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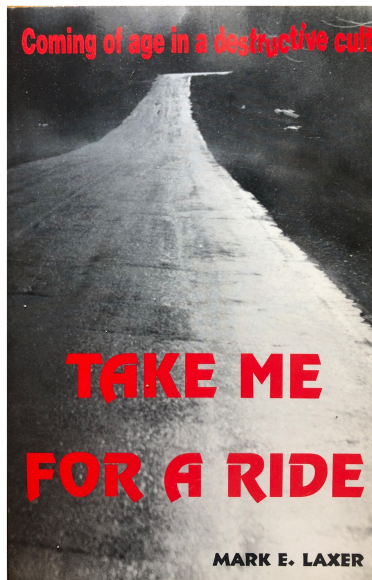
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TAKE ME FOR A RIDE: COMING OF AGE IN A DESTRUCTIVE CULT ***

**TAKE ME FOR A RIDE
Coming Of Age In A Destructive Cult
by Mark E. Laxer
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Take Me For A Ride

* * *

One flew east,
One flew west,
One flew over the cuckoo's nest.

—Childhood nursery rhyme
quoted in One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest
by Ken Kesey

Fly me over the cuckoo's nest,
To your *golden* side,
I don't care if you're the cuckoo—
Take me for a ride...

—Agni

TAKE ME FOR A RIDE

Coming Of Age In A Destructive Cult

by

Mark E. Laxer

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Reviews:

“While his portrait of a charismatic leader’s slide into madness is gripping, perhaps more important here is Laxer’s disclosure of some of the motives impelling young people to immerse themselves in cults the work is well written.”

--Library Journal

“This is a very important work It is today’s Darkness at Noon.”

--Herb Rosedale, President, American Family Foundation

“One of the most important books written for a very vulnerable population.”

--Roberta Davis, WRCT-FM, Squirrel Hill, Pittsburgh

“Mark Laxer does a great service in his deeply personal portrayal of life within a cult. His struggle to attain independence is a poignant quest of a seeking spirit.”

--Jacob Longacre, Lutheran Minister

“All students of human nature will delight in Mark Laxer’s insightful story of his personal journey into a new kind of American cult that interweaves pseudo-spiritual goals with money making, computer, hi-technology ambitions. He shows us the subtle techniques used to seduce bright college students and graduates into this cult and the powerful forces that bind members to their charismatic leader. My students have enjoyed the narrative and learned much from this analysis of the psychology of cult indoctrination in Take Me For A Ride.”

--Dr. Philip Zimbardo, Stanford University, Initiator of the Stanford Prison Experiment

Update:

After weathering a \$30 million lawsuit meant to silence his “Take Me For A Ride: Coming of Age in a Destructive Cult” (1993), Mark Laxer went on to write “The Monkey Bible” (2010) with companion rock opera “The Line” by Eric Maring and “Rama Trauma Trump: I Left the Cult and Now Look What Happened” (2020) - a nonfiction graphic novel illustrated by Marcie Vallette. Contact author for free digital copies of aforementioned books and rock opera.

Additional resources:

- Free audio of “Take Me For A Ride: Coming of Age in a Destructive Cult” read by the author on the Mark Laxer youtube channel, in the Take Me For A Ride playlist
- Subscribe to Mark Laxer and TheMonkeyBible youtube channel for latest
- Follow author on twitter.com/marklaxer and [instagram.com/mark.laxer](https://www.instagram.com/mark.laxer)
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To Patsy Sims—inspired teacher, intriguing storyteller, intrepid journalist.

Author's Note

Names in the following story have been changed, except for those already mentioned in the press.

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1. Bicycle Ride—Walden

After I left Rama's inner circle in 1985, I occasionally bicycled to Walden Pond, where I read about Thoreau's experiment with self-reliance. My seven years in the cult of Rama—Dr. Frederick Lenz, who was known early on as Atmananda—had deeply shaken my confidence. Atmananda often assured me that I was possessed by Negative Forces, that I was barely able to function in the real world, and that I was fortunate he did not drop me off at a mental institution. I met him in 1978, when I was seventeen.

Thoreau helped me recall a time, before Atmananda, when I was strong and self-reliant. I had been an avid cyclist. Pedaling thousands of miles each year helped strengthen both my legs and self-esteem. Throughout my teenage years bicycling and self-confidence were inextricably linked, and I grew to believe I could ride anywhere, under any conditions. I tried to approach life with a similar gusto, which may explain why, in 1979, Atmananda invited me to move with him to southern California to start a spiritual centre. From 1979 to 1981, I lived with him by the cliffs of La Jolla where I witnessed his rise to power. Today, in 1993, he controls the minds of several

hundred computer consultants, businessmen, doctors, and lawyers. Each year he extracts from them roughly ten million dollars.

As I gazed at Walden Pond in search of calm, the wind spawned new waves, and the surface swelled with complexity. I recalled what Atmananda had said after I returned from a five-day bike trip in California. He announced in front of other disciples that my aura was dark. He also said that I had been attacked by nocturnal, mountain-dwelling Entities which "cause neurosis and psychosis, obliterate lifetimes of spiritual evolution, and can possess your soul."

Atmananda's Entity-prevention program included studying with a fully enlightened teacher, meditating regularly, and avoiding solitary excursions into nature. Yet in the spring of 1986, nearly one year after I left him, I reminded myself that I would rather be possessed in my world than potentially perfect in his. I planned to pedal across America not with an exorcist, but with a puppy.

On May 31, 1986, as warm, moist air pushed pockets of fog over Walden Pond, I lifted the four-month-old Siberian husky, Nunatak, into the doggie-carrier. The carrier rested on top of the bicycle trailer, attached to the frame of my 12-speed. Strong headwinds soon strained my muscles, shook the lush canopy of foliage, and pelted me with large drops of rain. As I began the journey west, the front tire raced through puddles while my mind raced through painful memories and questions. How had my years with Atmananda affected me? Why was it so difficult to leave him? What was it about my past that led me to him?

2. Zapped!

"Lights," said my father and for a moment, except for the phosphorescent hands of the clock on the wall, the room went black. With a flip of a switch, he suddenly reappeared: a tall, thin man with thick glasses, standing beside the glowing enlarger. As a child I sat for hours under a dim yellow light, mesmerized by images appearing on paper submerged in trays filled with smelly liquid. Yellow, my father taught me, has no apparent effect on the light-sensitive specks coating photographic paper.

The unorthodox images which leapt from the walls of our house seemed as eerie as the darkroom experience itself: there was a photograph of a llama's head as viewed through a distorting fish-eye lens, there was a photograph of a shredded poster of a man's face, and there were many abstract photos which seemed to defy description. My father, a production manager at a New York publishing company, perhaps saw the world in a different light than his peers.

My mother was an elementary school teacher with black hair and sometimes kind, sometimes intense eyes. A generous and caring woman, she put her career on hold for more than a decade to raise a family. She met my father in upstate New York on a hike sponsored by an outing club.

When I was fourteen, I sensed that my father was growing tired, detached, and depressed, but I did not understand why. He expressed abstractions better than emotions, and found it difficult to vent the angers and frustrations which had accumulated from work and from home.

Nor did I understand that my mother freely gave to me what she, in her youth, had sorely missed: love. Oblivious to the magnitude of her workload—she taught full-time and was pursuing a Master's degree—I grew angry with her as a teenager partly because she seemed insecure and overbearing, and partly because she expected me, my brother, and my father to help keep the house clean in the way that she wanted.

Despite my family's love for the outdoors, for our dog, and for one another, the emotional fabric that bound us together often seemed on the verge of ripping apart. And the problems only intensified as my brother and I grew older.

Two-and-a-half-years my elder, my brother was an avid backpacker and rock climber with jet-black hair, Gandhi glasses, and a gentle but determined disposition. He too felt that something in our family was "out of whack," and we occasionally discussed what we would do when we left home. But unlike me, he had no one to buffer him from my parents who, I was starting to discover, were only human.

I was a sensitive child. I was so sensitive that the sounds of someone chewing made me upset. I was a light sleeper. I was also a slob, a knee-jerk rebel, and something of a nerd when it came to doing things like making friends with girls. Nonetheless, I decided that I could work out whatever I needed to work out in a healthier environment than at home; the countdown to the last day of high school, after which I planned to set out on my own, began when I was around fifteen. Meanwhile, I read a lot and spent time with friends, some of whom also enjoyed hiking and bicycling.

In the summer of 1976, when I was sixteen, I bicycled from the White Mountains of New

Hampshire to Boston with people from an outing club. One morning, as I watched my traveling companions prepare their daily dose of hallucinogens, I realized that I wanted to be part of their fellowship. The desire, however, was checked by a gut-level impulse to avoid drugs, so Jim, a sinewy guy stooped over a pot of boiling morning glory seeds, turned me on instead to *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*. This was a popular account of Carlos Castaneda's purported apprenticeship with Yaqui Indian medicine man Juan Matus, or Don Juan.

From the cover of the book peered a menacing and surreal painting of a crow.

"But a crow isn't always a crow," said Jim softly, paraphrasing Don Juan as he stirred the seeds. "Sometimes it's a powerful sorcerer in disguise."

Intrigued by the paradox of the crow, I plowed through *The Teachings of Don Juan* and through Castaneda's *A Separate Reality* and *Journey To Ixtlan*. At summer's end, still drugless and clueless as to whether crows were birds or sorcerers, I left Boston clutching a Castaneda book.

Back in New York, I chose to see the world less through the eyes of an eleventh grader taking honors physics and history, and more through the eyes of a sorcerer's apprentice. I incorporated into my daily routine Don Juan's recommendations. As an exercise in humility, I spoke aloud to plants. To *see* beyond society's description of reality, I tried to stop my thoughts. To expand my awareness beyond the confines of the waking state, I sought to wake within a dream.

My interest in what lay beyond the scope of traditional reality led to an interest in what lay beyond the scope of traditional education, and, that fall, I thought about switching to a public experimental high school founded in the late '60s. I firmly believed that I would thrive in a world without grades, attendance taking, tests, and requirements. In January, 1977, with the guidance of my brother, I managed to persuade my reluctant parents to let me join.

I chose to continue taking physics and history at the traditional school; other subjects I took at the non-traditional school where, in a creative writing class, I wrote:

Teachers force us to perceive,
The surface world of reason:
"A tree is but a pole with leaves,
Whose habits change each season."

I thrived within a self-designed, academically rigorous educational program, but experienced no breakthroughs in my search for Hidden Realms of Perception until the following summer. The experience came when I was working ten-hour days and five-and-a-half day weeks on a farm in southern New Hampshire. In my spare time, I was designing and building an electricity-producing windmill, which ended up towering some twenty feet above Onyx, one of the tallest cows. Farm-crew members sometimes walked out to the hay fields to get high. One night, after smoking marijuana, I fell asleep and later saw, above where I lay, a cow, its head swaying gently to and fro. Though I thought I was awake it was but a dream, for when I woke from "waking," the cow had disappeared. This experience led me to believe that like Mr. Castaneda's mentor, I could consciously direct my actions within the context of a dream.

Back in New York, I became editor-in-chief of the high school newspaper. I soon learned that I had a knack for inspiring and for managing a team. I was well regarded by my teachers and by my peers, and I had many friends. I could have continued my studies at a prestigious university, but I longed for a mystical quest. I dreamt that I walked silently across a vast desert plain. I longed to experience that which lay beyond the surface world of reason. I dreamt that I flew over desert chaparral into an infinite orange horizon. I longed for a wisdom that was secret, magical, ancient. I decided to hitchhike, alone, to the Sonoran Desert in Mexico to find a mystical teacher, a *brujo*, who was just like Don Juan. I planned to leave on the day after high school graduation.

Meanwhile, I continued to read the Castaneda books and to experiment with consciousness. One time I attempted to raise my right arm without consciously lifting it. I wanted it to levitate on its own. I soon felt a tingling in the arm, but it did not rise. Finally, I lifted it on purpose. Then, as part of the experiment, I suggested to myself that the arm remain lifted. As long as I repeated the suggestion, the arm remained where it was. Afterwards, I could not recall how long the state of mind had lasted.

My brother shared with me an interest in rising above the limitations of home, school, religion, society, and reality. By the time I turned him on to the Castaneda books, he had already studied Einstein's special theory of relativity and *The Tao Of Physics*. In the spring of 1978, when he was studying physics at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, he told me that he had met an English professor who was an expert on the Castaneda books. He knew that my quest for a teacher would begin in roughly two months, when I would graduate from high school. He wanted to help me. He suggested that I attend the Castaneda expert's free lecture series on meditation in Manhattan.

I wondered why a Castaneda expert would live on Long Island rather than in a remote desert in Mexico, but my brother's enthusiasm was sincere. "Besides," I thought as we rode the train

into the city, "anything I learn now will only help me on the journey."

