What Do Meditators Do When They Meditate? Proposing a Novel Basis for Future Meditation Research

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Abstract

Objectives Meditation is an umbrella term for a vast range of contemplative practices. Former proposals have struggled to do justice to this variety. To our knowledge, there is to date no comprehensive overview of meditation techniques spanning all major traditions. The present studies aimed at providing such a comprehensive list of meditation techniques.

Methods In a qualitative study, we compiled a collection of 309 meditation techniques through a literature search and interviews with 20 expert meditators. Then, we reduced this collection to 50 basic meditation techniques. In a second, quantitative study, 635 experienced meditators from a wide range of meditative backgrounds indicated how much experience they had with each of these 50 meditation techniques.

Results Meditators’ responses indicated that our choice of techniques had been adequate and only two techniques had to be added. Our additional statistical and cluster analyses illustrated preferences for specific techniques across and within diverse traditions as well as sets of techniques commonly practiced together. Body-centered techniques stood out in being of exceptional importance to all meditators.

Conclusions In conclusion, we found an amazing variety of meditation techniques, which considerably surpasses previous collections. Our selection of basic meditation techniques might be of value for future scientific investigations and we encourage researchers to use this set.

Keywords Meditation techniques · Variety · Diversity · Preferences · Qualitative · Cluster analysis

Meditation has become one of the most popular and widely researched mental training techniques, and meditation and mindfulness are often treated as panaceas for almost anything (Van Dam et al., 2018). However, with its increasing popularity it has become clear that, in fact, “meditation” is not one specific technique but an umbrella term that encompasses a great variety of different techniques (Awasthi, 2013; Dorjee, 2016). These techniques range from the well-known observance of the breath to the far less common humming meditation or contemplation on death and mortality. This variety makes it difficult to define meditation and do justice to the vast range of practices associated with it (Bond et al., 2009; Schmidt, 2014). Thus, researchers and practitioners alike would benefit from a comprehensive overview of meditation techniques that would give them insight into what meditators actually do when they are meditating.

Benson (1975) was one of the first researchers to describe the effects of meditation. He investigated the effects of Transcendental Meditation (whose main technique is a form of mantra meditation) and concluded the main effect of meditation was the “relaxation response” it elicited. As the field of meditation research grew, it became clear that this view was shortsighted, as there were other meditation techniques that did not elicit relaxation in practitioners (Amihai & Kozhevnikov, 2014; Lumma et al., 2015). An initial and now widespread differentiation distinguished “focused attention” and “open monitoring” as two styles of meditation (Lutz et al., 2008). This differentiation was opened up and extended to include more styles, such as loving-kindness and compassion meditation, which were considered mixtures of focused attention and open monitoring (Lippelt et al., 2014).
Recently, new collections and classification systems encompassing a greater variety of meditation techniques have been proposed (Dahl et al., 2015; Lutz et al., 2015). Nonetheless, these collections and classification systems have still been derived mostly from the top down and they omit several important meditation techniques, especially from the Hindu context (Matko & Sedlmeier, 2019). A growing body of research has acknowledged the need to differentiate between different styles of meditation. Meta-analyses have found differential effects for several types of meditation in clinical (Goyal et al., 2014) as well as healthy (Fox et al., 2016; Sedlmeier et al., 2012, 2018) populations. Comparative studies have begun to distinguish the effects of mantra meditation, breathing meditation, body scan, open monitoring, observing-thoughts meditation, loving-kindness meditation, and compassion meditation. Obviously, these studies did not compare all but rather selections of the abovementioned techniques. In doing so, they found differences in, for example, attention (Lee et al., 2012), affect (May et al., 2014), concentration and emotion regulation (Kropp & Sedlmeier, 2019), creativity (Colzato et al., 2012), decentering (Feldman et al., 2010), mindfulness (Cebolla et al., 2017), heart-rate variability and perceived effort (Lumma et al., 2015), personal preference (Burke, 2012; Tang & Braver, 2020), phenomenological experience (Przyrembel & Singer, 2018), and brain activation and deactivation patterns (Fox et al., 2016).

Yet, despite these attempts to acknowledge and do justice to the variety of meditation techniques, the selection of techniques has still been limited to the few abovementioned, well-known styles of meditation. Additionally, the selection of techniques has often been arbitrary rather than guided by a sound theory or classification system. To date, only a few studies have investigated the effects of meditation techniques that are less well known but still very important and prevalent in their specific traditions. These techniques include visualization (Amihai & Kozhevnikov, 2014; Lou et al., 1999), nondual awareness (Josipovic, 2010), supine/relaxation meditation (Gul & Jahangir, 2019; Kjaer et al., 2002), chanting (Harne et al., 2019; Wolf & Abell, 2003), analytical meditation (van Vugt et al., 2020), contemplation (Bach & Guse, 2015), energy meditation (Venkatesh et al., 1997), dynamic meditation (Bansal et al., 2016), or whirling meditation (Cakmak et al., 2017).

As can easily be seen from this rather arbitrary collection, these techniques partly originate from cultural, spiritual, or religious contexts other than the nowadays most prevalent forms of mindfulness meditation. For an introduction and comparison of different meditative practices in various spiritual traditions see Komjathy (2015) and Shear (2006). Visualizations are commonly used in the context of Hindu or (Tibetan) Buddhist meditation. Chanting as a form of meditation can be found in Hindu, Buddhist, and Sufi traditions. Energy meditation is commonly practiced by Hindu, Tantric, and Qigong meditators. To date, these various techniques have received a lot less attention in research.

However, one problem that arises with growing variety in the field is finding a definition that reconciles all these different forms of meditation. Definitions of meditation that have been brought up so far are almost as diverse as the techniques described above. Some authors have emphasized the relevance of particular aspects such as mental training, self-regulation, and attention (Lutz et al., 2008; Tang et al., 2015), while others have differentiated between meditative states and techniques (Bond et al., 2009; Nash & Newberg, 2013). The purpose of meditation also differs across definitions (for a detailed discussion see: Bond et al., 2009; Matko & Sedlmeier, 2019). According to some of these definitions, meditation can be practiced for either general well-being, alteration of consciousness, or spiritual insight. This variety in definitions represents the lack of consensus among experts on when or when not to label a practice meditation. Some authors have argued that finding an overarching definition of meditation might be close to impossible (Ospina et al., 2007; Schmidt, 2014). Others, in turn, have suggested that there might be commonalities across all techniques such as a common goal of reaching a “natural meditative state” (Reddy & Roy, 2019, p. 4), or that all meditation techniques share a somatic, embodied component (Matko & Sedlmeier, 2019).

To better identify and comprehend the defining features and working mechanisms of meditation, it is imperative to open up meditation research and investigate meditation in its many forms (Dahl et al., 2015; Ospina et al., 2007). This might also be helpful in developing one or several overarching theories of meditation (Dorjee, 2016; Sedlmeier et al., 2016). To achieve this, first we need to obtain a good overview of the meditation techniques, which exist throughout different spiritual and cultural contexts and traditions. Although some researchers have pointed out and described a great variety of meditation techniques (Dahl et al., 2015; Travis & Shear, 2010), as of this writing we know of no compilation that is truly comprehensive.

Additionally, in the past, many techniques were labeled with a couple of words, for instance, breathing meditation, without being given concise descriptions of what meditators were actually doing while meditating. However, “breathing meditation” can imply completely different techniques depending on the context. Some meditators count their breaths, some observe their abdomen while breathing, and still others combine breathing with visualizations of light and smoke. It is, thus, essential to describe the specific techniques that meditators are using during meditation in detail. In response to this issue, some researchers have developed taxonomies and frameworks to help researchers and practitioners describe what they are doing during meditation (Nash & Newberg, 2013; Schmidt, 2014).
Another issue repeatedly raised in the literature is the need to investigate basic meditation techniques that do not include confounding factors, such as supportive exercises or a religious context, to draw accurate causal inferences (Chiesa & Malinowski, 2011; Isbel & Summers, 2017). Research has shown that practicing meditation in the specific framework of a belief system can tremendously influence the outcomes of meditation (Amihai & Kozhevnikov, 2014; Bayot et al., 2020). Yet, little is known about the differential effects of basic meditation techniques, let alone their interaction with context factors or the effects of combined techniques.

We decided to approach the abovementioned issues from a different perspective, using qualitative and quantitative methods. In our first study, we deduced a set of basic meditation techniques that was as complete as possible, and then in a second study, we evaluated this set in a large sample of experienced meditators. Drawing on these data, we explored the question “What do meditators do when they meditate?” from three different perspectives. First, we approached the question in the most general way by identifying the most popular meditation techniques practiced by a large variety of meditators. Second, we looked at different meditative traditions to see which of these basic techniques are most commonly practiced in each tradition. And third, we focused on the question of which meditation techniques were commonly practiced together by meditators, irrespective of their tradition.

### Study 1

One aim of this qualitative study was to capture as many meditation techniques as possible through a bottom-up empirical investigation. We looked for a practice-based, straightforward answer to our main question: “What do meditators do when they meditate?” We expected to find a large number of different answers in our primary collection of techniques. Therefore, a second aim of this study was to reduce this primary collection to a manageable number of basic meditation techniques.

### Method

To obtain an exhaustive list of meditation techniques, we chose a combination of two approaches. On the one hand, we interviewed a large sample of expert meditators representing a wide range of different meditative traditions and schools in Germany. On the other hand, we conducted an extensive literature search. The literature search included meditation manuals from different traditions (Adyashanti, 2006; Anālayo, 2003; Austin, 1998; Bäumer, 2008; Bodian, 2016; Chinmoy, 2013; Kornfield, 2009; Mahasi, 1970; Main, 2013; Nandamalabhiyamsa, 2013; Osho, 1983; Ott, 2010; Rinpoche Dagsay Tulkū, 2002; Saradananda, 2011; Schimmel, 1992; Shear, 2006; Sivananda, 1975) as well as research papers that included detailed descriptions of meditation practices (Amihai & Kozhevnikov, 2014; Cebolla et al., 2017; Dahl et al., 2015; Fox et al., 2016; Osmania et al., 2007; Peng et al., 2004; Shannahoff-Khalsa, 2004).

The interviews took place in a multitude of meditation and yoga centers all over Germany via telephone, and personally in Dresden and Bad-Meinberg. The first author is an experienced interviewer and interviewed altogether 20 expert meditators from the following traditions: different schools of Tibetan Buddhism (Kadampa, Kagyu, and Nyingma), Theravada Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Yoga, Hinduism, Tantra, Sri Chinmoy, Kundalini Yoga, Osho meditation, Christian meditation, Sufi meditation, Brahma Kumaris, and Qigong.

The semi-structured interviews focused on one central question: “When you meditate, what exactly do you do?” This question was asked in an open manner to elicit a free response. The interviewer guided interviewees with repeated inquiries and questions to obtain the most detailed description of each meditation technique they employed during their meditation sessions. Then, the interviewer asked whether there were any more techniques that the interviewees used less often and, in the case of the interviewee being a meditation teacher, whether there were any more techniques that they taught to their students. All responses were instantly written down by the interviewer. The resulting transcripts were then double-checked by the interviewees to prevent any misunderstanding. Finally, all transcripts and the gathered meditation literature were qualitatively analyzed by extracting all mentions of meditation techniques and their corresponding descriptions. During this process, we decided to segment combined techniques into primary and secondary techniques. The primary technique represented the main practice, whereas the secondary technique(s) represented optional auxiliary or combinable practices, or variations of the main practice.

### Results

This exhaustive search resulted in a list of overall 309 meditation practices (see Supplementary Material A—Table A1). Approximately two thirds of these techniques were reported during the interviews, and one third originated from literature and manuals. This extensive list was reduced in a systematic process involving several steps (see Fig. 1).

First, we removed all duplicates of identical techniques, for example, identical forms of observing the breath. Second, the first author sorted all remaining techniques into 14 intuitive categories to get a general overview. These categories were (1) breath, (2) observing thoughts, contemplation,
insight, (3) prayer, opening up, grace, mysticism, (4) visualizations, (5) observing the body, (7) sensing/feeling of energy, emotions, or affect-centered objects, (8) chanting, singing, humming, music, (9) open monitoring or doing nothing in particular, (10) experiencing nonduality or emptiness, (11) concentrating on an object, (12) cultivating virtues, positive attributes, or good wishes, (13) moving the body, and (14) informal practice. Then, all authors examined the 239 meditation techniques in these categories and collectively searched for duplicates. In the case of disagreement, all authors engaged in constructive discussions until consensus was reached. This reduction led to a list of 168 meditation techniques (see Supplementary Material A—Table A2).

Because we considered 168 techniques to be still too many to be used in the second study, the next step focused on the deduction of a manageable number of representative basic meditation techniques. Again, all authors engaged in constructive discussions to deduce systematic rules that would guide this process. Additionally, we consulted two external researchers to review and, if necessary, modify these rules. First, all practices were reread carefully and their basic techniques were extracted referring to two rules: (1) technical terms were replaced by more commonly used

words, for example, “chakra” was replaced by “energy center” and (2) the level of abstraction was increased for practices that were too specific, for example, “visualizing a rose blossom in the heart” and “visualizing an expanding light in the heart” were subsumed under “visualizations associated with the opening of the heart.” This process resulted in a list of 86 basic meditation techniques (see Supplementary Material A—Table A3).

In order to further reduce the number of techniques, we consensually developed another set of guidelines: (1) We decided to remove techniques that were still too specific, for example, “locating one’s pulse and repeating a mantra following this rhythm.” (2) Very similar practices were subsumed to superordinate techniques, for example, “sitting with eyes closed and allowing the body to circle around one’s own axis” and “standing upright with the eyes closed and allowing the body to move smoothly without intervening” were subsumed under “sitting or standing upright with the eyes closed and allowing the body to move smoothly without intervening.” (3) Techniques that involved direct manipulation of breath, for example, rapid breathing or decelerating the breath, were subsumed under one category, as in some traditions they are considered preparatory rather than meditation practices. (4) Furthermore, we decided to remove techniques that were too vague in their description to be understood by people not familiar with this specific practice, for example, “letting go of all suppressed emotions (‘catharsis’)” or “detaching from all techniques, methods and goals and relaxing into a state of silent listening and profound stillness.” These were considered general labels rather than precise descriptions of meditation techniques. (5) In addition, we agreed to exclude meditation or mindfulness as a practice of daily life (“informal practice” such as “mindful eating” or “repeating a mantra in everything one does”), as it was not considered a “formal” meditation technique comparable to the other basic techniques. This systematic process led to a final list of 50 basic meditation techniques, depicted in Table 1.

**Study 2**

This study addressed the question “What do meditators do when they meditate?” in a broader sense. We wanted to see whether our selection of techniques had been adequate and whether experienced meditators from all kinds of different contemplative traditions would be able to identify their personal practice in our selection of meditation techniques. At the same time, by obtaining their traditional background and the amount of experience they had with each technique, we were able to draw conclusions on the popularity and prevalence of each technique, generally and tradition-wise. With this, we were able to answer the above question from
## Table 1 The 50 basic meditation techniques and their abbreviations utilized in the present paper

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic meditation technique</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being mindful of the rise and fall of the abdomen while breathing</td>
<td>Abdomen_Breath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combining inhalation and exhalation with visualization of energy, qualities, light, smoke, etc</td>
<td>Breath_Visualization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accumulating energy in specific centers (e.g., abdomen) and channeling it through certain pathways (e.g., spine)</td>
<td>Channel_Energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultivating compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity, loving kindness (for oneself, friends, neutral people, enemies, the whole world)</td>
<td>Compassion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concentrating on a location in the body (e.g., abdomen or an “energy center” like chakra, Dan Tien) or on a series of locations in the body/ “energy centers”</td>
<td>Concentrate_Energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemplating the conditional emergence of experiences (cause and effect)</td>
<td>Contemplate_Condition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemplating death and one’s own mortality</td>
<td>Contemplate_Death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemplating a spiritually important question (e.g., “Who am I?”)</td>
<td>Contemplate_Question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concentrating the mind on something contradictory without thinking about the contradiction</td>
<td>Contradiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counting breaths</td>
<td>Count_Breath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a visual representation of a deity and then merging with this visualization</td>
<td>Deity_Merging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trying to feel one’s heartbeat</td>
<td>Feel_Heartbeat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fixating on an object without blinking/ “staring” (candle flame, picture, hand)</td>
<td>Fixate_Object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking at/focusing on a sacred object (picture of the master, sacred geometric pattern, etc.)</td>
<td>Focus_Object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Droning or humming continuously with optional corresponding hand movements</td>
<td>Humming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With a specific intention (e.g., open one’s heart, raise one’s mood) selecting and repeating a mantra, combining it with associated hand postures or arm movements</td>
<td>Intention_Mantra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focusing on internal sounds and vibrations</td>
<td>Internal_Sounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labeling mental experiences with words that describe these experiences</td>
<td>Labeling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to the sound of singing bowls or a gong and feeling the corresponding vibrations inside the body</td>
<td>Listen_Sounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lying down and going into a state of deep relaxation while being fully conscious</td>
<td>Lying_Relaxing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary manipulation of breath, e.g., reducing the strength of breathing or “pranayama” with holding one’s breath</td>
<td>Manipulate_Breath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeating a mantra while focusing on corresponding points in the body</td>
<td>Mantra_Bodypoints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeating a mantra using a mnemonic (e.g., prayer beads)</td>
<td>Mantra_Mnemonic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrying out predetermined, meditative sequences of movements while allowing the breath to flow naturally</td>
<td>Meditative_Movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sitting or standing upright with the eyes closed and allowing the body to move smoothly without intervening</td>
<td>Move_Smoothly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being mindful of the sensations arising in the nose during inhalation and exhalation</td>
<td>Nose_Breath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observing how bodily sensations arise without adhering to them</td>
<td>Observe_Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observing emotions without adhering to them</td>
<td>Observe_Emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observing how thoughts arise in the mind without adhering to them</td>
<td>Observe_Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opening oneself up to blessings and inspiration</td>
<td>Opening_Up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focusing on the pauses between inhalation and exhalation, carefully observing what happens</td>
<td>Pause_Breath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focusing on one point of the body and letting the breath flow through this point of concentration</td>
<td>Point_Breath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading certain paragraphs of a text over and over again and taking them in</td>
<td>Read_Text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reciting a mantra loudly, in a whisper, and silently</td>
<td>Recite_Mantra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceiving, then releasing emotions and tensions (e.g., with the help of the breath), while scanning the body</td>
<td>Release_Tensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeating an affirmation (e.g., “I am patient”)</td>
<td>Repeat_Affirmation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentally repeating syllables or words while connecting them to the rhythm of breathing</td>
<td>Repeat_Words_Breath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being mindful of the respiratory flow in the entire body</td>
<td>Resp_Flow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scanning the entire body</td>
<td>Scan_Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singing sutras/mantras</td>
<td>Singing_Sutras_Mantras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fostering and focusing on a spiritual connection created by singing together</td>
<td>Singing_Together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sitting and gazing at the wall, observing oneself doing nothing</td>
<td>Sitting_Do_Nothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spinning around one’s own axis with the arms spread out</td>
<td>Spinning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visualizing how the dead human body slowly decays and decomposes</td>
<td>Visualize_Decay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visualizing the body expanding in all directions</td>
<td>Visualize_Expanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visualizations associated with the opening of the heart (e.g., rose blossom)</td>
<td>Visualize_Heart_Opening</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
three different perspectives: What do meditators do when they meditate in general?; What do they do in their specific tradition?; and What do they do with respect to combining several techniques?

Method

Participants

To answer these questions, we devised a four-part online survey using the SoSci Survey platform (Leiner, 2019). The survey addressed “experienced meditators” from any spiritual or meditative tradition or background with any level of meditation experience. We deliberately chose to approach a broad range of meditators as we were interested in the variety of practice and the diversity of practitioners. Altogether 878 experienced meditators responded to the survey, and 661 completed the survey. We excluded all participants who did not provide any data on their lifetime experience with meditation and/or on the tradition in which they were practicing. Two participants had to be excluded because they rated having the same amount of experience with all meditation techniques, which we deemed very unlikely. The final sample was composed of 635 participants, 60.9% women. The mean age was 52.32 years (SD = 10.71; range 21–92 years). At the time of the survey, 92.3% of the participants were living in Germany.

Participants had practiced meditation for 6 months up to 57 years (M = 15.01 years, SD = 11.11). On average, they reported practicing meditation 6.03 times a week (SD = 3.61) for 31.35 min per session (SD = 22.89). The majority of participants reported having taught meditation occasionally (40.8%) or regularly (23.0%) and described their meditation practice as very (30.4%) or fairly (42.4%) regular. Participants reported affiliations with a great variety of meditative traditions and schools, which we subsumed under 19 categories of major meditative traditions (see below).

Of all participants, 48.7% reported holding a university degree, 19.5% had graduated from high school, 6.8% had completed their doctorate, and 12.8% had acquired a professional qualification. Regarding employment, 32.9% of participants were working as employees, 37.0% were self-employed, and 8.5% were retired.

Procedure

In the survey, meditators were first asked to answer questions regarding their meditation experience and their current or past meditation practice/routine. Second, they were asked to name all traditions the meditation techniques they practiced were derived from, in reverse chronological order, that is, the most recent first. Third, they were given the list of 50 basic meditation techniques and asked to rate how much experience they had with each of the 50 techniques on a 6-point Likert scale (from 1 = no experience at all to 6 = a lot of experience). If an important technique they were practicing was missing, they had the opportunity to add up to two techniques to the list and rate their experience with these. Last, they answered a few sociodemographic questions.

We used snowball sampling to reach as many experienced meditators from as many traditions as possible. The internet was searched extensively for schools, centers, societies, and associations of meditation, yoga, or contemplation in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. We identified around 100 contacts in this way. Then, we sent the online survey to these contacts with the request to spread the survey and forward it to as many meditators as possible. Most meditation centers and societies agreed to do so.

Results

We performed multiple analyses to provide a multifaceted response to each question. One set of analyses was based on all 50 meditation techniques to obtain a complete picture of the adequateness of our selection and the distribution and clustering of the techniques. A second set of analyses focused on the top 10 preferred techniques of all participants or of subsets of participants. This was done in an attempt to simplify and reduce the vast number of techniques under investigation. The two types of analyses complement each other in supplying an in-depth examination of what meditators do when they are meditating.
Data were analyzed quantitatively by employing descriptive, correlational, and cluster analyses. All statistical analyses were performed using R 4.0.2 (R Core Team, 2020). Bar charts were generated with the statistical package ggplot2 (Wickham, 2016), and dendrograms with the package ggden- dro (de Vries & Ripley, 2020). Results on all three research questions will be reported consecutively in the following.

**What Do Meditators Do When They Meditate: the Commonalities**

Do experienced meditators agree with our selection of basic meditation techniques? Which meditation techniques are especially popular among meditators of all traditions? We relied on the two analytic approaches described above to answer these two questions. The first question was analyzed encompassing all 50 techniques, whereas the second question aimed at simplifying our selection by extracting the top 10 preferred techniques of all meditators.

We descriptively evaluated the ratings of all participants on all meditation techniques. If our list of techniques included irrelevant ones, we would anticipate that none of the experienced meditators would have a lot of experience with this specific technique. If we had omitted important techniques, we would expect them to appear consistently in the further added techniques. At the same time, these added techniques should not be variations of our already present 50 basic techniques. To deduce the most popular techniques, we calculated mean experience scores across all participants for each meditation technique and built a ranking sequence based on these scores.

**Adequateness of 50 Meditation Techniques**

In general, all 50 meditation techniques were commonly used. Every technique received all possible rating scores, ranging from the minimum of 1 (no experience at all) to the maximum of 6 (a lot of experience). On average, each technique had around 129 meditators (20.4% of the sample; $SD = 10.5\%$) who reported having a lot of experience with that particular technique. The most popular technique in this regard, that is, the one with the highest rating score (scanning the body), had 277 meditators, while the least popular technique (visualizing decay) still had 13 meditators reporting having a lot of experience with it. At the same time, each technique had an average of 147 participants (23.2% of the sample; $SD = 14.5\%$) who had no experience practicing it. The techniques with the highest (419) and lowest (23) number of participants with no practice experience were the same as above—visualizing decay and scanning the body, respectively.

This means that for every meditation technique, there were at least 23 experienced meditators who had never used it and at least 13 who used it a lot, which speaks to our selection of practices. A more detailed exposition on how rating scores were distributed across all meditation techniques can be found in the Supplementary Material (Table B1).

Next, we looked at the average number of meditation techniques our participants were acquainted with. On average, meditators from our sample reported having no experience at all with 11.6 ($SD = 9.7$) techniques, a little experience with 7.7 ($SD = 5.2$), some experience with 6.4 ($SD = 4.3$), more experience with 6.9 ($SD = 4.2$), quite a lot of experience with 7.3 ($SD = 5.8$), and a lot of experience with 10.2 ($SD = 9.4$) meditation techniques. Consequently, participants reported already having practiced 38 of the 50 meditation techniques, at least to some extent. This further validates our list of techniques as they, indeed, seem to be widely practiced.

Of all meditators, 6.6% reported having employed all techniques at least once in their life. The absolute minority of respondents, 0.8%, reported having used only 10 or fewer meditation techniques over the course of their practice. Thus, it seems that most experienced meditators did have accumulated experience with quite a few different meditation techniques over their lifetime of meditation practice. However, most meditators seemed to have a set of around 10 preferred techniques they most engaged with in their practice.

Furthermore, participants had the opportunity to add any meditation technique they felt was missing from the list. Altogether 240 techniques were added (list available on request). Again, we analyzed these techniques descriptively by extracting and grouping similar techniques. The analysis revealed four main groups of techniques: (1) Osho (or similar) techniques, for example, “catharsis” ($n = 18$), which we had considered in our first list of 309 techniques but excluded because they fell under the criterion of being too vague in their description to be understood by people not familiar with this specific practice; (2) sitting in silence ($n = 35$), which we had considered in our first list but excluded as a “vague” practice; (3) Koan, Mahavakya, or similar techniques ($n = 9$), which we had included in our list but for which we probably had not chosen the right wording; and (4) other techniques ($n = 178$) that (a) either fell under one of the exclusion criteria mentioned above, that is, they were either too general (e.g., “Zen”, “Yoga”), too specific (e.g., “heart chakra meditation,” “tree meditation”), or an informal practice (e.g., “mindfulness as a practice of daily life”); or (b) or were already included in the list (e.g., “mantra meditation,” “observing thoughts and emotions”).

Subsequently, we made three slight adjustments to our original list (depicted in Table 1). We decided to reword one technique and to extend our list by including two more basic techniques. Specifically, we included “sitting in silence” and “expressive practices,” such as catharsis or shaking, which
are often employed in the context of Osho meditation. To aid understanding, we reworded Technique 8 (“concentrating the mind on something contradictory without thinking about the contradiction”) to “concentrating the mind on something contradictory, a paradox, or a sentence of wisdom without thinking discursively about it (e.g., Koan, Mahavakya).” Thus, our final set included 52 basic meditation techniques. Yet, all of the following analyses are based on the 50 techniques we explicitly had requested participants to rate in this study.

The 10 Most Popular Meditation Techniques

We calculated the mean score of rated experience with each meditation technique across all participants to build a ranking sequence of preferred techniques. Our underlying assumption was that the meditation techniques that meditators rated as having “a lot of experience” with were being practiced more often in the present or had been practiced quite a lot in the past. Thus, it can be assumed that these techniques were more popular and important in meditators’ regular meditation practice than other techniques. Table 2 shows the top 10 meditation techniques that received the highest mean scores across all meditators from all traditions.

As can be observed from Table 2, the three most popular meditation techniques across all participants were scanning the body, observing the abdomen while breathing, and observing thoughts. Consistently, these are possibly the three most widely known meditation practices.

In this list of 10 techniques, five others stand out as having a clear body-oriented focus, that is, observing the breath in the nose and in the body, observing bodily sensations, releasing tensions in the body, and supine meditation (lying down and being relaxed but conscious). Therefore, body-centered techniques seem to be of particular importance for meditation. Only observing thoughts, singing sutras/mantras, and cultivating compassion or similar virtues refer to techniques not exclusively linked to the body.

Next, we looked at the preferred techniques of the most experienced meditators in our sample. Ninety-eight meditators in our sample had more than 30 years of meditation experience. Nonetheless, the top 10 preferred techniques of these very experienced meditators did not vary significantly from the general top 10. When we looked at the top 15 preferred techniques, there was only one technique that was considerably more popular among very experienced meditators compared to the overall sample, that is, “contemplating on a spiritual question.”

