



Ashram life: heaven or hell?

IS COMMUNITY LIVING ALL THAT IT IS CRACKED UP TO BE?

A SCEPTIC INVESTIGATES

by Arundhathi Subramaniam

First, a confession. I have a deep and visceral sympathy for Sartre's line about hell being other people.

I see the point of community, of course. The sangha – a fellowship of seekers committed to living in harmony with shared ideals – makes sense to me. It certainly seems saner than the individual groping for meaning in a state of splendid isolation.

But. And there's definitely a but. Community living, judging by the historical grapevine, has always been a mixed bag. There are the inevitable concomitants – a pecking order, regimentation, self-abnegation. And those daily irritants – mismatched chemistries,

ego collisions, complacency, pettiness, partisanship. In any case, isn't a community that's discovered or chosen – however blunderingly – preferable to one that's imposed or designed? (A bit like preferring a serendipitous love over an 'arranged' marriage, I figure.) The notion of a spiritual kibbutz appeals, but I have misgivings about its workability.

So it's not without apprehension that I embark on my visit to the Isha Yoga Centre in Coimbatore. My feelings about its founder aren't particularly ambivalent, however. Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev remains one of the most alive people I've met. I'm drawn to his ability to combine a sharp intellect with compassion, an

irreverent wit with gravitas, intensity with gentleness. Above all, his understanding of spiritual tradition is keen but non-puritanical – a vital stance in times of growing religious fundamentalism.

I still have reservations about guru figures. The equation with them is often too totalitarian for comfort. But I'm awed by this man's ability to give of himself without being patronising. And I do acknowledge a certain urgency about my interactions with him. A growing trust as well. I don't quite understand it. I figure that it's based on some primal hunch that he represents a live connection with a power source into which it makes sense to plug. But that's another story.



I tell myself I should logically have few problems with an ashram that's an embodiment of his vision. When I first visited the place a couple of years ago, I was impressed. Set against the cloud-smudged magnificence of the Velliangiri hills, the ashram, with its stark stone and wood décor, exuded an austere beauty. Nothing ostentatious here, but nothing joyless either.

There was also an air of naturalness and self-containment that so many of the residents seemed to radiate. There was no impression of 'having arrived', no self-important need to prove a point.

Bondage or freedom?

And yet, living out one's entire life in obedience to someone's diktats – however visionary – sounds stifling to me. A couple of days into my recent visit, and I find myself chafing just a little, an irrational spirit of rebellion rekindled. It's not just the Guru Pooja and yoga at 5.30 a.m. It's not just the lack of access to my daily dose of caffeine. I know my creaky adjustment to these rules could just be a process of city-slicker-detox.

What unnerves me somewhat is the sight of the orange-clad, tonsured brahmacharis. I find myself self-conscious about referring to every second person as 'Ma' and 'Swami'. Something about the uniformity of their appearance also strikes me as cheerless (though I know this could well be the illusion of 'out-group homogeneity'). And I'm unsettled by the looming persona of the guru – even in his absence. Love and gratitude towards him I understand, even share. But there seems to be a disquieting air of glazed-eyed adoration and hushed reverence.

Does my disquiet say more about me than my environment? Perhaps. But the questions start fermenting nonetheless. How do the inmates of a collective negotiate their space? Is there no simmering discontent? Open protest? While dismantling the ego is the aim of any spiritual community, do people get homogenised in the process? What

exactly is the difference between a faceless mob running on auto-pilot and a sangha of renamed monks and nuns running according to a guru's strictures? Does a realised master end up becoming something of a Big Brother?

I am curious. Sceptical? A little. But also willing to be surprised.

Swami Abhaya is an ashram stalwart who's been here over 12 years. Something about his wry humour makes me suspect a mind complex enough to see that dissent needn't spell disloyalty. He tells me of how his inadvertent exclamation ('Oops!') once started a discussion on whether there ought to be a systematised code of conduct for brahmacharis. (Nothing ever came of it though. And he still says 'oops' on occasion, though he sees that his role, as a sanyasi, has a certain public significance.) He also assures me that there's more of an inner party democracy at work than I suspect. "There's always been room here to question, to disagree," he says.

After a Masters degree in computer science and engineering, he taught at an alternative school in Ooty before joining the ashram at age 25. It was in college that he first met Sadhguru, however, and remembers him as "clean-shaven and jeans-clad, still an awesome and inspirational presence, but not yet explicit about his future role as guru."

From ashram inmate to brahmachari was a journey that took a year. "One day, Sadhguru called me. We talked for around 10 minutes. At the end of that conversation I knew I wanted to take brahmacharya. I don't remember all he said, but I do recall this: he reminded me of my college days when my friends were always going to see Rajnikanth films. I never did. 'Did you ever feel you were missing out on something?' Sadhguru asked." The implication was clear: renouncing the householder's life need be no more dire than abstaining from a certain genre of cinema for life!

Have there been crises of faith over the years? "There've certainly been moments

of frustration," he concedes, with the candour that is more credible than any dewy-eyed rhapsody. "But I see brahmacharya as a process, and not an irrevocable one. That helps. Besides, the big advantage of this life is that your spiritual process, your interiority, is entirely taken care of by Sadhguru. Why would anyone in their right mind give that up?"

Is there no resentment at being subjected to a life of obedience? "What makes me trust Sadhguru," says Swami with quiet logic, "is the fact that he's a man who values his freedom. That makes me confident that he'd never do anything to compromise mine."

