

**T**HE PERFECT cliché of hippiedom—that was me in 1966. A “flower child,” I fully embraced the counter-culture lifestyle. The hippie movement was our new religion, where we supposedly lived in peaceful communes, loved everyone, handed out flowers to strangers, experimented with all things forbidden, “did our own thing” (meaning whatever, whenever), and generally created an alternate universe in a parallel dimension.

We all were broken in some way and, like Humpty Dumpty, sought to put our shattered pieces back together. We bucked “the establishment” that betrayed us. We “stuck it to the man” that churned out nine-to-five robots living plastic lives in cookie-cutter suburbs. We abhorred violence, politics, and useless wars in overseas jungles. What we sought was world peace.

In 1967, kids came from all over the U.S. to join us. About 100,000 gathered in San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury district. Dressed in outrageous costumes, they arrived in VW Bugs and buses painted with psychedelic neon designs. They crashed on the street, in hippie pads, or in Golden Gate Park. Everyone was talking love and peace and getting high. Many were runaways or tourists, but they found togetherness and utopia, even for just one “Summer of Love.”

Harvard Psilocybin Project leaders Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert (aka Ram Dass) acted as our official tour guides to altered states through LSD, but my personal goal was not about drugs. I was seeking nirvana—whatever I imagined that to be. Leary and Alpert introduced us to the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* in *The Psychedelic Experience*. I tried to “turn on, tune in,” and achieve what Leary, Alpert, and others claimed to get with psychedelics.

LSD led me to the edge of stark raving madness but, during my third, final, and only successful acid trip, I lay in the grass on a cliff overlooking the Pacific in Big Sur, grinning blissfully for four hours—completely unconscious. Where was my nirvana? What was the point of tripping when I was out cold?

After this, my main focus was scouring bookstores on Telegraph Avenue for every text I could find about Buddhism, Hinduism, and spiritual enlightenment. Since the University of California, Berkeley, had an Asian Studies department, I sought books that helped me understand my psychedelic experiences.

Alan Watts’ books said we needed a “meditation guide.” In 1966, good luck finding “meditation” or anything remotely similar in the Yellow Pages telephone directory. So, I tried doing it myself, lying on my bed (clearly, I did not even know meditation should be practiced sitting up), praying for a “meditation.”

Suddenly, an electric shock jolted through me. A cord of energy started running through the midline of my body, from my toes all the way up to the top of my head, moving in an endless stream. I felt plugged into the electric socket of the universe. Cosmic life force flow-

# Trying to Groove with the GURU

BY SUSAN SHUMSKY

*“Maharishi . . . stopped and looked me up, down, and back up again. His face became stern. He looked through me, not at me—as though he were scanning hidden corners of my mind.”*

ed through me in a most ecstatic way. I lay on the bed for about 20 minutes, grooving to that electric energy cord. I figured, well, I guess this is meditation. Little did I know I just had experienced my first meditation and kundalini awakening concurrently, without drugs. (Kundalini, considered difficult to attain, is a rare spiritual energy flowing upward through the body.)

After that, sometimes I smoked a joint, crossed-legged, with eyes closed, and pretended I was Buddha. Electric energy hummed through my body. I floated off into nothingness. Though enjoying these experiences, I longed to meditate properly. I wanted a meditation guide, a real meditation guide.

In autumn 1966, a fellow art student/pot-head took me to the Transcendental Meditation Center. I entered what seemed a holy place. From a photo on the wall, an Indian guru smiled—or, more accurately, beamed. With long black wavy hair, beard, moustache, and white silk robes, his most-striking feature was his sparkling, radiating, magnetic, ebony eyes. If God wanted to visit Earth and look like someone, I imagined this was how He would look.

I would have to wait nine months for the next Transcendental Meditation course, but my dream finally was coming true. I was getting a real meditation guide. When I finally learned how to meditate, I was hooked immediately. All I ever talked about was traveling to Rishikesh, studying with Maharishi, and becoming a TM teacher.

My TM teacher Jerry Jarvis explained: “TM is like dying a cloth. In India, cloth is dyed by dipping it into a vat of dye, then placing it in the sun to dry. Most of the color fades, but some sticks to the cloth. By repeating this process over and over, the dye becomes colorfast. This is how we attain Cosmic Consciousness. We meditate 20 minutes twice a day, then engage in dynamic action, and thereby integrate Being fully into our awareness. Maharishi says it’s a five- to eight-year plan.”

Five to eight years seemed like an incredibly short time, even for me at age 19. Cosmic Consciousness—permanent establishment of absolute transcendental Being 24/7/365—had been sought for generations from caves of India, monasteries of Tibet, to temples of Indonesia and Japan. Spiritual enlightenment, freedom from the wheel of birth and death, the end of reincarnation, and a state of eternal bliss—all realized in five to eight years? Really?

Yes, it was a pitch, but we bought it. We longed to relieve our hopeless desperation. We craved the cessation of suffering and the end of the Vietnam War, Cold War, and war within our hearts that caused so much anguish. So, we swallowed the whole enchilada plus dessert—and yes, TM did work. It ended a good deal of pain, and we were changed. We were renewed. We were not the Buddha yet but, twice a day for 20 minutes, we experienced something massively better than misery.