We also had a look at the least popular meditation techniques, that is, techniques that only a few meditators reported having much experience with. The three least popular meditation techniques across all participants were visualizing how the body slowly decays ($M = 1.69$), spinning around one’s own axis ($M = 1.80$), and concentrating the mind on something contradictory ($M = 2.02$). Perhaps this is not surprising, as these techniques are considered very advanced and/or specific to certain traditions that might have been underrepresented by our sample of meditators. Whereas the first of these three techniques is commonly practiced by Theravada Buddhist monks and nuns, the second is considered a typical Sufi technique. The third was the technique we chose to reword because some meditators might have misinterpreted its description (see above). Thus, to provide a more differentiated picture of the variety of practices, we decided to run a few tradition-specific analyses.

What Do Meditators Do When They Meditate: the Differences

After gaining some general insight into the preferred techniques across a diverse sample of meditators, we were interested in how these findings would generalize across preferences in specific meditative traditions. For this reason,
we first evaluated which traditions were represented in our sample. Second, we compared preferred techniques in our two largest groups of meditators, that is, Buddhist and Hindu meditators. And third, to obtain an even more accurate picture, we subdivided our sample into 12 major groups of meditative traditions and compared their preferred meditation techniques with one another.

**Meditative Traditions in the Sample**

Participants were provided with a free input field to list all meditative traditions they were affiliated with and to provide the name of any prominent teacher in their school. Then, we examined and processed all enumerated traditions in three consecutive steps. First, we extracted and categorized all unique names of traditions and spiritual teachers until the list was complete and no new names could be added. Second, we aggregated these names into larger groups of related traditions and teachers. And third, we generated a final categorization of superordinate traditions by carefully grouping them into as many categories as necessary and as few as possible. This process was guided by three different considerations: (1) clustering similar traditions (e.g., Soto and Rinzai Zen into “Zen Buddhism”); (2) representing the highest possible diversity in philosophical, cultural, or geographical origin (e.g., Indian, Abrahamic, Chinese); and (3) retaining distinctive traditions, which were strongly represented in our sample (e.g., Sivananda vs. Kundalini Yoga).

We identified 18 superordinate traditions in this way. In a final step, we allocated participants to these superordinate traditions based on the descriptions they had given in the questionnaire. They could be assigned to several groups of traditions if they had been practicing in different meditative traditions. Table 3 gives the superordinate traditions and the number of participants having practiced in these.

Several participants reported having practiced in different meditative traditions. Therefore, the total number of allocated traditions \(n = 1107\) surpasses the total number of participants. On average, participants reported practicing in 1.74 \((SD = 1.04, \text{range} 1–6)\) of these traditions. The majority of participants had practiced in either Buddhist \((n = 462)\) or Hindu \((n = 449)\) meditative traditions.

**Hindu Versus Buddhist Meditators**

Participants who reported practicing in one or more Buddhist traditions (i.e., Zen, Theravada, Vipassana, or Tibetan schools) but in no tradition from another spiritual background were allocated to the group of Buddhist meditators \((n = 216)\). Participants practicing in one or more Hindu traditions (i.e., Yoga traditions, Osho, and other Hindu masters) but in no other spiritual tradition formed the group of Hindu meditators \((n = 204)\). Participants of any other spiritual or mixed spiritual backgrounds were not included in the following analyses.

### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate tradition</th>
<th>Number of meditators ((n))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zen</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sivananda Yoga</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theravada, Vipassana</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Hindu traditions:</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaishnavism, Sri Chinmoy, Sri Aurobindo, Mother Meera, Ramana Maharshi, Deepak Chopra, Transcendental Meditation, and others</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tibetan Buddhism</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoga (other)</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kundalini Yoga</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osho meditation</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindfulness-based stress reduction</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufism</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christianity</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qigong/Tai Chi</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No tradition/free meditation</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tantra</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shamanism</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthroposophy</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merkabah/Jewish</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other, e.g., Acem, hypnosis</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table B2 in the Supplementary Material gives the number and percentage of subgroups of traditions in both groups. Practitioners of Zen Buddhism and Sivananda Yoga were slightly overrepresented in our sample. However, we know of no representative survey giving reliable base rates of meditators practicing in the respective traditions. Still, both abovementioned traditions are very popular in Germany.

As for the previous analysis, we calculated the mean score of each meditation technique for both groups, that is, Hindu and Buddhist meditators, and built ranking sequences. Higher scores indicate more overall experience in practicing the respective technique. To ease comparison between the two groups of meditators, we visually present their top 10 preferred techniques in a comparative bar chart (Fig. 2). This figure depicts 17 techniques that appeared in any of the two top-10 lists with their corresponding mean ratings in both groups. It is ordered according to the top-10 list of Buddhist meditators to enhance comparability. Stars and daggers indicate the top 10 preferred techniques for Buddhist and Hindu meditators, respectively. Tables showing the top 10 preferred techniques separately for Buddhist and Hindu meditators can be found in the Supplementary Material (Tables B3 and B4).

Looking at the stars and daggers in Fig. 2, very clear distinctions in preferred techniques appear between Buddhist and Hindu meditators. Both top-10 lists have only three meditation techniques in common: observing the respiratory flow, observing the abdomen while breathing, and scanning the body. All other techniques differ and reflect tradition-specific preferences for techniques. Buddhist meditators prefer techniques such as observing thoughts or emotions, walking meditation, and cultivating compassion or loving-kindness. Hindu meditators, on the other hand, practice singing or reciting mantras, concentrating on locations in the body or “energy centers,” and manipulating the breath.
These preferences correspond to both statements of experienced meditators from Study 1 as well as meditation manuals from the respective traditions (Bodian, 2016; Chinmoy, 2013; Kornfield, 2009; Mahasi, 1970; Nandamalabhivamsa, 2013; Saradananda, 2011; Sivananda, 1975). Moreover, it seems that Hindu meditators also practice techniques preferred by Buddhist meditators quite a lot, but not vice versa.

Comparing these results to the overall top 10, the latter seem like a mixture of preferred meditation techniques from Buddhist and Hindu traditions. All three techniques that overlap in both traditions reappear in the top 10, as well as four more techniques from Buddhist traditions (observing bodily sensations or thoughts, cultivating compassion, etc., releasing tensions in the body) and three more techniques from Hindu traditions (singing sutras/mantras, supine meditation, concentrating on a location in the body).

As both groups of meditators, Buddhist and Hindu, represent a substantial proportion of meditators in our sample, 34.0% and 32.1%, respectively, it might well be that the abovementioned general top-10 list is slightly skewed. Nonetheless, it might also be possible that these techniques represent techniques actually preferred by many meditators independent of their tradition, which we checked in the following.

**Preferred Meditation Techniques in 12 Major Traditions**

To make our results more discernible, we decided to allocate each participant to one single tradition. If meditators reported practicing in more than one tradition, we allocated them to the tradition they described as their current one. If two traditions were mentioned as equally important, we tossed a coin to determine the allocation. Thereafter, we excluded all traditions with fewer than five meditators allocated to them, for example, shaman, anthroposophical, or Jewish meditators. As the “other” category was far too heterogeneous to be interpreted meaningfully, we refrained from including it in our analyses. We also excluded meditators with “no tradition.”

As a result, we obtained 12 categories of major meditative traditions. Respective sample sizes, gender ratios, mean ages, and mean meditation experiences of participants in each of the 12 traditions can be found in Table B5 in the Supplementary Material. We are well aware that subgroups with smaller sample sizes (such as the five designated Qigong/Tai Chi meditators in our subsample) provide less reliable estimates than subgroups with larger sample sizes. Therefore, the results should be interpreted with care.

Following the procedure described above, we built ranking sequences for each tradition. Then, we performed three analyses to generate a precise picture of differences and commonalities between traditions. First, we extracted the 10 most popular meditation techniques within each tradition and calculated the percentage of overlap in preferred techniques across all traditions. Second, including all 50 techniques, we used hierarchical clustering to determine the proximity/distance between the mean ratings in diverse traditions. And third, we identified distinctive meditation techniques that were uniquely preferred by one specific tradition, relying on their top 10 techniques.

To calculate the percentage of overlap, we divided the number of techniques shared in two traditions by 10. Resulting percentages are given in Table 4. As only the top 10 ranked meditation techniques were compared to each other, a score of 0.3, for instance, indicates that three of 10 techniques overlapped in two traditions. The mean percentage of overlap between all traditions was 44.4% (SD = 17%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Zen</th>
<th>Theravada</th>
<th>Tibetan</th>
<th>Sivananda</th>
<th>Kundalini</th>
<th>Yoga</th>
<th>Hindu</th>
<th>Osho</th>
<th>MBSR</th>
<th>Christian</th>
<th>Sufi</th>
<th>Qigong/Tai Chi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zen</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
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<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.6</td>
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<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tibetan</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
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<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sivananda</td>
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<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.4</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.2</td>
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<td>0.4</td>
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<td>Yoga</td>
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<td>0.4</td>
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<td>0.4</td>
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<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Osho</td>
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<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>MBSR</td>
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<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
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<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.3</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Qigong/Tai Chi</td>
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<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bold type indicates overlap of 20% or less. Bold italic indicates overlap of more than 80% of techniques. MBSR, mindfulness-based stress reduction; Y, yoga.
ranking sequences for all traditions can be found in Supplementary Material C.

Interestingly, Table 4 indicates that each meditative tradition has at least one prominent overlapping technique with each other tradition. Again, the two most popular techniques in almost all traditions were observing the breath in the abdomen and scanning the body (both found in 11 of the 12 traditions), followed by observing the respiratory flow (8 traditions). This finding corresponds to prior results presented in this paper, both the general top 10 as well as the top 10 of Buddhist and Hindu meditators. Thus, it seems these techniques are indeed practiced by many meditators irrespective of their current meditative tradition.

Remarkably, we found the least overlap between Kundalini Yoga and other traditions. Although some overlap exists with other Yoga or Hindu traditions, the overlap to other traditions’ preferred meditation techniques is minimal. A similarly small overlap was observed for techniques of Hindu and Zen meditators. The traditions with the highest overlap are Theravada Buddhism and mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), which might reflect the strong influence of Kabat-Zinn’s Theravada practice on the development of MBSR (Kabat-Zinn, 2013).

Next, we used cluster analysis to identify similarity in groups of traditions based on their ratings of all 50 meditation techniques. Cluster analysis maximizes homogeneity within as well as heterogeneity between clusters of objects and is performed with a proximity matrix (Kaufman & Rousseeuw, 2009). This proximity matrix can represent either similarities (correlations) or dissimilarities (distances) between objects. We considered the distances between ratings to be more relevant for our research question than their covariation. Therefore, we calculated Euclidean distances between the mean ratings across all 50 techniques of all traditions and submitted them to a Ward’s hierarchical agglomerative cluster analysis. The resulting dendrogram is presented in Fig. 3.

Dendrograms are analyzed visually by inspecting the relative lengths of their bars. Shorter bars indicate a smaller distance between objects whereas longer bars represent a greater distance. Thus, similar traditions appear closer to each other in the dendrogram in Fig. 3. After careful inspection, we identified two clusters of traditions that emerged from the data: (1) Hindu meditative traditions, also including Sufi and Tibetan meditators; and (2) Buddhist meditative traditions, also including Christian and Qigong/Tai Chi meditators. However, Qigong/Tai Chi meditators are relatively far from the remaining traditions in the Buddhist cluster. Within the Hindu cluster, one could differentiate a yoga cluster and a broader Hindu cluster, yet the distances between these two clusters are rather short.

These results support the general commonalities identified in the analyses above while at the same time substantiating the distinctions found between Hindu and Buddhist meditators. Interestingly, Tibetan Buddhism appeared within the Hindu cluster. This might be indicative of shared preferences in these two groups reflecting their shared past. Tibetan Buddhism incorporates many Hindu contemplative practices that other Buddhist traditions such as Zen and Theravada do not (Powers, 2007; Rinpoche Dagsay Tulku, 2002).

Last, we had a closer look at distinctive meditation techniques that appeared solely in the top-10 list of one specific tradition but in no other ranking sequence. We identified 12 distinctive techniques in six diverse traditions (see Table B6 in the Supplementary Material). In most cases, these techniques corresponded to the recollections of our interview participants in Study 1 who practiced in these specific traditions, except for Qigong/Tai Chi meditators. However, this might also be due to the relatively small subgroup of Qigong/Tai Chi meditators ($n = 5$) in our sample.

**What Do Meditators Do When They Meditate: the Combinations**

Meditators often use several meditation techniques when they practice. They might have a main practice and alternate it from time-to-time with other practices. Alternatively, they might have a certain set of techniques that are practiced in a predefined sequence, or depending on the time of day or a specific intention they have. Consequently, we were interested to find groups of techniques that are commonly practiced together. Therefore, we performed three hierarchical cluster analyses. These analyses relied on all 50 meditation techniques and complement the top-10 analyses described above. Hence, we first clustered the ratings...
of all 635 participants. Second, we performed two separate
cluster analyses for the two largest subgroups of participants,
namely, Buddhist and Hindu meditators. In accordance
with our previous descriptive analyses, we would expect
marked differences between clusters of Buddhist and Hindu
meditators.

Prior to each cluster analysis, we calculated Euclidean
distances between the ratings of each meditation technique
across all participants or across participants within each
of the two subgroups in question. Then, we submitted the
distance measures to a Ward’s hierarchical agglomerative
cluster analysis and visually inspected the resulting dendro-
grams. Figure 4 depicts the dendrogram of the overall cluster
solution. Meditation techniques with similar experience rat-
ings have shorter bars and appear closer to each other in the
dendrogram. Accordingly, these meditation techniques are
commonly practiced together by meditators in our sample.
Longer bars, on the other hand, represent greater distances
between practiced meditation techniques and point to differ-
ences in the combination of certain techniques.

Looking at Fig. 4, three main clusters of techniques
emerged from the data. We named them according to the
context in which they are commonly practiced together—
from top to bottom: (1) Hindu meditation techniques, (2)
Buddhist meditation techniques, and (3) common meditation
techniques.

We found meditation techniques summarized in the
Hindu cluster both in the recollections from expert medita-
tors in Study 1 as well as in the top positions in the ranking
sequences of many Hindu traditions. The same is true for

![Dendrogram of relative distances between experience ratings of 50 basic meditation techniques across all meditators (n = 635). Note. Dashed lines represent the partitioning of three clusters. See Table 1 for descriptions of technique codes.](image-url)
most of the techniques found in the Buddhist cluster. The last cluster, though, is different. It comprises many of the very common, more general techniques we located in many different traditions. A majority of these have a strong and prominent focus on the body. Although they correspond closely to the abovementioned top-10 list of Buddhist meditators, we nevertheless decided to call them “common” meditation techniques. This was done because all of these techniques are widely known and utilized in many different contexts, including traditional schools as well as secular meditation programs such as MBSR.

All clusters could be divided into smaller subclusters. However, the distances between these subclusters are markedly shorter than the distances between the larger clusters. One could section the Hindu cluster into three subclusters: (a) mantra meditation, (b) energy meditation, and (c) visualization and movement meditation. The Buddhist cluster is not as easy to subdivide. One subcluster could be named “contemplation,” but it is difficult to find suitable names for other possible clusters. The common cluster could be segmented into (a) body-centered meditation and (b) mindful observation and compassion/virtue meditation. Yet, the lengths of the lines in the dendrogram would suggest a three-subcluster solution that we could not make sense of.

Subsequently, we conducted two cluster analyses for Buddhist and Hindu meditators. Figures 5 and 6 give the respective dendrograms.

The first thing that catches the eye in both figures is the presence of two distinct clusters, one smaller and one larger. The large cluster within the dendrogram of Buddhist meditators can be subdivided into three smaller subclusters. The first two of these subclusters represent a more Tibetan style of practice including a lot of mantra, visualization, and energy meditation techniques. The third subcluster, though,
Fig. 6 Dendrogram of relative distances between experience ratings of 50 basic meditation techniques across Hindu meditators (n = 204). Note. Dashed lines represent the partitioning of two main clusters. Dot-dashed lines represent the partitioning of three subclusters within the larger cluster. See Table 1 for definitions of technique codes.

resembles a more Theravada or Zen style of practice, including labeling, contemplation, and sitting in silence. Hence, the larger cluster indicates specific differences between various schools of Buddhism, whereas the smaller cluster at the bottom represents techniques practiced by all Buddhist meditators, irrespective of their particular school, and closely resembles the cluster of “common” meditation techniques.

In contrast, the clustering within the dendrogram of Hindu meditators looks markedly different. The larger cluster can be segmented into three subclusters. The first subcluster contains diverse forms of mantra and affect-centered meditation. The second subcluster resembles the secular cluster in the overall solution but includes more breath and body-centered meditation techniques. The third subcluster includes meditation techniques with movement or sound and other techniques that are commonly practiced in Osho or Kundalini Yoga traditions. Accordingly, the first two subclusters represent meditation techniques commonly practiced in many Hindu traditions, whereas the third subcluster is indicative of two specific traditions. The smaller cluster at the bottom represents distinguished Buddhist meditation techniques that are very uncommon in Hindu meditation practice.

Discussion

Study 2 thoroughly evaluated the selection of 50 basic techniques that we had identified in Study 1. From the responses of our large and diverse sample of experienced meditators, we conclude that our selection of meditation techniques is comprehensive and representative for this sample. All 50 basic meditation techniques were commonly practiced and each technique had a notable number of participants.
who had a lot of experience with it. A small adjustment to the original list led to a final set of 52 basic meditation techniques.

An assessment of the 10 most popular meditation techniques across all meditators reveals a certain preponderance of Buddhist and Hindu meditation techniques. This is unsurprising as these two groups formed the majority of our sample. However, comparing the preferred techniques of Buddhist versus Hindu meditators, clear-cut distinctions between these two traditions became obvious. When we compared 12 major meditative traditions, we found that all traditions had at least one preferred technique in common with each other tradition, the mean overlap being substantially higher between related traditions. A subsequent hierarchical cluster analysis revealed two clusters of traditions indicating some shared preferences between otherwise less related traditions. A closer look revealed three very popular techniques that reappeared in the top ratings of almost all 12 traditions. All three techniques were body centered, pointing to an extraordinary relevance of body-centered techniques throughout all meditative traditions. Additionally, we uncovered a great variety of meditation techniques that are commonly used in diverse traditions but are, unfortunately, consistently under-represented in contemplative research.

Often, meditators use several techniques in their meditation practice, commonly reflecting the teachings of a certain tradition or the personal practice history of the meditator. Employing hierarchical cluster analysis, we found three large clusters of meditation techniques that are commonly practiced together. Again, there was an obvious divergence between clearly Buddhist and clearly Hindu meditation clusters. In contrast, the third cluster represented the aforementioned overarching meditation techniques spanning many meditative traditions. Two tradition-wise cluster analyses across purely Buddhist and purely Hindu meditators substantiated the presence of this general cluster in both traditions. Furthermore, both cluster analyses uncovered clusters of techniques relevant for specific subgroups of Buddhist or Hindu traditions. These clusters corresponded to our previous analyses, suggesting a greater differentiation between diverse meditative practices and traditions. Consequently, the consistent findings across a multitude of analyses increase the convergent validity of our results.

**The Central Role of Body-Centered Meditation Techniques**

Some studies comparing the effects of different meditation techniques found that breathing meditation or the body scan was experienced as less effortful and easier to learn than other techniques (Kropp & Sedlmeier, 2019; Lumma et al., 2015). Conventionally, many meditative traditions emphasize the central role of the body in meditation and recommend learning to observe the breath or the body to beginners of meditation (Ott, 2010; Sedlmeier, 2016). Accordingly, meditators in the present study, with all sorts of meditative backgrounds, preferred to place their attention on their body or basic bodily processes such as the breath. This is true even though they had experience with many other meditation techniques, too. Moreover, clusters of body-centered meditation techniques recurred in all analyses presented in this paper. Consequently, it seems that body-centered meditation techniques are of profound importance for general meditation practice.

Some studies found significant increases in body awareness or interoception (the processing of internal bodily signals) when participants practiced body-centered techniques compared to an active control activity (Fischer et al., 2017) or other meditation techniques (Kok & Singer, 2017). Developing a greater sense of body awareness and interoception has been proposed as one of the central mechanisms of meditation and mindfulness (Farb et al., 2015; Gibson, 2019). Furthermore, the insular cortex has been reliably associated with interoceptive processes (Craig, 2003). Fittingly, neuroscientific studies have shown consistent structural alterations and functional activations in the insular cortex across many different kinds of meditation (Fox et al., 2014, 2016). Thus, it seems that the focus on the body inherent in many diverse meditation techniques, but specifically in body-centered techniques, is one of the key aspects of meditation practice. This is in line with current literature emphasizing the embodied nature of meditation (Cebolla et al., 2016; Michalak et al., 2012).

A recent empirical classification system (Matko & Sedlmeier, 2019) identified two embodied dimensions along which meditation techniques could be classified. The authors posited that all meditation techniques share a somatic component and are inherently embodied. This might also apply to our selection of 52 meditation techniques. Many, if not all, meditation practices emphasize directing attention to interoceptive signals. Whether meditators visualize their heart opening like a rose blossom, focus on internal sounds and vibrations, or gaze at the wall and observe themselves doing nothing, the body remains a constant companion in all their endeavors. This may be less evident for techniques consisting of contemplating a spiritually important question or reading certain paragraphs of a text repeatedly. Nevertheless, even contemplation and reading are done with the intention to observe one’s internal reactions to the content of the text or the contemplative question. Thus, it might well be that all meditation techniques are embodied.

**Measuring Up to the Variety of Meditation Practice**

In their classification system, Matko and Sedlmeier (2019) detected seven clusters of similar meditation techniques,
namely, mindful observation, body-centered meditation, visual concentration, contemplation, affect-centered meditation, mantra meditation, and meditation with movement. All of these clusters were also present in the current study, albeit in different combinations. It seems that meditators in this study combined techniques from several clusters of similar techniques, presumably to maximize the diversity of effects associated with these varying techniques. This appears perfectly reasonable, as meditators might practice certain sets of meditation techniques, often jointly taught by certain traditions, but for a whole range of different purposes.

Many traditions formulate guidelines about when to use which technique. Some traditions differentiate between practices for beginners and those for advanced meditators (Anālayo, 2003; Mahasi, 1970). Some even provide specific meditation techniques connected to achieving certain goals or treating certain psychological or somatic conditions (Shannahoff-Khalsa, 2004). Some teachers advise meditators on which techniques to use based on a prior assessment of their personality (Kornfield, 2009). However, actual scientific evidence for many of these claims is still scarce, and future investigations should address these issues. Additionally, more research is needed to effectively disentangle similarities, effects, and purposes of diverse meditation techniques.

The most popular techniques identified in this study quite clearly depict the most well known and most researched groups of meditative practices, that is, the body scan (Dambrun et al., 2019), observing the breath (Doll et al., 2016), observing thoughts (Lumma et al., 2015), cultivating compassion or loving-kindness (May et al., 2014), and mantra meditation (Lynch et al., 2018). Nonetheless, the repeatedly observed evident differences between Buddhist and Hindu meditation practices call for closer inspection. Currently, the focus of contemplative research lies predominantly on mindfulness meditation (Rose et al., 2020), with other meditation techniques, especially from Hindu traditions, receiving a lot less attention. However, as Hindu meditation techniques differ so strikingly from Buddhist techniques, they should be investigated in more detail.

In light of the remarkable variety of meditation techniques found in the present study, definitions of meditation should be reconsidered. All definitions brought up so far indicate a great variance in possible approaches to defining meditation and a lack of consensus among experts (Bond et al., 2009; West, 2016). It would be advisable to include the embodied aspect of meditation in future definitions of meditation. It also might even be conceivable to establish different terms and definitions for various forms of meditation. With this, researchers could contribute to a more differentiated use of the umbrella term “meditation.”

Limitations and Future Research

We are well aware that our choice of meditation techniques might have been limited to the regional availability of meditation teachers and traditions in Study 1. Still, the adequateness and probably also the comprehensiveness of our selection was confirmed by a broad sample of experienced meditators with a diversity of meditative backgrounds almost unique in contemplative research. Although most meditators belonged to some Buddhist or Hindu tradition, we also reached smaller groups of meditative traditions, such as Christian, Sufi, or Qigong/Tai Chi meditators. We know of only one study that addressed a similarly large and diverse sample of experienced meditators (Vieten et al., 2018). Clearly, our sample cannot be regarded as being representative of Western European, let alone all, experienced meditators practicing the abovementioned meditation techniques. Admittedly, Qigong and Tai Chi are more prevalent in Asian countries, and recent meta-analyses have substantiated their beneficial effects (Liu et al., 2015; Zou et al., 2017). Thus, extending and repeating this research in Asian populations would provide more reliable insights on the practice of meditation in these traditions. We encourage researchers to evaluate our selection of 52 meditation techniques in other countries and contexts to examine its general validity. Additionally, we have become aware of at least one meditation technique that has to be added to our list as it has been extensively studied in prior research, that is, “passage meditation” (Oman & Bormann, 2018). This technique involves memorizing and internally repeating longer passages of spiritual texts.

The sample sizes of some traditions were relatively small, especially for Osho, Christian, MBSR, and Qigong/Tai Chi meditators. In addition, many meditators drew their meditation practices from several backgrounds or had a whole history of practicing in different traditions. It was, thus, difficult for us to determine the major tradition of some participants. Consequently, future studies should ask meditators to distinguish their major meditative tradition from possible adjunct practices explicitly. They should also approach meditators from the abovementioned, underrepresented meditative traditions.

One could argue that the 52 techniques that we evaluated in this study were artificially constructed and taken out of context. Traditionally, meditation techniques are practiced in a specific sequence, in the framework of a specific tradition, or in combination with other practices. Observing the breath, for example, is often combined with visualizations or with the repetition of a mantra. Yet, little is known about the effects of combined meditation techniques compared to basic techniques. Therefore, it seems promising to investigate and compare basic and combined techniques, to see if there are, indeed, any additive effects.
Furthermore, a specific traditional background or framework can tremendously influence the effects of meditation (Amihai & Kozhevnikov, 2014; Bayot et al., 2020). However, these effects may be very complex, specifically regarding the manifold meditation traditions. In an attempt to simplify this issue, we chose to deduce basic meditation techniques practiced in many meditative traditions. This might help clarify and disentangle genuine effects of basic meditation techniques from the effects of their traditional context. Future studies could compare the effects of basic meditation techniques to a combined intervention of meditation practice and ethical or philosophical teachings. A recent study found that the inclusion of an ethical education component significantly enhanced the effectiveness of a mantra meditation intervention on well-being (Matko et al., 2021).

Although we now have a better idea of what meditators do when they are meditating, or rather, which meditation techniques they employ, we have little access to the experiences they have during meditation. Several authors have pointed out the difference between meditative technique and meditative state or phenomenological experience (Bond et al., 2009; Nash & Newberg, 2013). Phenomenological experiences are difficult to capture and depend strongly on individual factors, such as personality or learning history (Schmidt, 2014; Tang & Braver, 2020). It seems, for example, that people who score high on the trait absorption tend to experience deep meditative states and intense feelings of self-transcendence more easily (Hölzel & Ott, 2006; Lifshitz et al., 2019). Furthermore, phenomenological experience also differs across diverse meditation techniques (Przyrembel & Singer, 2018). Recently, Lutz et al. (2015) proposed a phenomenological matrix to help describe different states and processes related to mindfulness practices. Future studies could investigate phenomenological experiences associated with the practice of a larger sample of meditation techniques and focus on possible interactions with personality factors, too. Single-case research designs (Barlow et al., 2009) seem to be a promising approach in this respect (May et al., 2014).

The research presented in this paper can contribute to future contemplative research in multiple ways. Our list of 52 basic meditation techniques potentially opens up meditation research to finding out about specific effects of hitherto hardly examined techniques. It also allows for comparing the effects of different techniques in a more thorough way. The respective results could be used for custom-tailoring the choice of meditation techniques for the specific needs of practitioners. Especially interesting might be comparisons of techniques within versus between different clusters. Moreover, it might be very informative to compare the effects of practicing a single typical technique within a cluster to practicing a combination of several or all techniques within that cluster. Researchers could also decide to pick the most common techniques (generally or in a specific tradition) depicted in our study, or compare similarly prevalent techniques in the context of different traditions. Alternatively, techniques could be chosen based on theoretical considerations. For example, if a researcher is interested in the effects of meditation on emotions, she could extract techniques that target emotions. In the long run, all of these efforts could contribute to establishing one or more theories of meditation.

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Declarations

Ethics Approval The studies received ethics approval from the Institutional Review Board of the Chemnitz University of Technology.

