DLM DAYS

Back in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, many American young people were seriously involved in political protests and activism, drug experimentation, communal living, and/or were largely questioning the very tenets of established capitalist traditions. But there was another subset who became fascinated much more with individual spiritual development and alternative ways of peacefully relating to the world -- ideally in a lasting, evolved state of universal higher consciousness. I and most of my closest friends in college were in this last group.

Around this time, the Beatles had gone to India to study transcendental meditation under a guru (teacher) named Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Carlos Santana studied under a guru named Sri Chinmoy, and released some devotional record albums to him. Some young people turned to Hinduism in the form of becoming members of the group Hare Krishna, who were seen with distinctive shaved heads and orange robes, chanting and selling flowers in public areas to help raise funds. Others followed a Korean religious leader (who claimed he was the returned incarnation of Jesus) named Rev.Sun Myung Moon, whose devotees were dubbed “Moonies.” Across the nation and even internationally, young people were abandoning their religious Western traditions – baffling and frightening their parents and the Establishment -- for the exotic lure of the East and its promise of ageless wisdom, secret mysteries, and mystic practices. Some spiritual providers were sincere, while others saw it as an easy opportunity to fake, cheat, and swindle the young, the innocent, and the gullible.

Being both searching for truth and curious, I first read a 600-page classic book called “Autobiography of a Yogi” by Paramahansa Yogananda. Next, I read “Siddhartha” by Hermann Hesse, a story about the Buddha. Having been raised a Catholic, I had previously read the Bible cover-to-cover. Now, I read parts of the Koran, the Book of Mormon, the Bhagavad Gita, and other religious tracts, looking for any enlightenment. Finally, I tried transcendental meditation (TM), eager to see what it offered and to then share the experience with my closest friends at Northern Illinois University. I attended an introductory class on campus, then paid $35 for a several-hour course. I was ultimately ushered into a darkened room, and given the mantra “AIM” (which I was never to reveal, sorry!) to concentrate upon as my consciousness gradually shifted with much practice to a new realm. It was surprising to feel the physiological changes as one’s mind pleasantly experienced complete relaxation and lowered blood pressure. I practiced the technique for several months, and enjoyed it. But soon I became impatient and wanted more than just the energizing, floating sensation of TM.

At this same time, there was yet another guru who arrived in the United States in 1971 from India. He was a 14-year-old boy named Maharaj Ji. His father, Shri Hans Ji Maharaj, had a huge following in India, and on his deathbed, he anointed the youngest of his three sons as the new leader. A paperback book hit the American bookstores, entitled “Who is Guru Maharaj Ji?” It was a best seller with many young people. It was endorsed by the famous political activist and member of the Chicago Seven Vietnam war protestors, Rennie Davis. He went on to praise the boy guru as the Perfect Master, the new Lord of the Universe -- eclipsing in modern times even Christ, Buddha, and other past religious personages. Even more dramatically, Maharaj Ji was purportedly the bringer of something called The Knowledge, a special four-fold secret meditation technique which would bring about world peace once everyone on the planet was initiated. Soon, colorful posters (proclaiming: “Who is Guru Maharaj Ji?”) appeared across the country where young people would most likely notice them, like on college campuses and in certain big city neighborhoods. The organization itself went by the name of Divine Light Mission (DLM). It claimed it was not a religion or a cult, but rather it was instead a practical way for people (and ultimately the world) to achieve natural spiritual realization and inner peace.

Well, it caught my interest after my college friend, Gale, had told me that her friend, Julia, had gotten involved in the whole budding DLM movement. By now, television news and other media begin to report on Divine Light Mission and on the unique boy guru, as more young people began to be drawn to his hopeful message. “The Kingdom of Heaven is within,” Maharaj Ji would proclaim in interviews, quoting Jesus, “and I have come to bring you The Knowledge. We can finally achieve world peace in our lifetime.” DLM went on to set up its headquarters in Denver. By 1972, there were dozens of ashrams (meeting and housing areas) set up across the U.S., along with hundreds of information centers. Premies (people who had received The Knowledge) were said to be numbered in the tens of thousands, along with one million devotees still in India. People were invited to the ashrams to attend free satsang sessions, which were “inspired holy dissertations” on The Knowledge and on the guru by both premies and by mahatmas, who were the directed masters appointed by Maharaj Ji to impart The Knowledge to worthy initiates.