Life on the edge

For Kavita, an intense 27-year-old who recently plunged into brahmacharya, life at the ashram is about adventure, rather than bovine placidity. "It's about living on the edge, walking consciously. It challenges you to be conscious, alert, every moment. I've always dreamt of a situation where everyone is fired up and dedicated to dissolving the limitations of their personality. And here it is. The people here are without agendas, vested interests. They don't merely offer support; they offer themselves."

Raised in Detroit and subsequently employed as a schoolteacher in Arkansas, Kavita decided to spend time at the ashram after doing some courses with Sadhguru in the US. "I was already experiencing heightened levels of energy, clarity and vibrancy, and I thought I'd turn myself into Superwoman here and go back! I was also struck by the volunteers here – their dignity, grace and gentleness. Trying to emulate Sadhguru seemed ambitious. But trying to emulate these people was an inspiring prospect."

Before she knew it, she'd enrolled for a Teachers' Training programme and found her grand ambitions punctured. "It was humbling. I thought I had to climb, conquer, and be the best. But becoming a teacher is about unlearning, melting, becoming a conduit. I found



myself growing more childlike, playful, unrestricted. I liked the change and decided to stay on." The challenge is now different. "Earlier, I wanted to make myself a person of worth. Now I want to unmake myself so something worthy can shine through me."

And does she never yearn for colour, I ask curiously. Does she never wake up with the urge to wear turquoise blue, for instance, instead of the prescribed orange or white? Even the thought is unsettling, says Kavita. "There's nothing wrong with blue, but I know it isn't for me. That's how deep the transformation goes."

And that proves to be one of the recurrent motifs of my conversations with people here: the silent interior transformation initiated by the alchemist guru. Each one I talk to vouches for it. That remains, they say, one of the chief reasons underlying their allegiance to Isha. This is not an easy place to be. It shows up one's warts with more clarity than one might care for. It's not a sanctuary as much as a laboratory where the subject of experiment is the self. But it's a place committed to growth. And that makes the discomfort worthwhile. As Sadhguru once remarked, the growth of all Isha meditators was assured; their only choice was to mature willingly or unwillingly.

The other subject that keeps surfacing is the paradox by which commitment (to a spiritual process or guru), actually fosters a process of inner freedom. Each of them seems to feel this sense of participation in a common journey – a voyage from compulsion to growing choice. Having watched myself grow a tad less rigid about some of my own habits during my two years of Isha yoga, I have a sense of what they mean. It also brings to mind Sadhguru's frequent declaration that he will never allow his meditators to be enslaved or entangled by their relationship with him.

Naheed is wide-eyed, soft-voiced, Lebanese and all of 24. She left a burgeoning career as a stage actor in Beirut to train as a teacher in the ashram

two years ago. "Through my growing years, I had a burning quest for something authentic," she muses. Attending an introductory talk by Sadhguru was a turning point. "I was floored by his logic, his commonsense."

Two programmes later, she found herself feeling more energetic and alive than ever before. There was also a mounting recognition of the fact that she had discovered an 'authentic' master. She recalls hastening to meet Sadhguru at a fellow meditator's home. "I ran to him, bowed down at his feet (though that's entirely alien to my culture) and wept for a long, long time. He just let me be there."

Soon, she scraped together her resources and came to Coimbatore to spend a few months and do the advanced

it," she says. "Earlier, there were no rules in my life, but absolute bondage. Today, I live with rules but few compulsions."

Hazra is in her early 50s, also Lebanese, and generates a warmth to which I'm drawn. A deep feverish need for a spiritual guide had preceded her first encounter with Sadhguru in Nashville, USA. When she met him, she recognised him as the strange figure that had appeared to her in a dream not so long ago and taken her on a 'cosmic tour', as it were. Her journey followed a now-familiar trajectory: an increasing involvement with Isha, followed by the decision to move to the ashram.

Yes, community living presents its share of challenges. Dorm living, for one. She shares a room and bathroom with four others, but is now used to it. She's also had her share of yearnings – for coffee, for pasta, for books (none of which are encouraged in the ashram). But she's reached the point, she says, when she enjoys them when they're available but doesn't miss them when they're not. "Living in an ashram is about breaking your limitations, not reinforcing them."

While she still visits the US and Lebanon annually, she maintains that any other kind of life pales into insignificance before this one. "Why do we settle for crumbs when we're all invited to a magnificent feast?" she asks wonderingly.

Her question stays with me.

A magnificent feast? Paradise on earth? I admit I still don't quite see the ashram that way. But as I sit outside my cottage watching the morning mist swirl around the stillness of the Velliangiri mountains, some of the fevered questions fall away.

I remember the way I once felt in a cab on my way to the ashram – the inexplicable sense that there's no place else I'd rather be.

At least just then.

And for a while, for just a little while, it feels like perhaps I could allow myself to unbelong — and still be home. ☺

(Names have been changed to protect the identities of the interviewees.)

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as much as a laboratory
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Samyama course. "It was painful. My old habits were being demolished, and yet I felt he was holding my hand throughout. It seemed like the authentic experience I'd always been looking for."

If Samyama made life seem suddenly simple ("All the emotions that had dominated my life fell away, and I felt I could finally breathe"), the Teachers' Training programme brought a freedom she'd never known. "I still have garbage to get rid of, but I'm freer than I've ever been. Earlier, my greatest fear was commitment. Today, I want my life to be an endless offering to my guru – and I know even that's not enough. I also know he's committed to me in the same way."

Is the stage now an abandoned vocation? "I still love acting, but don't need

