

**“If you’re playful
and intense, you’ll
be receptive to life”**

Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev rides a motorbike, chucks a Frisbee with his disciples
and thinks the average family might represent the beginnings of a cult
BY ARUNDHATHI SUBRAMANIAM

THE FIRST TIME I saw Jaggi Vasudev, it was in a slew of posters plastered all over Chennai. With his flowing beard catching the light and gaze turned heavenward, he seemed tailor-made for a stellar role on Astha Channel. The second time I saw him in a Sunday newspaper, he was astride a motorbike, wearing dark glasses. Very middle-aged James Dean. And macho, I thought. Spiritual masters surely ought to look more androgynous.

I later chanced on his book, *Encounter the Enlightened*. I recall him reproaching his disciples for lacking intensity. He sounded arrogant to me. Not the benign bodhisattva figure I'd visualised as mentor material. Did I want a mentor? Well, not in the genre of stereotypic guru. But yes, it would help to have someone address the questions so scrupulously avoided by formal education. Questions of why we're around, what it's all about, what to do about fear, the personal demons, the collective depravity of the planet, about death. Questions expected to subside by late adolescence, but which often inconveniently, don't.

Like the average seeker, I've dived into spiritual literature. And I concluded that I preferred my gurus dead. It's so much more invigorating to read them than negotiate the stench of personal charisma. And yet, I confess I wouldn't be entirely averse to an encounter with the right kind of person. Someone neither nauseatingly pious nor stifflingly orthodox. Someone approachable and egalitarian. Someone who knows.

Jaggi Vasudev - Sadhguru to his disciples - says he knows. He says it happened at the age of 25. He was sitting on a rock on Chamundi Hills when the frontiers between him and the world started dissolving. "Suddenly, I did not know which was me and which was not me. The air I was breathing, the rock on which I was sitting, the atmosphere around me, everything had become me." After several hours, he knew he was transformed.

Who was he anyway? And what warranted this benediction? After all, there was nothing earlier to suggest that he was 'chosen'. He'd had a normal boyhood in Mysore, where he spent more time swinging on trees and catching snakes than attending class. He'd later become a regular sophomore, bunking lectures, outsmarting the professors, devouring the regular adolescent fare of Beatles, Camus and Dostoevsky. Then he'd been a clear-thinking young adult, determined to make money on a poultry business and travel the world, rather than pursue the bourgeois professional route his parents preferred.

A reasonably bright, independent young man until that day on Chamundi Hills.

In the next few weeks, he says, lifetimes of memory descended upon him. The chronic sceptic now had to accept that something 'mystical' had befallen him. He also now knew that he had a single

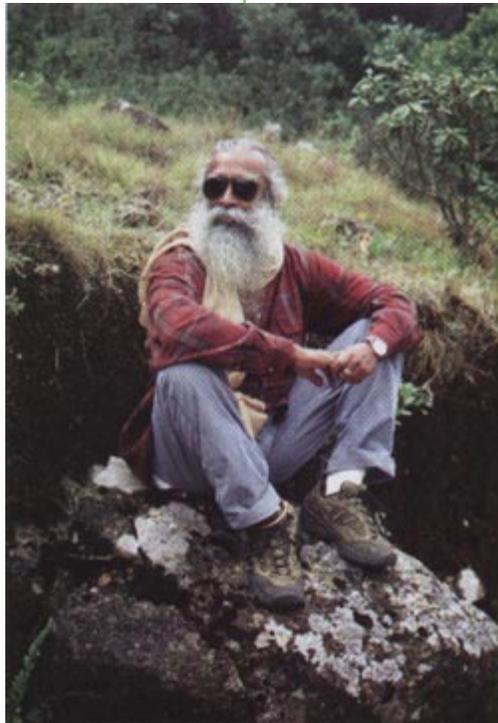
agenda: to complete a mission entrusted to him by his guru that had remained unfulfilled through three lifetimes.

It gets odder. He spent the next 15 years preparing to establish the Dhyanalinga: an ellipsoidal structure that represents a subtle body with all its energy centres operating at optimal capacity. It's open to people of every persuasion. You could see it as Shiva, if you like, he says, or just as the highest possible manifestation of formless energy. Its function? To sow the seed of spiritual liberation in anyone who sits in its precincts. And why a linga? Because it's a form designed to be a perennial storehouse of energy.

Now biography segues into fable. Creating the Dhyanalinga ('a concoction of pure awareness and madness') apparently entailed high levels of yogic virtuosity and near-death for its author. At this point, Jaggi Vasudev seems to turn into a bit of an Albus Dumbledore, an adept of a remote unfathomable arcane science. But the man himself, to be fair, doesn't ask you to swallow any of

this. His discourses, which draw listeners from various parts of the world, are far from fluffy or esoteric. Forthright, lucid, funny and vigorous, the path they enjoin is an age-old one of yoga and meditation. It's a path as old as Patanjali himself, but presented in a manner shorn of punditry or Age-of-Aquarius rhetoric.