In June of 1973, I was accepted for a summer camp counselor job at a horse ranch near Prescott, Arizona. I was driven across the country by Rick and Gale, who were heading to Phoenix to visit Gale’s brother, Craig. On the way (having been intrigued by Gale’s receiving The Knowledge for herself by now, and her telling of Julia’s deeper involvement in DLM), we stopped for two satsang sessions, one in Nebraska, and a major one in Denver where we saw our first robed mahatmas. At first it was rather strange, but the sure lure of the secret Knowledge had Rick and me quite curious. We asked a lot of questions and got a lot of sincere, almost loving answers. When we later got to the horse camp in Prescott, I found out that I was a week early, so Rick and Gale invited me to simply continue with them to Phoenix and stay with them there at Craig’s place, after which we could return to Prescott in a week when they drove back to Illinois. Meanwhile, we discovered that there was a premie house in Phoenix, on 1650 W. Thomas Road. I called them on the phone and said I was interested in receiving The Knowledge, and asked if I could come and stay for a while. They readily agreed, so Rick and Gale dropped me off there. I later called the horse camp in Prescott and told them that I unfortunately was unable to work for them as planned.

There were four men and four women around my age living there, some already with The Knowledge and some like me who were interested and sincere in getting it. There were pictures of Maharaj Ji and his family in the living room, with fresh flowers like an altar. Being raised a Catholic, it all seemed very foreign! I frankly could not fathom the whole guru thing, but because of my TM experiences, I was quite desirous about getting The Knowledge. Maybe all the hype and publicity was genuine? Maybe it led to true realization and spiritual enlightenment? After a few days, I asked if I could continue to stay there until mid-August, and my request was accepted by the house leader, a young man my age named Denny from Kokomo, Indiana. Although everyone there was warm, gentle, and welcoming, I quickly found Denny to be a bit of a prima donna, and was glad when he left for several weeks to attend to other DLM duties out-of-state.

The daily routine had everyone rise around 5 a.m. and meditate. This was done in the dark with lights off. I did my TM. Most meditated under bed sheets, crossed-legged in lotus position with erect spines. It was perfectly silent – unless someone accidentally fell asleep and began snoring! Some premies used a baragan – a wooden inverted T which afforded one’s elbows a place to rest while doing one of the four Knowledge techniques, I later learned. After sunrise, we ended our meditations and did a brief bit of singing called “arti”, where a sacred butter (ghee) lamp was lit and waved before Maharaj Ji’s altar while all chanted in devotion. (I usually just stood there, not knowing the songs and not knowing what else to do!)

After Denny left town, I quickly noticed that the premies and other non-premies looked rather malnourished. I asked what they were eating, vegetarianism being the rule at DLM. I was disturbed to find that everyone was basically eating brown rice with a few vegetables three times a day. Well, I announced, this was not good. I asked the house treasurer (all funds were communally held) for money to go to the supermarket. When funds were provided, I went and purchased fresh fruits, milk, eggs, yogurt, multivitamins, beans, peanut butter, and other nutritious fare to better our diet. After several days, the health of the house was much better! But once I snuck out of the house at 11:30 p.m. to walk eleven blocks (in the still 95 degree heat!) to the closest McDonald's to get a few hamburgers. I was wracked with secret guilt, but had craved some meat!

Next, I saw that we sorely needed to go out into the ‘real world’ to work and bring more money in. Using a donated house communal car, I and another non-premie named Mike got day labor jobs through Manpower, doing mostly carpentry or construction clean-ups at various sites around Phoenix. Outdoors the heat was fierce, but usually we were indoors in air-conditioned relief. It was good getting a weekly paycheck, which we then gave to the house treasurer. The other men and women in the house were very good people as well – kind, innocent, idealistic, sincere, introspective, searching like I was for purpose and meaning in a crazy world. I especially remember a younger girl named Kim Turetsky, who had an old convertible VW Beetle car. We would go around parts of southern Arizona delivering DLM’s slick monthly magazine “And It Is Divine” to friendly convenience stores. On hot days, we would soak ourselves with a garden hose before getting in the car, then drive and cool ourselves off as all the water evaporated at 60 mph! Kim also bought me my first date milkshake in Indio, CA, when we drove one weekend to visit another premie who was still living in her parent’s mansion in Pasadena. Another memory I recall was with premies Peter and his wife (both Jews from New York City), who lived separately in a small cottage at the back of our premie house -- being a married couple entitled to some privacy. I went one time to ask them a question, and they appeared slowly at their back door, peering out into the harsh afternoon sunlight. Both had been meditating so hard that their meditative “third eyes” above and between their eyes was bright red, and they were blissed out in huge smiles! It was a beautiful sight. Such love! I was more determined than ever to get The Knowledge after that.