We arrived at a building on 33rd Street. A rickety elevator took us to the third floor, where the sweet and spicy aroma of incense wafted through the air. I saw a row of sneakers by the elevator door and wondered if they had been responsible for the incense. After placing our sneakers in line with the others, we walked past a sign which read "Yoga Life Perfection." A young woman with long, black hair and a playful, impish grin sold books and incense in the hallway. She recognized my brother and smiled at us. She wore a sari.

We entered a medium-sized room where a smoldering stick of incense and two unlit candles rested on a table up front. Two young women stood together near the back of the room. One had long brown hair and dreamy eyes. The other had a face and figure like a model. Their faces were flushed and aglow. They also wore saris.

"Too bad I'm not gonna be sticking around New York," I thought, gazing at them.

In the audience sat two women in their sixties, dressed entirely in black. They sat near a man in his thirties, with the frame of a metal pyramid resting squarely on his head.

We sat by the two sari-clad women. They were clearly excited about something. They used words like inspiration, aspiration, concentration, visualization, meditation, reincarnation, and perfection. My brother, too, seemed excited, as if something extraordinary and wonderful were about to occur. With each passing minute, I found myself growing more curious, more impatient, and more excited. Fifteen minutes after the talk was scheduled to begin, the women in saris stopped talking and looked up.

I looked up too and saw a tall man with a projecting nose and lush locks. His long strides seemed synchronized with his arms, which swung like perfectly conflicting pendulums; this motion seemed to propel him into the room. He sat on the table facing the audience, folded his legs in the pretzel-like posture seen in Buddha statues, and introduced himself as Dr. Frederick Lenz. He explained that he had another name: Atmananda. Then he lit the candles and asked us to drop our preconceived notions because, "meditation is beyond thought."

"Thought is like a car," he said in a smooth, charming voice. "You can drive it to California. But if you want to cross the ocean, you will need an alternate means of transportation. If you want to cross the sea of consciousness, you will need meditation."

Though his metaphors were new to me, they seemed to point the way beyond the surface world of reason. He used words like guru, avatar, warrior, power, power spots, personal power, moments of power, spiritual power, psychic power, ecstasy, enlightenment, cosmic love, transcendental, supreme, Nirvana, and the Infinite. When he said it was time to meditate, I was surprised that he had been speaking for over forty minutes. It had seemed like five.

"Now extend your index fingers and close your eyes," Atmananda instructed.

I squinted to see if anyone else was peeking. From what I could tell, the twenty or so people obeyed him.

"Now say 'me' out loud and touch your chest."

My "me" was muffled by the group's "me".

"You are not only pointing to your chest," Atmananda explained, "but to your heart chakra, one of seven psychic energy centers associated with the subtle body. Concentrating on a chakra is an easy way to begin crossing the sea of consciousness."

So we sat there, drifting, and though I tried to stop my thoughts and feel the throbbing pulse of my heart chakra, I found myself checking out the women in saris.

"Very good," he said after about five minutes. Then he suggested that we sit back, relax, and ask questions.

There was something hauntingly familiar about this confident, well-spoken, young professor. Perhaps it was the way his chin jutted forward, the rich timbre of his voice, or his seeming interest in helping people that reminded me of the cartoon character Dudley-Do-Right. I felt drawn to him. I found myself staring into his full moon, gripping eyes. I found myself seeking his attention.

"Can a person be healed by meditating?" I asked, only partly concerned that I had a cold.

He locked my attention with those eyes... I felt slightly dizzy... it was not unpleasant... it felt as though I were floating... my vision blurred... things went fuzzy and white... it appeared as though it were snowing...

"Am I having a vision?" I wondered and immediately the "snow" vanished. Just then Atmananda seemed unreal, like a superhero from a cosmic comic-strip that had been cut, enlarged, and inserted into the room. When he smiled at me, I had the uncanny sense that he knew what I had felt and seen. Then he left, flanked by the women in saris.

3. The Joining

In the days following Atmananda's talk, I longed to know if my vision of the "snow" had been a mystical experience, an optical illusion, or a figment of my imagination. Graduation was only weeks away. I assumed that Atmananda would help me solve the mystery, and I counted the days until his next public lecture.

I did not tell my friends much about Atmananda. They seemed content, even after reading the Castaneda books, to view the world through a rational framework. In contrast, I grew excited about the possibility of transcending the world of reason altogether. They were proud of their letters of acceptance from the Harvards and the Princetons. I was proud of my letter of acceptance from The School Of Mysticism. My letter arrived in the form of brilliant white specks which swirled about me like snow.

Nor did I tell my parents, who represented discord, anxiety, and manipulation—the opposite of what Atmananda seemed to stand for.

Instead, I spoke with my brother. He and I were close. I wanted to be just like him. He used words such as disciples, selfless-service, humanity, humility, purity, soul, soul-mate, past-lives, karma, fast track, and cosmic evolution. He got excited when he talked about Atmananda. He told me that he too had experienced perceptual distortion during Atmananda's talks. We returned to "Yoga Life Perfection."

About thirty minutes after the talk was scheduled to begin, Atmananda strode through the door. He wore a light brown suit.

"Anne," he said, "did you bring the Transcendental?"

The sari-clad woman who had sold incense at the last lecture placed a frame on the table beside Atmananda. The Transcendental was a photograph of Atmananda's Indian guru, Chinmoy. But it was so underexposed that it seemed not a picture of a guru, but rather a mug-shot of a ghost with high cheekbones. It reminded me of one of the experimental images which had emerged from my father's darkroom.

"The Transcendental portrays Guru in his highest transcendental consciousness," my brother told me.

Atmananda scanned the audience, mostly women in their sixties. Then he began to lecture, not on meditation, but on reincarnation, which he had done many times before.

"Maya, or illusion, eclipses the original perfection of the soul," he said. "The soul reincarnates over thousands of lessons known as lifetimes."

I could not recall learning about reincarnation at Hebrew school.

"As the soul evolves, it transcends desire and attachment, which is the root of all suffering. Finally, enlightenment occurs."

Unaware that he was borrowing Hindu and Buddhist doctrine, and intrigued but not convinced that in a future life I would attain enlightenment, I kept one eye on Atmananda and the other on Anne.

"Everything can be classified according to its level of spiritual evolution. Rocks and minerals are very primitive, whereas plants have more developed auras. After thousands of years, the soul seeks an animal incarnation. Except in rare instances, enlightenment occurs through the human form only."

I grinned and wiggled my thumbs, figuring I was already ahead of the game.

"Humans in their early incarnations are responsible for many of the world's problems. But evolved people are not better than others. Are college students any better than third graders?"

This diffused my concern that Atmananda's line of reasoning justified the formation of an evolved elite.

"Karma is a cosmic feedback mechanism triggered by past actions. In a universe governed by karma, few experiences are coincidental."

I supposed a lottery winner could have been a generous philanthropist in a past life. But remembering the various times I had been robbed while growing up in New York, I doubted that I had spent incarnations as a mugger. Still, I liked his contention that it was karma's role not to punish, but to educate.

"After thousands of human incarnations, you become ready to study with an enlightened teacher. You may suddenly notice a teacher's poster. You may have seen the poster many times before—only this time something *clicks*."

I looked at the Transcendental and wondered if the Guru, who looked like he badly needed sleep, could make something in me *click*.

Atmananda turned toward me, as if in response to my newest doubt, and said, "An enlightened teacher can take a person through thousands of lives in just one lifetime."

"What's the rush?" I thought.

"The sooner you attain enlightenment, the sooner you can help others transcend this world of pain and suffering."

"How did he do that?" I wondered, unsure if he were addressing typical doubts, or if he were actually reading my mind.

Atmananda continued to look at me. I found myself gazing, without blinking, into his eyes... I began to feel as if I were floating... somewhere far away I sensed my body breathing... I heard "bzzzzzzzz" droning on and on and on...

He turned away, and I returned to normal consciousness.

"Holy cow," I thought. "He did it again!" Suddenly, I imagined that he was a sorcerer and I, his apprentice. I forgot about Anne and carefully followed his words.

"Advanced seekers say that after they attain enlightenment they will return to earth to help others. But most of them end up choosing eternal ecstasy instead."

I vowed to come back and help the downtrodden.

"It is even rarer for fully enlightened souls to return," he said, pointing out that his Guru was fully enlightened.

Fully enlightened souls, Atmananda explained, were aware of those who meditated sincerely on their photograph. Atmananda then instructed us to meditate on the Transcendental. After about ten minutes of silence he asked, "Who saw the light around Guru?"

One woman shot up her hand. Then another. I admitted to myself that I thought I saw the photo glow.

"Guru flooded you with light from another world," he explained. Then, inviting the audience to experience the "advanced" side of self-discovery, he told us about Chinmoy's free weekly meditations at St. Paul's Chapel, Columbia University.

By this time, in keeping with Atmananda's suggestions, my brother had applied to study with Chinmoy. He was accepted. He lived near the State University of New York at Stony Brook, near the eight or so Chinmoy disciples, near Atmananda. When I asked him to take me to his Guru, he said that he would.

We met at our parents' home. He wore all white clothes. "White symbolizes purity—the spiritual quality men need to develop most," he explained, quoting Chinmoy. "Wearing white only adds one or two percent more purity to your consciousness, but every bit helps."

My mother came into the room and looked at my brother.

"Uh-oh," I thought. I felt bad for my mother. She typically had to deal with me and my brother on her own. Perhaps in anticipation of an ulcer condition, my father tended to avoid so-called family discussions. "If only she would leave us alone," I figured, "she would not get so bent out of shape."

I also felt bad for my brother. Everything he did, it seemed, aggravated my parents. "They should support him in his spiritual quest," I decided.

Now my mother looked upset. I did not know it then, but she was not upset that her sons were interested in yoga. In her youth she had satisfied a similar interest in the East by taking a course on Gandhi's philosophy. She grew concerned, however, when she realized that we were intensely focusing on one person—on a living guru.

"Where are you boys going?" she asked.

"It's okay, Mom," I replied, assuming my role as mediator. "We're just going to a talk on relaxation and meditation—you know, stuff like that." I had already told her about Chinmoy and Atmananda ("Mom, I think I found a teacher right here in New York!"). But she wanted to know more. She looked hurt.

"You're upset about relaxation and meditation?" I said, trying my best to reason with her.

"This is nothing, Mom. What are you going to say when I hitchhike to Mexico to study with a *brujo*?"

The silence that ensued bore with it all the weight of a mother's love, hope, and fear for her sons.

We said good-bye and rode to the city.

"I mean, I have to lead my own life," I thought, and focused on my parents' shortcomings to offset pangs of guilt.

Manhattan's ivy-league citadel of the intellect seemed an unlikely spot for people to be led beyond thought. But then, finding a guru with an enlightened soul uptown seemed no less likely than meeting a sorcerer with a Ph.D. downtown. We switched at Grand Central Station to an uptown train and emerged at 125th Street. The clatter of subway cars gave way to traffic noise which faded once we entered the Columbia University campus. Soon we ascended steps to St. Paul's Chapel. Ahead of us were men with closely cropped hair wearing all white clothes. With hair clenched in braids, the sari-wrapped women walked apart from the men—who were not looking at them. At the top of the stairs, dressed in a red tennis outfit, stood Atmananda.

"Hi, Atmananda," said my brother, looking up.

With folded arms, Atmananda looked down and said, "Hello, Dan."

"You remember my kid brother?"

"Hello, kid brother."

Atmananda and I were roughly the same height, yet as disciples flocked by him he seemed much taller. I was again struck by his piercing eyes, sharp nose, and thick crown of brown hair. With such a countenance of nobility, he could have passed as a high Roman senator or Greek god.

"Guru couldn't make it this week," he said. "Why don't you go in and meditate, and pick up on Guru's vibes?"

My brother and I went inside. High above us on the massive chapel dome were paintings of angels. Perhaps it was the distant angels, the two hundred or more silent disciples, and the rising scent of sandalwood incense, that made me feel foreign and small. We meditated for about five minutes and left.

Outside, Atmananda was speaking with a man in white, when it struck me that he was wearing red. "A non-conformist within a group of non-conformists!" I thought.

He nodded to us but continued talking.

I walked by and noticed his name tag. Directly beneath "ATMANANDA" glimmered a sticker from AAA and this warning: "Fasten Your Seat Belt."

That night, in the Castaneda books, I read how ordinary events were often portentous omens. I wondered if there was a significant message hidden in the Guru's absence. I wondered, too, if I was supposed to meditate with this Guru before hitchhiking west.

The following week, I ventured with my brother to another of Atmananda's lectures. We also returned to meditate with Chinmoy. When we arrived at Columbia, disciples were arranging flowers, lighting incense, and otherwise darting about in preparation for their master's presence. Chinmoy apparently was on his way. Several minutes later a short, stocky Indian entered the chapel. He had a shiny head, a hooked nose, and high cheek bones. He was draped in a light-blue dhoti, the male version of a sari. He walked slowly toward the front. He sat in a big blue chair, opened his eyes wide, and blinked a couple of times.