I thought I had found the answer to everything—a way to experience what yogis call samadhi, Buddhists call nirvana, and Zen Buddhists call satori. My goal of spiritual enlightenment seemed within sight. During the following months, a new feeling of well-being, equilibrium, and continuity of inner contentment grew.

I raved incessantly about how meditation changed me, saved me. All I desired was to take meditation retreats, volunteer at the Center, become a Meditation Checker, go to India, and become a TM teacher (an “Initiator”). Fellow art students became impatient with my obsession with TM, but I was hooked—in what I believed to be a good way. At the time, I felt it was my best way.

“Maharishi will be in Los Angeles this week. Wanna go?” a friend asked. We piled into two cars, a crew of sundry hippies, young, old, gay, straight. I was the youngest. They informed me to say “Jai Guru Dev” (Hail to the holy teacher) when I see Maharishi. In this case, “Guru Dev,” a common salutation in India, referred to Maharishi’s guru, Brahmananda Saraswati, Shankaracharya of Jyotirmath, Himalayas, religious leader of North India from the late 1940s to early 1950s. When I



The author (in pigtails, far right) with the Maharishi and his followers

learned TM, offerings were presented to his picture, which sat on an altar.

We arrived in time for Maharishi's airport landing. About 100 people made a double line with a central aisle to walk through. Nearly everyone held flowers—expensive ones from flower shops. Nervously, I clutched the scrappy, ripe wildflowers I had picked along the road.

Then, like sunrays bursting at dawn, Maharishi appeared—a diminutive but muscular figure, about five feet tall, with large hands and thick fingers, wearing white robes, red beads strung in silver, and a shawl that looked like undyed cashmere. His long wavy hair and mustache were jet black. His beard had turned snowy. His ebony eyes sparkled with humor and wisdom.

Enveloped in a nimbus of splendor, he glided deliberately and gracefully through the corridor of followers—so small, yet powerful and majestic. His face radiated joy. His body shone with luster and grandeur. His feet—why, they were iridescent . . . and what strange sandals, polished foot-shaped wood with rust-colored rubber straps.

As Maharishi drew closer, my teeth clenched and jaw tightened with mixed emotions of excitement and a sort of terror. What is making me afraid? My hands turned cold and clammy, as blood receded from my extremities. I gripped my wildflowers tighter. Blissful and childlike, he cooed, smiled, and giggled. Collecting flowers from both sides, he welcomed each devotee with warmth and exuberance.

Maharishi finally got to me. He stopped and looked me up, down, and back up again. His face became stern. He looked through me, not at me—as though he were scanning hidden corners of my mind. I felt naked. What is he

thinking? He seems to disapprove, I thought.

"Jai Guru Dev," Maharishi said in a high-pitched Indian accent. He snatched the wildflowers from my hands briskly, in what seemed a derisive gesture. He did not smile. He smiled at everyone else, but not me. "Jai Guru Dev," I finally managed to chirp, after he had moved to the next person.

My 19-year-old mind started churning. He does not like the way I look: my clunky handmade leather sandals held together with big grotesque nails; my hairy legs and underarms; my secondhand rayon dress vintage 1940s (dull gold printed with ugly black patterns); no bra; homemade glass bead necklace; disheveled hair; granny glasses. I must look like a ridiculous hippie to him—but he looks even more like a hippie. Carrying bunches of flowers, with long black hippie hair, white robes, long beads. He is wearing a skirt, not pants.

On the way to the lecture, my fellow travelers were busy talking about Maharishi, but I stared out the car window in silence. At the auditorium, hundreds waited in a double line to greet Maharishi with flowers. He smiled at them all. Why did he scowl at me at the airport? I loathe to admit it, but I did sort of look like a scary Charles Manson Family reject.

I had read about disciples who first found (or more precisely returned to) their beloved masters (whom they have known for lifetimes). Nearly all described a heartfelt homecoming, love exchange, and immediate recognition. My first encounter with Maharishi could not, by any stretch of imagination, compare with such wonders. However, guru first encounters are not always showers of rose petals and strains of violin strings. Sometimes, they are violins strung with barbed wire.

Paramahansa Yogananda's first meeting with his guru Sri Yukteswar began as a love fest of hearts, daffodils, and butterflies. Within a few minutes, however, when Yukteswar told the youngster to return to his family in Calcutta, Yogananda obstinately refused. The mood then deteriorated rapidly into what Yogananda described as "controversial tension."

Yukteswar said in a stern voice, "The next time we meet, you will have to reawaken my interest: I won't accept you as a disciple easily. There must be complete surrender by obedience to my strict training." Then the guru threw the boy into a tailspin with this zinger: "Do you think your relatives will laugh at you?"

Yogananda wondered "why the miraculous meeting had ended on an inharmonious note." After this initial meeting, 25 years elapsed before Yukteswar again gave Yogananda any affirmation of love. Considering the rebellious Yogananda's contentious meeting with his guru, I figured perhaps I was in good company. I speculated why Maharishi wasted no time administering harsh treatment. Was he resuming a long-standing relationship, picking up where he had left off—as if I already were a close disciple—or was he assuming a familial or fatherly role, where scolding was acceptable?

At the time, I did not know Maharishi's scowl was just the first of many "tests" he would deliver over the next decade. This was the beginning (or perhaps continuation) of a unique relationship that would change me profoundly. ★

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