While all this was happening that summer, I was writing in earnest to my girlfriend, Joan, back at NIU in DeKalb, IL. I was excited about what I was doing in Phoenix, but she replied negatively, thinking I had gone completely bonkers skipping out on my horse camp job to join “a cult” (in her words). She was very upset, even though I tried to reassure her that I truly knew what I was doing and would return to her at summer’s end, still and even more in love with her!

Meanwhile that summer, my college friend Joe was bicycling across the U.S. from the Chicago area with his friend Jim, on their way to Santa Monica, CA. Writing to both him and Rick about my experiences , I invited Joe and his friend to stop in Phoenix and see me at the W.Thomas Road premie house.

Joe was somewhat intrigued but skeptical, and Jim was very critical and skeptical. We had a rather heated discussion on the correctness of what I becoming involved with, but I assured them both that what I really wanted was simply to learn The Knowledge, rather than change my entire life and become a guru devotee. Meanwhile, I was still writing to Rick to keep him updated on my summer in Phoenix, after Joe and Jim left.

The weeks rolled on. Our premie house hosted some evening information sessions for the public, and those who had Knowledge gave satsang. People asked me what I thought, especially when I told them I was temporarily living there but not initiated yet. I told them that I didn't really understand the whole Maharaj Ji aspect, but that I believed in the love and sincerity of his followers and felt that The Knowledge had made them better human beings.

Denny then returned, and he was rather surprised at the changes I had put into motion regarding improved diet and income, but he let it all slide. I told him that I had to leave and return to the Chicago area, it being mid-August. I was anxious to see Joan and my other friends and tell them in person what an adventure I had. I asked if the house would cover my airfare back home, and they did. Kim drove me to Sky Harbor airport and hugged me goodbye.

Joan, and her roommate Suzie, at University Heights Apts., were both very upset with what I had done. Joan wanted to break up, which we did gradually and sadly over the next few months. I soon learned a harsh truth: not everyone was either interested or believed in the value of what I was pursuing! So I had to be very careful as to who I trusted.(I never told my two sisters or my father about DLM, for example. My mother had died years earlier.) At this point, it was Gale, Julia, and Rick (who had just received The Knowledge shortly after returning from Arizona). Later, Marty, Joe, and Mary Alice would join with us. Other friends either rejected us or gave us harsh criticisms. Had we gone crazy? they asked again and again. Meanwhile, some of us continued to read the DLM newspaper, The Divine Times, or the And It Is Divine monthly magazine, to see where satsang was being held in the Chicago area, and more importantly, where Knowledge sessions were being held. All DLM publications kept promoting Maharaj Ji's messages and speeches, as well as those of his three older brothers and mother. Wealthy devotees were giving the boy guru vast amounts of cash and real estate, expensive gifts, cars, and jewelry. It was incongruous to many. But the guru laughed it off, saying that wealth was mere "maya" (worldly illusion), and that it didn't matter. Meanwhile, the U.S. media was getting further alarmed and suspicious.

There was a very large mansion on 5600 Greenwood Avenue in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago which served as that city's DLM headquarters. I went there for satsang, and it was frankly fun being with premies again. By now, I was living back home, having run out of money to attend college, and I was working downtown as a delivery clerk at an optical supply shop/retail eyeglasses store near Randolph & Wabash Avenues called The House of Vision. I took the Illinois Central train to work every Monday through Friday. The job was simple and paid well, but I was stuck working with uninteresting coworkers and managers. I spent break times apart, reading or writing poetry or thinking about The Knowledge, and counting the months when I would have saved enough money to return to school at NIU and finish my teaching degree.