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Guru logics*

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This commentary highlights the diversity of thematics and conceptual schema generated by guru-ship, and its capacity—as a set of principles as much as specific persons—to participate in, and move between, multiple social and conceptual domains. The aim is to reassess some of the key existing literature on guru-ship while developing a kind of analytical toolkit in order to aid future studies and stimulate new thought on the phenomenon. The guru, we argue, is a social form of peculiar suggestibility. We suggest that the multiplicity and diversity of the guru’s political and economic entanglements point toward a sense of the guru’s uncontainability, a quality which, in a seeming irony, relies at least in part on the guru’s ability to contain diverse others (principally his/her devotees and former incarnations). We present the case study of an avatar guru—a particularly prolific “collector of associations”—who exemplifies the expansive personhood of the guru as an “inclusive singularity.” Emphasizing the plural forms of guru-ship, we define categories of anti-guru and collective guru while also drawing attention to the guru’s mimetic proficiency and the complex role of the guru in imagination and fantasy and gender politics. The political and governmental functions of guru-ship are also analyzed, with “guru governmentality” not “just another” agency of devolved governance in an era of economic liberalization but the retooling of the radical asymmetry of the guru-devotee relationship in order to produce “humanitarian” or “developmental” effects, which from devotees’ point of view could hardly be glossed as “secular”.

Keywords: gurus, anti-gurus, gender, containment, devotion, politics, technology, South Asia

The phenomenon of guru-ship has been a classic and enduring theme within South Asianist scholarship, but nevertheless critical aspects of the social lives and roles of gurus remain under-explored. The aim of this commentary is at once modest and considerable: it is to demonstrate the diversity of social sites and conceptual domains in which gurus have participated and continue to participate. Rather than focus on a particular sect or leader, we provide insights into the wider

* An expanded version of these ideas can be found in the volume The guru in South Asia: New interdisciplinary perspectives. London: Routledge. 2012.

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political and social significance of guru-ship in pre-modern, modern and contemporary South Asian society. The commentary moves across different gurus, and kinds of gurus, defining the term “guru” broadly—not only do we deal with categories of South Asian religious leader variously called maharaj, sant, baba, sadhu, mahant, swami, sanyasi, and acharya, we define guru-ship as a kind of principle or model with significant capacities of structuration.1 Considering guru-ship as a set of principles as much as specific persons enables us to better apprehend significant ways in which “guru-ship” affords movement across social and conceptual domains in addition to ways in which logics of guru-ship act as conceptual modeling tools for other forms of social phenomena.

Recent literature has begun to move beyond gurus and their “sects” in narrowly denominational terms and instead place them in the context of their multiple roles in South Asian society more generally (Peabody 1991; McKean 1996; Prentiss 1999; Copley 2003; Fuller & Harriss 2005; Warrier 2005; Beckerlegge 2006; Shah 2006; Barrett 2008; S. Srinivas 2008; Copeman 2009; T. Srinivas 2010; foretokening these contributions, see Khare’s [1984] important study). Studying gurus and the structures of experience and belief they embody “in their own right” is no doubt important and continues to have its place, but we welcome this turn to a broader approach because it gives due recognition to the extraordinary breadth of social roles and entanglements of gurus. We reflect here on this expansive analytical move and take it further. We insist that it is not that gurus have only recently begun to participate in non-denominational domains—extending beyond the ashram, so to speak—but that scholars, influenced by Latour (1993) and others, are now less prone to unhelpfully fence off the practice of “religion,” say, or “politics,” from other areas of life (see Spencer 1997). We are thus now better able to “see” the manifold extensions and entanglements of the guru. This commentary thus aims to highlight the diversity of thematics and conceptual schema generated by “the guru” and to draw attention to the guru’s capacity to participate in, and move between, multiple symbolic and practical spheres, the aim being to reassess some of the key existing literature on guru-ship whilst developing a kind of analytical toolkit in order to aid future studies and stimulate new thought on the matter of the compelling and enduring phenomenon that is South Asian guru-ship.

As we have already noted, we are not only interested in the ways in which gurus are translated into new and sometimes unexpected contexts in present times, but also in considering how the guru was always a social form of peculiar suggestibility; a veritable “vector between domains” (Carsten 2011: 2). Indeed, the guru is a prolific producer of “domaining effects”; effects that occur when the logic of an idea associated with one domain is transferred to another, often with interesting or unanticipated results (Strathern 1992: 73). This commentary is a study of the domaining effects of gurus. The prolificness of the guru in this regard is connected to its extraordinary propensity for becoming apt for given situations, whether the

1 While many gurus are “ascetics” (though see the “Asceticism and accusation” section below) only few ascetics attain guru-hood.

2 The phrasing here is inspired by Carsten’s (2011) approach to the domain-crossing propensities of blood.

3 Of course, the vastness of this literature requires that we be extremely selective.
situation is one of quasi-legal adjudication (Ikegame 2012a), political mentorship (Jaffrelot 2012), anti-stigma campaigns concerning leprosy or HIV (Barrett 2008; Mehta & Pramanik 2010), a liberalizing economic milieu (Froystad 2012) and its connected frame of globalizing cosmopolitanism (T. Srinivas 2010; Khandelwal 2012) or indeed the high-profile anti-corruption campaigns of 2011 (one of whose leaders was yoga guru Swami Ramdev). Such “aptness” is consequent on a guru’s ability to respond to the vagaries of situations in ways that allow him or her to be carried forwards. “The agent [guru] keys into the momentum of the situation and surfs its possibilities” (Thrift 2010: 261). This sense of “carrying forward” by way of an ability to “harvest” situations is suggestive of the expansibility of the guru, an idea we develop later in this commentary. We also ask: what are the conditions of possibility of such “harvesting,” and explore the ways in which gurus have crossed domains and become apt for given situations, drawing in and re-composing diverse aspects of Indian social life in the process: from sexuality to new media; from slavery to imagination and transgression; from Brahmanical orthodoxy to the arts of government; from milieus of modernizing reformist fervor to those of convention and continuity. Needless to say, whilst intervening in and mediating these phenomena in various ways, the guru is not reducible to any of them. Following Carsten (2011), we suggest that the multiplicity and diversity of these interventions points toward a sense of the guru’s uncontainability. Surely their power to act in such a diversity of situations and projects partly rests on the polyvalent meanings of gurus themselves, and their unusual capacity to accrue resonances that, because of the nature of gurus’ participation in multiple fields and discourses, are simply uncontainable. We return to this sense of uncontainability below.

Recent scholarly works have focused on “middle class” gurus such as Swami Dayananda Saraswati (not to be confused with his namesake, the founder of the Arya Samaj), Mata Amritanandamayi and Sathya Sai Baba, the latter two each claiming millions of devotees. These studies pay close attention to the nuanced links between these gurus and processes of economic liberalization, globalization and technological modernity. In terms of the typology proposed by Nanda (2009), Mata Amritanandamayi and Sathya Sai Baba are type 1 gurus, whose appeal is critically dependent on the miracles they are said to perform, whereas Swami Dayananda Saraswati is an instance of a type 2 guru, for his appeal lies principally in his exposition of Hindu philosophy (principally the Vedas) such that it may be applied to contemporary practical concerns (for instance, business management—see Fuller & Harriss 2005). Type 3 gurus, according to Nanda, are primarily known for teaching yoga or meditation (Swami Ramdev would be a high-profile example). What links each type, says Nanda, is their comparability to CEOs—which is certainly apt when one considers the management teachings of Swami Dayananda Saraswati and the success of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar’s breathing courses, some of which are explicitly targeted at business professionals for alleviation of work-related stress—and a pronounced evangelism, in respect of which she quotes

4 We draw here on Carsten’s (2011) insistence on the literal and conceptual “uncontainability” of blood.

5 Nanda is careful to state that in practice these “types” are prone to overlap in various ways.
media commentator and Hindutva supporter Swapan Dasgupta’s (2005) contention that “the real energy of contemporary Hinduism” lies in its “living saints”:

There is a thriving tradition of what can be loosely called evangelical Hinduism. It comprises the likes of Asaram Bapu, Murari Bapu, Swami Ramdev, Amma, Satya Sai Baba, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, and many others who feature on the various religious channels on TV. They are the Pat Robertsons and the Billy Grahams of modern Hinduism. They are able to inspire and motivate individual Hindus far more successfully than purohits and pontiffs. (Cited in Nanda 2009: 101)

The reference to evangelical Christian preachers is instructive on several levels. That the Hindu right seeks to operationalize gurus in support of its agenda is hardly a novel proposition. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP—“World Hindu Council”) famously seeks (and is frequently granted) the support of such gurus in initiatives to combat “minority appeasement,” the building of a Ram Mandir, and so on, and Nanda cites evidence that the organization is actively seeking to harness the evangelical potential of such gurus. Moreover, such gurus—mirroring the highly mediatized presence of US evangelicals—may possess and appear on their own television channels. Sociologist Dipankar Gupta (2009: 260-1) also draws a comparison between India’s “living saints” and US evangelical Christians. Seeking to debunk worn-out perceptions of Indian “exceptionalism,” Gupta questions whether India’s so-called “passion for godmen” implies some unique Indian predilection for the mystical. For Gupta, though Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell may look and sound different from Sri Sri Ravi Shankar or Asaram Bapu, “what is categorically not different is the fact that the evangelist and godman are both showmen, skilled in whipping up collective effervescence, skilled also in verbal pyrotechnics or crude shows of legerdemain.” Like Dasgupta, Gupta points to the presence of these gurus on Indian cable TV as a factor connecting them to the US “holy man” variant; and, presumably drawing on Kakar (1982) and others, he sees Indian “godmen” as equivalent to US psychoanalysts who “soothe the febrile temperaments of middle-class Americans” (Gupta 2009: 261).

We agree that the study of high-profile Indian spiritual gurus and their milieus can tell us much about contemporary middle class predicaments and sensibilities, and aim to show below that their study can illuminate important features of new media in the subcontinent. This kind of analysis is also in sympathy with our aim of exploring the lives of gurus beyond the ashram, and several recent ethnographies have underscored the importance of middle class “godmen” for understanding the ways in which faith “travels” (e.g., T. Srinivas 2010). But there are several dangers here. The comparison with US evangelism is certainly instructive up to a point given the VHP’s evident attempts to instrumentalize gurus for evangelical purposes (Dasgupta’s comments imply a direct emulative link between the phenomena, a point that echoes Jaffrelot’s [1996: 76] famous description of Hindutva organizations’ strategy of simultaneous stigmatization and emulation of the minorities by whom they feel threatened). However, as can be the case with projects of comparison, it results in a simplification. The term “Indian godmen” is frequently made to subsume massive differences beneath its obviating moniker. It has purchase insofar as it refers to what Nanda (2009) calls the “new gurus”—those who tend to be followed by well-heeled Indians (and indeed many
foreigners), who purvey a new age-ish spirituality, and who are “practically CEOs of huge business empires”—but its prevalence could all too easily lead to an impression that such gurus are the only game in town, that all gurus share such characteristics.

Study of such publicly visible “hyper” gurus is extremely important for reasons already stated, but the rise of globalising middle class gurus, who appear on television and possess millions of devotees, is only part of the picture. What of the lives and roles of non-Hindu gurus? What of perspectives on guru-ship from outside Hinduism? What of gurus who stand as advocates of their lower caste/class followers? What of more minor gurus who do not necessarily appear on television or claim millions of devotees and the complex and multifaceted roles of gurus in history and myth? While we may be sympathetic to Gupta’s assault on the western appetite for “exotic” India, it is important not to obscure what is genuinely distinctive about the Indian experience of guru-ship, and to avoid a situation where scholarly and public representations of hyper gurus or “godmen” substitute for recognition and analysis of the radically variegated figures and milieus of the guru in actuality.

A distinction introduced by Benjamin (2000) and further elaborated by Harriss (2007) might be helpful here. The distinction is between South Asia’s “local” and “corporate” economies, and our suggestion is that categories of guru may be loosely assimilated to the division: “local economies’ are diverse and complex . . . and provide most of the population with their accommodation, work and livelihoods. Their links with government are through middle and junior bureaucrats and local political leaders . . . ‘[C]orporate economies’, on the other hand, are the arena for industrial, bureaucratic and IT sector elites; they are plugged into higher level political circuits, and have quite direct links with state-level and national parastatal agencies (including finance corporations and development authorities). They operate through ‘master planning’ and mega-projects, that have made it possible” for the capitalist, or upper middle classes, “to ‘achieve hegemony in the shaping of the urban form’” (Harriss 2007: 4).

Of course, we see the majority of Indian spiritual leaders as analogous to local economies, more diverse and complex than headline-stealing hyper gurus; and though they represent the majority of guru-led communities, they are likely to be less politically influential than “parastatal” corporate (hyper) gurus who, with their vast resources, are able to engage in high-profile development works and achieve hegemony in public discourse and representation (and to some degree, academic debate). But the connection is not only analogical. Gurus and their institutions participate in and help form the “local”/“corporate” division of which Benjamin and Harriss write. That is to say, the relationship is both conceptual and thoroughly material: it is one of personal connections, transactions and flows of money/spirituality—as examples provided below demonstrate.

Plural forms

We seek now to elaborate further on what we earlier called the uncontainability of the guru, and delineate several of its features. First, we examine how the category of “guru” is uncontained to the extent that even those who campaign against what they see as the pernicious influence of gurus sometimes come to be treated as gurus themselves; second, we explore the powerful and complex role of the guru in
imagination and fantasy, such that the guru-disciple relationship may surface in different situations as a “model of” various societal relations - or at the very least as a “model for” apprehending them; finally, we draw on recent literature in order to investigate the guru as an expansible figure who employs a variety of well-honed techniques in order to extend his/her influence.

We begin with what we call the anti-guru paradox. Copeman (2012) has recently provided an example of this. The focus of his study is on a controversy that took place in 2007 in which the guru presiding over the north Indian devotional order the Dera Sacha Sauda (DSS) was widely considered by mainstream Sikhs to have blasphemously imitated Guru Gobind Singh, who in 1708 had proclaimed himself the final living Sikh guru. The scandalous suggestion, according to orthodox Sikhs, was that the DSS guru was claiming an affinity with Guru Gobind Sigh, or worse still, proclaiming himself as his successor within a tradition which, though embedded in guru-ship, has expressly forbidden new dehdari (bodily, or living) gurus. But this was hardly the first time a claim to living guru-ship had emerged in a tradition within which this is expressly forbidden. Ironically, given that his reformist mission included putting an end to a contemporary resurgence of dehdari guru-ship, in the early nineteenth-century Dyal Das (1783-1855) ended up being elevated to the status of a guru by his followers (Singh 1952: 52). The very person seeking to proscribe the guru became one. Copeman thus notes that the dehdari guru is an insurgent category in Sikh contexts, and we might say that it is an uncontainable one, too, for gurus—even “anti-gurus”—tend to beget gurus. As Gold (1987) vividly shows in reference to the Radhasoami movement, sets of intersecting and proliferating lineages produce dense networks of gurus and branches. One may become a guru by descent, by initiation, by designation of a former guru, be reborn as the incarnation of a former guru, and so on. Cutting the network of gurus (Strathern 1996), as Guru Gobind Singh sought to do, could never be a simple prospect.

In our possession is a photograph of one of the most significant Indian rationalist activists of the twentieth-century, taken shortly before his death in 2009. Devoting much of his life to exposing confidence tricks perpetrated by gurus (“self-styled godmen”), he shared the opinion of another noted “anti-guru,” Khushwant Singh (2003: 34-35), that “the growth rate of crime and corruption is directly proportional to the rise in the number of such frauds and charlatans.” Singh also quotes fellow atheist A.T. Kavoor with approval: “The question is not whether there is God or not. What worries us more is the blind belief in godmen. In the name of God they are cheating the people. God, if there is one, himself did not create wristwatches, gold chains or rings. Yet, the godmen claim they create these things and fool people.” (In a fascinating aside in her magnum opus on Sathya Sai Baba, T. Srinivas [2010: 296] notes that the presence of serial production numbers on watches and other items said to be materialized by the guru constitutes, for skeptics, “a weak spot in the materializations thesis”). Now the anti-guru activist depicted in the aforementioned photograph has a bedraggled look about him, with

6 See also Padoux 2000: 45 on a distinction between “fabricated” (kalpita) and “not-fabricated” (akalpita) gurus in the Tantric tradition.

7 On high-profile rationalist campaigns against Sathya Sai Baba see T. Srinivas 2010. See also Quack 2011 for a study of anti-superstition activism more generally in South Asia.
extremely long white hair, and a beard halfway down his front—in other words, he appears positively sannyasīesque. In person, the famed “mischiefousness” or eccentricity of the guru was also evident. Disembarking from the third class compartment of a train in early 2009 he immediately pointed to the anti-impotence pill advertisements festooning the railway station, declaring “what’s the use since I’ve left my girlfriends at home.” Having spent a number of weeks travelling with such activists in Bihar, Karnataka and elsewhere, we can attest to the peripatetic nature of their lives—rarely do they have a notion of where they will be sleeping on any given night, only hoping that the local anti-superstition committee might have arranged food and a room at their destination. And, as with “real” gurus (see Rinehart 1999), hagiographies abound. The format is strikingly similar to those we find with “divine humans,” with an emphasis on the gifted child and enumeration of signs of future greatness. An example follows:

Prabir spent his early childhood in the railway towns of Kharagpur and Adra. Growing up with god-fearing parents in this multicultural township, Prabir had keen interest in gods and godmen. As a child he spent hours with these religious people. As a result, he learnt magic and all the other tricks these godmen practiced at a very young age. . . . He grew up to have keen interest in politics and developed excellent oratorical skill. . . . An avid reader, his interests include anthropology, archeology, history, psychology, sociology and, of course, politics. As a result, his understanding of the human mind as an individual and the social human being as a species is vast. With this knowledge of the human mind [he possesses] a rare understanding of all human problems. . . . Once the Rationalists’ Association was established, he had to face severe animosity from various groups of spirituals and godmen. An immensely courageous and upright person, he faces all attacks with the help of his keen intellect, understanding and the worldwide network of support and goodwill that he enjoys. 

The following hagiographical details of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar possess a similar emphasis on giftedness and prowess in learning: “Born in 1956 in Southern India, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar was a gifted child. By the age of four, he was able to recite parts of the Bhagavad Gita, an ancient Sanskrit scripture and was often found in meditation. . . . By the age of seventeen in 1973, he had graduated with degrees in both Vedic literature and physics.” Of course, there are certain key inversions—whereas gurus such as Sathya Sai Baba are often said to have performed miracles as children (T. Srinivas 2010: 56-7), Prabir is said as a child to have learned all the godmen’s “tricks,” and whereas Sri Sri Ravi Shankar associated with holy men to learn from their grace, Prabir associated with them in order to expose their malfeasance—but the hagiographical template is nevertheless not dissimilar to that found in the cases of those the rationalist seeks to debunk.

While it can appear as though Indian “anti-gurus,” in self-defeating manner, replicate the institutions they seek to critique—appearing in the likenesses of holy men, while also duplicating symbols of their non-attachment and stimulating a

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8 On guru hagiography see also Babb 1986; T. Srinivas 2010.
9 http://rationalistprabir.bravehost.com/
10 http://srisriravishankar.org/biography
similar hagiographical excess, and so on—it is in fact not so simple. For often, when a rationalist activist dons saffron robes and flowing locks and performs “miracles,” replication is a conscious strategy—this is imitation to disarm. Having amazed his/her audience, the rationalist dramatically disrobes, before demonstrating how these “miracles”—now revealed to be no more than tawdry tricks—can be performed by anyone. Like Yukhagir hunters in northeastern Siberia who transform their bodies into the image of their prey all the better to catch and kill them (Willerslev 2004), atheist activists dress up as sadhus all the better to unmask them: similarity is strategy. But there are less tactically motivated replications, too. What we are simply seeking to establish here is that even those most dynamically opposed to “guru logics” can find it difficult to escape them, even if sometimes they are reproduced knowingly or strategically. (It is worth mentioning here that some rationalist activists themselves, with a certain ironic pleasure, use the term “anti-guru.” At the recent sixtieth birthday party of a leading Indian activist, a sign on the stage read: “60 years old with the help of no gods.” On one side of the notice was a picture of the activist’s biological parents, and on the other a photograph of his “ideological father,” the aforementioned recently deceased rationalist, with the description “My anti-guru.” A sense of a lineage of anti-guru gurus was thus generated.

If anti-gurus can become “gurus,” gurus may also, of course, become “anti-gurus.” The iconoclastic “sex guru” Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (Osho) was a famously prolific debunker of his fellow gurus. For Rajneesh, “they were all worthless ‘bullshitters’, not holy men but ‘holy dung’. Swami Muktananda, a contemporary Indian guru with a large following, was an ‘Idiotananda’” (Kakar 2008: 29). However, if it takes a guru to be an anti-guru then one is confronted again with a sense of the inescapability of guru logics. Rajneesh is also an exemplary case in the performativity and/or theatricality of guru-ship: “Rajneesh self-consciously prepared for his public appearances as does an actor for his role. In later life he would use make-up, wear rich robes that accentuated his broad shoulders and jewel-studded caps that hid his baldness” (ibid.: 14). Moreover, central to the self-representation of Mata Amritanandamayi are those occasions on which she “dresses up in the regalia of the goddess [Devi] and thus ‘reveals’ her goddess aspect (bhava) to her devotees” (Warrier 2005: 3). Again, dressing up in order to reveal. As was noted above, Copeman (2012) has similarly focused on a case of one guru dressing up as another, the copier guru attempting to reveal an affiliation of sorts, via the copy, with the copied guru. It is tempting to follow Butler (1998: 722) here and make the point that such dressing up, rather like the relation of drag to “proper” gender, enacts the very structure of performance and impersonation by which all guru-ship is assumed.

No doubt many guru postures and gestures are mimetically acquired techniques of the body—necessary corporeal indicators of a guru’s guru-ship—but there is a further aspect to the question of “guru mimesis.” Butler (ibid.: 727) notes that incorporation may be understood as a kind of psychic miming. If legitimate guru-ship requires the claimant to partake of prior gurus and other divine forms, then a whole array of mimetic techniques comes into play as part of a methodology of incorporation. Thus, a Mumbai-based guru who claims to be the reincarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba adopts mannerisms and accoutrements said to be characteristic of
the forbear guru," while Gold (2012: 253) records that the son of a deceased guru in Gwalior, soon after his father’s passing, began uttering unexpected remarks of the sort formerly made by his father. Was the father-guru now acting in and through the son? Whatever the case, it is clear that a certain mimetic proficiency can be very helpful for gurus or would-be gurus in matters of succession and incorporation. “Guru culture” comprises a particularly dense complex of imitative registers. Anti-superstition activists partake in what is in fact a great Indian tradition of dressing up as gurus, and whose participants are not least gurus themselves.

Such questions lie at the heart of what may be termed the cultural production of the “really real” guru. That the same procedures via which gurus seek to “upgrade their reality calibre” (van de Port 2011: 75) as gurus in whom forbear gurus and/or other deities are revealed as immanent are also those that may be suggestive of expedience and cheap imitation means, unsurprisingly, that acute suspicion frequently arises around the question of the identity of the true guru, and techniques of identification for separating these out from perceived charlatans can be elaborate (Khandelwal 2004: ch. 5; Barrett 2008: 37). While the specter of the fraudulent guru may breed anxiety about the origins of (spiritual) value, “fakery appears as the margin, the horizon against which a moral centre is clarified” (Shipley 2009: 524), which is to say that the very accusation that someone is a pakhandi or a dhongi (i.e. fake) guru rests on the assumption (and reconfirms as fact) that real or true gurus do exist. Things can get more complex due to the recognition that “really real” gurus may be faking their fakeness (which means one should not be too dismissive of even those who appear most obviously fake [Khandelwal 2004: 173]). The guru, then, must of necessity dress the part and this may produce authenticating effects or, conversely, mimetic tensions.

In a discussion of spiritual seeking among middle class urbanites in north India, Frøystad (2012: 194) describes the dressing up of (Hindu) guru Sri Sri Ravi Shankar as Sikh at a congregation in south Delhi. In this case the guru’s dressing up—an incongruence he playfully acknowledges—becomes an aspect of the guru’s social charm. The same might be said of the newly minted yoga guru discussed by Cohen (2012: 108-10) who finds in his white flowing robes an artful drama he terms “drag” and “camp.” Prior to becoming a religious teacher he had been a drag queen with a reputation for destructive excess. Cohen frames the life of homosexuality in contemporary India in terms of both promise and accusation, and the same terms seem helpful in attempting to account for the guru and his/her dressing up. Does the potential of guru-ship to form a kind of existential loophole that allows a person to eclipse or perfect problematic pasts form the basis of a kind

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11 http://www.shreedarshan.com/saint-sadguru-aniruddha-bapu.htm

12 See also Sathya Sai Baba devotees’ sensuous imitation of their guru’s ascetic body (T. Srinivas 2012: 191). Both devotees (in respect of their guru) and gurus (in respect of other gurus), then, are mimetically inclined—a classically Tardean situation (for Tarde, famously, society began “when one man first copied another” [1903: 28]).

13 The phrase draws upon van de Port (2011: 74).

14 Or as Hyde (1998: 60) puts it, “only when there is a Lying Worm can we begin to speak of a True Worm”.

of promise? That is one possible reading of Cohen’s drag queen turned religious teacher. Other suggestive examples are available: Chatterjee (2002) recently provided an account of the “Bhawal Sannyasi Case” from 1921, in which a sannyasi is identified as in fact a zamindar thought to have died twelve years earlier. Rumors that freedom fighter Subhash Chandra Bose led an ascetic afterlife continue to possess currency. An RSS volunteer’s activist past is eclipsed (hidden from view) by his new guru-ship (Mills 2006). Such eclipse or dissociation is to an extent institutionalized in Hindu theory which posits particular transformations as convention (i.e. the four stages of the ideal life, culminating in sannyas). It is perhaps widespread implicit knowledge that guru-ship may be used in order to eclipse identities and problematic pasts that can cause gurus to be treated ironically (one thinks of Mastii TV’s Baba Filmananda who solves the problems of perplexed devotees with reference to Hindi films) or, indeed, as subjects of accusation. For the promise of eclipse and re-formation (of pasts or past lives) may, of course, also be conceived pejoratively as calculated obviation or disguise, and holy man confidence tricksters are as prominent in ancient Indian texts (Mabbett 2010) as in the present-day writings of rationalist activists. For a Company official in the 1760s warrior ascetics were insidious “mendicants in disguise” (Pinch 2012: 70), while in the case of the aforementioned Dera Sacha Sauda guru, too, an accusation of injurious disguise was implicit in denunciations of the guru. Was assuming the form of dressing up as—Guru Gobind Singh an attempt on the part of the DSS guru to reawaken guru-ship’s promise; that is, to eclipse and re-form a past principally associated for most observers with criminal charges and drawn-out legal cases? Perhaps, but it led also to intensified levels of accusation, of course.

Beckerlegge (2010) provides a further example of the anti-guru paradox. In a revealing discussion of the Vivekananda Kendra, a lay service organization influenced by Swami Vivekananda but also affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which maintains 206 branch centers across India, we learn of an intriguing critique of “guru culture” from within the Hindu nationalist movement. Such a critique, which contrasts markedly with the VHP’s endorsement by and of a variety of Hindu spiritual leaders, usefully calls our attention to internal differentiations within Hindu right attitudes towards gurus. Named after a swami, the kendra can hardly discount the category of “guru” entirely, but the movement’s founder, Eknath Ranade, disparaged all too ready acceptance of “avatar-hood,” was skeptical about the role of ascetics in providing humanitarian service, and generally critical of charismatic personality cults (in contrast to which the kendra emphasizes the ordinariness of its mission and membership). However, in 2008 on the occasion of Guru Purnima, the kendra’s present vice-president said of its founder, Ranade, that he,

did not establish himself or even Swami Vivekananda as the Guru of Vivekananda Kendra. Any specific name or form of God also would have brought limitations on our capacity for representing the whole society. Therefore, Mananeeya Eknathji has seen to it that Omkar . . . would be the guide for us . . . when we say that Omkara is our Guru it means we see divinity in each and everything. . . . Thus this is a day to remember all the Gurus who have contributed in continuation and propagation of the Vedic principles. Actually as we bow down to Omkara as Guru we are paying our obeisance to all the Gurus in our culture. (Cited in Beckerlegge 2010: 80)
The idea of omkara—the Hindu sacred syllable—as a kind of guru is interesting for several reasons. First, categories of guru-ship once again seem uncontainable, for even in an organization critical of the institution, guru-ship clearly remains important as an idea even as it resurfaces in another form (omkara). Second, this shapeshifting quality of the guru—the ready capacity of the originary template of the living person as a manifestation of the divine (Gold 1987: 3) to be transferred into other objects or concepts—alerts us to what is a wider phenomenon of transfers of guru logics across scale and form, of which the present commentary provides several vivid examples.