Disciples in the audience sat with their hands folded, as if they were praying to him.

"Are they praying to him?" I asked my brother.

"No," he whispered. "They are aspiring to the Infinite in him."

The Guru sipped from a glass which he held with his pinky pointing out.

"Well," I thought. "As long as they aren't praying to him."

Suddenly Chinmoy belted out, "Aummm. Auuummmmmmm. Auuummmmmmmmmmmmmmm." After five minutes of meditation, the Guru folded his hands and bowed to the audience.

My brother whispered, "He is offering his meditation to the Infinite in us."

"That about evens the score," I thought, feeling better about the whole business of guru worship.

Chinmoy signaled a disciple who placed a box of oranges before him. He stood behind it and nodded to the audience, which began forming a line.

At first I thought he was just giving out oranges. But by filling the fruits with spiritual light, my brother explained, the Guru was really giving darshan.

One by one, the disciples looked into Chinmoy's eyes with out-stretched hands. When they received the darshan they touched the orange to their heart chakra, bowed, and walked reverentially back to the benches.

When it came my turn, I approached slowly so that people would think I was spiritual. "When Guru flickers his eyes," I recalled my brother telling me, "he is entering the perfect awareness of Nirvakalpa Samadhi." I looked up. Chinmoy smiled, flickered his eyes, and pulled from the box... nothing! He had run out of oranges.

"An omen!" I thought. I was unsure, though, what the delay exactly meant. Nonetheless, I decided to take advantage of the situation. I focused my gaze on Chinmoy. Soon everything in the chapel, except for his shiny face, seemed to disappear. Then, borrowing a technique from the Castaneda books, I squinted and crossed my eyes until Chinmoy transformed into swirls of shimmering light. "Wow!" I thought. For a moment, the distorted image before me reminded me of the Transcendental.

When Chinmoy came back into focus, he shot a glance at the side of the chapel. A disciple brought him a fresh crate. After the second flickering, I took the orange with both hands, touched it to my heart chakra, and bowed. I walked away feeling grateful. A wave of joy washed over me. I saw the disciples, including my brother and Atmananda, gazing lovingly at Chinmoy. I felt touched by a power which seemed greater and more romantic than that of the world of reason. "How many people get a gift from a *fully* enlightened guru?" I wondered.

"Don't just stare at it," my brother reproved, explaining that oranges were poor retainers of Spiritual Light. "Eat it!"

Moments later, the Guru announced in a lilting voice, "Atmananda, pleeeez bring."

Atmananda led the five or six potential initiates to the front of the chapel. He had found, inspired, and persuaded them through his lectures. While Atmananda watched the Guru initiate them, he did not return to his seat. Instead, he remained in front, several feet away.

Chinmoy rapidly oscillated his eyes at the new recruits. His eyes were still flickering when he placed his hand on each of their foreheads. When his eyes returned to normal, he flashed a smile at Atmananda, at the new disciples, and at the rest of the audience. Then he left the chapel in a flurry of whites and saris.

As I watched him leave, I felt secure that he and Atmananda knew a lot about the unknown. I glanced across the room at the disciples. I realized that I wanted to be part of their fellowship.

My brother and I found Atmananda outside, addressing a group of Stony Brook Chinmoy disciples.

"Do you want to go with us to Au Natural?" he asked us.

At that moment I would have gone with him anywhere, partly because I was not keen on going home, and partly because he was so compelling. There was something about him that felt nurturing yet electric, casual yet happening.

"Yes!" we chimed.

Atmananda organized rides, gave directions, warned us about potholes and drunk drivers, and suggested that we maintain a meditative consciousness, lest we lose the Guru's light. Then he led us away from the other Chinmoy disciples, from the chapel, from the campus, and onto the streets.

I watched the blur of city lights from the back of Atmananda's Saab, which hurtled through the streets at a velocity close to that of a New York taxi. He skillfully avoided potholes and drunk drivers. He told my brother of his plan to have Stony Brook disciples advertise his free public lectures by placing posters in Manhattan. I relaxed, believing he was in control.

At Au Natural, a yogurt shop, Atmananda introduced me to the Stony Brook disciples. There were Anne, Dana, and Suzanne, the sari-clad women from his lectures. There was Tom, a dark-haired young man who was as tall as Atmananda and who seemed easygoing. There was Sal, a balding young man who seemed intense. There were other Chinmoy disciples milling around, but the Stony Brook group stuck together.

I expected the conversation would be spiritual, seeing as how we had just meditated with a fully enlightened guru. To my surprise, Atmananda and Tom recalled an episode from *The Twilight Zone*.

"And he totally disappeared."

"Into the fifth dimension."

"Yeah, he really got zapped."

That night, when I got home, I wondered if Atmananda should have been more meditative. But I recalled that Don Juan often acted absurd, funny, and irreverent. He did so to balance the utter seriousness of The Path, as well as to shake up Castaneda's pre-conceived notions of what it meant to be a seeker. "Besides," I thought, quoting Atmananda, "who says spirituality can't be fun?"

The following week, I wondered if Chinmoy would accept me as his disciple. I asked my brother what my odds were.

"If you are drawn to Guru," he said, "the chances are you have studied with him in past lives. But if he sees that he's not the right teacher for you, he'll guide you inwardly to the right one."

I wanted to believe what my brother and Atmananda had been telling me. I wanted to believe that the Guru installed disciple-specific, invisible channels through which peace, light, and bliss could, if the disciple were receptive, inwardly flow. Yet I was not sold on the theory of reincarnation. Nor was I convinced that Atmananda was fully accurate when he claimed that Chinmoy was the Cosmic Boatman, an avatar [incarnation of a Hindu deity], and the most advanced soul ever to have incarnated anywhere in the entire universe.

"Why would the messiah live in Jamaica, Queens?" I wondered. But then I felt bad. After all, the Buddha and Christ probably didn't live in such fancy neighborhoods either. I also realized that my doubts were based on the premise of rationality, the very nature of which Atmananda had taught me was limited, flawed, and often destructive. "I suppose Chinmoy *could* be the Cosmic Boatman," I told myself as part of a compromise.

Days later, after one of Atmananda's public lectures, I grew curious about my earlier vision of the snow. I asked Atmananda to explain.

"Your third eye chakra is opening up a bit," he explained matter-of-factly. "You are seeing into another world. It is not unusual to have this type of experience if you have meditated in past lives."

"Thanks, Atmananda!" I said.

"Sure, kid," he said, suggesting that I sit back and enjoy the process.

Except for occasional doubts, I had been enjoying the process. I enjoyed hanging out with the Stony Brook disciples. They were not only fellow seekers, but they seemed to have a good time. Atmananda, in particular, was fun to be around. He sometimes made me feel important and powerful. I enjoyed his lectures, during which he quoted The Bhagavad-Gita, The Bible, Jonathan Livingston Seagull, Star Wars, Shakespeare, T.S. Eliot, Thoreau, Roethke, and Carlos Castaneda. One time he even recited my favorite passage from the Castaneda books, the one about traveling on paths that have heart.

Now convinced that I had found a home in Atmananda's world, I decided to seek initiation from Chinmoy.

My mother knew that my involvement with the group was intensifying. She had been trying to get me to talk to the rabbi.

"Why should I talk to the rabbi?" I responded.

"Will you at least listen to what he has to say?"

But I had been listening to the rabbi since my bar mitzvah four years ago and, frankly, I was not impressed. A kind and sometimes humorous man with a keen intellect, the rabbi represented a religion which seemed less mystical than social. He struck me as being extremely reasonable, if not a little dull. In all the years I studied, sang, and prayed in his congregation, not once, as I recall, did he capture my imagination.

"I don't want to talk to the rabbi," I had replied.

Now I told my mother that I wanted to become a disciple.

She grew quiet and pale.

I told her that I had had mystical experiences while meditating with Chinmoy. I did not tell her, nor did I acknowledge, that the mystical experiences mostly occurred after I crossed or squinted my eyes, or after I gazed at Chinmoy for two minutes or more. I told her that Chinmoy was an enlightened guru, and that I respected him greatly. I did not tell her, nor did I acknowledge, that my respect—my reverence—was shaped largely by Atmananda and the other disciples.

I was convinced by these reasons. So was my brother. My parents were not.

"Mark, would you please talk to the rabbi?"

I finally agreed to go.

When my brother, my mother, and I entered the book-filled office, the rabbi's expression, accentuated by a bulbous nose and glasses, was anything but humorous.

"Hello, Mrs. Laxer," he said. "Hello, boys."

"Hello, rabbi."

He asked us if we were getting involved in another religion.

"No, rabbi," explained my brother. "We are studying spiritual mysticism."

"We're just learning to meditate," I added.

"I see," he said. He mentioned an obscure mystical sect within the Jewish religion known as Cabalism. But Judaism, he explained, slowly, as though measuring each word, was based upon laws—not direct mystical experience. As he spoke, I recalled that Jewish law had been passed down through the generations since the time of Abraham and Isaac. Chinmoy's teachings, I realized, also stemmed from a tradition dating back thousands of years. I found myself picturing Chinmoy and Atmananda. "They are such colorful characters," I thought.

I glanced at the rabbi. He was saying something about the dangers of mind control. "The rabbi is so... plain," I decided. I felt certain that he had never read the Castaneda books.

My mother said little during the meeting. She was hoping that the rabbi would build for my brother and me a framework through which we could view our mystical quest. When the meeting was over, I went home and stared at the underexposed Transcendental photo of Chinmoy.

The next day I tried to meditate, but my mind dwelt on familiar thoughts: "As soon as I graduate, I'm going to leave my tired, depressed father. I'm going to leave my manipulative, demanding mother. I'm going to follow a path with heart, and things are going to get better."

Meanwhile, my mother had asked if she could attend one of the meetings with the Guru.

"Sure," I replied. I felt I had nothing to hide, and I secretly hoped that she would wish me well on my journey.

Dressed in Western clothes, she went to St. Paul's Chapel that Wednesday night and sat near the front. She felt uncomfortable being surrounded by a sea of whites and saris. She saw disciples praying to a short, Indian man dressed in robes. Her stomach became tense when the man placed his hand on the forehead of her youngest son.

I stood in front of the chapel, before Chinmoy, squinting. In the flickering of the Guru's eyes, I was initiated. I bowed and turned, and in the audience I saw my mother. I quickly looked away. I saw myself less as the son of caring, creative, and slightly mixed-up New York Jews, and more a disciple of the man Atmananda said was perfect.

After initiation, I began to spend less time at home, where I often heard things like: "Artie, you talk to your son about what he is getting involved in."

"Leave me alone!" my father replied, irritably.

"It's a *rotten* family!" my mother declared.

I happily spent time instead with my brother, Atmananda, and the other Stony Brook Chinmoy disciples.

One time, while camping with my brother in a marsh near Stony Brook, my calves began to itch. I tried not to scratch what seemed to be poison ivy, but must have done so in my sleep because by morning, the rash had spread.

When I went home, my mother applied lotion to my skin. The next day, she asked if I was better.

"Yup," I said and left for school. Confident that my skin would heal on its own, I did not want to make a fuss over the red bumps which now covered most of my body. Yet later that day in writing class I had to stop reading a poem because I could not get the words out, and my mother arrived and rushed me to the hospital. After a shot of adrenaline caused the puffy, quarter-sized blotches to shrink, the doctor pointed out that had I not been treated in time, I might have been suffocated by the growing bump in my throat.

"How odd to have a near-death experience so soon after my spiritual initiation," I thought. I asked the doctor what he thought had nearly killed me. "Perhaps you had an allergic reaction to something you ate," he said. But after various food groups were one by one reintroduced into my diet, the cause of the hives remained hidden.

I asked Atmananda what he thought had nearly killed me. "It is no coincidence," he said mysteriously. "Whenever you make genuine spiritual progress, the Negative Forces in the universe try and hold you back. But don't worry. When you are attacked by the Forces, just think of Guru."

I did think of Guru. I often doubted, though, that nefarious, non-physical Entities from beyond the world of reason were getting underneath my skin. I recalled that Don Juan tricked Castaneda into pursuing the path to knowledge, and wondered if Atmananda's explanation was a ploy to maneuver me closer to Guru. But because I sought adventure, challenge, and entrance into the metaphysical worlds of Don Juan, Obi-Wan-Kanobi, Chinmoy and Atmananda, I willfully suspended my disbelief. I also suspended my plans to hitchhike west. After reading a speech at my high school graduation, I said good-bye to friends and family, and bought a one-way ticket east to Stony Brook.

4. The Community

"Hello... Atmananda?" said my brother into the phone. Then he winced and hung up.