I believe it was in the late summer of 1973 that I heard that an official Knowledge session was being offered at the Greenwood mansion. At last! Mahatma Parlokanand would do the honors to those initiates who were deemed worthy: those having done "service" (volunteer jobs) at ashrams or premie houses, attended several satsang sessions, and who seemed ready and sincere to follow Maharaj Ji. Well, I would agree to any stipulations at this point in order to be included, though the whole guru thing was still a mystery to me. The mahatma spoke that evening for about an hour. He was a small, brown-skinned, shaved-headed man wearing white robes, perhaps in his late 30's, from India. A gentle, nice guy I thought. When he concluded his talk with the question: "Now who here would like this Knowledge?", I immediately spoke out, saying "I will!" and raised my hand and stood up. So they counted me in along with maybe ten others. We were questioned further, then taken upstairs to a dark waiting room. We sat in a circle in lotus positions. So there I was at last...The mahatma went around to each initiate. Finally, it was my turn. Parlokanand was very soft-spoken and friendly. He told me never to reveal the techniques he was about to reveal. (I agreed -- at that point -- sorry!) The first technique was The Word, which was basically focusing on one's breath ("prana") as the primary life energy. (Similar to TM, really.) The second technique was The Light. My eyes were closed. Then, the mahatma carefully pressed the outer corners of both of my eyes inward, as I was to focus on the spot of my Third Eye in the center of my forehead. He asked if I was ready, and I said Yes. Suddenly, I was experiencing an explosion of blinding light and colors, such as I had never experienced! It was incredible and unbelievable, yet real and totally awesome...I felt universal oneness and transcendent love and energy and blissfulness for about five seconds. So this was The Knowledge! Parlokanand next whispered in my ear, “This is God inside of you. Whenever you want to experience Him, you can.” Then the mahatma placed my fingers in the position he had made so I could do it for myself correctly. I did, yet it only worked for a second or two, and not as intensely. He whispered to me that with daily practice it would improve and last longer. The third technique was The Music, which had one insert one's thumbs into one's ears while placing the other eight fingers flat on one's head like a cap. You then concentrated on the sounds of blood coursing through your head via your ear canals. Lastly, the fourth technique was called The Nectar. You used your fingers to push the tip of your tongue back and up slowly into your throat, until you found an area of sweet-tasting liquid. This was very odd and difficult; I thought it had to be related to nasal drainage somehow, rather than being connected to something spiritual. But I made no remark afterward to my mahatma. It all being finished in about 20 minutes, I was free to leave. Although The Knowledge is free, Parlokanand said, it is customary to give a small offering to Maharaji Ji and DLM, so that they could continue to spread it around the world. It could be some money, or a flower, or a piece of fruit, he suggested. I could leave it downstairs. I thanked him and left the room. I gave $20 as an offering. On my way home, I relived the experience in my mind. I really, really liked The Light technique! The Word was relaxing and pleasant. The other two techniques were not as impressive to me. I later shared my experience with Rick, Gale, and Joe.

At this point, those friends in our group who had obtained Knowledge made audiocassette tapes outlining our meditation practicings and experiences, and sent them to each other. We got hand-made wooden baragans. We wrote letters back and forth – asking questions and offering advice and encouragement. We attended more satsang sessions together. We discussed The Light technique: Was it really a spiritual gift, or was it instead a natural physical/optical phenomenon somehow connected to inner enlightenment? We occasionally tried to tell other friends about The Knowledge, but with no success, though some friends became less hostile and more sympathetic.

Our first seeds of doubt and confusion regarding DLM came during November 8-10, 1973, when the massively publicized “Millennium '73 Festival” was held in the Houston Astrodome in Texas. Rick, Joe, Marty, and I went by air together, and I believe we met Gale, Julia, and Mary Alice there. I also got to see Kim again, from Phoenix. We got to see Maharaj Ji and his whole family from afar, including his other three brothers -- Bal Bhagwan Ji, Raja Ji, and Bhole Ji, the last who led a premie orchestra called Blue Aquarius, which later released a record album of DLM devotional songs.

