may get lost for a time, you will in the end hear clearly in your inner heart what to do, and all the impurities around you will just become more grist for the mill of your awakening.