"Well?" I asked.

"I have to call him back," he replied sheepishly.

"How come?"

"He said I didn't have the right spirit."

He dialed again. "Hallooooooo, Atmanaaaaaanda!" he bellowed. This time, Atmananda gave him directions to the party.

Weeks before, Atmananda gave me permission to attend his parties—provided that I did not "vibe" the women.

"Don't look at them as women," my brother had suggested, quoting Chinmoy and Atmananda. "Look at them as seekers. When you look at them as women, it hurts their evolution."

I assured him I would try.

After I moved to Stony Brook, I started going to Atmananda's parties regularly. At one party my brother and I arrived at Tom's house, left our sneakers by the door, and went inside. Atmananda, Sal, Anne, Tom, and a few other disciples stood in the kitchen. They looked bewildered. The air smelled charred. Black, gooey gobs darkened the floor. Atmananda was not talking. Something was wrong.

When Anne had lit the stove moments before, an explosion singed her hair and propelled chocolate and marshmallow covered graham crackers across the room. Now, as we cleaned the mess, Atmananda began to speak.

"Guru protected us from the Negative Forces," he said in a rich, lulling voice.

I told myself that the explosion had probably more to do with the gas being left on than it did with Guru and the Forces.

"The Negative Forces want to hurt Guru's mission," Atmananda continued grimly. "But they know not to challenge an avatar directly. Instead, they go after his disciples—particularly those wide open to doubt."

For months I had grappled with the concept of Negative Forces. Perhaps they existed, I told myself, perhaps they did not. In either case, I did not take them seriously. Now, though, I tried to imagine what they looked like. I pictured massive, menacing storm clouds in a dark, foreboding sky. I imagined the "clouds" were aware of my current thoughts. Suddenly the clouds seemed real. I felt jolted. I looked around the room. I sensed the disciples had taken Atmananda's caveat seriously. My stomach felt taut. I thanked Chinmoy silently.

Atmananda had meanwhile flipped to a less somber mood. "One of the best ways to combat the Forces," he said, "is to have fun." So we went out to eat.

At an Italian restaurant during one party, Atmananda suddenly slapped Sal on the back and, adopting the voice of the Godfather, cried, "Heyyy Sal! You plenty-fine kinda guy!"

"Sure I'm plenty-fine, but I'm also plenty-hungry!" Sal replied with an equally zesty accent, but without slapping him back.

Atmananda then denounced Sal for rescuing a maiden who had been held against her will in "a large vat of ravioli."

"What's wrong with that?" I asked.

"Sal, tell the baby what'sa wrong with that."

Until now I had enjoyed their antics, but the transition from being the editor-in-chief of my high school paper to "the baby" felt awkward. Yet at seventeen, I was the youngest in the group, the average age of which was twenty-one. Atmananda was twenty-seven. And I had learned from Chinmoy and Atmananda that humility was the quintessential spiritual quality. Besides, I loved the attention.

Sal replied that rescuing maidens was wrong because he should have been at home meditating.

I looked again at Sal, a twenty-year-old with a large, creased forehead. He had studied computer engineering first at CalTech, and now at Stony Brook. He also studied guitar and drama. He cradled the eggplant parmigiano hero lovingly in his hands and closed his eyes before each bite, as if bracing for the next dose of ecstasy.

"Observe the maestro chow hound," Atmananda announced.

We laughed.

Sal had apparently adjusted to his role as chow hound. He continued to eat as if nothing happened.

"If only Sal could focus on the Infinite rather than on the eggplant," Atmananda noted, "he would be the first among us to realize God."

It was fun eating out with Atmananda. After dinner, we often continued the fun and the fight against the Forces at the movies.

One time, Atmananda took us to Warlords of Atlantis. He bought five buckets of heavily buttered popcorn, Tabs, Cokes, diet Cokes, boxes of licorice, Sno-caps, and Raisinetes. Then, from the fourth row—Atmananda claimed that four was a power number—we watched a film which, at the time, seemed extraordinary.

Atmananda sat by the aisle of the nearly empty theatre. He whispered something to Sal, who told Tom, who told my brother, who told me: "Atlantis was once a real city."

"Atlantis was a real city," I told Anne, who told Dana, who told Suzanne. Meanwhile, juxtaposed at an intersection of transmigrating junk food, I further divided my attention between monitoring what needed to be passed, trying not to notice the women, and watching a man on the screen discover a lost world of magic and conflict under the sea.

"We all had past lives in Atlantis."

"We had past lives there." Pass the Raisinetes. A hidden city of magicians, seers, and warriors, where the laws of physics do not apply.

"We were together then."

"We were together." Pass the napkins. Crystals have a non-physical power.

"Atlantis was destroyed by the greed of its inhabitants."

"Atlantis was destroyed by greedy people."

Afterwards, we drove back to Tom's and caught the last few minutes of The Twilight Zone. It was late. I was getting sleepy. Atmananda began to repeat how Guru had saved us from stove-demolishing Entities. I entered a state of mind where I heard his words, but did not scrutinize them. Fifteen or twenty minutes later, he suggested that we meditate on the Transcendental which Tom placed on a table by the television.

In the months that followed, Atmananda accepted me into his inner circle of friends. But not every encounter with him, I quickly learned, was a party.

* * *

One morning Atmananda emerged from his cottage in Stony Brook carrying a thick stack of posters. Bluejays, doves, sparrows, and chickadees flocked around a feeder. Sal, Paul, my brother, and I stood nearby. Atmananda approached, but the little birds remained.

"Ellaow," he said in a Cockney accent.

"Ellaow," we echoed.

"WHAT... is your name!" he demanded, quoting from the movie Monty Python and the Holy Grail.

"Sir Waff-noid," offered Sal.

"WHAT... is your quest!"

"I seek the higher worlds."

"WHAT... were you thinking about last night at 11:30!"

Sal blushed.

"Alas, my lad," said Atmananda, patting him on the shoulder. "You won't reach the higher worlds thinking about that."

Atmananda showed us a poster. It read: "ECSTASY AS A WAY OF LIFE." Also printed were details about a free lecture series, "With Atmananda-Dr. Frederick Lenz." But before he sent us to Manhattan, Atmananda inspired us, told us how to protect ourselves, how to change.

"Guru's mission," he said in a pacifying voice, "is to bring peace, light, and bliss into a world that is rapidly heading towards darkness."

I realized that it was largely through Atmananda's lectures, and through his appearances on radio and television—including a recent appearance on the Phil Donahue Show—that Chinmoy's mission was being spread. I felt important that I was a part of the operation.

"Your task is to see where to place the posters so that they will be noticed by advanced seekers. To do this you will need to maintain a very high state of consciousness."

We nodded solemnly.

"If you run into religious fanatics, be polite but firm. Do not let them engage you in conversation."

We nodded again.

"By postering, you are helping Guru bring light into this world. But Negative Forces will sense this and will try to inject you with doubts. If you are attacked by the Forces, cry inwardly to Guru."

I was not too worried about non-physical creatures on the prowl. I had a great deal of self-confidence, I assumed the Guru would protect me, and I wasn't convinced that Atmananda's ghosts were real.

"I see that many will be helped as a result of today's efforts— provided that Sal can muster the willpower to work and not just eat," he said, smiling warmly. "And don't forget to have a good time."

We meditated a moment.

"Guru put a special force on the posters," Atmananda said, breaking the silence and handing the stack to my brother. Then he strutted around us in a "silly walk" which I recognized from a Monty Python skit.

"Cheeriao."

"Cheeriao," we echoed, waddling down the driveway, imitating his imitation. On the way to the train station, his words reverberated in my mind: the path, spiritual, awareness, see, sea of consciousness, dream-time, vibrations, energy, chakra, subtle, metaphysical, psychic, unseen forces, traps, Entities, light, and darkness. The language defined for me a world in which I chose at each moment between good and evil. Put that way, there was not much of a choice. I believed now that ours was a pure and noble quest, and that I was a warrior of Truth, not a casualty of rhetoric.

On the train ride into the city, I sat next to Paul, a happy-go-lucky Swede with blond hair, a broad grin, and a magnet-like attraction for devices that were electronic. We both were Stony Brook freshmen who had learned about Chinmoy through Atmananda's lectures. We both sensed that there was something out there beyond the surface world of reason. We both intended to do something about it.

"What's the penguin doing on the tehlee?" he quipped, quoting from Monty Python. Green and grey scenes of Long Island sped by through the train's window frame.

"The penguin on the tehlee," I squawked, "is about to blow up!"

"Tickets, tickets," announced the conductor. "All tickets please!"

I remembered how, as a kid, I rode the trains without paying. I had stayed ahead of the ticket

collector, gotten off when I reached the front car, and then caught the next train... But now I no longer believed in free rides. It did not matter that the Ultimate Destination could not, according to Atmananda, be described using words. I still felt that I should pay to get there. By postering I was not only paying for myself, but was affording thousands the opportunity to be taken for a ride of their own. I handed the conductor my ticket.

My brother and Sal sat across from us. Their backs were straight, their eyes closed. I too tried to meditate, but could not. Instead, I thought about my parents. I had followed Atmananda's suggestion and told them that I was studying spiritual mysticism. Nonetheless, they seemed convinced that their sons were getting sucked into a cult. I was sensitive to their reaction to me and intentionally saw them less as the weeks went by.

I also thought about Chinmoy. He had instructed followers to memorize four of his disciple-published books. I opened one and read, "When you choose you lose." Chinmoy, it seemed, believed that major decisions should be left to the Supreme, his favorite word for what Atmananda called the Infinite, which the Rabbi had referred to as God.

"Help, Guru!" I thought, doubting I could memorize the numerous aphorisms without divine intervention.

"Penn Station, Penn Station," came the reply. "Last stop!"

We left the train and were funneled onto the escalator by the crowd. Paul and my brother headed uptown on Third Avenue, while Sal and I worked Second Avenue. Dodging cars, bicycles, and more crowds, we entered a supermarket and found the manager.

"Excuse me, sir," Sal said sweetly. "We are sponsoring a workshop on relaxation and were wondering if we could place this in your window."

"One of the posters is already outdated," I pointed out. "So we won't have to take up more of your window space."

The manager looked us over, glanced at the poster, and nodded.

"Thanks," we said and quickly placed two, back to back, visible to people inside and out. After several hours we had placed more than half the stack.

Postering with Sal boosted my confidence in asking favors from strangers. Soon, though, we decided to work opposite sides of the street to increase our efficiency. I found that by acting polite and a bit shy, I could easily persuade store owners to say yes. The more I spread the word of Guru's mission, to people in stores and on the street, the more I believed in it. And the more I believed, the more I wanted to spread the word of Guru's mission...

When Sal and I ran out of posters, we crossed over to Third Avenue, met Paul and my brother, and caught the subway to Penn Station. I was tired from the postering. I found the repetitive clatter and vibrations of the train soothing. I found it easy to meditate. I could have thought about how Atmananda had been teaching me how-to-hunt-and-how-not-to-be-hunted. I could have thought about how those who teach how-to-hunt-and-how-not-to-be-hunted can easily prey upon those whom they teach. I could have thought about how, by asking Atmananda to take me beyond the world of reason, I was hunting him. I could have thought about how he was hunting me. But I just sat there and let my thoughts run free.

That year, Sal, Paul, Tom, my brother, and I placed thousands of posters in Manhattan. Working with Anne, Dana, and Suzanne, we also distributed thousands of handouts on the Stony Brook campus. Sometimes we worked in sub-freezing temperatures. Once Atmananda had us glue posters on buildings in Manhattan in the middle of the night. I did not mind. I tended to enjoy the effort, in part because I believed we were doing some good, because we had plenty of time to pursue other interests (in January, 1979, I began studying English literature at Stony Brook), and because as hard as we worked, we played.

* * *

"The Muppet Movie?" I asked after another full day of postering. "Starring Kermit-the-Frog?"

"Trust me," Atmananda replied.

Trust was the bridge to Atmananda's world, a peculiar, improbable place where it snowed inside buildings in Manhattan in the spring, where invisible beings threatened a guru's mission by blowing up stoves, and where people were hunters or hunted or both. It felt natural to trust a man who treated me with kindness, who exuded an aura of competency and of vulnerability, and who seemed wholeheartedly dedicated to the cause of self-improvement.

We met at a theatre where we ate popcorn and candy in the fourth row. I told Atmananda that the postering had gone well. The lights faded and the movie began.

A Hollywood agent on a fishing trip strikes up a conversation with Kermit-the-Frog. The agent is impressed with him and suggests that he move west, to Hollywood.

University. She first met Atmananda while interviewing him for the campus radio station. After the interview, which touched on Atmananda's book *Lifetimes: True Accounts of Reincarnation*, he invited her to visit him in Stony Brook. Shortly thereafter she left her boyfriend, family, school, and country. She moved to Stony Brook, just around the block from the charismatic young meditation teacher and author.