What is perhaps the most famous example of all has already been referred to: the banning of living gurus by Guru Gobind Singh in 1708, when he proclaimed himself the final living Sikh master and designated the text that has become the central devotional focus of orthodox Sikhism, the Guru Granth Sahib, as the next and final guru of Sikh tradition—the book thus replacing living gurus as the focus for devotional veneration (McLeod 1996). Another form of depersonalized guru is the collective guru. This is an idea introduced in Jaffrelot’s (2012) recent work in which he explores certain guru-like qualities of the RSS.

Jaffrelot explains that though Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, who founded the RSS in 1925, actively sought to avoid guru status, he designated the movement’s saffron flag (Bhagva Dhwaj) as the guru of the movement. RSS members’ physical training and ideological instruction was thus to take place “under the eye of this imaginary guru.” But the RSS’ relationship with guru logics does not end there. It is itself the archetypal collective guru, a contemporary depersonalized analogue of the Raj guru, who acts as counselor to official bearers of power. Not only are the ascetic qualities of the movement pronounced (for instance, its leaders take sannyas), its annual conference with BJP leaders takes place during the festival of the Guru dakshina, a yearly ceremony in which RSS members reaffirm their commitment to the organization.15 And, while it possesses formal links with the BJP, the RSS sees itself in ideal terms as guru not only to the political party but to the nation in its entirety. Thus, while the guru is usually a human, “it can be depersonalized and become a kind of principle” (Jaffrelot 2012: 88-94). It is this important idea that the guru may subsist as a principle as much as a specific person that facilitates variegated “scaling up” and “scaling down” of what can count as a guru. And such scaling, of course, begs the question of how the principle is remade as it enlarges, contracts or takes on new forms.

The RSS is not the only non-human or collective guru that is of interest. We have already seen how a book and a flag can take on qualities of guru-ship. Jaffrelot (2012: 88) offers the further example of an effigy exalted as a guru: “The Mahabharata epic . . . relates how a young ‘out-caste’, Eklavya, to whom no guru wished to teach the art of archery—reserved for the warrior castes—modelled the effigy of a guru and trained to great effect under his watch.”(Cohen [2012] has also recently recounted Eklavya’s story, but to a quite different purpose. For Cohen the story prompts the searching question: what is it to be denied the relation to a guru? Pechilis [2012], conversely, has asked what it is to be denied the position or status of guru). For some, serving as a component of nationalist narrativization and rhetoric, India herself constitutes a collective guru to the world. As is well known,

15 Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People’s Party).
ever since Swami Vivekananda’s Chicago visit in 1893 where he addressed the Parliament of Religions, Indian gurus have, so to speak, ministered to the world (or at least, Euro-America). It is also well known that travelling gurus have in recent years “flourished as never before and [that] they are key agents in globalising Hinduism” (Fuller & Harriss 2003; see also Gold 1988: 121-2; 2005; Forsthoefel & Humes 2005). But the idea that a country might be a spiritual guru is qualitatively different, albeit perhaps not all that surprising given that the country is also, on occasion, deified as Bharat Mata (see Ramaswamy 2008). For instance, a documentary film from 2001 is titled “India: A Tribute—Spiritual Guru to the World.” The idea is particularly prominent among right-wing Hindu activists. The Hindu nationalist organization, Hindu Jagruti, has on its website a page titled, “Why is Bharat the ‘Spiritual Master (Guru)’ of the World?” (In classic Hindutva style, the answer is rendered in bluntly demographic terms, with the high number of Indian gurus—separated into “Guru,” “Sadguru” and “Paratpar gurus,” and on a scale from 70-100% “spiritual advancement”—contrasted in tabular form with far lower numbers of gurus and saints located in “rest of world”).

Comprehending through gurus

We moved in the above section from the anti-guru paradox to consider the extensibility of guru models such that guru-ship, as a kind of principle, may appear in many different forms. Each instance describes different facets of the guru’s uncontainability. But the extensibility of guru logics is not limited to the surfacing of the guru in forms other than that of divine human. Also significant are the ways in which guru logics can act both to structurally determine and as a means for apprehending particular human situations—such as, for instance, Hindu-Muslim relations.

In a recent study centering on the imaginal proximity of a Muslim amil and a Hindu guru, Das (2012) brings together “classical” themes—ritual, sacred speech, dreams, asceticism—with the very contemporary concern of communal relations. Providing important non-Hindu perspectives on “Hindu” gurus, Das’s essay demonstrates ways in which the figure of the guru—in an imaginative sense—can act as a kind of mediator between “communities.” However, the entanglements of the guru are not connotative in some warm, fuzzy way of inter-communal harmony. Akin to a pir and yet simultaneously transgressively other, the guru is a figure of distancing connection. The dreamed guru in Das’s study appears to unsettle any notion of clear boundaries between Islam and Hinduism, and this makes the figure all the more ambiguous from the amil’s point of view. Unnamed and a source of great danger, the guru cannot be simply translated as “pir” (Das emphasizes there are no easy translations to be had). Relations with gurus—even imaginative or dreamed relations—are liable to all too easily and take on a menacing hue. At stake, asserts Das, are “the affects that surround particular figures [so that] the question becomes, how is one to be a Muslim amil in a world so saturated by the whisperings and the machinations of shaiytan [satan]?” (ibid.: 147). Our point, after Das, is that, ambiguous as the guru is, he remains the conceptual point of departure for the Muslim amil as he seeks existential grounding in an entangled world. He is the figure through which “encounter” is apprehended.

Tropes of renunciation and/or guru-ship may be draw upon by individuals or institutions as “available models” in order for them to not only comprehend their
own situations or predicaments but to make them comprehensible to others. Various Christian organizations in India have famously articulated versions of Jesus as a guru-figure for purposes of “native” apprehension (see, for instance, the chapter “The word made flesh: the crucified guru” in the book, *One Gospel—Many Cultures* [Oduyoye & Vroom 2003], which presents a set of global proselytizing case studies). In the following example, taken from a news report published in 2007, trainee medics in Tamil Nadu drew upon imagery of renunciation in order to protest against a yearlong extension of their Bachelor of Medicine/Surgery (MBBS) courses because of a new compulsory rural service scheme. Not only did the medics strike and undertake a “fast unto death,” they also sported “saffron dress and carried books on their heads to drive home the point that they have to forego everything if the Centre went ahead with its decision and extended the MBBS course by a year”.

A further such example is discernible in the work of the Delhi-based Dadhichi Deh Dan Samiti (Dadhichi Body Donation Society), an organization that employs ascetic tropes in order to promote the donation of bodies for dissection and medical research. Leaders of the movement explain that the donated body is to be thought of as supremely sacred because it is a *guru*—a teacher to future generations of medics. Further, in order to help assuage the general reluctance of the public to forego cremation rites, recruits are characterized as renouncers of their bodies and/or cremation. (This is after the mythic sage Dadhichi who is said to have renounced his body—specifically, his bones—in order for them to be made into weapons). Body donors are given saffron scarves to wear at the ceremonies at which they prepare their wills, which of course recalls the formal vows undertaken by initiate renouncers. The ideal-typical renouncer is not cremated, performing his or her own mortuary rites at the time of initiation. The *samiti* thus foregrounds the ascetic as an archetype for the body donor who must forego cremation. The *samiti*’s use of the trope of renunciation is no doubt a tactical deployment of a (mostly) revered assemblage of categories for furthering the ends of medical utility. But we would insist that the usage is also a means of explaining—to self and to other—the deeper import and necessity of a set of novel and in some ways discomfiting medical practices. The point is simply that a key aspect of the lives of renunciation and guru-ship in the subcontinent is their existence as a set of available conceptual materials or principles readily deployable for purposes of apprehension and/or pedagogy. (Though it is also worth noting here that in explicitly pedagogical contexts as diverse as the training of mental health professionals [Jain & Jadhav 2008] and formal education in the north Indian classical music tradition [Schippers 2007] questions have recently been raised about the appropriateness and efficacy of the “authoritarian” guru-*chela* paradigm as the dominant model of knowledge transmission. Conversely, nuclear scientists based in the Anushaktinagar township in Mumbai enthusiastically endorse the guru-*shishya* relationship, with its “holistic” bringing together of discipline and emotion, as the culturally appropriate antidote to the hollowed out, self-interest educational environment considered to typify the liberalizing present [Kaur n.d.]).

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17 A fuller account is available in Copeman 2006.
It is also the case that where scholars understand the model of the guru-disciple relationship as key to the structuring of other social relationships, the model as a means of comprehension once again comes into its own. In other words, guru-ship is a two-fold model for scholarly as much as local apprehension. For instance, a recent incisive study of Dalit leadership in Tamil Nadu (Gorringe 2010) sees the guru-disciple relationship as a kind of cultural precedent for the radically asymmetrical leadership structures of Dalit social movements in the state. However, while Dalit leaders are frequently characterized as “superior beings”—to be revered and followed” (ibid.: 126), it is also the case that, as in the aforementioned study by Das, no easy translations pertain. In particular, Gorringe points to the prevalence of discussion, debate and argument on the part of followers concerning the character and modus operandi of Dalit leaders as a necessary qualification of guru-ship as an explanatory model. Moreover, the historical marginalization of the group acts as a further qualifier, for “we cannot assume . . . that prevalent cultural patterns and relationships extend to those who have habitually been excluded from the body politic” (ibid). While the latter point is important and persuasive, it should be pointed out that debate and argument concerning the authenticity and direction of the leader is far from absent in contexts of guru-ship (see Gold 2012; Copeman 2012; Khandelwal 2004: 160) to the extent that the presence of these attributes in the contexts examined by Gorringe may attest more to the “fit” of the guru-disciple model than its incompatibility.

We turn now to a third aspect of the guru’s uncontainability: the practical and conceptual techniques employed in order to augment the expansibility of the guru.

The guru as inclusive singularity
Introducing a noteworthy recent volume on leadership in India, Price (2010: xxiv) draws attention to the “expansive agency” that characterizes the style of leadership she terms “lordly” in the subcontinent. Drawing on works by Burghart (1996) and Brass (1965), Price (op. cit.: xxv) notes that “constituents’ perceptions of their head as a benevolent person of expansive agency form a major element of allegiance to lordly leadership in the South Asian context. . . . A [lordly] divinity protects creatures in a multitude of ways, according to his/her desire or will. The human lord of this model may offer protection in the glamorous and generous mode of monarchs or in the spiritual efficacy and knowledge of gurus.” Taking this notion of lordly expansive agency as our starting point, we now explore specific techniques of expansibility. This emphasis on the specifics of expansibility is important for, as Gorringe (2010: 120) argues, resorting to the nebulous concept of charisma “can hinder analysis and obscure the complex processes, mechanisms and relationships that constitute leadership”.

We provided examples above of guru-ship, as a kind of principle, extending from human to nation. Similar “ideologies of scale” (Tsing 2000: 347) inhabit such pronouncements as “all the world is my ashram,” reported to have been made by Dadaji, a guru famous for “renouncing” renunciation and celibacy and for his film star followers (Singh 2003: 148). While in this case the guru is “de-collectivized” (scaled back down to the human), imagery of the guru’s constituency is similarly world-wrapping in nature. In this section, then, we move from the depersonalized guru that exists as a kind of principle in non-human forms via sets of scale-making
practices back down to the human guru who nevertheless “scales up” in order to extend his reach (variously to include the whole of the world and entirety of the universe). Such techniques of expansibility form a further key aspect of the guru’s uncontainability.

Dadadji’s declaration is an example of an imagistic technique of expansibility. Such world-wrapping imagery abounds: we have attended Nirankari gatherings during which the traditional American spiritual “He’s got the whole world in his hands” was sung, and indeed, the presiding guru is frequently depicted cradling the globe in his arms; and we learn of images in the official Sathya Sai Baba museum of Puttaparthi such as “Sai Baba straddling the globe, balancing the universe on one finger, and a NASA space photograph believed to show Sai Baba’s imprint on earth, suggesting his divine reach into the celestial plane” (T. Srinivas 2010: 138).

Spectacles of humanitarianism are a further means of generating and conveying such imagery. As Copeman has recently explained (2009, 2012), the Dera Sacha Sauda (DSS) devotional movement, based in Haryana, holds the Guinness world record for most blood donated in a single day. A feat detailed in the “miracles” section of the movement’s website, the appearance of the guru’s name in such an iconically global publication provides both critical evidence and means of achieving world-wrapping prowess. There are shades here of the Indian “institutional” big-men described by Mines and Gourishankar (1990: 762), who “attract followers and enact their roles as generous leaders through the charitable institutions that they control”—with the obvious caveat that the DSS guru’s charitable actions target expansion on an altogether different scale than the south Indian examples discussed by these authors. The Delhi-based Sant Nirankari guru, too, has been able to take on a new expansibility via the large quantities of blood donated to the Red Cross in his name. Here the guru acts as the knot of centripetal and centrifugal movements in which devotees offer blood to their guru in a centripetal movement from many to one, with the guru, in a centrifugal movement from one to many, symbolically transferring the same blood to patients in need and the nation at large (see Copeman 2009: ch. 4). The anonymous structures of humanitarian blood donation, in other words, allow the guru’s love and influence to travel outwards from an exemplary centre in a consummate enactment and image of his expansibility. Though the Nirankari tradition is not a yogic one, there may also be an element here of the guru—in classic yogic fashion—using devotees’ bodies to enter the bodies of others (see White 2009). Considered to contain the guru’s love, knowledge and intentions, devotees’ donated blood thus also carries forth the guru’s personality such that a blood transfusion comes to offer much more than mere physical relief. As a twentieth-century yogic practitioner and scholar explains, it is the teacher’s ability to inhabit others’ bodies that allows them to progress on the path of yoga: “The more people’s bodies a yogi is able to make his own by entering into foreign bodies, the greater the number [of bodies] will be pervaded by his mind, and the more he will be able to use his own action-energy (kriya-shakti) for the general welfare, in his all-pervasive form” (White 2009: 166).

Harnessing the humanitarian structures of voluntary blood donation, the Nirankari guru similarly increases his dominion, expanding and fortifying both his own body and the corporate body of the sect.

Ironically given that our subject is the guru’s uncontainability, containment forms a second strategy of expansibility; more specifically, expansive containment. By this we mean “extending in order to include and including in order to extend.”
Gold (2012), in a wonderfully subtle personal exploration of continuity and change as one guru passes away to be succeeded by his son, provides an interesting example of this. Offering a rich longitudinal perspective on the development and changes in the relationship between presiding gurus and their disciples at an ashram in Gwalior and beyond, Gold describes how individual personalities can impact profoundly upon devotional experience. Initiated into the sant mat tradition (creed of the Hindi poet-singers such as Kabir) at an early age, Malik Sahib combined a career in the civil service with a gradual path towards guru-ship, beginning to initiate disciples into a form of Radhasoami practice on the passing of his own guru in 1940. His professional life afforded opportunities to attain a following: “As he was transferred around the state to different postings, he found new groups of disciples, some of whom stayed with him till the end of his life” (Gold 2012: 244). His son and successor Maharajji, however, toured well beyond the state—for instance, to Himachal Pradesh—and integrated local folk songs from these travels into the movement’s repertoire more generally. Such diversity, in turn, “helped integrate new local folk cultures into his devotional field” (ibid.: 249).

Without wishing to impute crass instrumentalism to such acts of incorporation, such generative inclusiveness nevertheless begins to provide a sense of what we mean when we say “extending in order to include and including in order to extend”.

The expansive selfdefinitions of Sathya Sai Baba, alluded to above, provide a further example. S. Srinivas (2008) and T. Srinivas (2010) have documented the extraordinary scalar shift in the biography of Sai Baba from minor local guru in the 1940s to—by the midlate twentiethcentury—“global” hyper guru. As S. Srinivas (2008: 67) explains, Sai Baba enfolds categories of guru, sant and avatar. While a sant may be a guru and a guru a sant, “all gurus may not emerge from the sant tradition, nor are all gurus avatars” (ibid). The latter point is significant. As Warrier (2005: 36) observes, though devotees have historically affirmed their gurus’ avatarhood as incarnations of specific deities, most typically Vishnu, presentday gurus’ explicit claims to avatar status are in fact relatively novel. Let us look more closely at the avatarhood of Sai Baba, which we see as being connected to the aforementioned shift from local to global guru.

Born in 1926 and named Sathyanarayana Raju, in 1940 he declared he was Sai Baba; that is, the reincarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba (d. 1918), a saint from the town of Shirdi in Maharashtra whose ritual and theological repertoire included elements from both Islam and Hinduism (though his followers have largely expunged the Islamic elements and tend to follow a Vaishnava worship sequence closely associated with Krishna bhakti). As T. Srinivas (2010: 58) explains, “this open declaration of affiliation with Shirdi Sai Baba and . . . subtle declaration of affiliation to Krishna was, and is, a recurrent theme in Sathya Sai Baba’s discourses, from the 1940s to the 1960s, and then again from the 1990s to the present.” To be clear: “Sathya Sai Baba does not claim that Shirdi Sai Baba was his guru: he claims to be Shirdi Sai Baba. The two bodies are different but the divinity is one’ is his common formulation of this identity” (S. Srinivas 2008: 69). Already having identified himself with Krishna and Rama, the most renowned and revered of Vishnu’s other avatars, in 1963 he claimed to be an incarnation of the god Shiva and his consort Shakti. He also prophesized his final form as Prema Sai, to be born eight years after his death in southern Karnataka. He thus added to his already burgeoning collection of associations, allowing him to further his reach.
theologically and socially (T. Srinivas 2010: 65): “He could claim Brahminic status (through Bharadwaja [the gotra through which he was born Shiva-Shakti], within the Hindu Shaivite tradition (as an incarnation of Shiva), an appeal to female devotees (through the female Shakti principle), Islamic Sufi sainthood (through the ‘flashback’ of his previous incarnation as Shirdi Sai Baba), the potential to prophesy his future divinity as Prema Sai (the saviour of the universe in an immoral age), and the Hindu concept of divine androgyny (as he declared himself to be the unification of male and female principles in the universe)” (ibid.: 66).

Containment comes to form an aspect of his uncontainability because a feature of his being uncontained is his containing everything. He “contains” his spiritual forebears and a range of other associations/affiliations (there is seemingly no limit to them) and this contributes dramatically to his expansibility. Affiliations are not only claimed explicitly but also suggested in more subtle ways. For instance, many devotees view Sathya Sai Baba’s fondness for animals as evidence of a further affiliation with Dattatreya (thought to be an animal-loving god and also identified with Shirdi Sai Baba). “Relational speculation,” to employ Carsten’s (2011) phrase, is positively encouraged. Having himself revealed a set of multiple and layered associations, devotees appear to be adept in taking (proliferating) them further: here the guru, as signifier, to employ Derridean terminology, is not fixed to a signified but points beyond itself to other signifiers in an indefinite referral of signifier to signified. The relational speculation fostered by the drama of the staged revelation of his divine personality thus further increases and augments the dispersed habitation of his divine self. A picture emerges, then, of a kind of strategic unfolding, that is also simultaneously an enfolding, for its structuring logics are those of encompassment and commensuration: “The operational core of the guru-sant-avatar-future fourfold narrative is the modality of strategic ambiguity . . . the various plastic forms [of his divine identity] cover the various possibilities. This modality of strategic ambiguity located in temporal stretching enables Sathya Sai Baba to transform himself from local guru to global godman” (T. Srinivas 2010: 74). For “hyper-” or middle class gurus avatar-hood appears to have developed into an index of spiritual worth and means of obtaining distinction among “the vast array of gurus in India’s teeming urban spiritual supermarket” (Warrier 2003: 234, 2005: ch. 2; see also Copeman 2009: 143). What Sathya Sai Baba has done, no doubt influencing other gurus in his wake, is to perfect the art of sacred unveiling, performing a kind of genealogical diversification, enfolding diverse spiritual provenances as an exemplary means of expanding appeal and reach. This is a kind of semiotic or associational uncontainability; the guru as collector of associations.

For T. Srinivas (2010), such genealogical diversification forms the basis of a particular kind of cosmopolitanism. The “engaged cosmopolitanism” that characterizes the Sathya Sai Baba movement is rooted in a form of “social inclusivity” that enfolds “conflicting opinions and diverse positions.” Such inclusivity is consequent on the “grammar of diversity” developed by the guru himself (ibid.: 329), something akin to what we called above associational or semiotic uncontainability. Such a “matrix of possible meanings . . . allows devotees agency . . . in picking the required ingredients for their personal transformation” (ibid). Khandelwal (2012) also connects aspects of contemporary guru culture to the literature on cosmopolitanism. Drawing on fieldwork in the north Indian town of Rishikesh, Khandelwal shows how gurus, monks and their ashrams accommodate a variety of “spiritual tourists” in search of self-transformation. Here
a certain form of cosmopolitanism is found not so much amongst visitors as amongst the hosts. Gurus and renouncers typify a certain detachment (from the world), displacement (from the comforts of domestic life, the better to achieve non-attachment), aloofness (from social and ritual convention), and openness to variations in bodily practice (e.g., a forgiving attitude towards the ritual/behavioral missteps of visitors), and as Khandelwal shows so effectively, it is just such qualities that figure prominently in scholarly definitions of cosmopolitanism (e.g., Pollock et al. 2002). The form of cosmopolitan dialogue that emerges in Rishikesh, then, is critically dependent on the particular conventions already present in a place of pilgrimage and renunciation.

However, if their hosts mostly tolerate visitors’ manifold social and cultural differences, such tolerance of difference is quite different from the political recognition of difference doctrinally present in Euro-American multiculturalism: the ethos of neo-Vedanta treats social and cultural difference as illusory and therefore meaningless. Moreover, Rishikesh cosmopolitanism has its limitations. Undesirable non-Indian spiritual seekers are categorized pejoratively as “hippies” or “fake sadhus,” and despite these gurus’ rhetorical embracement of all religions, Muslims are noticeable for their absence. The coexistence of a rhetoric of embrace and chauvinistic attitudes in the religious town of Rishikesh is perhaps suggestive of an inherent contradiction of globalising Hinduism and its proselytizing gurus. While gurus are adept in flexibly selling different messages and goods according to the needs of western spiritual seekers, they can also foster exclusivist Hindu nationalist attitudes amongst Indians at home and in the diaspora. The VHP, which was established in order to mobilize Hindus throughout the world, is a case in point. The VHP uses anti-globalization rhetoric at home by arguing that Hinduism is under attack from “foreign” threats (Christianity and Islam), while it is itself a key agent of the globalization of Hinduism. van der Veer (2002) urges us to regard these religious movements as offering an “alternative cosmopolitanism,” with the potential for considerable ideological and technological creativity.

Differently located and of another scale entirely, the mode of “guru cosmopolitanism” identified by Khandelwal is nevertheless comparable to that described by T. Srinivas, with the creation of a sacred cosmopolitan milieu dependent on the enlarged cosmopolitanism of guru figures themselves. In the case discussed by Khandelwal particular “local” ascetic principles already suggest the cosmopolitanism that flourishes in the context of spiritual tourism. In T. Srinivas’s case, the manifold religio-cultural provenances condensed in the figure of Sathya Sai Baba allow for processes of cultural translation that she terms “cosmopolitan.” As we saw earlier, though physically discontinuous with Shirdi Sai Baba, he and Sathya Sai Baba are, in spiritual terms, to be counted as one. But not only that. Shiva, Shakti, Dattatreya, even (controversially) Jesus, are counted as one in the containing figure of the uncontained guru. How are we to think of this mode of personhood? Certainly, such containment of diverse provenances forms an element of the guru’s centrifugal or extensible personality—the spiraling outwards that Mines and Gourishankar (1990) have discussed. The language of “count-as-one” derives from the philosopher Badiou (2006). Influenced by mathematical set theory, multiplicities of any kind (from plants to situations to materials), as a consequence of limitations on human perception, are nevertheless counted as one. For Badiou, there follow from this a number of complex political and ontological
implications that we are unable to explore here." Given that for Badiou all phenomena is counted (perceived) as one, despite its multiplicity in actuality, it is not necessarily clear how or whether we can distinguish thoroughly strategic enfoldings of the multifarious into images of singularity, such as that performed by Sathya Sai Baba. In consequence, the language of count-as-one may be useful only up to a point. If we continue to employ the language of count-as-one we do so not in the sense of this being a kind of inevitable epiphénoménon of human perception, but rather as a deliberate means of "extending in order to include and including in order to extend."

Perhaps a more helpful model is that provided by Fausto in his work on mastery and magnification in Amazonia (2008). Just as Mines and Gourishankar (1990) looked to the classic Melanesian "big man" as a helpful model in elucidating styles of leadership in south India, Fausto turns towards Strathern’s Melanesian concept of the magnified person in order to explicate Amerindian notions of mastery and ownership as these are manifested in particular persons. Fausto (2008: 6) cites ethnographic research from among the Kanamari of western Amazonia where the term warah expresses a relation of "container-contained, singularity-plurality, such that ‘the name of a person followed by -warah designates not only that person’s body, but also, in the case of chiefs, all those who call that person “my body-owner” (“my-chief”), along with all the belongings of the person whose name forms the noun-phrase X-warah’" (Costa cited in Fausto 2008: 4). The figure of the owner-master, in other words, is "the form through which a plurality appears as a singularity to others" (ibid.: 6). It is important to note that such magnified persons, or "inclusive singularities," do not appear as representatives, occupying the place of others, but rather "as a people"—that is, "as the form through which a collective is constituted as an image [and] presented to others" (ibid).

Such a model of inclusive singularity may be brought to bear on the question of guru-ship in at least two ways. First, it may help us further our understanding of the avatar-guru who piles up (embodies, contains) multifarious associations, including in order to extend. But the Amazonian owner-master who, as a magnified person, appears to others "as a people" is also suggestive of the way in which a guru may contains his/her followers. The avatar-guru is doubly magnified, so to speak: first, they contain their former incarnations, and second, in respect of others, they appear as the collective image of their followers. This has implications for gurus’ relationship with democracy. India is famous as the land of "vote bank" politics, where different caste groups are seen to vote in elections en masse as single entities, and usually according to the instructions of their "caste leaders" (see Khilnani 1997: 79). These, too, are a kind of magnified person and, as has been shown elsewhere (e.g., Ikegame 2010; Jaffrelot 2012), it is not only caste leaders, but also gurus, who are vital "container actors" at election time (Ikegame [2012a] has shown that the categories of guru and caste leader are perfectly capable of collapsing into one). Gold (2012) refers to the Indian media’s coinage of the term

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18 For a sustained attempt at applying Badiou’s work to problems in the social sciences, see Humphrey 2008. We are indebted to Giovanni da Col for encouraging us to explore the work of Fausto in this context. His essay “The poisoner and the parasite” (2012) takes theoretical discussion of containment to a new level.
“Ballot babas” to describe the phenomenon, the assumption being that the recruitment by political parties of consummate “inclusive singularities” constitutes simultaneously the recruitment of those whom they contain (their followers) (see also Chatterjee [2004: 50] on the state’s engagement with governed populations through their “natural leaders”).

Such a logic is further reproduced in respect of the guru’s “miraculous feats.” For instance, Warrier (2003: 256) notes that Mata Amritanandamayi’s devotees view the enlargement and spread of her devotional movement as evidence of her miraculous powers, whereas in fact it is “the perseverance of . . . devotees . . . themselves that has made this institution building possible in the first place.” In other words, followers of the Mata are responsible for the miracles they attribute to her. The participatory production of such miracles is ideologically denied by both the movement’s literature and by devotees themselves. The guru’s followers fetishize the energy they have produced together as a power inherent to the “magnetizer”-guru (Mazzarella 2010a: 724).

We have thus suggested that an aspect of gurus’ uncontainability is their unusual capacity to key into the momentum of given situations and harvest them so as to generate a sense of “carrying forward,” and that this is possible, at least in part, because of the polyvalent meanings of gurus themselves. ‘Guruness’ can attach to different people (is uncontainable), while persons may use guruness to expand themselves (ironically, through strategies of containment). All of this raises the question of media. Do recent developments in print and electronic media contribute to gurus’ expansive agency, enabling them all the better to extend a sense of their presence? Of course, the guru historically is no stranger to technologies of mediation. For instance, in Morse’s (2012) discussion of the Datta sampradaya, we learn that this tradition’s central focus is the Marathi liturgical text, the Gurucaritra, and the Sanskrit hymn to the guru, the Gurugita, while Chatterjee (1993: 45) has drawn attention to the centrality of print media in the popularization of gurus.