In 1999, the Dhyanalinga was consecrated at the foothills of the Velliangiri mountains in Coimbatore. It's here that Jaggi Vasudev's ashram, the headquarters of the Isha Yoga Foundation, is also situated. Like the many mushrooming spiritual centres in the country it seems to answer a growing need for non-sectarian spiritual guidance. It offers basic and advanced courses, in India and overseas, that initiate disciples into yoga kriyas, hatha yoga and meditation. There are social outreach projects, including a brisk Rural Rejuvenation Programme in Tamil Nadu and an



Inner Freedom programme for prisoners in India and the US.

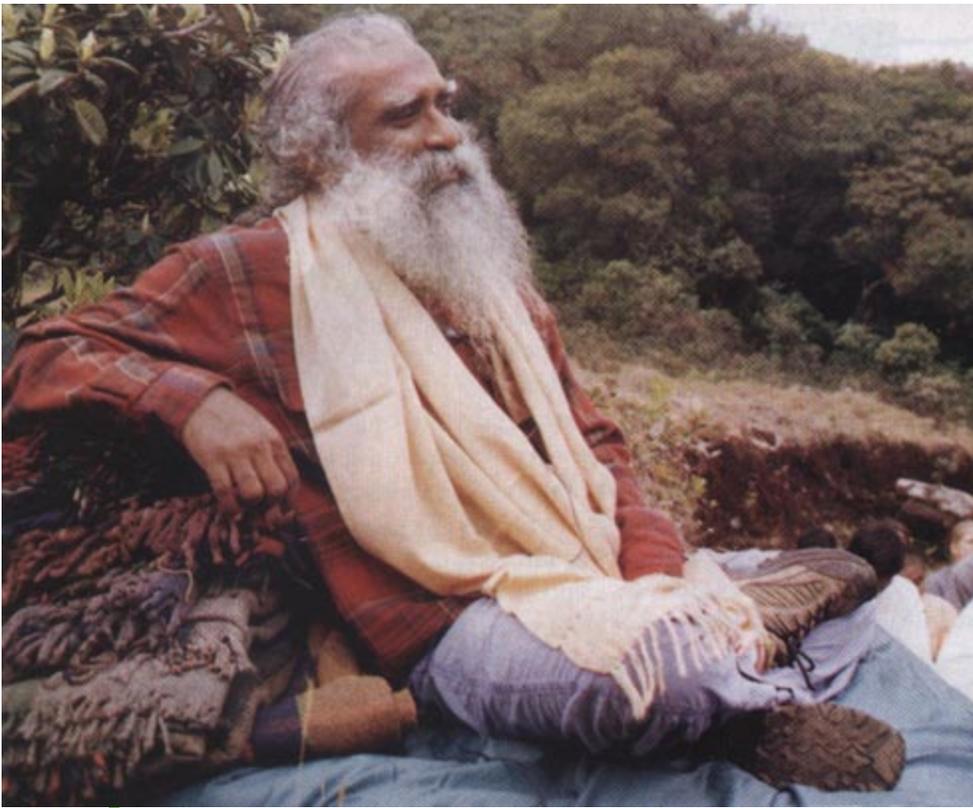
But what distinguishes Isha Yoga, above all, is the persona of the founder. Consider this random sample of quotes from the Dumbledore of Coimbatore.

"Let your mind chatter... There is no such thing as pure mind on this planet. Mind is just a garbage bin."

"I am not talking about God ... Enlightenment, ... anything beyond. I am only talking to you about what is restraining you here and how to get rid of that."

"Spirituality is about acting out of your inner humanity. If you go deeper, you'll be acting out of your inner divinity. This has nothing to do with morality ... The maximum damage in the world has been done with good intentions."

"Sex and money aren't problems. Sex in the body is fine; money in the pocket is fine. It's only a problem when they enter your mind."



“Don’t think by going to temples you will become spiritual. By looking at gods you will only hallucinate...”

“If Krishna lived today, he’d make you all very uncomfortable. Your wife would want to go dancing with him, so would your daughter and your 80-year-old mother.”

“You can’t do spirituality, you have to allow it ... The very fundamentals of Shoonya meditation is just that you are not needed for it to happen.”

I’m still not sure what I make of Jaggi Vasudev. There are occasions when he’s a bloke whose quirky take on things makes for stimulating company. On other occasions, he’s very much the master, the archetypal shaman, who induces more awe than comfort. On still other occasions, he’s just a mean player of volleyball or Frisbee - games played routinely at the ashram. What’s remarkable is the way he handles the insistent demands on his time without exuding a whiff of stress.