Connie was a waitress with long dark braids, a Midwesterner's friendliness, and a cheeky smile.

Suzanne had long brown hair and dreamy eyes. She studied art at the Parson's School of Design in Manhattan.

And Anne, with long, black hair and that playful, impish grin, was studying to be a nurse.

I turned back to watch Atmananda. "Don't think that spirituality is divorced from the physical world," he was saying as he reached for a chip. "After you meditate a few years, you begin to see that Annam Brahma—food is God." He then set the chips-and-cheese-laden tray in the oven.

Sal observed intently, as though witnessing a ritual.

Soon Atmananda and Sal were delivering trays of crunchy nachos. I garnished mine with sour cream to alleviate the delicious, consciousness-altering burn of the hot sauce. As we ate, I felt proud that I had managed to stop thinking about the women. Then I had to tell myself to be careful, lest my ego swell instead. Finally, I told myself to relax. Which I did. The food, the crackling fireplace, and the medieval trumpet and recorder music reminded me of something distant, intangible, and noble. My spirit soared.

"The kid and I are going to write some songs for you," Atmananda announced.

I looked at him, perplexed. After all, I was no longer "the baby" but "the kid."

He motioned for me to follow him upstairs.

I immediately assumed that my brother would be right beside me when I climbed those stairs: him first and then me. But he just sat there, boosting my confidence with a faraway smile.

I nearly told Atmananda to write the song with my brother. Instead, I chose instead to go with the flow. I climbed.

"If you are going to study English," Atmananda told me, "you might as well get used to putting together words." He grinned mischievously. "Let's write songs about Sal."

At first, he was the driving force behind the creative process; I merely smiled at each of his ideas. Later, though, I came up with a few lines of my own, which seemed to blend with his, and after about forty-five minutes we marched triumphantly downstairs and sang together.

Soul of Sal
(sung to the tune of O Sole Mio)

Ohhhh, soul of Sal,
Aspire tonight.
Don't be a shmuck-o,
Manifest Light.
Tomorrow—may be too late,
Now is never,
My gazpacho, she cannot 'a wait.

Now is the right time,
The food delight time,
So open up 'a you mouth,
And face the south.

Tomorrow—may be too late,
Now is never,
My gazpacho, she cannot 'a wait.

We sang and danced around Sal, who tried to maintain a dignified countenance but who ended up laughing along with the rest of us. Then Rachel made cinnamon-spiced, hot apple cider and we sat around the fire sipping the brew. Later, Atmananda sang a revised version of *I Don Quixote* from *Man of La Mancha*:

Hear me heathens and wizards
and servants of sin,
All your dastardly doings are past,
For a holy endeavor is now to begin,

I am I Atmananda—the humble and pure!
My destiny calls and I go,
And the wild winds of fortune
shall carry me onward,
Oh whither soever they blow.

Whither soever they blow,
Onward to glory I go!

After the performance, Atmananda said that the level of our consciousness was dropping, so he had us meditate for about twenty minutes. Then he said, "We are going to play The Game."

"What game?" I asked, feeling bolder after having performed with him.

"Part of The Game," he replied cryptically, "is to figure out what The Game is."

"The Game is The Intuition Game," said Sal. "You want us to intuit something."

"Right."

I wondered if Sal could read Atmananda's mind.

"Some of you think that you can read my mind," Atmananda said, peering at Sal. "But you can read only those thoughts that I make available to you."

Sal had intuited that we had to intuit something but we still did not know what it was.

"Is it about the past?" asked Anne.

"When you intuit The Truth you get an answer, not a question," Atmananda stated.

"It's about the future," stated Dana.

"Right."

"You want us to look into the future," she continued.

He nodded.

"I see you traveling around the world giving lectures," she predicted.

"Many seekers will become disciples as a result of your talks," offered Tom.

"Guru will be happy with us," suggested Anne.

"We're going to put up a lot of posters," I added.

Atmananda said that we had done well but were forgetting something important.

We looked at him expectantly.

Then, in his Kermit-the-Frog voice, he said, "We're going to make millions of people happy."

"Make millions of people happy," I echoed.

Chinmoy seemed willing to look the other way when Atmananda, his chief recruiter, disregarded his etiquette on sex, ego, cinema, individuality, and language. But his patience ran out in 1979, when a Queens disciple informed him that Atmananda was "playing guru." Actually, it had been several months since Atmananda had made it a practice to scan the audience during the meditation part of his talks, as if he were channeling Divine Light. But now Chinmoy saw the light, and Atmananda was in immediate danger of being kicked out of the Centre.

When Atmananda learned of his predicament, he had an idea. Fond of temperate climates, he had been wanting for years to move back to his birthplace, sunny southern California. This dream had recently reasserted itself in his mind as the number of people attending his talks gradually dwindled, which he attributed to a diminishing interest in spirituality in the New York metropolitan area. But suddenly the idea of starting a Chinmoy Centre in a distant city seemed

less of a dream than a necessity. He wrote Guru a letter asking if he could move to San Diego.

Chinmoy consented.

Weeks later, the phone rang. It was Atmananda.

I offered to find my brother.

"No," he said, "I want to speak with you. Why don't you come over?"

He lived about a quarter of a mile from my apartment in Stony Brook. I jogged down Cedar Street and knocked on his door.

"Hi, kid. Make yourself at home." He offered me a yogurt.

I accepted.

He told me that he was starting a Centre for Guru in La Jolla, California. Then, in an enchantingly anesthetizing voice, he explained that southern California rested upon a mystical power spot around which had congregated the nation's largest population of spiritual seekers. "Would you like to go?"

I realized that San Diego—San Diego!—was driving distance to the Sonoran Desert and to UCLA—Castaneda's frequent haunts! I remembered Atmananda telling me that California boasted many lovely, friendly women! I realized that such a move would distance me from my parents, who continued to worry that I was in a cult! I also realized that such a move would distance me from Guru. But I now believed that the Light would reach me in whichever state I inhabited. Besides, I sensed that without Atmananda as a buffer, Chinmoy's highly regimented brand of spirituality would be difficult, if not impossible, for me to conform to.

And what a buffer Atmananda was! I pictured him striding about with his chin jutting forward, exuding that aura of confidence; joking and singing, inspiring and enlivening us; challenging our intellects with the known and unknowable; framing and reframing the way in which we viewed the world; and generating mystical experiences—not on his own, of course, but with the Guru's Spiritual Light.

"Yes!" I replied, without considering the feelings of my brother, who continued to support me in my quest with a faraway smile. I was proud that Atmananda had chosen me to be part of his team. I did not know, however, that he had embellished stories in his book *Lifetimes*. Nor did I know that he had told the *San Francisco Examiner* that he never experienced a past life remembrance. Nor did I know that he had once asked a girlfriend to slip out the window when another appeared at the door. Nor that he had recently been in deep trouble with Chinmoy. Nor that during the height of the controversy, he had admitted to Tom that he might leave the Centre before Chinmoy kicked him out.

"What would you do if you left?" Tom had asked him.

"I'd move to California and teach meditation," Atmananda replied.

On August 30, 1979, Atmananda, Dana, Rachel, Connie, and I left the ground in a jet bound for San Diego. In the excitement of packing and leaving, I had forgotten my wallet and daypack back at my brother's. Now, without money or ID, I watched rays of light play off darkening clouds and thought about the frog.

5. Bicycle Ride—Lenox

The weather had cleared since I had started pedaling west from Walden Pond five days before, but headwinds continued to press both the doggie-carrier and bicycle-trailer as if I were tugging a parachute. Contributing little to the weight of the rig was a book by William Shirer on Mahatma Gandhi. Disillusioned, but not yet ready to live without heroes, I actively sought a replacement for Atmananda.

I rode over the mountains of western Massachusetts and rolled into the town of Lenox. There a woman noticed the oddness of my entourage and asked, "What exactly is going on?"

"I am bicycling across America with my dog," I replied.

Ten minutes later she was interviewing me in a nearby cafe. She was a reporter for the *Berkshire Eagle*, and, as I answered her questions, I thought about how I would answer when she asked me "why?" I realized it was more than a love for bicycling, more than a longing for adventure, and more than a desire to strengthen my self-confidence that propelled me west. I wanted time to think about Atmananda's thousands of lessons, some of which I sensed were valid

and some of which I knew were not.

There was another reason: I wanted to do something distinctly *me*. Bicycling across a continent against the prevailing winds with all my possessions and a Siberian husky—that was *me*.

"Why?" she asked later.

I tempered my answer with the knowledge that I was being interviewed by a journalist and not a shrink. At one point I told her that I was traveling with a book on Gandhi.

"Do you like it?" she asked.

While reading the book I felt proud that Gandhi had been deeply influenced by Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience," proud that a thinker and experimenter from the United States had had an effect on one from India whose thoughts and experiments affected humankind. But it was more than pride which attracted me to Shirer's *Gandhi: A Memoir*. Gandhi's dream of helping the masses reminded me of Atmananda's seeming interest in making millions of people happy. While Gandhi wielded influence over two-thirds of a billion people as he helped India secure independence, never did he grow twisted by the enormity of his own power, never did he betray the public trust. Though Atmananda eloquently described the balance between the spiritual and the mundane, I knew from years of firsthand experience—yet found it difficult to admit—that a Mahatma Gandhi he was not.

"I like the book very much," I replied.

"Would you like to meet Shirer?" she offered.

William L. Shirer was the only correspondent sent by an American newspaper to cover India's revolution. He gathered that Gandhi's philosophy encompassed more than civil disobedience, passive resistance, non-cooperation and non-violence, but "had to do also with something more subtle—and fundamental: the search for truth, for the essence of the spirit..." Insights such as this made him seem particularly suited to investigate so complex and sensitive a matter as India's social, political, and spiritual ferment. Shirer was also the author of *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany*. As I knocked on his door, I hoped that with his knowledge of benevolent and malevolent charismatic leaders, he could help me to understand Atmananda.

I wanted to tell Shirer that I had seen Atmananda's seemingly tight-knit community transform into a group of fearful, paranoid people. I wanted to tell him that I had seen Atmananda himself transform from a seemingly kind and noble seeker into a man who used anti-psychotic drugs and LSD as tools of persuasion, who—without the use of drugs—persuaded one woman to leave her husband and newborn child, who dreamt of filling stadiums and of starting a world religion, who claimed to be the anti-Christ, and who spoke repeatedly of taking the inner circle for a ride in a Learjet into a mountain. I wanted to tell Shirer how, in 1984, I had helped Atmananda through a bad LSD trip and how, as he was "coming down," I had observed his opposing personalities reassert themselves. I wanted to tell him that Atmananda seemed to be getting progressively worse. And I wanted to tell him how Atmananda had persuaded one disciple that he and I would be forever locked in a battle over mystical power. The disciple was my brother.

When Shirer answered the door his large, bright forehead and serene countenance made him appear intellectually and spiritually advanced, and I had an uncanny feeling that something of the Mahatma himself peered out at me through those eighty-three-year-old eyes.

"What can I do for you?" he asked me.

"I wanted to tell you that I'm enjoying your book," I said, suddenly aware that he might not want to discuss the extremities of human nature with a total stranger. I told him about the bike trip, his book on Gandhi, and the reporter. But he was busy preparing for a lecture tour of Russia and had no time to talk. I thanked him, got back on my bicycle, and left.

I pictured Shirer as a young man, contemplating the life and lessons of Mahatma Gandhi. I also pictured him observing uniformed men with swastikas, bent on genocide. I imagined him accepting both good and bad in people, for only by cultivating acceptance did I imagine him harvesting peace. But I realized, as I pedaled north, that I would have to learn to distinguish between the nurturing and noxious roots Atmananda had sown in my mind without Shirer's help. This was something I would have to do for myself.

I continued to ride towards Pittsfield, Massachusetts, with Frank, a childhood friend. Tall, with messy red hair, he was an expert car mechanic though he never made much money. This was in part because he was a slow worker, because he had little self-confidence, and because people took advantage of him.

"How's work going?" I asked him.

"Okay, I suppose."

I knew that he was making less than six dollars an hour. "Have you thought about looking for a higher paying job?" I asked.

He shrugged.

"You know you're being ripped off."

He shrugged again. We had been through this conversation before. I wanted to teach Frank that he was like a sitting duck, that he could protect himself, that he could change—suddenly I froze. I remembered that Atmananda had taught us that we were like sitting ducks, that we could protect ourselves, that we could change...

6. The Garden

Southern Californians have been exposed to more New Age teachers than perhaps any population in the United States. Yet the forty or so people seemed unprepared for Atmananda, who strode into the lecture hall twenty minutes late, with a can of diet soda in one hand and a pack of green gum in the other.