19 Politicians may also, of course, be framed as inclusive singularities—see, for instance, the Emergency-era slogan: “India is Indira and Indira is India” (Rajagopal 2011: 1015). We noted earlier the corporate nature of the parastatal guru. Following Roberston’s (2001) analysis of the business corporation, the comparison may be extended. Consider the definition of a corporation as “a company or group of people authorized to act as a single entity (legally a person) and recognized as such in law” (New Oxford American Dictionary). Writing with reference to early mercantile communities, Robertson (2001: 215) notes that “repackaged into new corporate bodies, people could do business with one another more concertedely and at less personal risk, in ever-expanding arenas.” The parastatal guru, similarly, is a “many” who acts as one, and who, in consequence, can appear to possess less “liability” (for instance in the sense of possible culpability for a given action being distributed across, or locatable within, a guru’s contained elements—e.g., a divine forbear [cf. the 1860s “Maharaj Libel Case”]).

20 To employ terms proposed by da Col (2012), we might say that the guru is both parasitical and hospitable at the same time. He draws on and deploys the vital forces of his devotees for the enactment of miraculous feats or great works of a charitable or developmental nature, while being recognised as their singular origin. But containment may be equally a mode of hospitality, since protection and nourishment, both spiritual and material (e.g. in the form of subsidised medicines and foodstuffs), are also frequently provided to devotees happy to be “hosted” in his person.
of Ramakrishna among the Bengal middle class. But what of more recent changes in the form and reach of media technologies? It is to these questions that we now turn.

Gurus and/as media
On March 2, 2010, Tamil television channel Sun News broadcast videotapes in which the prominent south Indian religious leader Swami Nithyananda and a young woman, apparently the Tamil film actress Ranjitha, were shown in a number of “compromising positions.” Later that same day numerous other national and regional channels aired the videos and reported the incident as a sex scandal involving the “self-styled godman.” At the same time, several more videos involving the guru, the Ranjitha look-alike, and another woman were being uploaded onto YouTube. The next day a group of young men forcibly entered Nithyananda’s Bidadi ashram, near Bangalore, and vandalized buildings. It was alleged that Nithyananda’s driver-cum-manager filmed and sold the tape to the TV channel. On April 21, after several weeks of hiding, Nithyananda was arrested in Himachal Pradesh by Karnataka police on charges of rape, committing unnatural sex acts, criminal intimidation, criminal conspiracy, cheating, and deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious sentiments under sections 295A, 376, 377, 420, 506(1) and 120 of the Indian Penal Code. Nithyananda was kept in custody by the Bangalore Police until June 23. A video of him being released from custody was also released on ‘TV and the Internet.

The televised Nithyananda episode dramatically presents us with two important themes for analysis of contemporary gurus. The first concerns the manner in which contemporary media technologies caused the guru’s alleged activities to become instantaneous nationwide and global news. The guru was betrayed by the very same technologies that had hitherto enabled the global circulation of his image and teachings, proliferating his influence and “presence.” Secondly, this scandal demonstrates the ineradicable link between a guru’s sexuality, or lack of it to be precise, and his authority and legitimacy. The indelibility of this mystical connection seems to suggest that the ultimate condition of being a guru is celibacy or the total negation of sexual desire. Despite this public conviction, there are many local traditions that allow gurus to marry, and some that even make marriage obligatory in becoming a guru. Even amongst orthodox Brahmins, it is not uncommon for devotees to share among themselves the secret knowledge of their guru having a wife (for examples of non-celibate gurus see Peabody 1991; Gold 1988: 102). The sexuality of a guru becomes problematic only in certain contexts and in specific ways.

Born in 1978 in Tamil Nadu, the youthful Nithyananda was fast becoming a high profile face amongst the globalising hyper-gurus. By the time of the scandal, his spiritual organization—Life Bliss Foundation—claimed to have centers in thirty-three countries. According to one participant, the expensive meditation workshop offered by Nithyananda claims to provide techniques of meditation “deeper and more transformative” than those available elsewhere in the spiritual marketplace (Malhotra 2010). On the Bangalore-Mysore highway, prior to the scandal, could be seen several gigantic billboards depicting the guru wearing a big smile alongside messages such as, “I am not here to prove that I am God. I am here to prove that you are God”.

Such messages are reflective of those of his predecessors who travelled to the West since the late nineteenth century spreading new forms of Hinduism which, in turn, provided inspiration to alternative spiritual movements in north America, Europe and beyond. As is well known, a large number of gurus have travelled overseas and in consequence become key agents of a globalising Hinduism. In the nineteenth century, Hindu religious reformists such as Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), founder of the Brahmo Samaj, and Protap Chunder Mozoomdar (1840-1905) travelled abroad and began interpreting Hinduism in the light of European Christian moral values, or vice-versa in the case of Mozoomdar.

However, it is the spectacular success of Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) at the Chicago Parliament of Religions in 1893 that is widely considered to mark the beginning of “globalising” Hinduism. Vivekananda gave a series of classes and lectures in the United States and instructed workers who would later spread his philosophy. Another prominent first generation travelling Hindu guru, Paramahansa Yogananda (1893-1952), moved to the United States in 1920 and began teaching the practices and philosophy of yoga and meditation. The teachings of Vivekananda and others were not always similar, but they all contributed towards the creation of so-called Neo-Vedanta or Neo-Hinduism. Vivekananda, in particular, articulated a clear monistic vision of Hinduism in which “each individual was able to achieve the direct experience of God-realisation and the diversity of various religions and sects merely meant that they were different paths to the same goal” (Wessinger 1995: 176; Huffer 2011).21 Apart from this message that “the individual can have direct experience of ultimate reality,” Vivekananda’s denial of the Christian doctrine of original sin strongly appealed to Americans searching for alternative religious experiences (ibid.: 180).

Vivekananda’s universalized version of Hinduism was extremely successful, not only because it made Hinduism open and accessible to non-Indians, but also because it elevated Hinduism to a status equal to that of other world religions, especially Christianity. Meanwhile, he sought to sanitize and resolve various tensions and transgressive aspects inherent within many guru traditions. He erased, for instance, the terrifying iconographical image of the bloodthirsty Goddess Kali who, for Vivekananda’s own guru, Ramakrishna, was the ultimate goal of all the religious paths (Saha 2007: 489). The eccentric boundary-crossing behavior of Ramakrishna—dressing and eating like a Muslim (Wessinger 1995: 175), experiencing menstruation by having periodic discharges of blood through the pores of his skin (Mehta 1993: 182)—was no longer on the agenda. However, Neo-Vedanta was not quite “India’s spiritual gift to the world” as some Hindu writers have forcefully argued, but rather a result of previous interactions between India and the West. Some scholars have argued that the construction of Neo-Vedanta is a prime example of how romanticized, Orientalist images of “mystical” or

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21 In a recent stimulating discussion, Huffer (2011) shows how Indian gurus teaching in the United States, in order to appeal to the broadest possible constituency, have inaugurated a process of “active distancing of largely Hindu ideologies, practices [and] discourses. . . from the category of Hindu religion” (ibid.: 375). Intriguingly, she suggests that this process appears to result (unwittingly) in the advancement of Hindutva ideologies, with “youth searching for a Hindu identity [being] more often than not restricted to conservative and orthodox options because the innovative and liberalistic options have been recoded as [generic] spirituality” (ibid.: 376).
“spiritual” India contributed to the construction of the self-awareness of modern Indians (King 1999). Others point out that Vivekananda and his early followers belonged to the newly assertive bourgeois class that emerged as beneficiaries of the burgeoning colonial administrative system based in Calcutta (Vivekananda was of the kayastha caste from which the British recruited most of their administrators) (Chowdhury 2001: 124; Raychaudhuri 1989: 221).

If, in such instances, Hinduism is, so to speak, “disambiguated” for purposes of presentation to non-Indians, Frøystad (2012) offers an exemplary account of how urban Indian middle classes consume new forms of Hinduism that were originally designed for the benefit of Western audiences. Rather then merely treating this as a phenomenon of “reverse-globalisation,” she locates their consumerist spiritual quest within a tension between intellectualism and instantaneity or simplicity, which has been, as French Indologist Biardeau argues, a feature of Indian religious traditions for centuries. For instance, in opposition to the closed adult male-only intellectualism of the Brahmanical elite, Buddhism, and later bhakti movements, emphasized devotion and the importance of direct sensory experience of the divine.

Olivelle (1990) regards the nomadic wandering of the solitary renouncer as an early, Vedic-era, form of asceticism. Like other structuralist understandings of renunciation (e.g., Dumont 1970; Das 1977; Thapar 2003), he views Indian asceticism as an “anti-culture,” which embodies everything which settled Indian village community life denies. However, he carefully avoids the claim that Indian asceticism is countercultural, since it does not seek to overturn or transform the existing social structure. Rather, it purports to exist outside of that structure. The argument is that, with the development of the monasticism of Buddhism and Jainism and finally the establishment of Brahmin matha institutions by the Shankaracharya in the eighth century, the “wilderness” of early asceticism was domesticated. But the tension between the “wilderness” and “village” remained a part of the Indian religious ethos, the wilderness of Indian asceticism always providing freedom and the village the bondage of rules and obligations (ibid.: 132).

In Frøystad’s (2012) account of contemporary Indian middle class spiritual seekers, perhaps we witness a contemporary quest for freedom beyond the confines of community or family life. Their preference for instantaneity or simplicity reveals a strong desire to participate not only intellectually but also sensually in this new Hindu religious culture. In response to this, gurus are flexible enough to adopt new narrative styles (autobiographical and impressionist), simple Hindi or English, and performative skills which evoke intimacy and playfulness. Frøystad provides a fascinating description of how Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, whom she calls “one of India’s ultimate embodiments of instantaneity,” speaks and performs in front of a large audience. Use of modern high-tech sound systems means he is able to talk softly while addressing large crowds. This creates an impression that he is casually chatting to each one of them, “directly.” He also often giggles and playfully crosses the boundaries of religious differences by, for example, wearing a Sikh turban and a sword (as mentioned above). The serious message of the sameness of all religions is expressed with a childlike playfulness and in a manner that enables the many thousands of his followers to feel close to him. Cautious manipulation of media forms makes it possible to have an intimate one-to-one relationship with a guru who might otherwise seem distant and inaccessible.
Globalising hyper gurus and transnational religious movements have been effective in employing technologies of mechanical reproduction in order to spread their messages and maintain their authority (see, especially, S. Srinivas 2008, T. Srinivas 2010). These technologies have developed and diversified from print media (books and god posters etc.) to include diverse forms of audio-visual recording (cassette tapes, VCRs, DVDs), radio, films, television, and the Internet (Babb & Wadley 1995; Dasgupta 2006; Hughes 2009; Meyer & Moors 2006; Meyer 2009; Rajagopal 2001; Saha 2007). While new technologies, especially satellite TV and the Internet, enable new forms of transmission and community building, older technologies do not simply die out. For instance, publication of the books of the aforementioned guru Rajneesh (Osho) has accelerated since his death in 1990 (Urban 2005). There are thus multiple new means for gurus to transmit their presence to often globally dispersed devotees. Not only for travelling global hyper gurus, but also amongst orthodox Brahmin gurus who do not travel overseas because of purity restrictions (kalapani), new media technologies have become extremely important to reach followers residing in North America and the Gulf states (Saha 2007: 493-495).

It is worth asking, however, whether such broadening or extension of presence may be accomplished without consequences for its intension or meaning (Laidlaw 2007). Or, to paraphrase Rajagopal (2011: 1035), are we witnessing the increase of influence through spatial extension or its weakening through dislocation? To attempt an answer it is necessary to examine more closely questions of “aura” and mediation. Despite the prediction of modernization theory that as mediating technologies of reproduction developed religiosity would lose its intensity and diffuse into modern secular sensitivities, many scholars of religion recognize that the opposite has been the case. Media and religion are now frequently characterized as being complementary rather than antagonistic to one other (Stolow 2005; Meyer & Moors 2006; Meyer 2009; Engelke 2010). The exponential unboundedness and translocality of religious experience has caused scholars to redefine their categories of religiosity, requiring them to pay less attention to the boundaries of religious practice and rather more to the means by which religiosity is communicated:

[R]eligion can be analyzed as a practice of mediation, to which media, as technologies of representation employed by human beings, are intrinsic. It is important to note that this perspective extends the notion of media, which implies modern devices such as films, radio, photography, television, or computers—the usual focus of scholars studying media—towards the inclusion of substances such as incense or herbs, sacrificial animals, icons, sacred books, holy stones and rivers, and, finally, the human body, which lends itself to being possessed by a spirit. (Meyer 2009: 11)

Following Meyer, reconsidering gurus as media enables us to revisit classic arguments concerning the guru as a mediator while analyzing gurus’ use of technologies of mechanical reproduction. In a rejoinder to popular scholarly opinion that postulates the ‘loss of aura’ in the age of mechanical reproduction, Dasgupta (2006), through a careful reading of Benjamin, argues “[i]t would be a mistake to assume that the aura vanishes with technological mediation; rather, its character changes given its displacement from the time and space of tradition in
ritual and religion to the mobile and fragmented temporality and spatiality of modern experience” (Dasgupta 2006: 256). How then do contemporary gurus maintain their aura whilst acting as mediators between earthly and spiritual planes?

Historically, and in the present, the guru has been represented either as a guide who leads devotees to the Supreme Being or as himself a primary object of faith (Gold 1988). Even among contemporary hyper gurus the two types are discernible. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1914-2008), founder of the Transcendental Meditation movement, and Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabupada (1896-1977), founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON), both presented themselves as extremely knowledgeable yet human teachers, while other high-profile gurus, notably Sathya Sai Baba and Mata Amritanandamayi, emerge as avatars or embodiments of the divine (Gold 2005: 220-221). As Gold and others point out, in most guru-inspired religious movements gurus are represented both as respected teachers and avatars, and gurus switch as a matter of convenience between the two images according to the demands of devotees and social circumstance.

Though the appearance of the guru as teacher and as avatar may be strikingly different, both are nevertheless types of media. Respected teachers transmit sacred knowledge and practical means of self-transformation to their followers, while through the body of the avatar-guru devotees may come to witness transcendent being. (Sathya Sai Baba, of course, expanded his avatar-hood ad infinitum, claiming that one could see any and every divine figure within him). Both types are media which simultaneously assure us of the existence of the transcendent (ultimate salvation or the divine being) and its unattainability. Such a paradoxical message of accessibility and unattainability is an important mechanism in maintaining the authority and charisma of the guru.

The guru as a mediator presents us with a further paradox. Most guru-inspired religious movements began life as social and political movements opposed to hierarchical social structures and the monopolization of religious knowledge and/or rights of access to god(s) by religious elites (Turner 2011: xxiv-xxv). Such movements were founded on the insistent promise that one could directly communicate with the Supreme Being without relying upon the sacred knowledge and rituals monopolized by Brahmin elites. Many medieval religious movements in India, such as sant movements in the north, Sikhism in western India, and Lingayatism in the south, were iconoclastic, subaltern and revolutionary—at least in the beginning. But in the process of, to employ Weber’s terminology, the “institutionalisation of charisma,” gurus themselves became a centre of devotion. Some developed exclusive guru lineages of a radically asymmetrical nature. The guru as mediator does not, though, disappear as result of the institutionalisation or “routinisation” of charisma. The institutionalized authority of gurus is frequently challenged and replaced by new guru movements in which the guru offers renewed social change and a revision of religious aspirations.

In an era offering ever-increasing forms of mechanical reproduction, globalising religious movements seeking to reach their globally dispersed followers have been active in what Benjamin called the “reactivating of aura.” The messages and teachings of the guru must be easily available (reproducible, consumable), while at the same time it is of critical importance that his/her singularity and uniqueness is maintained, for it is the latter which ensures the transcendent nature of the guru and his/her teaching. Dasgupta (2006: 255) argues, employing Benjamin’s concept
of the “distant effect,” that the aura “signifies authority in that its distanciation from its audience confers a socially recognized privilege on those sanctioned to maintain this distance.” He further claims that this effect which, prior to mechanical reproduction, was locked in a specific location in a particular time and place in order to ensure auratic authority and social privilege, has retained a positive role in the contemporary era of mechanical reproduction. We may look, for example, to the figure of the hugging guru Mata Amritanandamayi (also known as Ammachi or Amma) whose devotees regard Amma dolls as containers of her sacred presence, thereby enabling them to carry her with them far and wide (Raj 2005: 140). The Amma doll is not simply a mass produced copy. Their producer’s claim that in crafting the dolls they use a piece of cloth that Amma has herself worn, making each doll a unique device that activates her aura. The Amma doll, which is simultaneously unique and one of thousands, connects each devotee to Amma’s body and ensures the presence of the singular body of Amma even at a distance. The Amma doll seems not to dilute her aura but to reactivate it at home. Here can be noticed the dialectical effect of what Mazzarella (2006: 496) has called “close distance” in which “a carefully calibrated blend of the approachable and the awe-inspiring” enhances auratic authority. Technologies of mechanical reproduction thus seem less to have undermined the authority of gurus than to have successfully amplified it while creating scattered but connected spaces of the faithful.

But media technologies are not always loyal in their auratic image creation. Around the time of the Nithyananda scandal, the extent to which there has been a subaltern “takeover” of media technologies was beginning to be recognized. Since the famous Tehelka sting operation in 2001 (see Mazzarella 2006), the technology of the sting operation or exposé has been radically democratized. Tehelka, then an Internet-based journal, sent journalists pretending to be arms dealers to meet with the secretary of the then ruling BJP, who was filmed in his office receiving a cash bribe in exchange for implied favors. Corruption in the government itself was hardly shocking news, though the dramatic visibilization of the scene of corruption was sensational enough. More recently, however, we have seen not only the investigative journalism that Tehelka claims to embody but several cases of ordinary young women secretly recording conversations or filming scenes of their in-laws demanding unreasonable sums in dowry and then sending these videos to the national media. Guru killing has many precedents (see the elaborate argument about the killing of gurus amongst wandering ascetics in Bengal in Openshaw 1998), but the Nithyananda case was the first example of “killing the guru” from below via the use of modern media technology.

The sting operation by Tehelka in 2001 embarrassed the BJP led government, but Tehelka suffered a backlash and subsequently was forced to close down (Tehelka has since been reincarnated as a paper-based magazine). A similar parallel could be seen in the case of Nithyananda. On his institution’s professional-looking website, a campaign was started called “All sides Exposed,” which featured a host of video interviews of ashramites supporting Nithyananda. The site also contained the images of 1,200 letters in blood sent to the Bangalore high court from devotees from all over the world as well as news of their legal action against the ex-driver. When we visited his Bidadi ashram in November 2010, devotees were building several guesthouses for visitors. With his movement restricted by the conditions of his bail, Nithyananda had begun a new meditation workshop, “eN-Kalpataru,” using Skype. From pictures posted on the institution’s website, it is
clear that a number of devotees have treated their guru’s usage of Skype as an opportunity to take his darshan (i.e. behold his sacred image). Here again the “close distance” of affective immediacy and the aura of the guru were carefully orchestrated via the use of media technology. Like many other guru scandals, this one too became merely a test of the true loyalties of the guru’s devotees.

Close distance was also characteristic of the brief appearance in November 2011 of high-profile Arya Samaj leader and social activist Swami Agnivesh in the house of India’s controversial reality television show Bigg Boss, the Indian version of the Big Brother format. News of the 72-year-old guru exposing himself to 24-hour camera surveillance was splashed across the media. Prior to entering the house he had split from Anna Hazare’s anti-corruption movement after having been caught on camera making critical remarks about “Team Hazare.” In fact, recalling the notorious holy man confidence tricksters of the Kautiliya Arthasatra (see Mabbett 2010), the accusation was that he had been placed by the Indian government as a kind of secret agent in order to poison the movement from within. Though his choice of media was certainly bold, his entry into the house was carefully choreographed. He did not participate as a contestant but as a guest and stayed in the house for only a few days. (This meant he did not have to do the embarrassing dance routine). He managed to persuade quarrelsome inmates to grant him a separate room for sleeping, to call him “Swamiji” and to show him respect despite their thinking him an obscure soothsayer on first encountering him. It is not certain if he succeeded in his original intention of conveying messages of social justice to younger viewers, but his carefully managed exposure certainly contained elements of performative elevation and distance as well as invasive scrutiny. Like Nithyananda before him he sought to employ the same technologies that had “exposed” him in order to reconstitute a measure of his diminished auratic authority.

**Asceticism and accusation**

The Nithyananda sex scandal was scandalous not merely because it visually exposed his (supposed) sex acts. Rather, it was disturbing because the controlled distant effect of his guruhood had been violated. Instead of regarding the guru from a ritually and socially constructed distance, people were suddenly transported into his bedroom. Producing controlled distance between the public (or devotees) and the guru ensures the paradoxical co-existence of the transcendental nature of the guru and his public immediacy. In the case of Nithyananda, the scandal seemed to assume complete precedence over his mediated authority.

Of course “guru scandal” is not itself a new phenomenon. Succession scandals among militant ascetics in the early nineteenth century (Pinch 2012), the infamous “Maharaj Libel Case” of the 1860s, the deportation of Osho from the United States, the murder and sex abuse allegations within Sathya Sai Baba’s ashram, and the murder charge against Kanchi Shankarachariya in 2004, are just a few examples. In a literary version of the televisual and Internet exposés discussed above, various writers have in addition been concerned to “uncover” homoeroticism within the teachings of various saints and saintly figures. Books such as Kali’s Child (Kripal 1995), which discusses the revered Sri Ramakrishna,

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22 *The Hindu*, November 11, 2011
and David Lelyveld’s *Great Soul* (2011), on Mahatma Gandhi’s life and career, have often been accused of entertaining baseless accusations against great men, resulting in nationwide controversies involving both scholars and political activists, calls for bans, and sometimes physical violence.

In view of such examples of accusation and exposé, the Nithyananda case might be legitimately considered “just another” guru controversy. Nevertheless, it possesses several exemplary features. First, there is the aspect of its mediatization. As was noted above, the scandal, intensely visibilized, became a YouTube phenomenon and was reported on national news and even in some international newspapers. To borrow from Thompson’s (2005: 43) discussion of media and political scandal in the UK, it seems likely that the growing prevalence of controversies involving gurus has less to do with a general decline in the moral standards of gurus than with the changing ways in which, and the extent to which, the activities of gurus are made visible in the public domain. Second, the scandal revealed the extent to which modern Indian sensitivities are still invested in the icon of the celibate, non-sexual guru-renouncer. From such a standpoint, whether the guru had affairs with female disciples was less important than the fact that he had violated the ideal of the sacred guru-renouncer. In fact, if one has the patience to watch extremely long YouTube clips, it is clear that, in the expression of one commentator, “there is no sex as we know it.” One could even say that the intimate acts captured in the video were no more than religious discipleship frequently allows, including “unusual, physical intimacies (such as massaging the feet) between female disciples and male guru” (Khandelwal 1997: 93). Nithyananda himself claimed in a public statement that “I am not a man. There is no way I could have indulged in sexual activities with women. Do a potency test on me.”23 Claiming his impotency as a proof of his innocence may be pitiable but it reveals what is at stake within modern ascetic ideals.

The concept of *brahmachari* (celibacy) as a crucial linkage between sexuality and Indian nationalism has been the subject of much scholarly discussion (Alter 1994a, 1994b, 1996; Chowdhury 2001; Kakar 1990; Nandy 1983; Prakash 2000; Skaria 2010). Two prominent nationalists, Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi, although quite differently, were notable for their re-interpretation of the traditional concept of *brahmachari* as a means to achieve perfect self-control and true Indian masculinity. Classical Hindu texts define *brahmacharya* as the first stage of the four-fold ideal life cycle. *Brahmacharya* is the stage of initiated studentship, which marks the ritual initiation of second birth for high-caste twice-born boys. Combined with South Asian ideas of seminal discharge as a loss of vital energy (Srivastava 2007), modern nationalists developed the concept of *brahmachari* as one opposed to Western masculinity (Alter 1994b: 49; Chowdhury 2001: 120-149). While western masculinity was based on physical strength, its eastern counterpart was viewed as an embodiment of spiritual strength deriving from self-control over bodily desires and especially total restraint from sex. In the construction of ascetic nationalism, womanhood can similarly only enter in the form of an idealized Mother, certainly not as sexual partner or wife (Chowdhury 2001: 131-135; Charu Gupta 2001).

23 *Times of India*, April 30, 2010
However, in the case of Gandhi the woman is already an ideal mystic. According to Mehta (1993: 182), Gandhi came to believe that “if he was ever to grow into a perfect brahmachari—achieve universality and union with God—he must, like some Hindu brahmachari mystics, become physically and spiritually more like a woman, or, rather, embrace in his person both male and female attributes” (Mehta 1993: 182). For Gandhi, like most of his contemporaries, female sexual desire simply did not exist and the early history of Hindu eroticism was completely forgotten (Doniger 2011). On the perfect brahmachari, Gandhi writes: “Even his sexual organs will begin to look different . . . it is said that impotent [men] . . . desire erection but they fail to get it and yet have seminal discharges. . . . But the cultivated impotency of the man whose sexual desire has been burnt up and whose sexual secretions are being converted into vital force . . . is to be desired by everybody” (quoted in Mehta 1993: 182).

Echoing the militant ascetics of the eighteenth-century (Pinch 2012), the ideal model of the ascetic nationalist develops pure loyalty towards the nation and the vital force derived from complete self-control becomes a strong force for countering colonial domination. Here it seems that the erotic religious imaginary of older versions of Hinduism—which thrived through ancient cults of fertility, medieval devotional eroticism, and Tantric traditions—has been completely subsumed by modern incarnations of asceticism. However, as Doniger (2011) argues, the two aspects—one the path of domesticity (or eroticism), the other the path of renunciation—have historically co-existed in the Hindu imaginary. The genealogy of female gurus, which Pechilis carefully traces (2012), describes one such interaction between these two paths. “Traditionally women have been completely excluded from the gurukula system in which student-disciples reside with the guru and study at his feet, enabling master-gurus and student-disciples to develop intimate relationships and lineages of philosophical thought. Women represent “domesticity” (marriage, kinship, practicality), defined in opposition to the kinless creation of the guru lineage, within which they thus cannot hope to participate. Yet despite this structural obstruction, female gurus existed even in canonical Hindu scriptures. Here Pechilis evokes resonances with one of the strongest feminist messages of the 1960s and 70s: “the personal is political” (Hanisch). Situated outside the institutionalized system of initiation and renunciation, female gurus are inevitably transgressive. But instead of directly confronting the dominance of the male, they have subtly redefined and appropriated a number of rules and conventions characteristic of the guru-disciple relation. By questioning, testing and tricking their male counterparts or husbands, female gurus of pre-modern times caused them to realize limitations intrinsic to the knowledge-centered path toward spiritual insights, thereby opening new paths of personal experience. Moreover, contemporary female gurus have begun prioritizing the personal experience of devotees over the presence of gurus and centralized organizations. Importantly, what this suggests is the survival of a long established alternative path to male-centered asceticism within the Hindu imaginary; which is to say that uncontainable guru-ship could not be contained in one gender alone.

24 See also Pechilis 2004 and Huffer 2010 on female gurus in the United States and Khandelwal 2009 on Hindu female ascetics in general.
Political asanas
Following our earlier discussion of “ballot babas” and devotee mobilization, we now consider more closely the political lives of Indian gurus. A recent Wall Street Journal news item, headlined “India’s Government by Guru,” stated: “Only an incorruptible man can beat a corrupt system. That’s what many Indians have begun to think after witnessing a spate of graft scandals”. The report was in response to high-profile campaigns spearheaded by yoga guru Swami Ramdev and Gandhian activist Anna Hazare in 2011 against state corruption and the flow of “black money” to foreign bank accounts. The point about incorruptibility is significant. As Ikegame notes (2012a), a guru’s putative kinlessness can cause him to be seen as an ideal figure for politics because, lacking children to direct funds to, they are considered far less likely to succumb to corrupt practices. (See also Cohen [2004: 187] on perceptions of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who did not marry, as a worldly ascetic. This meant that, like issueless Hijra politicians, he could be better imagined as serving the nation rather than being parasitical on it for family gain). It should be noted that the celibate yoga guru Ramdev has on more than one occasion voiced his intention to form a political party. Might Hazare and Ramdev be considered heirs to the saintly political idiom, discussed by Morris-Jones (1963) and Nandy (1970) and most famously exemplified by Gandhi, where in a seeming challenge to Dumont’s (1970) insistence on an absolute distinction between the politico-economic arena of artha and the moral order of dharma, (ascetic) suppression of desires comes to legitimise—to lend force to—political participation? While Ramdev invokes Gandhi in calling for a “satyagraha against corruption,” he has also demanded the hanging of corrupt politicians and, as we shall see, also called for the creation of a “yoga army.” Despite such periodic “saintly” challenges to politics as usual, however, for Jaffrelot (2012) the more powerful underlying model, frequently occluded by the theatricality of the saintly intervention, is one in which ascetics and politicians collaborate in the exercise of power. Such a perspective requires that we maintain Dumont’s distinction between artha and dharma whilst calling attention to ways in which political power nonetheless “has constant relations” with the spiritual sphere.