He has too much vitality to be dismissed as just another populist godman or ersatz designer guru. It seems equally facile to regard him as the manipulator of the spiritually naive, or simply as the product of New Age faddism. His appeal is clearly not to the simple *bhakta* or the diehard *jnana margi*. It’s to the seeker looking for a more composite approach involving both inner and outer praxis.

There are misgivings. You do sense evangelism - inevitable perhaps with institutionalised spirituality. There’s also a tribe of sanctimonious volunteers who revel in policing participants during programmes. And the guru himself. Do the marketing mechanisms have his sanction? Does he choose to make acolytes out of his yoga adherents?

Niggling questions. But there’s also the transformational technology of breath he offers - with a democratic refusal to distinguish between the devoted and the doubter. This, by all accounts, offers very tangible rewards: not just a perceptible lightening of mental

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cargo, but undeniable health benefits. A mentor? I don’t know. Let’s say we disbelieve the whole story about his yogic mastery and enlightenment. We’re still left with an interesting deal. There’s a bracing wit, a refreshing lack of piety, a provocative unputdownable book, *Mystic’s Musings*. And more: a razor-sharp intelligence, a belly-heaving chuckle, a contemporary vocabulary, the teaching of a meditation process that requires no faith, only committed practice. Jaggi Vasudev wears the air of a man who’s figured out how to lead a life of sanity. Perhaps that is enough?

I also discerned something else: gentleness.

It’s an incredible biography by any standards. I’m interested in what it actually feels like inside. How does the world look to you?

(Laughs)

Bleak?

Not bleak at all. Even if the world ends, it wouldn’t look bleak. But yes, the way it’s going, it looks like it’s going to end.

Does no fear remain?

There can only be fear when there’s something to lose. When whatever I considered to be me disappeared, all that remained was boundless emptiness. That’s beautiful.

Not terrifying?

Boundaries and limitations terrify us, not their absence.

What remains?

A conscious creation. A self you create consciously for yourself to the extent required - nothing more, nothing less. A self you can downsize and upscale, according to your need.

Does a world of suffering no longer touch you?

There was a time when the sight of anyone on the street could make tears flow. Now I’m seasoned. I see the world the way it is. I laugh instead. Because suffering is born of stupidity. Suffering exists because you identify with what is not. The only reason your situation doesn’t seem idiotic to other people is that everybody’s with you.

Do you ever long for a day off?

Physically, yes. Sometimes I want a physical break from all the travelling that I do. Otherwise I’m always off. Is there a need for privacy, you mean? Well, in the last few years there hasn’t been too much time off. I need privacy to handle certain dimensions of life, from the simple to the complex. But I usually travel with people with whom I can share long hours of silence and conversation. There’s nothing compulsive about the interaction.

Is it frustrating being a teacher?

Not frustrating, but limiting. I’m constantly aware that I’m doing much less with people than I could.

Is it just New Age hype or are we moving towards some collective transformation in human consciousness?

Just wishful thinking! But yes, the scale of the crisis is different today. Science and technology have made affluence possible for a much wider section of society. With affluence, you begin to realise that all the stuff that you've gathered doesn't work. That's the beginning of spiritual longing. When I started 25 years ago, most of those who attended my programmes came for health benefits (maybe because I was an embodiment of health then) and a minuscule segment for spiritual well being. Now that's reversed - perhaps because I am different now.

There are also changes in my approach. For almost 20 years, I refused to enter five-star hotels to conduct programmes. It seemed socially irresponsible in this country. But today we realise that people in positions of power need to change for real change to happen. So five years ago, we made a list of around 2000 people in the country - not top political leadership, but the second level in bureaucracy, business and industry. We decided to target this group.

The other day someone asked whether I'd do a programme for Michael Jackson. I said yes - but only if he's willing to make it happen to everybody. The logic is simple. I want to teach meditation to everybody. You see how hard our volunteers have to work to get 200 people for a programme? Now if Michael Jackson meditates, we'd get a million people here without any effort!

But isn't something lost by reaching out indiscriminately?

Michael Jackson's more effective than me. I have no issue with that. I'll never compromise on what I'm doing. But just the fact that Michael Jackson's meditating will make millions of fans close their eyes and emulate him. That's not a bad thing. Looks commercial to you? I just think it's sensible.

We're organising a conference in Jordan with 2000 international youth leaders in 2006. Maybe just 10 will eventually make it to positions of power. But if we can make a small change in the way they look at the world, that's a huge difference. I've kept a certain amount of time for this. Then I intend to withdraw and devote myself to those committed to evolving internally.

If it works, fine. If not, that's fine too. If it ends in a nuclear holocaust, it still won't be bleak. I might even enjoy the sight of the last plume of smoke as the world burns itself out - if I'm not burnt out myself!