I assumed that many of the Birkenstock-clad seekers drank natural fruit juice and did not chew gum.

"This evening I'd like for you all to hold hands and be like reeeally mellowwww," said Atmananda, mimicking the way some people spoke in San Diego's flourishing holistic community.

There was tense laughter. A few people left.

"Those who take themselves too seriously on the path to enlightenment," Atmananda said in a more dignified tone, "tend not to get very far."

I felt good knowing that I did not take myself too seriously.

"From the spiritual point of view," he said later on, "eating junk food is fine—as long as you do so in moderation and as long as you exercise regularly."

Jaws dropped. I figured that many of them ate unprocessed rice and seaweed.

When the meditation began, Atmananda played fast-paced electronic music by Tangerine Dream.

More jaws dropped. I surmised that many of them meditated to flute and chime melodies.

During the meditation, Atmananda briefly gazed at each person in the audience, as if he were sending them Spiritual Light.

I closed my eyes... tried to slow my thoughts... opened my eyes... gazed intensely at Atmananda... perceived light emanating from his eyes!... kept gazing without blinking... perceived the entire room go white!... .

"How many of you saw Light in the room?" he asked several minutes later.

No response.

"Be honest now."

I raised my hand.

"Why don't you describe what you saw, Mark?"

I did.

"Mark has been studying advanced meditation techniques with us for over a year. But you don't have to be advanced to have mystical experiences. Who—besides Mark—got zapped?"

A few raised their hands.

"I think you all got so blasted," Atmananda said, "that you don't know what hit you."

After the talk, many of the people came forward with questions. I wanted to watch Atmananda work his charm, but I knew that I had a task to perform. Weeks earlier he had instructed me, "If you see a guy at a workshop trying to pick up a lady, move right in and engage him in conversation. This will give her the opportunity to walk away and maintain a high level of consciousness."

"Do you know what women at the lectures really want? They want to get closer to God. They may think that they want relationships with men. But if they choose that world, believe me, their inner beings will be miserable."

I did not ask how he proposed to relate to them.

"The tricky part," he added, "is to do this without letting either one know what is going on." He was silent awhile and I sensed there was more he wanted to tell me.

"Why don't more women attain enlightenment?" he finally sighed. "Because they are taught in a male-dominated society to marry, have children, and serve their husbands. Traditionally, they have not had the opportunity to study with an enlightened teacher."

I was moved by the truth that I felt in his words and now, as he answered questions in the front of the room, I interrupted conversations with all the speed and savvy I could muster. People did not seem to mind. On the contrary, they seemed to regard me as someone special, as if I were on The Bus—and they were trying to get on.

With each passing week, Atmananda further opened the audience to the possibility that they could evolve countless lifetimes by staring at the underexposed photo of a balding man. After about a month, he announced: "Those who are interested in the advanced side of self-discovery should ask Mark for a map to the Centre."

"The Centre" was Atmananda's term for the San Diego branch of Chinmoy's organization. It was also his term for the house he now shared with me and the three other Chinmoy disciples. Atmananda had not needed a map to the Centre months before, on the day that the five of us moved west. He had seemed to know the way. "There's Mission Bay," he said, pointing to bright green lawns bordering light blue water. When he exited the freeway, which he assured us was free, I noticed ground-cover plants surrounding and dividing the road like armies of fat green spiders. On La Jolla Scenic Road, I saw more exotic flora: tall, cedar-like trees, plants with huge vein-covered leaves, and cacti with yellow flowers and spiny needles. I did not know their names.

"At last," boomed Atmananda, pointing to a large shrub which drooped like a wilted phallus. "We have found the fabled swaaaanso bush!"

I laughed nervously at his fabrication and glanced at Dana, who sat beside me. Only minutes ago, she and I had sat outside the San Diego airport terminal, caressed by a balmy breeze, waiting for Atmananda and Rachel to rent a car. It was the first time we had been alone. My heart pounded, and I unsuccessfully tried not to watch the way in which her breasts pressed against her blouse.

She ran her fingers through her hair and smiled at me.

I wanted so much to kiss her, to tell her that she was beautiful, to love her. Had I followed my gut feelings, Atmananda might have sent me back to New York on the next available flight. But Chinmoy and Atmananda had explained that sex saps psychic growth. And I was concerned that Atmananda and Dana might be in some sort of relationship already. Besides, I never had had a girlfriend and was at a loss as to what to say. I paused, and Atmananda and Rachel appeared with the rental car.

Atmananda often displayed an extraordinary sensitivity toward what people around him were thinking and now, as we approached the Centre for the first time, I wondered if he had timed his arrival back at the airport based on my wayward desire. I also wondered how to diffuse my crush on Dana.

"Don't worry," I told myself. "Guru will help me work it out."

Now Atmananda told his passengers that the new Centre was only a few blocks away. He had chosen a house on Cliffridge Avenue where, in the name of the Guru, we would fight evil forces and make millions happy. Before turning left on Cliffridge, we drove past Nottingham and Robin Hood.

The lawns in the neighborhood seemed like tiny golf courses. Atmananda pulled into one of the driveways, got out of the car, and said, "Here we are." Then he strode down the path as though leading us to his castle.

He claimed the master bedroom which overlooked the garden. Dana's was next to his. Then mine. Then Connie's. Then Rachel's.

"Welcome to Atmananda's bar and grill," he grinned from behind the kitchen counter, pretending to serve us.

Adjacent to the kitchen was the meditation room, where Atmananda planned to conduct weekly meetings for the soon-to-be-recruited Chinmoy disciples. From the meditation room I could see the long, narrow yard and the large, wooden deck which he christened "the flogging platform." On the steep hill past the deck, legions of spidery plants advanced imperceptibly toward the garden.

Nearly every day during the first few weeks in San Diego, Atmananda drove us to La Jolla Shores Beach. There, he led Rachel, Dana, and me to where the water was over our heads. Connie was intimidated by the Pacific surf and did not immerse herself the way the rest of us did. With Atmananda's guidance, however, that would soon change.

Two years before, in New York, Atmananda and Tom had tried to swim across a channel in the Long Island Sound. Though a strong swimmer, Tom grew fatigued fighting the swift current, and Atmananda risked his life to save his friend from being swept to sea.

Now, buoyed by Atmananda's legendary strength, I rode the swells beyond the breakers to where my feet dangled above the ocean floor. After thirty minutes or so, we rode the waves toward the shore. At this time Atmananda often disappeared beneath the surface. We stood there in the waist-deep water, waiting, watching, and trying to figure out his next move—when suddenly there was a scream! Still underwater, Atmananda had seized and was tickling someone's foot.

Then we sat on the beach, soothed by gentle currents of the herb-scented air. I looked to the west. Blue on blue stretched across the horizon. I looked to the east. White buildings gleamed behind a row of tall, healthy palms. I remembered Atmananda's advice: "If you want to live in a pretty world, just cry inwardly to Guru." I could not help but feel that I had entered one of Dr. Seuss' fantasy-gardens for children.

Atmananda drove us back to the Centre, where we gazed for forty minutes or so at the Transcendental. Then we ate nachos—a perfect ending, I thought, to a perfect day. I was so absorbed in having fun with my new family, I did not think to contact my parents or my brother.

Several days after we arrived in southern California, Atmananda took us on a bus tour of the San Diego Zoo in Balboa Park. The guide pointed to an elephant and said, "This is Peanuts. Peanuts has been with us for seven years."

"This guy is making it up as he goes," whispered Atmananda, who seemed to resent having someone else control the conversation.

The guide pointed to a giraffe. "This is—"

"Fwazznoid," interrupted Atmananda loudly.

"—and Puzzles has been with us for three years," continued the guide, trying to ignore the man monkeying around with the four laughing hyenas.

One time during our first few weeks in California, Atmananda saw me standing on a wall in the yard. He later told me that he had seen me fly.

"Really?" I said.

"Yes," he replied. "I saw your Astral Body hovering over the canyon."

"Wow!"

Suddenly, his kind encouragement transmogrified into a cold, penetrating glare. I felt he was looking right through me.

"I can see that you still doubt me," he said, turning away.

I was upset with myself. As usual, he was right. Yet I sensed there was something more, something in the way he looked at me...

But he was smiling now. "Don't let it bother you, kid. You're doing fine."

"Whew," I thought, happy to forget about it.

Perhaps Atmananda had been happy to forget about it too because he began giving me other things to think about. He gave me the task, for instance, of starting a meditation club at my new school, the University of California at San Diego (UCSD). He understood that by controlling a university club, he gained legitimacy, prestige, and unlimited access to free lecture halls.

I saw no harm in Atmananda's request. We were, after all, using the club to help Guru. So I set out to find three full-time students who were willing to sign up as the club's officers.

"Hi!" I said, approaching one student. "I'm starting a meditation club and was wondering if you might be interested in helping out."

"What's a meditation club?"

"We're going to have guest lecturers teach Zen and relaxation—you know, stuff like that."

"Sounds cool, dude, but I'm already relaxed."

"Great—but maybe you could take a moment and help people who are not." And so, by

soliciting signatures from those not particularly interested in meditation, I became the club's sole proprietor.

Meanwhile, Dana designed, Rachel mostly payed for, and Atmananda "zapped" the new stack of posters, which I then placed around UCSD, San Diego State University (SDSU), and the neighboring communities. The talks went well, and I soon handed out many maps to the Centre.

Before the potential recruits arrived, Connie spent hours cleaning the Centre. According to Atmananda, this was something her soul loved to do. My soul, he pointed out, loved to greet people.

"Howdy—I'm Mark!" I said.

"Hello," she replied. She was graceful and alluring. "I'm Mandy."

"This one," I thought, "is gonna need some heavy protecting."

During the lecture, Atmananda predicted that the world would enter a spiritual dark age in 1985. "The darkness will last for thousands of years, and it will become increasingly difficult to meditate and to think clearly. Spiritual warriors will need to band together under the protection of a guru who can fight the Negative Forces and forge a path toward freedom and Light through a world turned murky and grey." Then we had cookies.

After several public meetings at the Centre, Atmananda invited those who were interested in studying with Chinmoy to stay afterwards.

"What do you do for a living?" Atmananda asked each of the three.

"I'm a flight attendant," said Mandy.

"I know a few things about flying," Atmananda interjected.

"I cane chairs," said a woman with long, brown hair.

"I cane people," said a man with a crewcut.

"If you sincerely want to take the next step in your spiritual evolution," Atmananda said, "we will mail your photographs to Guru. Guru will use his psychic vision to see if you are meant to study with him."

By the time Chinmoy accepted the flight attendant, the crafts-person, and the marine, there were many more applicants to be processed.

Despite the intensity of the recruitment drive, Atmananda found time to assist certain seekers on a one-on-one basis. Mandy, in particular, must have exhibited potential because he often spent nights at her condo.

I figured it was okay for Atmananda to sleep with Mandy, though it was not okay for me to appreciate her beauty. He was, after all, an advanced disciple and knew a lot more about these things than I. (He said on occasion that I could have a girlfriend outside the Centre, but mostly he said that I shouldn't.) My perceptions might have changed, however, had I known that he was sleeping with *numerous* women disciples. My perceptions also might have changed had I known about the "Bedroom Incident."

When Atmananda first flew with Rachel to La Jolla in search of a rental, he chose a house with "good vibes"—but with only four bedrooms. He told Rachel that he would take the large bedroom, that she would take the dining room and living room areas, and that they would switch.

But he never allowed her to use the living room. Nor would he switch. To complicate matters, he often sat outside her makeshift bedroom, advising disciples through the night and early morning how they could accelerate their march toward a wordless perfection.

Unlike Atmananda, Rachel had to wake up in the morning and go to work. After too many nights of too little sleep, she grew tired, angry, and confused.

When Atmananda sensed that she was not her usual, happy self, he did not openly communicate his displeasure. Instead, he ignored her. He let the other women know that she was in a bad consciousness and should be avoided whenever possible. He began to treat her as if she were an outsider.

Rachel grew increasingly flustered. She reached out in her thoughts to Guru, to family, and to friends. When Atmananda asked her to move out of the house, she breathed an exhausted sigh of relief.

In the meantime, without a clue, I studied literature, worked part-time, read Guru's books, meditated one-and-a-half hours a day, tried to see, organized poster teams, attended Atmananda's talks, and immersed myself each day in water over my head. I felt so good about my life and the community I was helping to build that it seemed like I was living in paradise.

7. Money Mantra

Arriving carless in California, Atmananda thought about continuing his career as a college professor. He thought about writing another book. He even considered going to law school. Instead, he expanded the Money Club.

The Money Club had started in New York when Atmananda began collecting from Stony Brook disciples. We voluntarily gave a few dollars a month to offset the cost of the posters.

In San Diego, he raised membership dues to four or so dollars a week. Rachel, who took out loans to help the San Diego Chinmoy Centre get started, gave much more. As The Centre rapidly grew, so did the numbers in Atmananda's club.

