

How genuine is Sri Sri Ravi Shankar?

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar seems to be one of India's biggest export products these days. His popularity already being huge in India itself, many positive reports in several (above all American) media outlets make the guru hugely popular world wide. His popularity reminds us of other best seller gurus before him, like Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and Osho. But these examples in turn remind us perhaps that we should be cautious when it comes to multi-millionaire gurus.

Osho (formerly Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh) of course tops the fraudulent and hypocritical gurus having 96 Rolls Royces while he told his sannyasins were told to renounce attachment to possession. It only takes a little research instead of blind reverence to find a lot of information about how neither him nor his ashrams were quite like he pretended. The whole 'free love' idea that gave him the name of 'guru of the vagina' didn't quite work out all the time, he probably was addicted to laughing gas for a certain while and his organization, while based in Oregon, was even linked to murder cases.

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi was less flamboyant, but is nevertheless put heavily under criticism, not in the least for the question who benefits from the million dollar industry surrounding his persona. The Maharishi got his incredible fame because of his association with the Beatles. Although the Beatles turned away from Maharishi, and in a rather controversial way, his popularity did not wane. One of his following pupils would be none other than Ravi Shankar. This Ravi Shankar would later give himself the honorific title of Sri ('revered' or 'holy') and double it to make a distinction between himself and the famous sitar player with the same name.

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar is nonetheless very silent about his own guru Maharishi. The Beatles guru is not mentioned on his personal official website or the website of his "Art of Living foundation" - although this is kind of a give away, since the book that introduced Maharishi's Transcendental Meditation to the world was entitled: "The Science of Being and The Art of Living".

It is in itself questionable why a guru does not mention his own guru. It is only normal in Hindu spirituality to trace one's lineage of Guru's, like in the case of Paramahansa Yogananda, the founder of the Self-realization fellowship who was, besides Vivekananda, the first guru to bring modern Yoga and Indian spirituality to the United states.

Perhaps the rumors on the net are true and Shankar is very disappointed because Maharishi Mahesh Yogi strongly and publicly renounced him after his departure. Or perhaps Sri Sri Ravi Shankar doesn't mention his guru because of the controversies surrounding the Maharishi. Such a stain in the image does indeed not go well with the overall clean-ness and pure-ness his sites and publications want to attach to Shankar.

To retain that image of being impeccable, much of the history of the founder is clouded in pure mystery. Again and again one can only find the official story of how Sri Sri as a little boy of four already recited the Bhagavadgita, how he had a physics degree at seventeen, and how he discovered Sudarshan Kriya in 1982.

Sudarshan Kriya is supposed to be the thing that makes Shankar so different. Many disagree on this point. The website of Art of Living says "Sudarshan kriya is a completely natural process that was cognized by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar during divine meditation". Others claim it is simply old Yoga techniques rolled into a new and more commercial package.

In any case Sri Sri Ravi Shankar had "Sudarshan Kriya" registered it as a trademark – though this move makes it more funny than different. When reading web pages about Sri Sri's spirituality, all of

the sudden a copyright sign is seen every time Sudarshan Kriya is mentioned. It is strange for somebody who does not care for 'worldly matters'. He himself says he had to register the trademark, because otherwise others would have done it, and made profit on his expense. But perhaps he simply learned it from his own Guru once again, as it is again something the Maharishi has done before him when trademarking transcendental meditation.

Transcendental meditation is centered around the extremely old practice of chanting mantras. Sudarshan Kriya is centered around the extremely old Yoga breath exercises. In both cases, although their respective promoter-gurus claim the opposite, there's nothing new under the sun.

The art of living foundation and Shankar of course say that you have to really try and do it before you can realize what is so different. But trying it would imply paying quite a lot of money for the courses offered at the Ashram or several centres around the world. Those who choose not to pay and to just observe it from a distance see no difference with other breathing exercises that are used in older Yoga forms, in rebirthing exercises or in some of the many Osho meditations one can try at the Osho resort.

Also in the claims of its effects the Art of Living foundation goes through great lengths to show what is so special about it, but for somebody with a bit of background into yoga or meditation in general, they absolutely fail in that effort. When their programs promise reducing stress, reduction of depression, peace of mind and serenity, better health and well being, increased energy and stamina, making you more self-aware, harmonious relations at home and work, and so on, you can not help but wondering: in what way do they offer anything different than any other form of meditation?

Pupils from every guru and adepts of every form of meditation make the same claims as to how the encounter with the person or meditation changed their lives. From more self-confidence over energetic awarenesses to more health. And of course they claim so, as these things have exactly been the point of doing Yoga ever since its origin many many centuries ago. Sudarshan is no different in that respect.