The aforementioned Wall Street Journal item proceeds to bemoan the political interventions of such unelected figures as Ramdev and Hazare whose campaigns of civil disobedience have led to a situation in which “fasts and protests—and, at times, mob violence—are now common vehicles of policy-making” (cf. Chakrabarty 2007). Unelected and unaccountable, the author’s view is that gurus should be kept separate and separable from the political domain. Government ministers were trenchantly critical of Swami Ramdev for engaging in anti-democratic “political asanas”; that is, for illegitimately mixing yogic spirituality with politics. Having been forcibly removed by police from the Ramlila Maidan in Delhi where he was

26 http://www.ndtv.com/article/india/ramdev-threat-will-build-an-army-arm-protesters-110874&c
27 It is worth noting that pre-colonial states allowed differing political segments considerable autonomy, with gurus and their institutions sharing sovereignty with the king (Ikegame 2012a, 2012b). Powerful local gurus, king-like, would frequently resolve local disputes, collect tax/donations, and distribute a range of welfare services.
undertaking an anti-corruption fast, Swami Ramdev was reported to have threatened to set up a yoga militia for self-defense: “Next time at Ramlila, it will be Ravanlila. Let’s see who gets beaten up.” Baba Ramdev detailed the arms training plan: “Twenty youth from each region will come forward for the fight against corruption. These young people should be 35-40 years old. Not only men, young women must also join them. They must be dedicated, ready to make the ultimate sacrifice. They will be given arms training. We will build an army of 11,000 men and women.” Congress spokespeople described the interventions of Ramdev and Hazare, variously, as “anti-national” and “anti-democratic.” These events in summer 2011 were certainly dramatic, but not altogether novel, for the guru in South Asia has long been a figure of multiple political entanglements.

To begin with, accusations concerning gurus’ lack of democratic accountability are not new (Jaffrelot 2012). As we noted earlier, the RSS would like to consider itself a kind of Raj guru, and its influence, in particular over the Janata Party when it was in power having ousted the Congress, post-Emergency, in 1977, led to accusations that it was seeking a role incompatible with democracy. Parliamentarians sympathetic to the RSS were accused of a “dual membership” discordant with (and deeply compromising of) their elected status. Politicians of all varieties seek the assistance of gurus, whether in public or secretly (usually when either they are Tantric or in other ways “disreputable” [Jaffrelot 2012] or when their party’s public stance, as with the CPM in West Bengal, is “anti-guru” [see McDaniel 2000: 79]). But they seek, so to speak, to contain them even as they deploy them. But “uncontainable” gurus are not necessarily amenable to their own controlled deployment, as we have seen. The case of government attempts to harness the authority of Sikh “holy-man” figure Bhindranwale provides a telling example of this."

As we have noted, a further aspect of the 2011 guru-led anti-corruption campaign was Ramdev’s declaration of militaristic intent. In a recent brilliant exploration of interrelations between slavery and religious discipleship in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century north India, Pinch (2012) demonstrates that the notion of the guru as a military commander possesses historical antecedents. Exploring the “shared ground of slavery and discipleship,” Pinch attempts to account for and interpret critical changes in the intellectual history of spiritual and political authority in relation to the values and ethics of being a devotee. Many of the chelas in pre-modern ascetic armies, notes Pinch (2012: 64), were in fact “slaves acquired in their infancy by their guru-commanders.” In the nineteenth-century the practice became increasingly controversial partly as a result of testimonies from former slave-chelas but also through the efforts of Company officials who tackled the issue in tandem with that of “thuggee.” Pinch’s principal case study concerns the succession of guru-ship. On the death in 1804 of Anupgiri, commander of a prominent gosain army, it was his infant son, Narindragiri, who was installed as his successor, rather than his more militarily accomplished brother

28 Ibid. I.e., it will not be the play (lila) of the righteous god Ram, but the play of the demon-king Ravana.

29 Initially a campaigner against perceived heresy within Sikhism, Bhindranwale became the figurehead of the Khalistan movement. He was killed in 1983 along with 500 of his followers in Sikhism’s holiest shrine, the Golden Temple, by Indian Armed Forces.
Umraogiri. Kanchangiri, a senior *chela* of Anupgiri—possibly with the connivance of the political agent John Baillie—had outmanoeuvred Umraogiri in order to become the power behind the throne. The intrigue lies in the origins of the “son” Narindragiri, for in fact evidence points towards his being purchased as a slave-*chela* in Lucknow. This substitution of an adopted slave-disciple for kin-member in fact demonstrates the mutability of each category. As Pinch remarks (ibid.: 69), “slavery, discipleship, birth, and ‘adoption’—and the mediation of these statuses by officials of the Company state—were central to the transition from late Mughal to early British rule.” As we noted earlier, gurus’ “kinlessness” can cause them to be viewed as trustworthy political actors. Pinch notes that guru-commanders may have similarly favored slave-*chelas* because, unlike “voluntary” *chelas*, they perform no competing loyalties to natal kin.

One of the vital insights of Pinch’s study is that common to slavery and renunciation is social death—in both cases, one’s former life is abandoned. Such “functional similarities between discipleship and slavery,” states Pinch (ibid.: 71), “would have given rise to the social, semantic, and historical proximity [between them].” It should be noted that the kind of slavery at stake in the case of ascetic armies was not that of the racialized Atlantic variant. Indeed, Anupgiri and Umraogiri began their military careers as slave-disciples, rising in each case to the level of guru-commander. The key observation here is that master-slave, guru-*chela* and parent-child relationships may overlap and, indeed, constitute “forms of each other” (ibid.: 74).

If in pre-modern north India master-slave and guru-*chela* relationships both involved absolute submission to the will of another, the authoritarian or coercive nature of the guru’s leadership continues to be much commented upon. During the aforementioned anti-corruption agitation of 2011, political analyst and economist Jayati Ghosh stated: “Ramdev and Hazare are fundamentally very populist. They are authoritarian, with a simplistic message and are extremely socially and politically conservative.” Kakar (2011), too, has commented on a relation between “godmen” and “the anti-intellectual and authoritarian tendencies of Hindu society.” We could easily take this perspective further: Borneman (2004: 4), for instance, has recently argued that among the most notable aspects of totalitarian regimes “is their reliance on both premodern and modern forms of sovereignty, death cults and biopolitics, as well as a demand for subjective identification with the father.” Often known to their devotees as “Pita Ji” or “Bapu”—both terms mean father—gurus frequently seem to achieve just such a subjective identification. The guru’s medicalized humanitarianism, already referred to and which is dependent on the guru’s access to the bio-capital of the devotee’s body, is suggestive of the ready incorporation of the biopolitical into forms of traditional sovereignty. Borneman (2004: 19) also notes that “Mussolini, Hitler, and Ceausescu . . . each had a peculiar relation to the conjugal couple, marriage and reproduction. Mussolini, for example, organized large collective weddings in the name of the people.” Likewise, we were present when the DSS guru, whom his devotees call Pita Ji, performed just such a collective wedding in Sirsa, Haryana, with more than 30 couples marrying during the same simple ceremony.


31 *India Today*, May 9, 2011.
Moreover, the oft-noted admiration of Hitler among some sections of the Indian middle classes has been attributed to his guru-like qualities. In a recent essay on British Second World War propaganda in India, Mazzarella (2010b: 9) quotes a 1941 administrative report from the Indian northwest:

India, as you know, is the land of mystics and people here especially the masses have a great faith in mysticism. Certain sections of the mystics, perhaps impressed by the Nazi successes in Europe, have come to believe that Hitler has been endowed with some supernatural powers and that is why he has been successfully challenging the invincible might of the British Empire.” . . . And while the British . . . routinely tried to discredit the Congress by associating it with fascism, the following comment was overheard in February 1941 by a Ministry informant in Madras: “Hitler is a good man; he does not drink or smoke and is a vegetarian; only in the matter of violence does he differ from Gandhi.

It should be noted that our purpose in presenting these examples is to note the (longstanding) currency of such perceptions rather than simply to endorse their conclusions. Given the extremely wide range of “styles of adherence” it would be foolish to generalize too readily concerning the forms of power embodied in guru-chela relationships. Certainly, far from unquestioning obedience, studies of “middle class” gurus such as Mata Amritanadamayi (Warrier 2005) and Swami Dayananda (Fuller and Harriss 2005) have emphasized the role of picking and choosing one’s guru from among the many presented in the present “dense religious marketplace.” In contrast to Kakar’s (1982: 47) contention that devotees are infantilized by their dependence on spiritual masters and the fairly typical claim that gurus replace “true listening” with “submission” (Badrinath 1993: 46), Warrier (2003) sees gurus such as Mata Amritanandamayi and Sathya Sai Baba as forming part of a landscape of religious figures in which choice and flexibility reign supreme, with devotees acting reflectively to revise their religious identities as they see fit. It is not lack or alienation (Kakar 1982; Varma 1998) or the desire to prostrate themselves before an imposing authority figure which leads mainly middle class Indians to join such movements, but “the hope of increasing possibilities and multiplying opportunities” (Warrier 2003: 231).

McKean (1996), like Nanda (2009), Warrier (2005) and Fuller and Harriss (2005), draws a portrait of devotees as consumers. She is far more willing than these other authors, however, to embrace the familiar depiction of the guru as an authoritarian figure. Like the corporate manager, she says, the guru “desires to control subordinates” (McKean 1996: 9). While we cannot endorse her broad-brush characterization of contemporary gurus as thuggish “big men” whose modus operandi is “greed, guile, and violence” (ibid.: 23), there is nonetheless much of interest in her analysis. In particular we would point to her incisive remarks concerning the guru-devotee relationship as one of radical asymmetrical exchange. “The figure of the guru,” she states, “provides a model for relations of asymmetrical exchange. . . . The guru always gives more than the disciple or devotee could possibly reciprocate” (ibid.: 5). This asymmetry and indebtedness has had, for centuries, consequences that exceed the specificity of the guru-disciple relationship—for instance, their complex imbrication with Company rule as discussed by Pinch (2006, 2012). We turn now to a significant contemporary
“recombination” of this relation between guru-disciple asymmetry and governance—in particular, as it pertains to state policies of economic liberalization.

**Guru governmentality?**

Recent years have seen increasing scholarly attention directed towards the contribution of guru-led (or inspired) sects to “modern, secular, developmental activities” such as relief work after major disasters, the setting up of hospitals and colleges, and so on (Shah 2006: 244; Beckerlegge 2006; S. Srinivas 2008; Copeman 2009). Indeed, the provision of free eye operation and “checkup” camps and blood donation activities forms part of a “common repertoire of social service engagements” undertaken by guru-led service organizations (Warrier 2003: 241). One could say that such activities are at once emblematic and a furtherance of the guru’s multiple societal “entanglements.” But what has this to do with McKean’s (1996: 5) aforementioned remarks concerning asymmetrical exchange?

A critical way in which devotees seek to repay their indebtedness is through acts of *guru-seva* as a kind of counter-gift that can never measure up—hence its repetition. Now, though gurus declare that their humanitarian activities are *manav-seva* (service of humanity), devotees may view them just as much (if not more) as *guru-seva*, since it is their gurus who ask them to do it and whom, in effect, their activities serve to glorify. Though classically involving ministering to the guru “by performing the work of a menial, by massaging his feet, and by writing down his words” (Mayer 1981: 158–159), *guru-seva*, in many contexts, is typified by a very particular corporeality that can involve physically imperiling tests of devotion. Gold (1987: 175-6), for instance, recounts the devotion of Gorakh, a *nath* yogi, to his guru Matsyendra. Gorakh procured food for his hungry guru in exchange for both of his eyes. Similarly, in founding the *khalsa*, the “pure” Sikh order, Guru Gobind Singh demanded that five volunteers offer him their lives. Such stories demonstrate “the disciple’s ardent desire to serve” (ibid). As has already been suggested, the corporeality of *seva* persists in a newer domain of the medicalized gift—blood donation, the pledging of eyes and bodies, the organization of free “health camps” for the poor—such that we might begin to speak of a biopolitics of devotion. Such service is “humanitarian”—for instance, health camps are usually co-organized with an organization such as the Red Cross—and yet, for devotees, their participation is a gift to—service of—the guru. In other words, the large-scale service feats enacted by a multitude of guru-organizations are in large measure an effect of a guru-devotee model typified by asymmetrical exchange; *guru-seva* the repeated attempt to repay that which cannot be repaid.

“Governmentality,” a term famously introduced by Foucault (1991), has been much elaborated and adapted in recent years the better to take into account the concurrent processes of economic liberalization globally in our time (e.g., Rose 1996). By speaking of “guru governmentality,” our aim is simply to draw attention to ways in which the Indian state now “borrows” from or harnesses the guru-devotee relationship in order to fulfill certain governmental ends. For Foucault (1991), governmentality referred to “a nexus of institutions, of objects, and of disciplines—especially ‘population’ and ‘economy’ as objects of knowledge and

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32 Warrier (2003) suggests that such organisations engage in *seva* activities at least in part as a means of divesting themselves of wealth for tax purposes.
zones for systematic intervention—that took hold in Western European society at some point in the eighteenth-century” (Spencer 2007: 109). The concept aimed to illuminate the multitude of techniques employed in the organization of power, bringing to the fore the how of exercising power (Merlingen 2003). It was concerned, in other words, with “the conduct of conduct” (Dean 1999: 10). Moreover, Foucault was interested in non-state modes of the exercise of power at least as much as in those officially embedded within state institutions (Spencer 2007: 109). And as Ferguson & Gupta (2002: 989) note, the concept of governmentality more recently has been refined in order to take account of intensified logics of economic liberalization globally: “Although this move to neoliberalism has often been understood (and variously celebrated or lamented, depending on one’s politics) as a ‘retreat’ or ‘rolling back’ of the state [scholars have stressed] that it has, rather, entailed a transfer of the operations of government (in Foucault’s extended sense) to non-state entities [such that] the social and regulatory operations of the state are increasingly ‘de-statized,’ and taken over by a proliferation of quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations”.

A number of compelling examples suggest that throughout India quasi-autonomous guru organisations are resituating themselves in relation to state provision activities, with gurus treated increasingly as a kind of governmental shortcut well suited to the present economic milieu. For instance, when in 2007 the rate of farmer suicides in Maharashtra could finally be ignored no longer, “instead of attending to the problems of indebtedness and low infrastructural facilities under which cotton farmers in Vidharbha labour, the ministers [advocated] breathing lessons by Sri Sri Ravishankar and religious discourses by other assorted swamis” (Gupta 2009: 81). Exploring local guru institutions in Karnataka (called mathas) and their employment of welfare activities as a means of situating themselves within the neoliberal economic and political agenda of the Indian state, Ikegame (2012a) provides a further vivid example of this phenomenon.

There is a longstanding tradition of socially and politically active mathas in rural Karnataka. Recently, many powerful mathas—Veerashiva, but also Brahmin and backward caste—have expanded their social activities and now operate thousands of educational institutions, free hospitals, free mid-day school lunch schemes, and even courts at which the guru resolves everyday conflicts. Commentators have been quick to declare that the matha has become a parallel state. Far from being disturbed by this development, the BJP-led state government has begun to use mathas as their executive agents through which the state distributes funds. Such a combination of the matha and state sponsorship forms an example of what Ikegame calls a Sacred Public-Private-Partnership. The idea that if private and public funds are directed through a guru-led organization, they will be well spent (more wisely than through government agencies) is widely shared amongst the people of Karnataka, partly as a consequence of the fact, already referred to, that a renouncer’s lack of kin creates an impression of incorruptibility.

Indian guru-led movements’ profile is thus increasingly prominent as a key component of the quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations that “fill in” for a state in the process of abandoning its commitment to socialist principles. Guru governmentality is not “just another” agency of devolved governance. First, its mode of operation is guru-seva, such that we witness a relationship consequent on radical asymmetrical exchange harnessed for governmental ends in an era of
liberalization. Second, as a consequence of this, the “work” of humanitarian provision—whether the context is developmental, disaster-relief, or the giving of “civil gifts” in health camps (Cohen 2011)—is, from a devotee’s perspective, likely to be far from value-neutral. So, for instance, the leprosy medicine prescribed by Aghor ascetics is *prashad*, brimming with the guru’s blessings (Barrett 2008: 94, 122); Sathya Sai Baba’s biomedical hospitals “rest on a spiritual vision” and are offered on the understanding that “the day will surely come when the hospital will be superfluous since all will be healthy, accepting the *sadhana* way” (S. Srinivas 2008: 125); and certain Nirankari devotees donate their blood with the emphasis being as much on spiritually transforming transfusion recipients as saving them (Copeman 2009: ch. 4). We add the important caveat, however, that such understandings, significant though they are, must not be carelessly generalized. It is certainly not always the case that guru movements, in taking on multiple roles of provision, infuse what were previously viewed as “secular” practices with a new and transformative religiosity (Ikegame’s aforementioned study illustrates this point well). The more important point is that retooling *guru-seva* governmentally is at the same time the repurposing of an “authoritarian” aspect of the devotional relationship in order to produce “humanitarian” or “developmental” effects. Insofar as a logic associated with one domain (*bhakti*) is transferred to another (governmental), with the production of potentially unanticipated results (e.g., life *changing* as well as life *saving* blood transfusions), we are provided here with a further striking example of the domaining effects of the guru.

All this is also reminiscent, of course, of the idea of the guru as an inclusive singularity. Magnified persons, they contain a devotee constituency mobilizable not only for electoral but also for developmental purposes. For instance, the recruitment of voluntary blood donors in the country is conducted according to just such a model of mobilization (Copeman 2009). But it can be difficult to “contain” the container, as the 2011 corruption controversy demonstrated, and harnessing the intensity of the guru-devotee relationship for governmental or other ends is by no means a simple operation; moreover, the guru as a political actor is not always an uncontroversial proposition for those who would safeguard “democracy.” The guru’s multifarious political roles, nonetheless, are such that we might begin to think in terms of a “guru governmentality.”

**Conclusion**

We have been at pains to emphasize that we are by no means dismissive of the rich existing literature on spiritual leadership in the region; rather, we seek to build on it and take it further. Troubling propriety and crossing easy boundaries, “the guru” does not refer to a consistent body of knowledge and practice (Cohen 2012: 99). Perhaps the quality most common to the guru across its manifold individuals, institutions and logics is that of uncontainability. Guru-ship is a suggestible form: as a principle-cum-model it affords movement between domains; the extension and transformation of modes of power; scaling up/down; the expansion/containment of persons.

As a domain crossing par excellence, the figure of the guru demonstrates that such domains—religion, politics, economy, “local” culture, “global” culture—“are mutually implicated, in ways that cannot be anticipated but have to be explored and narrated” (Jenkins 2010: 93). The guru thus comes to appear something like
Mauss’ “total” social phenomenon. This observation gives rise to recognition of several possible analytical limitations that we see as requiring further elaboration in future scholarship. First, statements to the effect that gurus cross domains or boundaries seem to unhelpfully entrench (or reinstate) such boundaries in stating that they have been breached. We might respond that we are merely drawing attention to boundaries delineated by the subjects of our writing and that in any case maintaining certain distinctions is necessary in order to be able to recognize their porousness in given situations (the signal extensibility of the guru’s form and reach in this case)—but a discomfiture remains.

Second, our characterization of the guru as a magnified person or “inclusive singularity” would require a refinement that granted greater recognition to the potential for messiness and inconclusiveness inherent within the strategies of affiliation and enfolding we examined. To return to Sathya Sai Baba, T. Srinivas (2010: 68) notes that “having established himself as an avatar on earth to educate human beings, he then [sought] to establish a connection to divine beings from other faiths.” One such connection was with Jesus Christ, but “some divinities are difficult to enfold” (ibid.: 86), and a degree of controversy (what T. Srinivas terms a “translation failure”) resulted. We may also recall here the “Maharaj libel case” of the 1860s, which hinged on allegations of adulterous behavior among gosains of the _pushtimarg_. The gosains’ claim was that they were enacting Krishna’s play, but though counted as “part” of the founder guru Vallabha, it was a bridge too far to count them as one with Krishna (the claim seemed simply opportunistic) (Gold 1988: 90-1). The _gosains_ were thus _not_ counted as one with Krishna; what thereby resulted was a classic in the genre of “guru scandal.” The guru therefore cannot be assumed to always enact successful containment.

We have explored here the guru’s expansive agency, but it is necessary to re-emphasize the differential multiplicity of meanings condensed within guru-ship that are the condition of possibility of such agency. Famously, for Lévi-Strauss (1950: xlix-I), a floating signifier was “a meaning-bearing unit that nevertheless has no distinct meaning” (Faubion 2010: 93). Lévi-Strauss was discussing the Pacific islander concept of _mana_, but the guru, too, possesses the “semiotic limitlessness” characteristic of the floating signifier. Floating signifiers are “especially effective carriers of the transcendent and the absolute . . . in lacking determination, the floating signifier also positively conveys an omnipotentiality that remains not merely undifferentiated but also auratic, atmospheric, ineffable, beyond articulation” (ibid.). Gurus, likewise, have been famously characterized as being beyond all limiting categories (Babb 1986: 147; T. Srinivas 2010: 66). It seems likely that it is at least in part because guru-ship is akin to a floating signifier, lacking determination, that it can participate in so many domains while generating a sense of omnipotentiality. If the floating signifier constitutes “the semiotic abyss that is also a plenitude and thus a topos of the excess that can only be experienced, never pinned down or spelled out” (Faubion 2010: 93), we might say that guru-focused scholarship cannot hope to pin down the nature of guru-ship but rather simply act as another of its staging posts as it moves between domains and troubles cherished distinctions.
References


Kaur, Raminder. n.d. “A nuclear cyberia: interfacing science, culture and ethnography of a township’s social media.”


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**Logiques gourou**

Résumé: Ce commentaire souligne la diversité des thématiques et schémas conceptuels engagés par la gourou-ité, et sa capacité — comme ensemble de principes tout autant que de personnes — à prendre part et se déplacer entre de multiples domaines sociaux et conceptuels. L’objectif est de reconsidérer une part de la littérature sur la gourou-ité en développant un outillage analytique afin de faciliter de futures recherches et de stimuler de nouvelles analyses du phénomène. Nous proposons d’envisager le gourou comme une forme sociale inhabituelle de suggestibilité. La multiplicité et la diversité des intrications entre le politique et l’économique chez le gourou nous orientent vers une perception de son incontenabilité, une particularité qui, de manière ironique, repose au moins partiellement sur sa capacité à contenir de multiples autres (principalement ses dévots et ses incarnations antérieures). Nous présentons l’étude du cas d’un gourou avatar — un cas particulièrement prolifique de « collectionneur d’associations » — qui exemplifie la personnalité expansive du gourou en tant que « singularité inclusive ». Insistant sur les formes plurielles de la gourou-ité, nous définissons des catégories d’anti-gourou et de gourou collectif tout en attirant l’attention sur la capacité mimétique du gourou et son rôle complexe dans l’imaginaire, le fantasme, et les politiques du genre. Les fonctions gouvernementales et politiques de la gourou-ité sont également analysées. La « gouvernementalité gourou » n’est pas juste une capacité d’action de la gouvernance déléguée dans une ère de libéralisation économique, mais la réorganisation de la relation gourou-adepte, ayant pour but de produire des effets « humanitaires » ou de « développement » qui, du point de vue des adeptes, pourraient difficilement être dépeints comme « laïcs ».

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Rajneesh (born Chandra Mohan Jain, 11 December 1931 – 19 January 1990), also known as Acharya Rajneesh,[1] Bhagwan Shri Rajneesh, Bhagwan Rajneesh, Osho Rajneesh and later as Osho (/ˈoʊʃoʊ/), was an Indian godman,[2] mystic, and founder of the Rajneesh movement.

During his lifetime, he was viewed as a controversial new religious movement leader and mystic. In the 1960s, he travelled throughout India as a public speaker and was a vocal critic of socialism, arguing that India was not ready for socialism, and that socialism, communism, and anarchism could evolve only when capitalism had reached its maturity. Rajneesh also criticised Mahatma Gandhi[3][4][5] and the orthodoxy of mainstream religions.[6][7][8] Rajneesh emphasised the importance of meditation, mindfulness, love, celebration, courage, creativity, and humour—qualities that he viewed as being suppressed by adherence to static belief systems, religious tradition, and socialisation. In advocating a more open attitude to human sexuality[8] he caused controversy in India during the late 1960s and became known as "the sex guru".[9][10]

In 1970, Rajneesh spent time in Mumbai initiating followers known as "neo-sannyasins". During this period he expanded his spiritual teachings and commented extensively in discourses on the writings of religious traditions, mystics, bhakti poets, and philosophers from around the world. In 1974, Rajneesh relocated to Pune, where an ashram was established and a variety of therapies, incorporating methods first developed by the Human Potential Movement, were offered to a growing Western following.[11][12] By the late 1970s, the tension between the ruling Janata Party government of Morarji Desai and the movement led to a curbing of the ashram's development and a back tax claim estimated at $5 million.[13]

In 1981, the Rajneesh movement's efforts refocused on activities in the United States and Rajneesh relocated to a facility known as Rajneeshpuram in Wasco County, Oregon. Almost immediately the movement ran into conflict with county residents and the state government, and a succession of legal battles concerning the ashram's construction and continued development curtailed its success. In 1985, in the wake of a series of serious crimes by his followers, including a mass food poisoning attack with salmonella bacteria and an aborted assassination plot to murder U.S. Attorney Charles H. Turner, Rajneesh alleged that his personal secretary Ma Anand Sheela and her close supporters had been responsible.[14] He was later deported from the United States in accordance with an Alford plea bargain.[15][16][17]
After his deportation, 21 countries denied him entry. He ultimately returned to India and revived the Pune ashram, where he died in 1990. Rajneesh's ashram, now known as OSHO International Meditation Resort, and all associated intellectual property, is managed by the registered Osho International Foundation (formerly Rajneesh International Foundation). Rajneesh's teachings have had an impact on Western New Age thought and their popularity has reportedly increased since his death.

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Rajneesh (a childhood nickname from Sanskrit रजनी rajanee, night and ईश isha, lord meaning the "God of Night" or "The Moon" चंद्रा Chandra) was born Chandra Mohan Jain, the eldest of 11 children of a cloth merchant, at his maternal grandparents' house in Kuchwada; a small village in the Raisen District of Madhya Pradesh state in India. By Rajneesh's own account, this was a major influence on his development because his grandmother gave him the utmost freedom, leaving him carefree without an imposed education or restrictions. When he was seven years old, his grandfather died, and he went to Gadarwara to live with his parents. Rajneesh was profoundly affected by his grandfather's death, and again by the death of his childhood girlfriend and cousin Shashi from typhoid when he was 15, leading to a preoccupation with death that lasted throughout much of his childhood and youth. In his school years, he was a gifted and rebellious student, and gained a reputation as a formidable debater. Rajneesh became critical of traditional religion, took an interest in many methods to expand consciousness, including breath control, yogic exercises, meditation, fasting, the occult, and hypnosis. He became briefly associated with socialism and two Indian nationalist organisations: the Indian National Army and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. However, his membership in the organisations was short-lived as he could not submit to any external discipline, ideology, or system.

University years and public speaker: 1951–1970

In 1951, aged 19, Rajneesh began his studies at Hitkarini College in Jabalpur. Asked to leave after conflicts with an instructor, he transferred to D. N. Jain College, also in Jabalpur. Having proved himself to be disruptively argumentative, he was not required to attend college classes at D. N. Jain College except for examinations and used his free time to work for a few months as an assistant editor at a local newspaper. He began speaking in public at the annual Sarva Dharma Sammelan (Meeting of all faiths) held at Jabalpur, organised by the Taranpanthi Jain community into which he was born, and participated there from 1951 to 1968. He resisted his parents' pressure to marry. Rajneesh later said he became spiritually enlightened on 21 March 1953, when he was 21 years old, in a mystical experience while sitting under a tree in the Bhanvartal garden in Jabalpur.

Having completed his BA in philosophy at D. N. Jain College in 1955, he joined the University of Sagar, where in 1957 he earned his MA in philosophy (with distinction). He immediately secured a teaching position at Raipur Sanskrit College, but the vice-chancellor soon asked him to seek a transfer as he considered him a danger to his students' morality, character, and religion. From 1958, he taught philosophy as a lecturer at Jabalpur University, being promoted to professor in 1960. A popular lecturer, he was acknowledged by his peers as an exceptionally intelligent man who had been able to overcome the deficiencies of his early small-town education.