"Seekers used to live in monasteries and in caves," Atmananda taught at Centre meetings. "But Guru recommends that instead, we live in a city. This gives us the opportunity to strengthen our psychic defenses and to better serve humanity. In order to live in the world, particularly as your consciousness evolves and as the vibrations of the world grow darker, you will need money."

Most of the new disciples, though, were UCSD undergraduates; when Atmananda explained the etiquette of selfless giving—"You can give in the right way or you can give in the wrong way"—many of us wondered how we could give in any way.

But Atmananda had an idea. He suggested that we take out student loans for more than we actually needed.

"You can then donate the extra amount to a worthy cause," he pointed out. "To a genuine spiritual centre, for instance."

It was no coincidence that the Centre's finances improved significantly after banks issued checks for guaranteed student loans.

Atmananda had another idea.

"Accepting money from your parents is the spiritual thing to do. Why not give your parents the opportunity to help? Why shouldn't they be given the opportunity to make spiritual progress?"

He even devised a way that we could earn money.

"Why work for five dollars an hour when you could be making twenty? Work is not supposed to be fun. Believe me, they would not be paying you if it was. Unless you already have a career that you are happy with, you should study computer science.

"Most of you developed software back in Atlantis, back when computers were far more advanced than they are today. Keeping track of all those variables will help you strengthen your mind. Besides, programming pays extremely well after a relatively short period of time."

Atmananda interspersed talk of raising consciousness and money with stories from the rich world of his imagination. He told stories, for instance, about a legendary character that he called "The Gwid."

"The Gwid is close friends with Roshi Megabucks," he said, stroking his chin and smiling. "The Gwid leases all of reality to God."

At one Centre meeting, a UCSD anthropology graduate student pointed out that millions in the world were starving. "Shouldn't we be doing something to help?" she asked.

"On the surface," Atmananda replied, "Elizabeth is asking a perfectly legitimate question. But if you could see, you would have detected the underlying hostility in her tone."

The room filled with uneasy silence.

"But that is why we study meditation," he went on. "We are constantly striving to perfect our different selves."

He slowly scanned the disciples. "Many of you send Guru hostile vibrations in the inner worlds, so don't hide behind your holier-than-thou facade. It isn't necessary. We understand."

He turned back to Elizabeth, his sarcastic pout transforming into a compassionate smile. "There are many who are suited for helping the poor. What we do here is help people on a higher level." He went on to provide a framework through which to view poverty. Each soul, he explained, chooses the circumstance of its birth so that it can best work out its karma.

At first, Elizabeth's question struck a chord in me. But I associated her question with Atmananda's accusation—that many of us were sending hostile vibes to Guru. This made me upset, so I tried to think about something else. But there was something else I was trying not to think about.

"Has anyone noticed that I have been going into advanced states of consciousness?" Atmananda had started to ask at the Centre meetings.

At first there had been no response.

"The powers from my past lives are returning," he continued in a sincere-sounding voice. "My consciousness is cycling. Those of you who can see will easily feel The Change."

Several disciples nodded, as though for the first time they were feeling The Change.

I knew that if I gazed at him intensely for several minutes, I saw auras in whichever hue I imagined. Nonetheless, I had not detected The Change. I wanted to maintain complete trust in my mentor, housemate, and friend. I told myself that my seeing abilities must not be too advanced.

Atmananda then changed the subject. "The Golden Gwid Card," he said with a grin, "gives The Gwid and Roshi Megabucks unlimited access to multi-dimensional, trans-reality banking networks."

Perhaps it was with The Golden Gwid Card in mind that Atmananda asked me to perform a "task of power." He instructed me to inspire each of the several dozen disciples in the Centre to donate money. "Tell them that the money will be used to buy me a surprise gift, and tell them the gift will be a new car." He suggested that I remind them that he worked night and day for the good of others, that he was broke because he gave all his money to the Centre, and that if he concentrated on making money rather than on helping Guru's mission, he could easily afford to buy his own car.

"Got it," I said.

"Don't pressure anyone. If someone does not want to contribute, that's fine."

"Of course!"

"And keep a list of who gave what."

"No pro-blem-mo!" Honored that Atmananda would trust me with such responsibility, with such a secret, and with so much money, I felt guilty for not having thought of the idea myself. I understood that Atmananda was being a sneak. But he did work for the good of others night and day. And ours was the fastest growing Chinmoy Centre in the world. And the Guru's mission would suffer if Atmananda worked a traditional job. Besides, I was drawn to the idea of sneaking for a noble cause.

The disciples gave generously, and Atmananda soon shifted the garage door opener from Rachel's car, which he had frequently borrowed, to the glove compartment of his shiny, new Renault LeCar.

Rachel, who had donated generously to the "surprise" gift, felt that they should share the garage door opener. She decided that Atmananda was being unfair and told him so.

The next day, Atmananda instructed Dana to tell Rachel that, spiritually speaking, she was heading for some serious hot water and had better apologize quickly.

Unaware of the "Garage Door Opener Incident," I was feeling pretty good. I felt even better when Atmananda, who liked the new car, reminded the Centre of how advanced a soul I really was. When the disciples began to treat me with a mellow kind of reverence—a phenomenon local, perhaps, to southern California—I was thrilled. I had an intuitive grasp on how to wield the ad hoc power, but I did not grasp that it was the power which was actually wielding me.

Meanwhile, Atmananda had added "money collector" to the growing list of my responsibilities. This task, he cautioned, was not without its dangers. "Money is physically dirty," he said, as though telling me a secret. "It also retains and transmits the greed of its handlers. Always wash your hands after you touch it." But he did not always ask me to collect it directly.

In 1981, he asked me to inspire Richard, a tall, large-hearted disciple who owned a racket-stringing shop in La Jolla. Richard, who appeared to love Guru even more than he loved tennis, was on the verge of purchasing a million-dollar house, which he planned to rent to the Centre at a bargain rate.

"How's your game coming along?" I asked him.

"Oh, not too bad I suppose."

"Are you ready to play against Guru?"

"Guru is not going to want to play tennis with me."

"Sure he is. Only if I were you, I'd let him win every so often."

We laughed.

"How's the deal going?" I asked.

His gaiety suddenly vanished. "It almost went through," he said. "But someone pulled out at the last minute... again."

"Oh well," I tried. "Maybe there's someone else who could help."

No response.

"Wouldn't it be great," I continued, "to have the Centre across the street from UCSD? Parking sure wouldn't be a problem anymore. And picture a meditation room overlooking the ocean—a meditation room large enough to hold everyone."

He nodded.

"Imagine Guru coming to San Diego and visiting us at the new Centre!"

"That would be nice," he admitted.

"Remember Richard," I added, working in a quote from Atmananda, "whatever you really want you will get."

"You're right," he said resolutely. "I'll just keep trying."

After several more setbacks the deal went through, and Atmananda, Dana, Anne, Tammy, and I moved in. Atmananda occasionally paced the carpets of the new Centre, improvising a song from Fiddler On The Roof in which pious dairyman Tevya aspires for a little wealth from God.

"If I were a realized soul!" Atmananda began. "Ahhh yaahtuh daahtuh daahtuh yaahtuh daahtuh daahtuh daahtuh duhm. All day long I'd bittih bittih buhm. If I were a realized soul! Ahhh wouldn't have to work hard... "

Once at the new Centre, Atmananda recited for me the money mantra.

"Ya devi sarva bhutesu ratna rupena sangsthita nastasvai namastvai namastvai namo nama," he chanted soulfully.

If I could have followed his words down the corridors of time, I would have seen him—

Ya devi...

Dramatically increasing the cost of public meditation lectures and seminars.

... sarva bhutesu...

Charging one thousand dollars a person for weekend desert trips (1987).

... ratna rupena...

Increasing his advertising budget from hundreds (1977) to hundreds of thousands (1987).

... sangsthita...

Requesting that mandatory tuition—which took the place of the voluntary Money Club—be paid in hundred dollar denominations to avoid "low vibe" tens and twenties. Suggesting that followers hold off on tax payments until "later." Raising monthly tuition from one hundred dollars (1982) to approximately thirty-five hundred dollars (1993).

... nastasvai...

Driving a Renault LeCar (1979), a BMW (1981), a 911 Porsche (1982), a 928 Porsche (1983), a turbo Carrera Porsche (1984), a Bentley (1991). Keeping seven cars at his New York property: three Mercedes Benzes, two Porsches and two Range Rovers (1991).

... namastvai namastvai...

Renting the Del Mar castle, complete with turrets, a walk-in fireplace, and a full-court basketball-game-sized living room (1982). Renting in Malibu what he claimed was Goldie Hawn's house (1983). Spending roughly nine hundred dollars per night for a hotel suite where his dog enjoyed a room of its own (1988). Buying a house on Conscience Bay in Old Field, New York, for about nine-hundred-fifty thousand dollars (1988). Buying a house in Tesuque, a suburb near Sante Fe, New Mexico, for about eight-hundred-seventy-five thousand dollars (1990). Spending approximately one million dollars on each house for electronic security systems and renovations

(1991). Renting Sting's house in Malibu Colony for about twenty-five thousand dollars a month (1992).

... namo nama.

I spent many happy hours with Atmananda, in the plushly carpeted meditation room, watching the Pacific Ocean as I listened to him sing and talk about his dreams. Deeply believing that millions would be made happy, I refused to acknowledge that millions would soon be made. And though I never chanted the money mantra, I helped my housemate who did.

8. Fast Leader

In the fall of 1980, Atmananda spoke with the Stony Brook disciples, who were still in New York, "on an inner level." He also spoke with them on the phone. He told them that Chinmoy was directing a "special force" toward our new, million-dollar Centre in La Jolla. He told them about our now legendary recruitment drive. He told them about our feasts.

These disciples missed Atmananda. They missed his advice, friendship, and love. They missed his extended family. They missed him coaxing, "Eat, eat."

When Sal moved west, he joined the disciples who ate each week at a Mexican restaurant with Atmananda. One time Atmananda declared, "I wonder where The Gwid has been hiding these days."

Sal said, "You would not believe how many people have asked me that very question."

"You swine!" cried Atmananda. "All along you've been hiding him in... your nose!"

"How can you tell?"

"Hah—so you doubt my ability to see!"

A few minutes later, the waiter arrived. I ordered a quesadilla and a chile relleno.

"C'mon kid," said Atmananda, "where's your capacity?"

I admitted I was low on money.

"Stop worrying about money," he admonished. "If you're in the right consciousness, believe me, the money will come."

"Okay," I agreed, adding a large cheese crisp to the order. So the disciples, now reunited with Sal, happily broke bread and chips with our nurturing spiritual shepherd. A ditty from the Paul Winter song Icarus played in the background.

Atmananda often spoke about myths. Icarus, according to Greek mythology, took flight from prison on wings of wax which were crafted by Daedalus, his father. Despite warnings from Daedalus, Icarus soared too near the sun and fell with melted wings to his death in the sea.

I knew about the myth of Icarus from my childhood. "Icarus was punished," my father had taught me, "because humans are not supposed to fly among the gods."

Atmananda did not teach the myth of Icarus. He spoke, instead, about the role of the Self-Sacrificing Hero. "Be like a star," he said at Centre meetings, citing Guru, Gandhi, and Jesus Christ. "Burn your own substance so that others may see."

Yet as the months in southern California slipped by, he spoke increasingly about the myth of the Fluid Warrior. "Be fluid," he said. "Don't let people pin you down as being a certain way." Perhaps, then, the deviation from his role as Feeder Of The Tribe should have come as no surprise. It was during a Centre meeting that he announced the fast. Missing meals for thirteen days, he explained, would raise the level of our consciousness, increase our personal power, and bring us closer to Guru. "Besides," he said, "it's the thaaang."

I longed to raise my consciousness, increase my power, and develop a deeper connection with Chinmoy. I wanted to maintain my status as an "advanced" follower. I hungered, too, for Atmananda's approval. About twenty of us agreed to limit our nourishment to a glass or two of juice a day.

Painful, dizzying hours of drinking water passed. Several devotees, including Atmananda, claimed that their meditations were growing increasingly powerful. In contrast, my efforts to empty my mind were interrupted by gurgling complaints rumbling up from the caverns of my gut. I found myself concentrating not on eternal salvation, but on persistent growls. I found myself

thinking not about God, but about vast quantities of food.

On the sixth day of the fast, I stood at the edge of the meditation room trying not to think about the sharp pains now forking my belly. I gazed at the larger-than-life Transcendental on the tall, wooden table. Atmananda typically lectured from beside this shrine. It was also from here that he continued his effort to spread Spiritual Light—to play guru—during public and private meditations. After weekly Centre meetings, Atmananda often cooked for the nearly one hundred Chinmoy disciples. It was a joy to watch him sing and dance around the kitchen, adding spice to our lives and to the simmering vats of Indian curry. On occasion, he asked Cheryl to cook for the Centre. He loved the way her eggplant parmigiano patties tasted. Leftovers were wrapped in aluminum foil and stored in the freezer.