Even the claim that it could help against cancer and aids has already been made by the other Indian export product in guruism: Ramdev. In the case of Ramdev the Indian Ministry of Health government of India stepped in to rebuke the claim. Ramdev replied that his idea was misrepresented. He believed that Yoga and Ayurveda together can alleviate the suffering from aids, not cure it. In order to escape from further legal consequences he distanced himself from some of the top claims made by some of his 'admirers'. It was nonetheless this kind of 'admiration' and the propaganda about the miraculous powers of the guru, his yoga and his products that proved to be the perfect marketing strategy to make his ayurvedic business very lucrative.

Unlike Ramdev, but just like Maharishi, Ravi Shankar loves to provide a huge amount of scientific research that backs up his claims about Sudarshan Kriya. On his website you can find many links to scientific articles that are supposed to prove the effectiveness of Sudarshan Kriya Yoga. The studies seem to indicate for example that it helps against depression, and that it brings better antioxidant status and lower blood lactate levels.

But, if one takes a close look, it actually does not seem to show what is so amazing about Sudarshan Kriya. Both lower lactate levels and better antioxidant status for example might simply be attributable to a better breathing pattern of the subjects and not so much to Sudarshan particularly. Depression on the other hand is something that exists in many possible forms and of which some as well are in general helped (not cured – as the articles also do not say the Yoga is a direct cure) by learning to control the mind, which again is a general outcome of any meditation.

On top of it, the research on the effect of Sudarshan on cancer does not say that Sudarshan helps against cancer because of some 'energetic effect', but simply because the breathing exercises seemed to help smokers to quit. "This result could mean that regular practice might reduce the incidence and progression of cancer" because of "a reduction in tobacco consumption." The less people smoke, the less cancer they will have. Sounds logical. Nothing mysterious here. Meditation is not a miraculous healer. Learning to breath properly just helps people to leave of smoking. It should not surprise therefore that the same study researched both Sudarshan and Pranayama and concluded that they both helped just as much.

On top of it, when one turns from those research articles back to the normal web pages of the Art of Living, it is amazing to see how all the 'scientificness' has all of the sudden gone. On the Sudarshan Kriya page it says that "this unique breathing practice is a potent energizer. Every cell becomes fully oxygenated and flooded with new life. Negative emotions that have been stored as toxins in the body are easily uprooted and flushed out." What might 'a potent energizer' be in scientific terms? Energy in scientific terms is not the prana of the Yoga terms. And how does a concept like 'new life' relate to oxygenation of blood? Oxygenation is simply a chemical term describing the amount of oxygen in the blood. And what on earth are 'the toxins' that store 'negative emotions' in the body? A proper scientific research proving the existence of those would surely be very hard to find.

The research the Art of Foundation mentions is therefore not at all linked to the concepts that the organization uses in advertising its products. The wording all of the sudden becomes an obvious case of pseudo-scientific language when they explain it in their 'own' terms.

Thus, if Shankar's Sudarshan Kriya helps, it's because the control of breathing through Yoga helps. What is so wondrous about that? It has been known in India for thousands of years.

So what is the difference between Shankar and others. It is not the fact that he is a famous guru – many have been before him – it is not his message – because that as well sounds very similar to those before him – and it is not the technique – for many techniques do the same. Some critics claim it is the immensely good PR department behind him that helps him to (literally) sell his Sudarshan to the whole world. He's a better businessman than the others, they say.

Supporters of Ravi will reply time and again that those critics should stop attacking 'his holiness' without real arguments and should look at what he has done for the world. And indeed one of the difference with Shankar and the other gurus exported to the west seems to be his emphasis on development work.

But when one again has a deeper look at the types of development work Shankar and the Art of Living is engaged in, some questions can again be raised. His organization splits up in many branches of which one is the "International Association for Human Values" that was set up together with the Dalai Lama. The real structure behind all these organizations is not really comprehensible and it is very difficult to get a decent overview of the whole.

Not minding about the structure, one can just look at the immense variety of development work the whole of the organization is supposed to be involved in. Trauma relieve after the earthquake in Kashmir or the Tsunami in Tamil Nadu, women empowerment courses, rural development, prisoner rehabilitation, youth education, promoting ayurvedic medicine, and so on make up an impressive list of which one can not help but wonder how it is possible to all be set up by one man.

One thing makes it more comprehensible: in most of the different problems they simply bring the

same 'solution': Sudarshan Kriya. Whether it is people having no homes after an earthquake, women that have to be empowered to face their suppression in male dominated societies, inmates in jails that need to refocus their lives or rural kids that need education, the art of living comes to teach them their meditation practices so that they can be relieved from their 'stress' and 'fears'.

