

yogi bhajan, chinmayananda and me

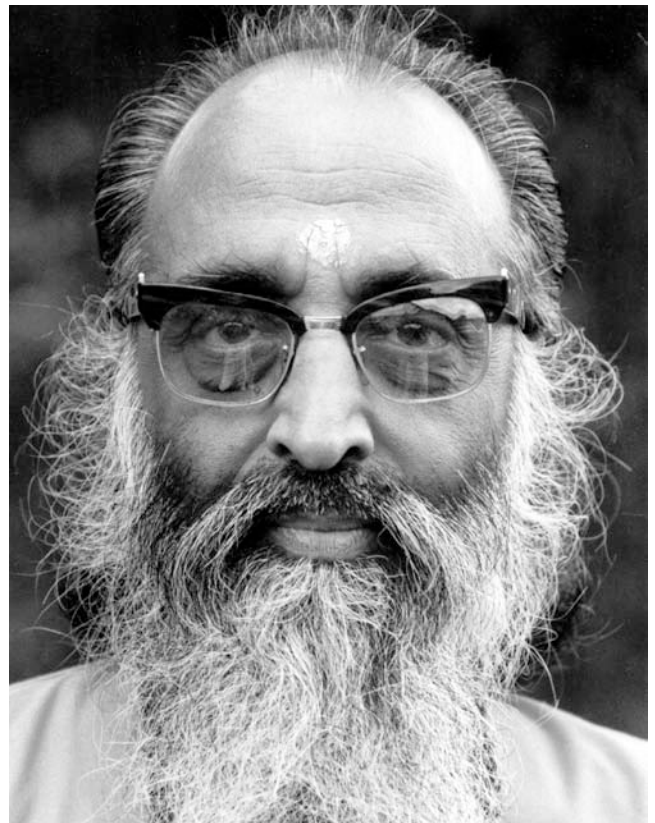
by don gamble

I stumbled into “yoga.”
It wasn’t elegant or conscious.

Yogi Bhajan was my first “real yoga” teacher. I found him in 1976 through 3HO, his Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization. I was in Ottawa, working and living hard. I decided to try taking a yoga class conveniently offered in the building next to my office.

I found myself in front of a young Caucasian Sikh, completely clad in white. He led a Kundalini Yoga class—something that seemed to me to be like the Canadian Armed Forces 5 BX Fitness Program put on fast forward. I found it exhilarating. My body lapped it up. Over the following weeks, I felt I was returning to a state that I had left behind—my youth. My emotions began to align themselves into something useful. My mind came alive in a new way. There wasn’t a lot of explanation. As Yogi Bhajan put it on one of his visits to Ottawa, the first mantra is simple: “Keep up.” (What’s a mantra? I asked.)

Over the next three years I became more involved with Yogi Bhajan’s yoga. I went from one to two to three classes a week. These practices really worked for me. I wanted more. I asked if I could join the 3HO “ashram” group in their morning practice. I got up at 3:30 to be there for 4:00 and often stayed for breakfast at 7:00. This was my first experience of a yogic community—doing practices together, working and living together, all the while addressing what was really happening with each other in daily life in a direct way. They had a system for living based in the Guru Granth Sahib (the Sikh sacred



Swami Chinmayananda

text), the *Khalsa* brother/sisterhood and Yogi Bhajan’s prescriptions of yogic practices, dress and diet. It all fit together in a seamless wholesomeness. Uncommon as it was, it made a lot of sense to me.

After gaining some stamina with the Ottawa group, I decided to go to Washington to a special White Tantra workshop led by the charismatic Yogi Bhajan. Like other things I was discovering, it was demanding to live up to my own potential. The purpose of life, Yogi Bhajan said, is to be happy. Who wouldn’t want to be happy? There was no doubt he had a prescription. I also went to the

winter solstice retreat he led in Florida. It was equally exhilarating. I remember coming home with the mantra SA TA NAM AH spontaneously repeating in my mind. Needing little sleep, I entered into one of the clearest and most productive periods of my life.

What Yogi Bhajan offered gave me a new start on life. I'd arrive at work feeling fresh and energetic, delighted to be alive. But as time went on there was a growing problem. As much as I was getting from the practices, these people, this community, I just wasn't a Sikh. I'd wear a makeshift turban for the vigorous practices, as they suggested, but something was still missing, and I knew it.

In the spring of 1979 I saw a poster for talks to be given by a Swami Chinmayananda at the University of Ottawa each morning and evening for a week. I went out of curiosity, and was overwhelmed. He gave an explanation of mind, of emotions, of soul or spirit, all delivered in the most eloquent way, using ancient texts I'd never even heard of, including the Upanishads and Puranas. For a week I felt an odd understanding or resonance with everything. On the last evening, when Chinmayananda ended his discourse, I was embarrassed to find myself sitting in the middle of the auditorium in tears. He was leaving. I felt like a child losing his father. I saw others, mostly East Indian, go to pay their respects to this Swami. He was, I had discovered, quite a famous Jnana Yogi, a sharp skeptic who had gone to the Himalayas as a young journalist to debunk the legends of India's gurus and holy men, only to become one himself. When I met him that last evening I could only whisper "thank you." He handed me a little book and said rather casually that he offered a correspondence course, if I was interested. There was no "if" in my mind.

Over the next fourteen months, I followed the prescribed routine of getting up early to do the readings and practices; each fortnight mailing off my papers to

Bombay. The ground rules were simple and practical—if they didn't get my papers every two weeks, no more course material would be sent.

With everything else I was doing at the time, this required a little perseverance and some ingenuity. I was still working long hours and full weeks, travelling extensively in my job as an environmental activist. For one memorable three-week period, I was travelling across the Arctic islands with David Suzuki, making a program for the CBC's *The Nature of Things*. Early each morning I'd secretly do my practice huddled in the corner of the cook tent or hidden away behind a barrenlands hummock. After dropping off supplies, a bush pilot heading back to Resolute Bay agreed to mail my papers to India. What if he forgot, or the mail was delayed from this place on the top of the world? But it all worked out. In December 1980 I received my Vedanta diploma from Chinmayananda. But once again I had been growing uneasy. My understanding was more alive on paper than in my daily experience. Just before the diploma arrived, what turned out to be the next step became apparent.

I had made a promise. It was in one of those rare times I think each of us knows, when we call on something from the depths of our being. It happened when Swami Chinmayananda left Ottawa. I went home that night and pleaded with this "God" or "Atman" or "Brahma" or whatever IT was to show me my teacher, my "guru." I just knew there was a way to understand life and I knew that I needed someone to show me how. I made a pact. It was a deal with the Divine: I would know my "teacher" when he came to stay at my house. I had no idea what I had opened myself to. But that is another story, the fruition of what I had so inadvertently stumbled into: yoga. ॐ

Don Gamble is *ascent magazine's* financial advisor. Swami Radha stayed at his home in 1981.

If you are interested in finding out more about Yogi Bhajan or Swami Chinmayananda here's how you can do it: Swami Chinmayananda:

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