In parallel to his university job, he travelled throughout India under the name Acharya Rajneesh (Acharya means teacher or professor; Rajneesh was a nickname he had acquired in childhood), giving lectures critical of socialism, Gandhi, and institutional religions. He said that socialism would socialise only poverty, and he described Gandhi as a masochist reactionary who worshipped poverty. What India needed to escape its backwardness was capitalism, science, modern technology, and birth control. He criticised orthodox Indian religions as dead, filled with empty ritual, oppressing their followers with fears of damnation and promises of blessings. Such statements made him controversial, but also gained him a loyal following that included a number of wealthy merchants and businessmen. These sought individual consultations from him about
their spiritual development and daily life, in return for donations and his practice snowballed.[44] From 1962, he began to lead 3- to 10-day meditation camps, and the first meditation centres (Jivan Jagruti Kendra) started to emerge around his teaching, then known as the Life Awakening Movement (Jivan Jagruti Andolan).[45] After a controversial speaking tour in 1966, he resigned from his teaching post at the request of the university.[4]

In a 1968 lecture series, later published under the title From Sex to Superconsciousness, he scandalised Hindu leaders by calling for freer acceptance of sex and became known as the "sex guru" in the Indian press.[10][8] When in 1969 he was invited to speak at the Second World Hindu Conference, despite the misgivings of some Hindu leaders, his statements raised controversy again when he said, "Any religion which considers life meaningless and full of misery and teaches the hatred of life, is not a true religion. Religion is an art that shows how to enjoy life."[46] He compared the treatment of lower caste shudras and women with the treatment of animals.[47] He characterised brahmin as being motivated by self-interest, provoking the Shankaracharya of Puri, who tried in vain to have his lecture stopped.[46]

### Mumbai: 1971–1974

At a public meditation event in early 1970, Rajneesh presented his Dynamic Meditation method for the first time.[48] Dynamic Meditation involved breathing very fast and celebrating with music and dance.[49] He left Jabalpur for Mumbai at the end of June.[50] On 26 September 1970, he initiated his first group of disciples or neo-sannyasins.[51] Becoming a disciple meant assuming a new name and wearing the traditional orange dress of ascetic Hindu holy men, including a mala (beaded necklace) carrying a locket with his picture.[52] However, his sannyasins were encouraged to follow a celebratory rather than ascetic lifestyle.[53] He himself was not to be worshipped but regarded as a catalytic agent, "a sun encouraging the flower to open".[53]

He had by then acquired a secretary, Laxmi Thakarsi Kuruwa, who as his first disciple had taken the name Ma Yoga Laxmi.[3] Laxmi was the daughter of one of his early followers, a wealthy Jain who had been a key supporter of the Indian National Congress during the struggle for Indian independence, with close ties to Gandhi, Nehru, and Morarji Desai.[3] She raised the money that enabled Rajneesh to stop his travels and settle down.[3] In December 1970, he moved to the Woodlands Apartments in Mumbai, where he gave lectures and received visitors, among them his first Western visitors.[50] He now traveled rarely, no longer speaking at open public meetings.[50] In 1971, he adopted the title "Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh". [52] Shree is a polite form of address roughly equivalent to the English "Sir"; Bhagwan means "blessed one", used in Indian traditions as a term of respect for a human being in whom the divine is no longer hidden but apparent. Later, when he changed his name, he would redefine the meaning of Bhagwan.[54][55]

### Pune ashram: 1974–1981

The humid climate of Mumbai proved detrimental to Rajneesh's health: he developed diabetes, asthma, and numerous allergies.[52] In 1974, on the 21st anniversary of his experience in Jabalpur, he moved to a property in Koregaon Park, Pune, purchased with the help of Ma Yoga Mukta (Catherine Venizelos), a Greek shipping heiress,[56][57] Rajneesh spoke at the Pune ashram from 1974 to 1981. The two adjoining houses and 6 acres (2.4 ha) of land became the nucleus of an ashram, and the property is still the heart of the present-day OSHO International Meditation Resort. It allowed the regular audio recording and, later, video recording and printing of his discourses for worldwide distribution, enabling him to reach far larger audiences. The number of Western visitors increased sharply.[58] The ashram soon featured an arts-and-crafts centre producing clothes, jewellery, ceramics, and organic cosmetics and hosted performances of theatre, music, and mime.[58] From 1975, after the arrival of several therapists from the Human Potential Movement, the ashram began to complement meditations with a growing number of therapy groups,[11][12] which became a major source of income for the ashram.[59][60]
The Pune ashram was by all accounts an exciting and intense place to be, with an emotionally charged, madhouse-carnival atmosphere.\[^{[58][61][62]}\] The day began at 6:00 a.m. with Dynamic Meditation.\[^{[63][64]}\] From 8:00 am, Rajneesh gave a 60- to 90-minute spontaneous lecture in the ashram's "Buddha Hall" auditorium, commenting on religious writings or answering questions from visitors and disciples.\[^{[58][64]}\] Until 1981, lecture series held in Hindi alternated with series held in English.\[^{[65]}\] During the day, various meditations and therapies took place, whose intensity was ascribed to the spiritual energy of Rajneesh's "buddhafield".\[^{[61]}\] In evening darshans, Rajneesh conversed with individual disciples or visitors and initiated disciples ("gave sannyas").\[^{[58][64]}\] Sannyasins came for darshan when departing or returning or when they had anything they wanted to discuss.\[^{[58][64]}\]

To decide which therapies to participate in, visitors either consulted Rajneesh or selected according to their own preferences.\[^{[66]}\] Some of the early therapy groups in the ashram, such as the encounter group, were experimental, allowing a degree of physical aggression as well as sexual encounters between participants.\[^{[67][68]}\] Conflicting reports of injuries sustained in Encounter group sessions began to appear in the press.\[^{[69][70][71]}\] Richard Price, at the time a prominent Human Potential Movement therapist and co-founder of the Esalen Institute, found the groups encouraged participants to 'be violent' rather than 'play at being violent' (the norm in Encounter groups conducted in the United States), and criticised them for "the worst mistakes of some inexperienced Esalen group leaders".\[^{[72]}\] Price is alleged to have exited the Pune ashram with a broken arm following a period of eight hours locked in a room with participants armed with wooden weapons.\[^{[72]}\] Bernard Gunther, his Esalen colleague, fared better in Pune and wrote a book, *Dying for Enlightenment*, featuring photographs and lyrical descriptions of the meditations and therapy groups.\[^{[72]}\] Violence in the therapy groups eventually ended in January 1979, when the ashram issued a press release stating that violence "had fulfilled its function within the overall context of the ashram as an evolving spiritual commune".\[^{[73]}\]

Sannyasins who had "graduated" from months of meditation and therapy could apply to work in the ashram, in an environment that was consciously modelled on the community the Russian mystic Gurdjieff led in France in the 1930s.\[^{[74]}\] Key features incorporated from Gurdjieff were hard, unpaid labour, and supervisors chosen for their abrasive personality, both designed to provoke opportunities for self-observation and transcendence.\[^{[74]}\] Many disciples chose to stay for years.\[^{[74]}\] Besides the controversy around the therapies, allegations of drug use amongst sannyasin began to mar the ashram's image.\[^{[75]}\] Some Western sannyasins were alleged to be financing extended stays in India through prostitution and drug-running.\[^{[76][77]}\] A few people later alleged that while Rajneesh was not directly involved, they discussed such plans and activities with him in darshan and he gave his blessing.\[^{[78]}\]

By the latter 1970s, the Pune ashram was too small to contain the rapid growth and Rajneesh asked that somewhere larger be found.\[^{[79]}\] Sannyasins from around India started looking for properties: those found included one in the province of Kutch in Gujarat and two more in India's mountainous north.\[^{[79]}\] The plans were never implemented as mounting tensions between the ashram and the Janata Party government of Morarji Desai resulted in an impasse.\[^{[79]}\] Land-use approval was denied and, more importantly, the government stopped issuing visas to foreign visitors who indicated the ashram as their main destination.\[^{[79][80]}\] Besides, Desai's government cancelled the tax-exempt status of the ashram with retrospective effect, resulting in a claim estimated at $5 million.\[^{[13]}\] Conflicts with various Indian religious leaders aggravated the situation—by 1980 the ashram had become so controversial that Indira Gandhi, despite a previous association between Rajneesh and the Indian Congress Party dating back to the sixties, was unwilling to intercede for it after her return to power.\[^{[13]}\] In May 1980, during one of Rajneesh's discourses, an attempt on his life was made by Vilas Tupe, a young Hindu fundamentalist.\[^{[79][81][82]}\] Tupe claims that he undertook the attack because he believed Rajneesh to be an agent of the CIA.\[^{[82]}\]
By 1981, Rajneesh's ashram hosted 30,000 visitors per year. Daily discourse audiences were by then predominantly European and American. Many observers noted that Rajneesh's lecture style changed in the late 70s, becoming less focused intellectually and featuring an increasing number of ethnic or dirty jokes intended to shock or amuse his audience. On 10 April 1981, having discoursed daily for nearly 15 years, Rajneesh entered a three-and-a-half-year period of self-imposed public silence, and satsangs—silent sitting with music and readings from spiritual works such as Khalil Gibran's The Prophet or the Isha Upanishad—replaced discourses. Around the same time, Ma Anand Sheela (Sheela Silverman) replaced Ma Yoga Laxmi as Rajneesh's secretary.

### United States and the Oregon commune: 1981–1985

#### Arrival in the United States

In 1981, the increased tensions around the Pune ashram, along with criticism of its activities and threatened punitive action by Indian authorities, provided an impetus for the ashram to consider the establishment of a new commune in the United States. According to Susan J. Palmer, the move to the United States was a plan from Sheela. Gordon (1987) notes that Sheela and Rajneesh had discussed the idea of establishing a new commune in the US in late 1980, although he did not agree to travel there until May 1981. On 1 June that year he travelled to the United States on a tourist visa, ostensibly for medical purposes, and spent several months at a Rajneeshee retreat centre located at Kip's Castle in Montclair, New Jersey. He had been diagnosed with a prolapsed disc in early 1981 and treated by several doctors, including James Cyriax, a St. Thomas' Hospital musculoskeletal physician and expert in epidural injections flown in from London. Rajneesh's previous secretary, Laxmi, reported to Frances FitzGerald that "she had failed to find a property in India adequate to Rajneesh's needs, and thus, when the medical emergency came, the initiative had passed to Sheela". A public statement by Sheela indicated that Rajneesh was in grave danger if he remained in India, but would receive appropriate medical treatment in America if he needed surgery. Despite the stated serious nature of the situation Rajneesh never sought outside medical treatment during his time in the United States, leading the Immigration and Naturalization Service to contend that he had a preconceived intent to remain there. Years later, Rajneesh pleaded guilty to immigration fraud, while maintaining his innocence of the charges that he made false statements on his initial visa application about his alleged intention to remain in the US when he came from India.

#### Establishing Rajneeshpuram

On 13 June 1981, Sheela's husband, John Shlfier, signed a purchase contract to buy property in Oregon for US$5.75 million, and a few days later assigned the property to the US foundation. The property was a 64,229-acre (260 km²) ranch, previously known as "The Big Muddy Ranch" and located across two counties (Wasco and Jefferson). It was renamed "Rancho Rajneesh" and Rajneesh moved there on 29 August. Initial local community reactions ranged from hostility to tolerance, depending on distance from the ranch. The press reported, and another study found, that the development met almost immediately with intense local, state, and federal opposition from the government, press, and citizenry. Within months a series of legal battles ensued, principally over land use. Within a year of arriving, Rajneesh and his followers had become embroiled in a series of legal battles with their neighbours, the principal conflict relating to land use. The commune leadership was uncompromising and behaved impatiently in dealing with the locals. They were also insistent upon having demands met, and engaged in implicitly threatening and directly confrontational behaviour. Whatever the true intention, the repeated changes in their stated plans looked to many like conscious deception.
In May 1982 the residents of Rancho Rajneesh voted to incorporate it as the city of Rajneeshpuram. The conflict with local residents escalated, with increasingly bitter hostility on both sides, and over the following years, the commune was subject to constant and coordinated pressures from various coalitions of Oregon residents. 1000 Friends of Oregon immediately commenced and then prosecuted over the next six years numerous court and administrative actions to void the incorporation and cause buildings and improvement to be removed. 1000 Friends publicly called for the city to be “dismantled”. A 1000 Friends Attorney stated that if 1000 Friends won, the Foundation would be “forced to remove their sewer system and tear down many of the buildings”. At one point, the commune imported large numbers of homeless people from various US cities in a failed attempt to affect the outcome of an election, before releasing them into surrounding towns and leaving some to the State of Oregon to return to their home cities at the state's expense. In March 1982, local residents formed a group called Citizens for Constitutional Cities to oppose the Ranch development. An initiative petition was filed that would order the governor “to contain, control and remove” the threat of invasion by an "alien cult".

The Oregon legislature passed several bills that sought to slow or stop the development and the City of Rajneeshpuram—including HB 3080, which stopped distribution of revenue sharing funds for any city whose legal status had been challenged. Rajneeshpuram was the only city impacted. The Governor of Oregon, Vic Atiyeh, stated in 1982 that since their neighbors did not like them, they should leave Oregon. In May 1982, United States Senator Mark Hatfield called the INS in Portland. An INS memo stated that the Senator was "very concerned" about how this "religious cult" is "endangering the way of life for a small agricultural town ... and is a threat to public safety". Such actions "often do have influence on immigration decisions". In 1983 the Oregon Attorney General filed a lawsuit seeking to declare the City void because of an alleged violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the Constitution. The Court found that the City property was owned and controlled by the Foundation, and entered judgement for the State. The court disregarded the controlling US constitutional cases requiring that a violation be redressed by the "least intrusive means" necessary to correct the violation, which it had earlier cited. The city was forced to "acquiesce" in the decision, as part of a settlement of Rajneesh's immigration case.

While the various legal battles ensued Rajneesh remained behind the scenes, having withdrawn from a public facing role in what commune leadership referred to as a period of "silence." During this time, which lasted until November 1984, in lieu of Rajneesh speaking publicly, videos of his discourses were played to commune audiences. His time was allegedly spent mostly in seclusion and he communicated only with a few key disciples, including Ma Anand Sheela and his caretaker girlfriend Ma Yoga Vivek (Christine Woolf). He lived in a trailer next to a covered swimming pool and other amenities. At this time he did not lecture and interacted with followers via a Rolls Royce 'drive-by' ceremony. He also gained public notoriety for amassing a large collection of Rolls-Royce cars, eventually numbering 93 vehicles. In 1981 he had given Sheela limited power of attorney, removing any remaining limits the following year. In 1983, Sheela announced that he would henceforth speak only with her. He later said that she kept him in ignorance. Many sannyasins expressed doubts about whether Sheela properly represented Rajneesh and many dissidents left Rajneeshpuram in protest of its autocratic leadership. Resident sannyasins without US citizenship experienced visa difficulties that some tried to overcome by marriages of convenience. Commune administrators tried to resolve Rajneesh's own difficulty in this respect by declaring him the head of a religion, "Rajneeshism".

During the Oregon years there was an increased emphasis on Rajneesh's prediction that the world might be destroyed by nuclear war or other disasters in the 1990s. Rajneesh had said as early as 1964 that "the third and last war is now on the way" and frequently spoke of the need to create a "new humanity" to avoid global
suicide. This now became the basis for a new exclusivity, and a 1983 article in the Rajneesh Foundation Newsletter, announcing that "Rajneeshism is creating a Noah's Ark of consciousness ... I say to you that except this there is no other way", increased the sense of urgency in building the Oregon commune. In March 1984, Sheela announced that Rajneesh had predicted the death of two-thirds of humanity from AIDS. Sannyasins were required to wear rubber gloves and condoms if they had sex, and to refrain from kissing, measures widely represented in the press as an extreme over-reaction since condoms were not usually recommended for AIDS prevention because AIDS was considered a homosexual disease at that stage. During his residence in Rajneeshpuram, Rajneesh also dictated three books under the influence of nitrous oxide administered to him by his private dentist: *Glimpses of a Golden Childhood, Notes of a Madman* and *Books I Have Loved*. Sheela later stated that Rajneesh took sixty milligrams of valium each day and was addicted to nitrous oxide. Rajneesh denied these charges when questioned about them by journalists.

At the peak of the Rajneeshpuram era, Rajneesh, assisted by a sophisticated legal and business infrastructure, had created a corporate machine consisting of various front companies and subsidiaries. At this time, the three main identifiable entities within his organisation were: the Ranch Church, or Rajneesh International Foundation (RIF); the Rajneesh Investment Corporation (RIC), through which the RIF was managed; and the Rajneesh Neo-Sannyasin International Commune (RNSIC). The umbrella organisation that oversaw all investment activities was Rajneesh Services International Ltd., a company incorporated in the UK but based in Zürich. There were also smaller organisations, such as Rajneesh Travel Corp, Rajneesh Community Holdings, and the Rajneesh Modern Car Collection Trust, whose sole purpose was to deal with the acquisition and rental of Rolls Royces.

### 1984 bioterror attack

Rajneesh had coached Sheela in using media coverage to her advantage and during his period of public silence he privately stated that when Sheela spoke, she was speaking on his behalf. He had also supported her when disputes about her behaviour arose within the commune leadership, but in early 1984, as tension amongst the inner circle peaked, a private meeting was convened with Sheela and his personal house staff. According to the testimony of Rajneesh's dentist, Swami Devageet (Charles Harvey Newman), she was admonished during a meeting, with Rajneesh declaring that his house, and not hers, was the centre of the commune. Devageet claimed Rajneesh warned that Sheela's jealousy of anyone close to him would inevitably make them a target.

Several months later, on 30 October 1984, he ended his period of public silence, announcing that it was time to "speak his own truths". In July 1985 he resumed daily public discourses. On 16 September 1985, a few days after Sheela and her entire management team had suddenly left the commune for Europe, Rajneesh held a press conference in which he labelled Sheela and her associates a "gang of fascists". He accused them of having committed serious crimes, most dating back to 1984, and invited the authorities to investigate.

The alleged crimes, which he stated had been committed without his knowledge or consent, included the attempted murder of his personal physician, poisonings of public officials, wiretapping and bugging within the commune and within his own home, and a potentially lethal bioterror attack sickening 751 citizens of The Dalles, Oregon, using *Salmonella* to impact the county elections. While his allegations were initially greeted with scepticism by outside observers, the subsequent investigation by the US authorities confirmed these accusations and resulted in the conviction of Sheela and several of her lieutenants. On 30 September 1985, Rajneesh denied that he was a religious teacher. His disciples burned 5,000 copies the book *Rajneeshism: An Introduction to Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh and His Religion* a 78-page compilation of
his teachings that defined "Rajneeshism" as "a religionless religion". He said he ordered the book-burning to rid the sect of the last traces of the influence of Sheela, whose robes were also "added to the bonfire".

The salmonella attack is considered the first confirmed instance of chemical or biological terrorism to have occurred in the United States. Rajneesh stated that because he was in silence and isolation, meeting only with Sheela, he was unaware of the crimes committed by the Rajneeshpuram leadership until Sheela and her "gang" left and sannyasins came forward to inform him. A number of commentators have stated that they believe that Sheela was being used as a convenient scapegoat. Others have pointed to the fact that although Sheela had bugged Rajneesh's living quarters and made her tapes available to the US authorities as part of her own plea bargain, no evidence has ever come to light that Rajneesh had any part in her crimes. Nevertheless, Gordon (1987) reports that Charles Turner, David Frohnmayer, and other law enforcement officials, who had surveyed affidavits never released publicly and who listened to hundreds of hours of tape recordings, insinuated to him that Rajneesh was guilty of more crimes than those for which he was eventually prosecuted. Frohnmayer asserted that Rajneesh's philosophy was not "disapproving of poisoning" and that he felt he and Sheela had been "genuinely evil". Nonetheless, US Attorney Turner and Attorney General Frohnmayer acknowledged that "they had little evidence of (Rajneesh) being involved in any of the criminal activities that unfolded at the ranch". According to court testimony by Ma Ava (Ava Avalos), a prominent disciple, Sheela played associates a tape recording of a meeting she had with Rajneesh about the "need to kill people" to strengthen wavering sannyasins' resolve in participating in her murderous plots, but it was difficult to hear, so Sheela produced a transcript of the tape. "She came back to the meeting and ... began to play the tape. It was a little hard to hear what he was saying. ... But Param Bodhi, assisted her, went it transcribed it. And the gist of Bhagwan's response, yes, it was going to be necessary to kill people to stay in Oregon. And that actually killing people wasn't such a bad thing. And actually Hitler was a great man, although he could not say that publicly because nobody would understand that. Hitler had great vision."

Ava Avalos also said in her testimony to the FBI investigators that "Sheela informed them that Bhagwan was not to know what was going on, and that if Bhagwan were to ask them about anything that would occur, 'they would have to lie to Bhagwan'."

Sheela initiated attempts to murder Rajneesh's caretaker and girlfriend, Ma Yoga Vivek, and his personal physician, Swami Devaraj (George Meredith), because she thought that they were a threat to Rajneesh. She had secretly recorded a conversation between Devaraj and Rajneesh "in which the doctor agreed to obtain drugs the guru wanted to ensure a peaceful death if he decided to take his own life".

On 23 October 1985, a federal grand jury indicted Rajneesh and several other disciples with conspiracy to evade immigration laws. The indictment was returned in camera, but word was leaked to Rajneesh's lawyer. Negotiations to allow Rajneesh to surrender to authorities in Portland if a warrant were issued failed. Rumours of a National Guard takeover and a planned violent arrest of Rajneesh led to tension and fears of shooting. On the strength of Sheela's tape recordings, authorities later said they believed that there had been a plan that sannyasin women and children would have been asked to create a human shield if authorities tried to arrest Rajneesh at the commune. On 28 October 1985, Rajneesh and a small number of sannyasins accompanying him were arrested aboard a rented Learjet at a North Carolina airstrip; according to federal authorities the group was en route to Bermuda to avoid prosecution. $58,000 in cash, as well as 35 watches and bracelets worth a combined $1 million, were found on the aircraft. Rajneesh had by all accounts been informed neither of the impending arrest nor the reason for the journey. Officials took the full ten days legally available to transfer him from North Carolina to Portland for arraignment. After initially pleading "not guilty" to all charges and being released on bail, Rajneesh, on the advice of his lawyers, entered an "Alford plea"—a type of guilty plea through which a suspect does not admit guilt, but does concede there is enough evidence to convict him—to one count of having a concealed intent to remain permanently in the US at the time of his original visa application in 1981 and one count of having conspired to
have sannyasins enter into a sham marriage to acquire US residency. Under the deal his lawyers made with the US Attorney's office he was given a ten-year suspended sentence, five years' probation, and a $400,000 penalty in fines and prosecution costs and agreed to leave the United States, not returning for at least five years without the permission of the United States Attorney General.

As to "preconceived intent", at the time of the investigation and prosecution, federal court appellate cases and the INS regulations permitted "dual intent", a desire to stay, but a willingness to comply with the law if denied permanent residence. Further, the relevant intent is that of the employer, not the employee. Given the public nature of Rajneesh's arrival and stay, and the aggressive scrutiny by the INS, Rajneesh would appear to have had to be willing to leave the US if denied benefits. The government nonetheless prosecuted him based on preconceived intent. As to arranging a marriage, the government only claimed that Rajneesh told someone who lived in his house that they should marry to stay. Such encouragement appears to constitute incitement, a crime in the US, but not a conspiracy, which requires the formation of a plan and acts in furtherance.

Travels and return to Pune: 1985–1990

Following his exit from the US, Rajneesh returned to India, landing in Delhi on 17 November 1985. He was given a hero's welcome by his Indian disciples and denounced the United States, saying the world must "put the monster America in its place" and that "Either America must be hushed up or America will be the end of the world." He then stayed for six weeks in Manali, Himachal Pradesh. When non-Indians in his party had their visas revoked, he moved on to Kathmandu, Nepal, and then, a few weeks later, to Crete. Arrested after a few days by the Greek National Intelligence Service (KYP), he flew to Geneva, then to Stockholm and London, but was in each case refused entry. Next Canada refused landing permission, so his plane returned to Shannon airport, Ireland, to refuel. There he was allowed to stay for two weeks at a hotel in Limerick, on condition that he did not go out or give talks. He had been granted a Uruguayan identity card, one-year provisional residency and a possibility of permanent residency, so the party set out, stopping at Madrid, where the plane was surrounded by the Guardia Civil. He was allowed to spend one night at Dakar, then continued to Recife and Montevideo. In Uruguay, the group moved to a house at Punta del Este where Rajneesh began speaking publicly until 19 June, after which he was "invited to leave" for no official reason. A two-week visa was arranged for Jamaica, but on arrival in Kingston police gave the group 12 hours to leave. Refuelling in Gander and in Madrid, Rajneesh returned to Bombay, India, on 30 July 1986.

In January 1987, Rajneesh returned to the ashram in Pune where he held evening discourses each day, except when interrupted by intermittent ill health. Publishing and therapy resumed and the ashram underwent expansion, now as a "Multiversity" where therapy was to function as a bridge to meditation. Rajneesh devised new "meditation therapy" methods such as the "Mystic Rose" and began to lead meditations in his discourses after a gap of more than ten years. His western disciples formed no large communes, mostly preferring ordinary independent living. Red/orange dress and the mala were largely abandoned, having been optional since 1985. The wearing of maroon robes—only while on ashram premises—was reintroduced in the summer of 1989, along with white robes worn for evening meditation and black robes for group leaders.

In November 1987, Rajneesh expressed his belief that his deteriorating health (nausea, fatigue, pain in extremities, and lack of resistance to infection) was due to poisoning by the US authorities while in prison. His doctors and former attorney, Philip Toelkes (Swami Prem Niren), hypothesised radiation and thallium in a deliberately irradiated mattress, since his symptoms were concentrated on the right side of his body, but presented no hard evidence. US attorney Charles H. Hunter described this as "complete fiction", while others suggested exposure to HIV or chronic diabetes and stress.
From early 1988, Rajneesh's discourses focused exclusively on Zen.[168] In late December, he said he no longer wished to be referred to as "Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh", and in February 1989 took the name "Osho Rajneesh", shortened to "Osho" in September.[168][174] He also requested that all trademarks previously branded with "Rajneesh" be rebranded "OSHO".[175][20] His health continued to weaken. He delivered his last public discourse in April 1989, from then on simply sitting in silence with his followers.[171] Shortly before his death, Rajneesh suggested that one or more audience members at evening meetings (now referred to as the White Robe Brotherhood) were subjecting him to some form of evil magic.[176][177] A search for the perpetrators was undertaken, but none could be found.[176][177]

**Death**

Rajneesh died on 19 January 1990, aged 58, at the ashram in Pune, India. The official cause of death was heart failure, but a statement released by his commune said that he died because "living in the body had become a hell" after an alleged poisoning in US jails.[178] His ashes were placed in his newly built bedroom in Lao Tzu House at the ashram in Pune. The epitaph reads, "Never Born – Never Died Only visited this planet Earth between December 11, 1931 and January 19, 1990".[179]

Rajneesh's death still remains a mystery and an article in 'the quint' in January 2019 asks some leading questions such as "was Osho murdered for money? Is his will fake? Are foreigners looting India’s treasures?".[180]

**Teachings**

Rajneesh's teachings, delivered through his discourses, were not presented in an academic setting, but interspersed with jokes.[181][182] The emphasis was not static but changed over time: Rajneesh revelled in paradox and contradiction, making his work difficult to summarise.[183] He delighted in engaging in behaviour that seemed entirely at odds with traditional images of enlightened individuals; his early lectures in particular were famous for their humour and their refusal to take anything seriously.[184][185] All such behaviour, however capricious and difficult to accept, was explained as "a technique for transformation" to push people "beyond the mind".[184]

He spoke on major spiritual traditions including Jainism, Hinduism, Hassidism, Tantrism, Taoism, Sufism, Christianity, Buddhism, on a variety of Eastern and Western mystics and on sacred scriptures such as the *Upanishads* and the *Guru Granth Sahib*.[186] The sociologist Lewis F. Carter saw his ideas as rooted in Hindu advaita, in which the human experiences of separateness, duality and temporality are held to be a kind of dance or play of cosmic consciousness in which everything is sacred, has absolute worth and is an end in itself.[187] While his contemporary Jiddu Krishnamurti did not approve of Rajneesh, there are clear similarities between their respective teachings.[183]

Rajneesh also drew on a wide range of Western ideas.[186] His belief in the unity of opposites recalls Heraclitus, while his description of man as a machine, condemned to the helpless acting out of unconscious, neurotic patterns, has much in common with Sigmund Freud and George Gurdjieff.[183][188] His vision of the "new man" transcending constraints of convention is reminiscent of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*;[189] his promotion of sexual liberation bears comparison to D. H. Lawrence,[190] and his "dynamic" meditations owe a debt to Wilhelm Reich.[191]

**Ego and the mind**
According to Rajneesh every human being is a Buddha with the capacity for enlightenment, capable of unconditional love and of responding rather than reacting to life, although the ego usually prevents this, identifying with social conditioning and creating false needs and conflicts and an illusory sense of identity that is nothing but a barrier of dreams. Otherwise man's innate being can flower in a move from the periphery to the centre.