Is that possible?

Maybe I'll have tears in my eyes and laughter on my lips. That's how I am most of the time anyway Sounds inhuman to you?

It sounds unbelievable to anyone for whom the fear of death is very real.

You don't cry for the dead. You cry for those who could not die - those who die in halves. Death is a big relief for most people.

While there's a marked increase in the community of spiritual seekers, there's also unease about this guru-

and-godman phenomenon.

On one level, the unease is because of misuse or abuse. Misuse is common to every sphere of activity. Doctors, policemen, writers, journalists misuse power every day. It's just that with a guru, the level of trust is different. So people feel much more betrayed when their expectations aren't met. Also, the negative's always more interesting than the positive, isn't it? So the need for scandal also needs to be met by today's media. But what most people don't realise is that if the guru's good, he's far more dangerous.

How?

The bad one may take away your money, misuse your body or your property. The good one will destroy you completely. So he's the one to be wary of. What can the bad one do really? Steal a few bucks at the most. (Laughs)

What about the cultism associated with new spiritual movements?

What's your idea of a cult?

When the guru's personality becomes paramount - When any spiritual movement begins, it's a cult. After some time, it's a great religion. Jesus was a cult figure and they crucified him for it. Krishna was a cult figure. When they're living beings, a few people gather, and the rest of the world terms it a cult. You call it brainwashing. When the following's big enough, you call it religion. That's just because society doesn't have the intelligence or awareness to recognize anything for what it is.

What about the dependency on the figure of the guru?

"The Other day, someone asked whether I'd do a programme for Michael Jackson. I said yes but only if he's ready to make it happen to everybody."



Is your family a cult?

At its worst, probably!

At its best, it's still the beginning of a cult. Is going to the doctor or lawyer cultist? Just because your life depends on it? When you sit in a bus, your driver becomes a cult figure, because you're following him without a choice.

I read about a group of people in France collectively committing suicide in a forest at the initiative of some French guru. So the media went about warning the public about joining cults. They offered a list of distinguishing characteristics: vegetarianism, chanting, swaying, etc. By those standards, we're definitely a cult. Anything you don't understand, or aren't into, is a cult.

When you have no eyes, what's wrong with depending on your guide dog? That's the condition of a large part of the population right now. Only if it leads to misuse, it's a problem. Marriage is also a risk, isn't it? That doesn't stop people from marrying. In fact, in marriage, you'll almost definitely be abused. As a brahmachari, there's just a chance you will be!

That's a bleak view of marriage.

Not if you're getting into it consciously. (Laughs)

Unlike several counterparts today, your programmes have a rational appeal as well. They don't mystify spirituality.

People mystify the simplest things. That's a hallmark of the New Age spirituality. It's the age of mystical soaps, mystical toothpastes! The very purpose of language is to communicate, to be logical. If there are dimensions that cannot be communicated, you don't talk about them, you talk around them, you lead your listeners to them. Once you open your mouth to speak, you'd better be logical. Otherwise, you're just full of bullshit.

All this type of spirituality has come from books. It's based on people's misunderstanding of scripture. Or maybe the scripture itself is a misunderstanding. That's also a possibility. I haven't bothered to read the scriptures, so I don't particularly care what's written there. We don't even know who the hell wrote them. Anyone who has sufficient language nurses ambitions of writing a scripture, isn't it?

Most of the scriptures - at least in India - were written by hugely prejudiced people in terms of caste. Even their basic humanity didn't function. Such a scripture is of no relevance to me, or to life. Maybe it's relevant to maintain a certain social order.

What about the trappings of gurudom in India? How

much of the veneration of the guru is based on the disciple's need -

And how much on the guru's need?

Or his tacit approval?

Emotion's a huge part of it. If you don't let people find expression for their emotions, you won't let them to grow. People want to express gratitude. I think it's obscene to keep giving, and not receiving. It's subjugating a human being. Take putting on my footwear, for instance. It's a competition to put it on for me. It's often very uncomfortable! But I accept it because it means something to the giver and I don't want to take that away.

You've said you wish for a time when the world no longer needs spiritual guidance. Any chance of being unemployed in the foreseeable future?

(Laughs) You never know. Suddenly, if a big disaster happens, something the world cannot ignore, there may be a huge upsurge of intense spiritual longing. I'm not saying it should happen. I'm not waiting for that possibility. Nor do I care. If spiritual change happens, it's wonderful. Otherwise, I'm happy alone.

Intense engagement without concern for the result?

Do I look unconcerned to you? With this level of intensity and involvement, of course I want results. But if they aren't forthcoming, I won't be broken. I'm not serious, but I'm intense. That's how life's meant to be led. If you're playful and intense, you'll be receptive to life. If you're too serious, you'll miss it.

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