But the hype of the event never materialized. The Astrodome -- holding 100,000 -- was only one-third full. Although peaceful indoors, there were protestors outside from other mostly traditional religious organizations calling Maharaj Ji the antichrist and a fraud, and labeling the DLM movement satanic and a cult. The event lost DLM a huge amount of money. And the Astrodome never levitated off the ground, as was rumored to occur with so much love inside of it(!)

Time went by, as 1973 gave way to the new year of 1974. We continued practicing The Knowledge, hoping for any kind of a spiritual breakthrough or assurance.

One day, news came that Maharaj Ji was coming to Chicago to give "darshan" (his holy presence) on February 19, 1974. This was a special chance to see him up close, so we were naturally excited. Still unsure about his role in The Knowledge (was he truly an enlightened spiritual Master?), I wanted to see what would happen internally to me --if anything -- in his actual presence, seeing as I now had The Knowledge. Rick, Joe, and Marty (all premies by now) were with me as we went to the People’s Church auditorium on Lawrence Avenue in the Uptown neighborhood of Chicago. There was much satsang and singing as the massive crowd was being warmed up for the big arrival. After a lengthy wait, the boy guru appeared, dressed in a white Nehru-style outfit. He sat on a kind of raised throne. He spoke for a while, then premies were allowed to line up and file past him, bowing or kneeling at his feet, or even kissing his feet (!) This was to give one special "grace." It was frankly rather bizarre at this point, but I and my friends got in line. About twenty people away from the seated guru, a man who had just kneeled before Maharaj Ji suddenly leaped up and screamed out "Your feet stink!" Security men from DLM quickly grabbed the man and dragged him off the stage. It was very alarming! After a few moments, the line to see the guru resumed, much like kids going to see Santa Claus. When I was a few feet away and almost at my turn, I looked very carefully at Maharaj Ji. It was weird! He looked more haughty than holy, either distracted or bored like a typical teen his age. Before I knew it, it was my turn. I kneeled and put my forehead on his thick white socks. I looked at him in the face as I rose, but he made no eye contact. I felt no recognition or special love or sense of enlightenment. I was further puzzled! It was then that I began to sense that while The Knowledge still had its merits, the whole DLM-guru component was now quite disturbing -- even questionable. Several non-premie friends that we had invited to attend this event were likewise unimpressed.

Had we premies been mislead, or even worse duped? We suffered and struggled with strange, conflicted emotions.

After Millennium '73 -- and now into 1974 -- the heady growth days of DLM rapidly waned. The IRS wanted to investigate the guru's shadowy finances. Ashrams closed. Informational posters slowly vanished. Some premies openly questioned the organization and its directions for the first time. Today, you can read all about DLM and its history on Wikipedia and in other sources on the internet. There are video clips on YouTube from those days. There are some web sites from ex-premies who claimed Maharaj Ji ruined their lives, while other sites (from premies who still meditate) continue to praise the guru and those idealistic, simple early days of The Knowledge.

Meanwhile, Maharaji Ji, at age 16, got married to a 24-year-old American premie (Marolyn Johnson, his former secretary, who was non-Indian) on May 20, 1974 in Colorado. This surprising event caused a dramatic rift between the boy guru and his family, especially with his mother, Mata Ji. She covertly now favored the guru's older brother, Bal Bhagwan Ji, to be the new DLM leader, and wanted them all to leave America for good and return to India.

And what of Maharaj Ji in 2016? He is still married, with two sons and two daughters, and many years ago moved to Miami. His name is now Prem Rawat. His organization is now called Words of Peace International, Inc. He still offers The Knowledge, and gives speeches around the world for spirituality and peace. He lives a wealthy lifestyle. And he will turn 60 next year. Some people worldwide continue to believe in both him and his message. He is estranged from the rest of his family, who all did indeed return to India in the mid 70's.

The phenomenon of DLM has been analyzed and debated by sociologists, religious experts, and the world media. It came and it briefly flourished at a time of great turmoil in history, as young people around the world searched for higher meaning and a sense of purpose beyond the material and the traditional. It was in many ways a grand and fascinating time, which provided me with unique experiences and insights. It was a time of joy, excitement, surprises, disappointments, and personal evolution. All in all, I am content with my memories of what happened to me those many years ago...

The End

by Jack Karolewski 3/12/16