Rajneesh viewed the mind first and foremost as a mechanism for survival, replicating behavioural strategies that have proven successful in the past. But the mind's appeal to the past, he said, deprives human beings of the ability to live authentically in the present, causing them to repress genuine emotions and to shut themselves off from joyful experiences that arise naturally when embracing the present moment: "The mind has no inherent capacity for joy. ... It only thinks about joy." The result is that people poison themselves with all manner of neuroses, jealousies, and insecurities. He argued that psychological repression, often advocated by religious leaders, makes suppressed feelings re-emerge in another guise, and that sexual repression resulted in societies obsessed with sex. Instead of suppressing, people should trust and accept themselves unconditionally. This should not merely be understood intellectually, as the mind could only assimilate it as one more piece of information: instead meditation was needed.

**Meditation**

Rajneesh presented meditation not just as a practice but as a state of awareness to be maintained in every moment, a total awareness that awakens the individual from the sleep of mechanical responses conditioned by beliefs and expectations. He employed Western psychotherapy in the preparatory stages of meditation to create awareness of mental and emotional patterns.

He suggested more than a hundred meditation techniques in total. His own "active meditation" techniques are characterised by stages of physical activity leading to silence. The most famous of these remains Dynamic Meditation, which has been described as a kind of microcosm of his outlook. Performed with closed or blindfolded eyes, it comprises five stages, four of which are accompanied by music. First the meditator engages in ten minutes of rapid breathing through the nose. The second ten minutes are for catharsis: "Let whatever is happening happen. ... Laugh, shout, scream, jump, shake—whatever you feel to do, do it!" Next, for ten minutes one jumps up and down with arms raised, shouting Hoo! each time one lands on the flat of the feet. At the fourth, silent stage, the meditator stops moving suddenly and totally, remaining completely motionless for fifteen minutes, witnessing everything that is happening. The last stage of the meditation consists of fifteen minutes of dancing and celebration.

Rajneesh developed other active meditation techniques, such as the Kundalini "shaking" meditation and the Nadabrahma "humming" meditation, which are less animated, although they also include physical activity of one sort or another. His later "meditative therapies" require sessions for several days, OSHO Mystic Rose comprising three hours of laughing every day for a week, three hours of weeping each day for a second week, and a third week with three hours of silent meditation. These processes of "witnessing" enable a "jump into awareness". Rajneesh believed such cathartic methods were necessary because it was difficult for modern people to just sit and enter meditation. Once these methods had provided a glimpse of meditation, then people would be able to use other methods without difficulty.

**Sannyas**

Another key ingredient was his own presence as a master: "A Master shares his being with you, not his philosophy. ... He never does anything to the disciple." The initiation he offered was another such device: "... if your being can communicate with me, it becomes a communion. ... It is the highest form of
communication possible: a transmission without words. Our beings merge. This is possible only if you become a disciple. Ultimately though, as an explicitly "self-parodying" guru, Rajneesh even deconstructed his own authority, declaring his teaching to be nothing more than a "game" or a joke. He emphasised that anything and everything could become an opportunity for meditation.

**Renunciation and the "New Man"**

Rajneesh saw his "neo-sannyas" as a totally new form of spiritual discipline, or one that had once existed but since been forgotten. He thought that the traditional Hindu sannyas had turned into a mere system of social renunciation and imitation. He emphasised complete inner freedom and the responsibility to oneself, not demanding superficial behavioural changes, but a deeper, inner transformation. Desires were to be accepted and surpassed rather than denied. Once this inner flowering had taken place, desires such as that for sex would be left behind.

Rajneesh said that he was "the rich man's guru" and that material poverty was not a genuine spiritual value. He had himself photographed wearing sumptuous clothing and hand-made watches and, while in Oregon, drove a different Rolls-Royce each day – his followers reportedly wanted to buy him 365 of them, one for each day of the year. Publicity shots of the Rolls-Royces were sent to the press. They may have reflected both his advocacy of wealth and his desire to provoke American sensibilities, much as he had enjoyed offending Indian sensibilities earlier.

Rajneesh aimed to create a "new man" combining the spirituality of Gautama Buddha with the zest for life embodied by Nikos Kazantzakis' *Zorba the Greek*: "He should be as accurate and objective as a scientist ... as sensitive, as full of heart, as a poet ... [and as] rooted deep down in his being as the mystic." His term the "new man" applied to men and women equally, whose roles he saw as complementary; indeed, most of his movement's leadership positions were held by women. This new man, "Zorba the Buddha", should reject neither science nor spirituality but embrace both. Rajneesh believed humanity was threatened with extinction due to over-population, impending nuclear holocaust and diseases such as AIDS, and thought many of society's ills could be remedied by scientific means. The new man would no longer be trapped in institutions such as family, marriage, political ideologies and religions. In this respect Rajneesh is similar to other counter-culture gurus, and perhaps even certain postmodern and deconstructional thinkers. Rajneesh said that the new man had to be "utterly ambitionless", as opposed to a life that depended on ambition. The new man, he said, "is not necessarily the better man. He will be livelier. He will be more joyous. He will be more alert. But who knows whether he will be better or not? As far as politicians are concerned, he will not be better, because he will not be a better soldier. He will not be ready to be a soldier at all. He will not be competitive, and the whole competitive economy will collapse."

**Euthanasia and Eugenics**

Rajneesh spoke many times of the dangers of overpopulation, and advocated universal legalisation of contraception and abortion. He described the religious prohibitions thereof as criminal, and argued that the United Nations' declaration of the human "right to life" played into the hands of religious campaigners. According to Rajneesh, one has no right to knowingly inflict a lifetime of suffering: life should begin only at birth, and even then, "If a child is born deaf, dumb, and we cannot do anything, and the parents are willing, the child should be put to eternal sleep" rather than "take the risk of burdening the earth with a crippled, blind child."

He argued that this simply freed the soul to inhabit a healthy body instead: "Only the body goes back into its basic elements; the soul will fly into another womb. Nothing is destroyed. If you really love the child, you will not want him to live a seventy-year-long life in misery, suffering, sickness, old age. So even if a child is born,
if he is not medically capable of enjoying life fully with all the senses, healthy, then it is better that he goes to eternal sleep and is born somewhere else with a better body."[213]

He stated that the decision to have a child should be a medical matter, and that oversight of population and genetics must be kept in the realm of science, outside of politicians' control: "If genetics is in the hands of Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, what will be the fate of the world?" He believed that in the right hands, these measures could be used for good: "Once we know how to change the program, thousands of possibilities open up. We can give every man and woman the best of everything. There is no need for anyone to suffer unnecessarily. Being retarded, crippled, blind, ugly – all these will be possible to change."[214]

"Science has been a dagger driven into the back of nature. Philosophers have not done much harm—they cannot because they are absolute failures—but science has done much harm. Now the greatest enemy today is science. And why it has been so harmful? – because from the very beginning enmity has been at the base. Hatred, not love...enmity with life, not friendship. Science has created the idea in humanity that they have been teaching survival of the fittest – as if life is just a struggle! The fact is otherwise, just the contrary. Life is a vast cooperation."[215]

"So the first thing to be understood is: All ideals are perfectionist. Hence, ALL ideals are inhuman.

And all ideals cripple and paralyse you. All ideals create a kind of subtle bondage around you, they imprison you. The really free man has no ideals."

If you make it an ideal, it is inhuman AND impossible. And it will destroy you. All ideals are destructive, and all idealists are the poisoners of humanity. Beware of them!

Live a simple, ordinary life – a day to day existence. Feeling hungry, eat; feeling sleepy, sleep; feeling loving, love. Don't hanker for anything perfect. Perfection is impossible. And don't start creating a new ideal out of this simple fact."[216]

The new man is the very ordinary man: Nothing special, nothing superior, supramental.

The new man is the first man who recognises that it is enough to be human. There is no need to be a superman. There is no need to become gods and goddesses, it is so fulfilling just to be an ordinary human being."

The new man will be simply man. And I repeat again: I don't accept anything higher than man. I am talking about the ordinary, simple man.

There is nothing higher than that."[217]

Contradictions and "Heart to heart communion"

Rajneesh claimed on 30 October 1984 in the first talk he gave after three years of public silence that he had gone into public silence partly to put off those who were only intellectually following him:[218]

He remained in his talks consistent only on his spiritual fundamentals such as meditation, love, humour, non-seriousness, celebration, and enlightenment. He was also consistent throughout his lifetime in teaching meditators to be wary of satori (temporary awakenings) and semi-permanent states which spiritual seekers often mistake for enlightenment.[219][220]

Rajneesh's "Ten Commandments"
In his early days as Acharya Rajneesh, a correspondent once asked for his "Ten Commandments". In reply, Rajneesh said that it was a difficult matter because he was against any kind of commandment, but "just for fun", set out the following:

1. Never obey anyone’s command unless it is coming from within you also.
2. There is no God other than life itself.
3. **Truth is within you, do not search for it elsewhere.**
4. Love is prayer.
5. To become a nothingness is the door to truth. Nothingness itself is the means, the goal and attainment.
6. Life is now and here.
7. **Live wakefully.**
8. Do not swim—float.
9. **Die each moment so that you can be new each moment.**
10. **Do not search. That which is, is. Stop and see.**

He underlined numbers 3, 7, 9 and 10. The ideas expressed in these Commandments have remained constant leitmotifs in his movement.

**Legacy**

While Rajneesh's teachings were not welcomed by many in his own home country during his lifetime, there has been a change in Indian public opinion since Rajneesh's death. In 1991, an Indian newspaper counted Rajneesh, along with figures such as Gautama Buddha and Mahatma Gandhi, among the ten people who had most changed India's destiny; in Rajneesh's case, by "liberating the minds of future generations from the shackles of religiosity and conformism". Rajneesh has found more acclaim in his homeland since his death than he ever did while alive. Writing in The Indian Express, columnist Tanweer Alam stated, "The late Rajneesh was a fine interpreter of social absurdities that destroyed human happiness."

At a celebration in 2006, marking the 75th anniversary of Rajneesh's birth, Indian singer Wasifuddin Dagar said that Rajneesh's teachings are "more pertinent in the current milieu than they were ever before". In Nepal, there were 60 Rajneesh centres with almost 45,000 initiated disciples as of January 2008. Rajneesh's entire works have been placed in the Library of India's National Parliament in New Delhi. The Bollywood actor, and former Minister of State for External Affairs, Vinod Khanna, worked as Rajneesh's gardener in Rajneeshpuram in the 1980s. Over 650 books are credited to Rajneesh, expressing his views on all facets of human existence. Virtually all of them are renderings of his taped discourses. Many Bollywood personalities like Parveen Babi were also known to be the followers of Rajneesh's philosophy. His books are available in more than 60 languages from more than 200 publishing houses and have entered best-seller lists in Italy and South Korea.

Rajneesh continues to be known and published worldwide in the area of meditation and his work also includes social and political commentary. Internationally, after almost two decades of controversy and a decade of accommodation, Rajneesh's movement has established itself in the market of new religions. His followers have redefined his contributions, reframing central elements of his teaching so as to make them appear less controversial to outsiders. Societies in North America and Western Europe have met them half-way, becoming more accommodating to spiritual topics such as yoga and meditation. The Osho International Foundation (OIF) runs stress management seminars for corporate clients such as IBM and BMW, with a reported (2000) revenue between $15 and $45 million annually in the US.
Rajneesh's ashram in Pune has become the OSHO International Meditation Resort. Describing itself as the Esalen of the East, it teaches a variety of spiritual techniques from a broad range of traditions and promotes itself as a spiritual oasis, a "sacred space" for discovering one's self and uniting the desires of body and mind in a beautiful resort environment. According to press reports, prominent visitors have included politicians and media personalities. In 2011, a national seminar on Rajneesh's teachings was inaugurated at the Department of Philosophy of the Mankunwarbai College for Women in Jabalpur. Funded by the Bhopal office of the University Grants Commission, the seminar focused on Rajneesh's "Zorba the Buddha" teaching, seeking to reconcile spirituality with the materialist and objective approach. As of 2013, the resort required all guests to be tested for HIV/AIDS at its Welcome Center on arrival.

Reception

Rajneesh is generally considered one of the most controversial spiritual leaders to have emerged from India in the twentieth century. His message of sexual, emotional, spiritual, and institutional liberation, as well as the pleasure he took in causing offence, ensured that his life was surrounded by controversy. Rajneesh became known as the "sex guru" in India, and as the "Rolls-Royce guru" in the United States. He attacked traditional concepts of nationalism, openly expressed contempt for politicians, and poked fun at the leading figures of various religions, who in turn found his arrogance insufferable. His teachings on sex, marriage, family, and relationships contradicted traditional values and aroused a great deal of anger and opposition around the world. His movement was widely considered a cult. Rajneesh was seen to live "in ostentation and offensive opulence", while his followers, most of whom had severed ties with outside friends and family and donated all or most of their money and possessions to the commune, might be at a mere "subsistence level".

Appraisal by scholars of religion

Academic assessments of Rajneesh's work have been mixed and often directly contradictory. Uday Mehta saw errors in his interpretation of Zen and Mahayana Buddhism, speaking of "gross contradictions and inconsistencies in his teachings" that "exploit" the "ignorance and gullibility" of his listeners. The sociologist Bob Mullan wrote in 1983 of "a borrowing of truths, half-truths and occasional misrepresentations from the great traditions"... often bland, inaccurate, spurious and extremely contradictory. American religious studies professor Hugh B. Urban also said Rajneesh's teaching was neither original nor especially profound, and concluded that most of its content had been borrowed from various Eastern and Western philosophies. George Chryssides, on the other hand, found such descriptions of Rajneesh's teaching as a "potpourri" of various religious teachings unfortunate because Rajneesh was "no amateur philosopher". Drawing attention to Rajneesh's academic background he stated that; "Whether or not one accepts his teachings, he was no charlatan when it came to expounding the ideas of others." He described Rajneesh as primarily a Buddhist teacher, promoting an independent form of "Beat Zen" and viewed the unsystematic, contradictory and outrageous aspects of Rajneesh's teachings as seeking to induce a change in people, not as philosophy lectures aimed at intellectual understanding of the subject.

Similarly with respect to Rajneesh's embracing of Western counter-culture and the human potential movement, though Mullan acknowledged that Rajneesh's range and imagination were second to none and that many of his statements were quite insightful and moving, perhaps even profound at times, he perceived "a potpourri of counter-culturalist and post-counter-culturalist ideas" focusing on love and freedom, the need to live for the moment, the importance of self, the feeling of "being okay", the mysteriousness of life, the fun ethic, the individual's responsibility for their own destiny, and the need to drop the ego, along with fear and guilt. Mehta notes that Rajneesh's appeal to his Western disciples was based on his social experiments, which established a philosophical connection between the Eastern guru tradition and the Western growth movement. He saw this as a marketing strategy to meet the desires of his audience.
viewed Rajneesh as negating a dichotomy between spiritual and material desires, reflecting the preoccupation with the body and sexuality characteristic of late capitalist consumer culture and in tune with the socio-economic conditions of his time.²⁴⁹

The British professor of religious studies Peter B. Clarke said that most participators felt they had made progress in self-actualisation as defined by American psychologist Abraham Maslow and the human potential movement.²⁷⁴ He stated that the style of therapy Rajneesh devised, with its liberal attitude towards sexuality as a sacred part of life, had proved influential among other therapy practitioners and new age groups.²⁵⁰ Yet Clarke believes that the main motivation of seekers joining the movement was "neither therapy nor sex, but the prospect of becoming enlightened, in the classical Buddhist sense."²⁷⁴

In 2005, Urban observed that Rajneesh had undergone a "remarkable apotheosis" after his return to India, and especially in the years since his death, going on to describe him as a powerful illustration of what F. Max Müller, over a century ago, called "that world-wide circle through which, like an electric current, Oriental thought could run to the West and Western thought return to the East".²⁴⁹ Clarke also said that Rajneesh has come to be "seen as an important teacher within India itself" who is "increasingly recognised as a major spiritual teacher of the twentieth century, at the forefront of the current 'world-accepting' trend of spirituality based on self-development".²⁵⁰

Appraisal as charismatic leader

A number of commentators have remarked upon Rajneesh's charisma. Comparing Rajneesh with Gurdjieff, Anthony Storr wrote that Rajneesh was "personally extremely impressive", noting that "many of those who visited him for the first time felt that their most intimate feelings were instantly understood, that they were accepted and unequivocally welcomed rather than judged. [Rajneesh] seemed to radiate energy and to awaken hidden possibilities in those who came into contact with him".²⁵¹ Many sannyasins have stated that hearing Rajneesh speak, they "fell in love with him".²⁵²²⁵³ Susan J. Palmer noted that even critics attested to the power of his presence.²⁵² James S. Gordon, a psychiatrist and researcher, recalls inexplicably finding himself laughing like a child, hugging strangers and having tears of gratitude in his eyes after a glance by Rajneesh from within his passing Rolls-Royce.²⁵⁴ Frances FitzGerald concluded upon listening to Rajneesh in person that he was a brilliant lecturer, and expressed surprise at his talent as a comedian, which had not been apparent from reading his books, as well as the hypnotic quality of his talks, which had a profound effect on his audience.²⁵⁵ Hugh Milne (Swami Shivamurti), an ex-devotee who between 1973 and 1982 worked closely with Rajneesh as leader of the Poona Ashram Guard²⁵⁶ and as his personal bodyguard,²⁵⁷²⁵⁸ noted that their first meeting left him with a sense that far more than words had passed between them: "There is no invasion of privacy, no alarm, but it is as if his soul is slowly slipping inside mine, and in a split second transferring vital information."²⁵⁹ Milne also observed another facet of Rajneesh's charismatic ability in stating that he was "a brilliant manipulator of the unquestioning disciple".²⁶⁰

Hugh B. Urban said that Rajneesh appeared to fit with Max Weber's classical image of the charismatic figure, being held to possess "an extraordinary supernatural power or 'grace', which was essentially irrational and affective".²⁶¹ Rajneesh corresponded to Weber's pure charismatic type in rejecting all rational laws and institutions and claiming to subvert all hierarchical authority, though Urban said that the promise of absolute freedom inherent in this resulted in bureaucratic organisation and institutional control within larger communes.²⁶¹

Some scholars have suggested that Rajneesh, may have had a narcissistic personality²⁶²²⁶³²⁶⁴ In his paper The Narcissistic Guru: A Profile of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, Ronald O. Clarke, Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies at Oregon State University, argued that Rajneesh exhibited all the typical features of narcissistic personality disorder, such as a grandiose sense of self-importance and uniqueness; a preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success; a need for constant attention and admiration; a set of characteristic
responses to threats to self-esteem; disturbances in interpersonal relationships; a preoccupation with personal grooming combined with frequent resorting to prevarication or outright lying; and a lack of empathy. Drawing on Rajneesh's reminiscences of his childhood in his book *Glimpses of a Golden Childhood*, he suggested that Rajneesh suffered from a fundamental lack of parental discipline, due to his growing up in the care of overindulgent grandparents. Rajneesh's self-avowed Buddha status, he concluded, was part of a delusional system associated with his narcissistic personality disorder; a condition of ego-inflation rather than egolessness.

**Wider appraisal as a thinker and speaker**

There are widely divergent assessments of Rajneesh's qualities as a thinker and speaker. Khushwant Singh, an eminent author, historian, and former editor of the *Hindustan Times*, has described Rajneesh as "the most original thinker that India has produced: the most erudite, the most clearheaded and the most innovative". Singh believes that Rajneesh was a "free-thinking agnostic" who had the ability to explain the most abstract concepts in simple language, illustrated with witty anecdotes, who mocked gods, prophets, scriptures, and religious practices, and gave a totally new dimension to religion. German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, a one time devotee of Rajneesh's (living at the Pune ashram from 1978 to 1980), described him as a "Wittgenstein of religions", ranking him as one of the greatest figures of the 20th century; in his view, Rajneesh had performed a radical deconstruction of the word games played by the world's religions.

During the early 1980s, a number of commentators in the popular press were dismissive of Rajneesh. The Australian critic Clive James scornfully referred to him as "Bagwash", likening the experience of listening to one of his discourses to sitting in a laundrette and watching "your tattered underwear revolve soggily for hours while exuding grey suds. The Bagwash talks the way that he looks." James finished by saying that Rajneesh, though a "fairly benign example of his type", was a "rebarbative dingbat who manipulates the manipulable into manipulating one another". Responding to an enthusiastic review of Rajneesh's talks by Bernard Levin in *The Times*, Dominik Wujastyk, also writing in *The Times*, similarly expressed his opinion that the talk he heard while visiting the Poona ashram was of a very low standard, wearyingly repetitive and often factually wrong, and stated that he felt disturbed by the personality cult surrounding Rajneesh.

Writing in the Seattle Post Intelligencer in January 1990, American author Tom Robbins stated that based on his readings of Rajneesh's books, he was convinced Rajneesh was the 20th century's "greatest spiritual teacher". Robbins, while stressing that he was not a disciple, further stated that he had "read enough vicious propaganda and slanted reports to suspect that he was one of the most maligned figures in history". Rajneesh's commentary on the Sikh scripture known as *Japuji* was hailed as the best available by Giani Zail Singh, the former President of India. In 2011, author Farrukh Dhondy reported that film star Kabir Bedi was a fan of Rajneesh, and viewed Rajneesh's works as "the cleverest intellectual confidence trickster that India has produced. His output of the 'interpretation' of Indian texts is specifically slanted towards a generation of disillusioned westerners who wanted (and perhaps still want) to 'have their cake, eat it' [and] claim at the same time that cake-eating is the highest virtue according to ancient-fused-with-scientific wisdom."

**Films about Rajneesh**

- 1974: The first documentary film about Rajneesh was made by David M. Knipe. Program 13 of Exploring the Religions of South Asia, "A Contemporary Guru: Rajneesh". (Madison: WHA-TV 1974)
1978: The second documentary on Rajneesh called Bhagwan, The Movie was made in 1978 by American filmmaker Robert Hillmann.

1979: In 1978 the German film maker Wolfgang Dobrowolny (Sw Veet Artho) visited the Ashram in Poona and created a unique documentary about Rajneesh, his Sannyasins and the ashram, titled Ashram in Poona: Bhagwans Experiment.

1981: In 1981, the BBC broadcast an episode in the documentary series The World About Us titled The God that Fleed, made by British American journalist Christopher Hitchens.

1985 (3 November): CBS News' 60 Minutes aired a segment about the Bhagwan in Oregon.

1987: In the mid-eighties Jeremiah Films produced a film Fear is the Master.

1989: Another documentary, named Rajneesh: Spiritual Terrorist, was made by Australian film maker Cynthia Connop in the late 1980s for ABC TV/Learning Channel.

1989: UK documentary series called Scandal produced an episode entitled, "Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh: The Man Who Was God".

2002: Forensic Files Season 7 Episode 8 takes a look into how forensics was used to determine the cause of the Bio-Attack in 1984.

2010: A Swiss documentary, titled Guru – Bhagwan, His Secretary & His Bodyguard, was released in 2010.

2012: Oregon Public Broadcasting produced the documentary titled Rajneeshpuram which aired 19 November 2012.

2016: Rebellious Flower, an Indian-made biographical movie of Rajneesh's early life, based upon his own recollections and those of those who knew him, was released. It was written and produced by Jagdish Bharti and directed by Krishan Hooda, with Prince Shah and Shashank Singh playing the title role.

2018: Wild Wild Country, a Netflix documentary series on Rajneesh, focusing on Rajneeshpuram and the controversies surrounding it.

Selected discourses

On the sayings of Jesus:
- The Mustard Seed (the Gospel of Thomas)
- Come Follow Me Vols. I – IV

On Tao:
- Tao: The Three Treasures (The Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu), Vol I – IV
- The Empty Boat (Stories of Chuang Tzu)
- When the Shoe Fits (Stories of Chuang Tzu)

On Gautama Buddha:
- The Dhammapada (Vols. I – X)
- The Discipline of Transcendence (Vols. I – IV)
- The Heart Sutra
- The Diamond Sutra

On Zen:
- Neither This nor That (On the Xin Xin Ming of Sosan)
- No Water, No Moon
- Returning to the Source
- And the Flowers Showered
- The Grass Grows by Itself
- Nirvana: The Last Nightmare
- The Search (on the Ten Bulls)
- Dang dang doko dang
- Ancient Music in the Pines
- A Sudden Clash of Thunder
- Zen: The Path of Paradox
- This Very Body the Buddha (on Hakuin's Song of Meditation)

On the Baul mystics:
- The Beloved

On Sufis:
Until You Die
Just Like That
Unio Mystica Vols. I and II (on the poetry of Sanai)

On Hassidism:
- The True Sage
- The Art of Dying

On the Upanishads:
- I am That – Talks on Isha Upanishad
- The Supreme Doctrine
- The Ultimate Alchemy Vols. I and II
- Vedanta: Seven Steps to Samadhi

On Heraclitus:
- The Hidden Harmony

On Kabir:
- Ecstasy: The Forgotten Language
- The Divine Melody
- The Path of Love

On Buddhist Tantra:
- Tantra: The Supreme Understanding
- The Tantra Vision

On Patanjali and Yoga:
(reprinted as Yoga, the Science of the Soul)

On Meditation methods:
- The Book of Secrets, Vols. I – V
- Meditation: the Art of Inner Ecstasy
- The Orange Book
- Meditation: The First and Last Freedom
- Learning to Silence the Mind

On his childhood:
- Glimpses of a Golden Childhood

Talks based on questions:
- I Am the Gate
- The Way of the White Clouds
- The Silent Explosion
- Dimensions Beyond the Known
- Roots and Wings
- The Rebel

Darshan interviews:
- Hammer on the Rock
- Above All, Don't Wobble
- Nothing to Lose but Your Head
- Be Realistic: Plan for a Miracle
- The Cypress in the Courtyard
- Get Out of Your Own Way
- Beloved of My Heart
- A Rose Is a Rose Is a Rose
- Dance Your Way to God
- The Passion for the Impossible
- The Great Nothing
- God Is Not for Sale
- The Shadow of the Whip
- Blessed Are the Ignorant
- The Buddha Disease
- Being in Love

See also
- 2010 Pune bombing
- Byron v. Rajneesh Foundation International
- Osho Times
- Vijnana Bhairava Tantra
- Rajneesh Movement

Notes
1. "His lawyers, however, were already negotiating with the United States Attorney's office and, on 14 November he returned to Portland and pleaded guilty to two felonies; making false statements to the immigration authorities in 1981 and concealing his intent to reside in the United States." (FitzGerald 1986b, p. 111)

2. "The Bhagwan may also soon need his voice to defend himself on charges he lied on his original temporary-visa application: if the immigration service proves he never intended to leave, the Bhagwan could be deported." (Newsweek, Bhagwan's Realm: [https://web.archive.org/web/20090710170848/http://www.nealkarlen.com/newsweek/bhagwan.shtml] The Oregon cult with the leader with 90 golden Rolls Royces, 3 December 1984, United States Edition, National Affairs Pg. 34, 1915 words, Neal Karlen with Pamela Abramson in Rajneeshpuram.)


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18. Aveling 1999, p. xxii
OSHO International Foundation (http://www.osho.com/oshointernationalfoundation) Archived (https://web.archive.org/web/20180620232417/http://www.osho.com/oshointernationalfoundation) 20 June 2018 at the Wayback Machine "is a registered foundation of Switzerland, founded in 1984 and is the owner of all the intellectual property of the contemporary mystic Osho (1931–1990) and the sole and registered owner of all of the copyrights ..."

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Further reading


**External links**

- [rajneesh on archive.org](https://archive.org/search.php?query=osho)
- [rajneesh archive collection](http://oshosearch.net/Convert/index_Convert_Osho.html)
- [Osho bibliography](http://www.sannyas.wiki/index.php?title=Osho_Bibliography) – On Sannyas Wiki site, a site devoted to Osho’s work, his discourses, his books, and the music made around him
- [rajneesh was once attacked with a knife discourse * Vilas Tupe Throws Knife Towards Osho In A Discourse... * Date – 22 May 1980 Day – Thursday Time & Venue – Morning, Buddha Hall, Rajneesh Ashram, Pune, India In the above photo video you will hear the voice of Vilas Tupe](http://www.oregonlive.com/rajneesh/index.ssf/2011/04/part_one_it_was_worse_than_we.html)