What else the Art of Living does is a bit of a mystery when watching the promotional video's. Most of those consist of interviews with people like kids in Kashmir or inmates in South Africa, after a Sudarshan session who say they feel 'so much more relieved' now. Whether they are also materially and/or socially relieved from the situation that put them in their 'stressful' situation is not known.

Anyone a bit involved in development work knows how slow it goes, how much time and effort it takes. Anyone a bit experienced in the difficulty of thorough development initiatives that have a bit of a lasting effect knows that it is rather impossible to reach "30,000 villages through personal interactions, teachings and humanitarian initiatives and to reach out to an estimated 300 million people worldwide." like Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's personal website states.

Certainly when you consider that Shankar himself is not involved in really leading the development work. He himself is conducting classes, giving lectures and traveling all over the world.

Some of the other efforts of the Art of Living foundation therefore involve Ravi Shankar personally meeting with and talking to leaders of various religious and political groups. But the depth of these talks is also questionable as he invariably proposes those leaders the same message: more peace through more friendly dialog and breathing techniques. Nothing concrete but simply a good emphasis on "love, peace and understanding" that should do the trick apparently.

Armed with this advice, Shankar headed for Iraq, and somebody in America got the idea of sending Iraqis to Shankar's Ashram in Bangalore, India. Official reason: reduction of the trauma of the war and more empowerment of the women so that they can go back and lead their communities. To achieve this, once again, in the video news reports we could see how this translates in Shankar or his pupils teaching Sudarshan Kriya as a solution to the 'stress' and the 'problems' of the Iraqis. As if the post-war situation of Iraq is comparable to the problems of an American house wife who has difficult kids in their puberty.

This oversimplification was very apparent when Shankar was in Iraq and gave an interview to CNN. He said he wanted to bring non-violence like Mahatma Gandhi and that he wanted the several parties to simply talk to each other peacefully instead of drawing arms. But that exactly showed how little he knew really of Mahatma Gandhi. The Mahatma for one had understood that the parties 'not being able to talk' was exactly the problem. The Mahatma at certain points knew that proposing a 'peaceful dialog' was simply ludicrous. At those moments Gandhi would resort to non-violent civil disobedience.

Not with flower power peaceful words did the Mahatma try to win independence, but with strenuous action. Non-violent, but with action nonetheless, and not with words or meditation. Gandhi understood the 'stress' of the Indians not to be simply a spiritual problem but to be a material, social, political as well as a spiritual problem. If Gandhi had simply told people to meditate to get rid of their 'anger', he would not have gotten far in all likelihood, because it certainly was not only 'anger' they had to get rid of.

If Sri Sri Ravi Shankar therefore is proposed for the Nobel Peace Prize – a prize which the Mahatma never received although he was five times nominated – it makes one wonder where and how he exactly is creating peace.

His own guru, Maharishi, once went to Pinochet to propose to the dictator that if only he and others in his country would meditate twenty minutes in the morning and twenty minutes in the evening everybody would be better off and get closer to world peace. The future showed that perhaps Pinochet just didn't listen to well. But perhaps such an effort is also simply not very effective or comparable to the efforts of Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu or Nelson Mandela and as such not really worthy of being given a Nobel Peace Prize for it. In Maharishi's case nobody considered to do so.

In Maharishi's case, just like Osho's for example, public controversies made it of course obvious that he was a bit 'bogus' and 'dodgy'. In Shankar's case the critics do not often come up with anything concrete to pin on Ravi Shankar and unmask him as a fraud, except personal stories of individual encounters and experiences.

His very commercial New Age image is far from a crime and does not at all take away the possibility that he might be genuinely wishing well for his followers and the rest of the world.

But, as the previous analysis has shown, there is certainly enough grounds for reasonable doubt as well. So he might just as well be a man on search of money, fame and glory through Guruism. His blatant exaggerations and mystifications in presenting himself and Sudarshan Kriya seem at least to point in that direction.

Or he might be a bit a fraud and a bit genuine. Again, he wouldn't be the first in that sense either.

In any case, the whole world should by now have enough memories of encounters with various guru's that are at least be a bit suspicious in certain cases. Certainly in cases like Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's, because it involves many many millions of dollars of which nobody really seems to know where they're going to.

So to use a spiritual word that for once was not exported out of India, it remains to be seen and heavily investigated whether Ravi Shankar is "kosher" enough to be given the Nobel Peace Prize or even the title of Sri, and certainly when using it in double.

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