On the seventh day, I opened the door to the freezer and there, wrapped in aluminum foil, were eggplant parmigiano patties waiting to be plucked like gems from a cave. I felt weak and disoriented. I was so hungry. Memories of the peppery patties brought back the luscious aroma. I thrust my hand toward a shimmering treasure...

On the eighth day, I wondered if I should confess that I had cheated. I recalled the story of a priest who, out of concern for his congregation, hid his doubts about God. I, too, chose not to confess, and the ensuing guilt served to strengthen my resolve not to stray from Atmananda's suggested path again. And though I did eat part of a patty, I still shared with the disciples an overpowering emptiness and a heightened receptivity to the fast leader.

During the second week, my meditations began to improve. Typically, when I gazed at the Transcendental, I only saw a subtle glow around the photo. Now I saw thousands of swirling dots swimming before me. Typically, when I meditated on my heart chakra, I had to remind myself to visualize the ocean. Now I became immersed in a world of blue light. Typically, when I realized that I was having a powerful mystical experience, I found it difficult to reenter a state of meditation after a self-congratulatory interruption. Now I found it easy to resubmerge my awareness into a thoughtless calm.

My newfound calm, however, was broken by what Atmananda said at a Centre meeting several days later. He announced that he had recently attained levels of consciousness so powerful and sublime that he was no longer the person that we thought him to be. Each time he dipped into these higher realms of perception, his old self died and a new one emerged, forged in the fires of what he called perfection.

"A number of you have already sensed the change," he said. "I first started entering into these higher states—which I call basement samadhi—during deep meditation. Recently, though, I have been slipping in and out of them spontaneously: while walking at the beach, for instance, or while eating at Howard Johnson's. Now I am finding that I can enter them at will." Atmananda repeatedly described his newfound abilities until the disciples, a number of whom had not eaten in nearly two weeks, appeared to accept the restructuring.

After the meeting I sat on the toilet, contemplating what had passed through Atmananda's lips. "What is going on?" I wondered. "Who does he think he is?" I felt angry and confused. I had been taught that samadhi was a state of consciousness so exalted that precious few enlightened souls achieved it. But now I was dizzy and nauseous from hunger. I was having difficulty concentrating. I saw swirling dots before me whether I was meditating or not. I found myself realizing that Atmananda had studied meditation in past lives. I found myself realizing that he was an advanced disciple of the Guru. I found myself feeling bad that I had doubted so advanced a soul, so educated a man, and so close a friend.

"The thing to remember," I told myself, recalling Atmananda's lessons on humility, "is that it's only *basement* samadhi."

After the fast, Atmananda took me to an Orange Julius shop in a mall. We sat by a window, sipping the sweet, rich drinks.

"What do you *see*?" he asked.

I looked and saw our reflection superimposed on the image of the crowd.

"The people," I said. "They don't seem real."

"Yes," he agreed. "Theirs is a world of illusion."

9. Off The Map

"Something heavy has been going down in the inner worlds," Atmananda announced at a Centre meeting in late December, 1980. "Can anyone *see* what it is?"

"Is Guru coming to visit us soon?" asked one disciple.

"No."

"Is the earth's psychic energy field getting progressively worse?" tried another.

"Yes, but that's not it. Anyone else?"

"This is going to sound crazy," said Kara, a UCSD student who seemed entranced by her own melodious voice. "But has Guru fallen?"

"Yes."

No one stirred.

"Why don't you elaborate, Kara?" said Atmananda.

"I first felt it a few weeks ago," she said, glancing at the ceiling as if she were trying to recall something. "I was meditating on the Transcendental but didn't *see* much light, ya know, and well, I just thought it was me but it just kept happening, and like I love Guru and all but... " Months later, Kara would be hospitalized for a mental disorder.

"You have truly *seen*," praised Atmananda.

My heart pounded. I felt like a bomb had exploded in my face. I saw Kara gazing at Atmananda. It was only months before that Atmananda had asked me to deceive the disciples into buying him a "surprise gift"—the new car. I scanned the crowded room. People seemed disoriented. Three disciples visiting from the Santa Barbara Chinmoy Centre kept glancing at the door. They looked ready to bolt.

"Many of you have been having difficulty meditating recently," said Atmananda in his familiar, soothing voice. "You have been blaming yourselves. But you should understand that it is not you.

"For years I have meditated on the Transcendental and the room has filled with a beautiful, white light. But lately, the light has simply not been there. At first I thought that the level of my meditation had dropped. Intuitively, though, I knew that that was not the case."

I could not believe what was happening. I had never heard Atmananda criticize his—our—beloved Guru. Still, I had to admit that his intuition was usually correct.

"When I tried meditating without the Transcendental," he continued, "my consciousness suddenly jumped to a much higher level—as if the Guru had been holding me down. And yet my logical mind still refused to accept that the Guru had fallen. You see, you don't just turn your back on someone you have devoted eleven years of your life to, someone you have loved more than anyone else in the universe."

I wondered if a con artist would devote eleven years of his life to a guru.

"I had to make sure that the Negative Forces were not playing tricks on my mind," he continued. "So I decided to visit New York and meditate on the Guru in person. I found that he still looked like Guru. But inwardly I could see right away that he had lost his power."

I wondered if I could have detected a change.

"When the Guru began to meditate, it became clear that he was not entering into samadhi—though the disciples still believed that he was. Nonetheless, I wanted to be absolutely certain that the Negative Forces were not clouding my vision. So I visited Apeksha, a Queens, New York, disciple who has studied with the Guru for as long as I have.

"At first, Apeksha thought I was crazy. But after we spent hours looking at old Guru photos, neither of us had any doubt as to what had happened.

"Apeksha is now in a real bind. On the one hand, he can see that the Guru has fallen. On the other hand, he knows that he's not strong enough yet to ward off the Negative Forces on his own."

Richard, who had bought the million-dollar Centre, raised his hand and said, "Atmananda, isn't there anything we can do to help Guru?"

"Your sentiment is a noble one," Atmananda replied. "But you have to be careful. If you are swimming near a sinking ocean liner, it doesn't matter how nice a person you are—you'll be sucked under when the ship goes down.

"You should understand that I am not criticizing the Guru. Nor should any of you. You should give him a great deal of credit for holding out against the Forces for as long as he did.

"The Forces are not exactly evil per se. They are merely playing their role in the Cosmic

Game. It just so happens that their role is to destroy Light."

Several disciples shook their heads incredulously. Others cast a glassy-eyed, soporific gaze at the renegade Centre leader—as if this were a typical late-night meeting.

"In 1985, the situation in the universe will begin to get much worse. A great cloud of darkness will envelop the earth for thousands of years."

I pictured the shadow of a huge oil slick creeping toward the globe.

"There will soon be a sharp increase in the number of wars and natural disasters, and nearly everyone on the planet will be affected. Spiritual seekers will suffer the most, because they are the ones who are most sensitive to the pain and suffering of others. It will become increasingly difficult to meditate, and seekers not grounded in the dharma [Truth] will be in grave danger of being seduced by the Dark Side."

Unaware of the effect Atmananda was having beneath the surface world of my reason, I watched his demanding, doughy face and listened to his soothing, arresting voice.

"But there is no reason for you to indulge in sadness. In times of great darkness, spiritual warriors band together and fight the Forces. This is their soul's work, and therefore their inner beings are extremely happy! Despite enormous odds, they fight for Truth and Light and, well, I'm not supposed to tell you this, but, let's just say that the warriors are in for some pleasant surprises in this and in future lives."

I assumed he meant that they would accrue good karma.

"And I would be willing to wager," he said, smiling warmly, "that they are in for a heck of a good time."

"Until the warriors are close to attaining enlightenment, they will need a genuine spiritual teacher. They will need a teacher who turns out strong, free-thinking individuals, *not* spaced-out, dependent disciples. They will need a teacher who is fully or partially enlightened, and who has extensive experience in guiding souls to self-realization. They will also need a teacher who has the power to ward off hordes of Negative Forces."

Atmananda reminded us that the powers from his past lives had been "cycling" through him and had been propelling him into basement samadhi and beyond. He said that he had been carefully monitoring his progress toward self-realization. He had not only asked the Infinite for advice, he assured us, but had been reading detailed accounts of the enlightenment process.

No one asked to review his source material.

He went on to describe the countless inner realms he had been slipping in and out of lately. The realms, he explained, were so deep and powerful that the man we had come to know as Atmananda had all but disappeared inside the clear light of the void.

I was attempting to make sense of his claims, when he said that samadhi was incomprehensible to the human mind. Then he paused, slowly scanned the audience, and announced that he would be helping advanced, sincere seekers in their quest for enlightenment... on his *own*.

"He's on a power trip!" I thought. "Maybe he's been planning this all along. Maybe he actually believes in it. In either case..."

"You need to realize that I am doing this because it is what the Infinite wants me to do. It certainly wasn't my idea. You see, when you reach this stage in the enlightenment process, you completely surrender your will to the Infinite."

"If that's true," I thought, "no problem. But..."

"Please understand that I am not a guru. I am a teacher. How can you tell if someone is your teacher? By how you feel when you meditate with them. By their glow. By how they treat the people around them. By whether they practice what they preach. But you have to be careful out there. You have to ask yourself, 'Are they phony or are they genuine? Are they trying to take your money? Are they trying to sell you spiritual rhetoric laced with subtle, complex half-truths?'"

"I agree," I thought, "we should watch out. But..."

"You have to ask yourself, 'Does the teacher give individual counseling when necessary? Provide a community of advanced seekers? Transmit light inwardly? Teach several spiritual philosophies and disciplines? Point out traps along the Path? Ward off the Negative Forces?'" Atmananda inundated us with so many details that he appeared to be conducting a lesson, not a coup.

"Another way to tell if someone is your teacher," Atmananda said, turning toward me, "is to see if you have studied with them in a previous life. Several of you have been with me before. Mark, for instance, has studied with me in Tibet, Japan, and India. He doesn't remember very

well, but he will. You may have noticed how easy it is to see his aura."

"He's just saying that!" I thought. Yet I had always felt a powerful affinity toward those countries. Several students cast their gaze at me. I felt a rush. I felt powerful. It felt good.

Minutes later, Atmananda suddenly grew bitter. "Don't think that I don't know what some of you are thinking," he accused, as he aimed his eagle-like glare. "You realize, of course, who I *am*," he added haughtily.

"Who are you really, Atmananda?" I wondered. I felt frenzied and dazed, as if a dark and powerful cyclone had swept Atmananda's train off its tracks—and me with it. I thought about the time Atmananda had narrated at a Centre meeting the tale of "The Emperor's New Clothes." He had likened himself to the story's truthful, outspoken child.

"Is he like the child?" I now wondered. "Or is he really like the deceitful tailor?" Looking up, I chose to see him as my kind, warm-hearted friend.

"There are a few of you," he said, "who are letting the Forces fill you with confusion and doubt. But overall, you are a fairly advanced group and should have no trouble perceiving what your inner beings already know."

"He sounds like he believes in what he's saying," I thought.

"Look, you can think about it all you want. But until you learn to *see*, believe me, you won't get very far."

The Santa Barbara disciples suddenly stood up.

"You folks are invited to stick around," Atmananda said.

They stepped outside and closed the door.

At around 9:30 p.m., Atmananda announced that those who sought to continue their studies with him should return to the Centre later that night. Then, pointing out that we were letting ourselves get fogged, he suggested that we meditate to clear things up.

Many in the audience closed their eyes to meditate.

"Open your eyes and look at me," Atmananda scolded.

Despite my new credentials as an old mystical seer, I looked but could not *see* if Atmananda was an enlightened spiritual teacher who had found the way, or a charismatic megalomaniac who had lost it. But the thick fog of illusion, which prevented me from gaining insight into his true nature, might have partially cleared had I known what Atmananda told Tom only weeks before, during a meditation with Chinmoy in New York.

"Have you noticed anything different about Guru?" Atmananda had asked him.

"No," replied Tom, who had not yet joined Atmananda's west coast entourage.

"Something heavy has been going down in the inner worlds," Atmananda said. "Call me in San Diego in late December, and I will fill you in."

10. Bicycle Ride—Utica

One week into the cross-country bicycle trek, I stopped near the New York-Massachusetts border by a sign pointing to a campground. It was getting late. I wondered if I should save the money and sleep in the woods. I recalled Atmananda's penchant for lodging at exclusive, expensive hotels. I realized that I did not want to follow him. I also realized that I did not want to *not* follow him. I wanted to do what was right for me. I followed the sign.

I stood at the campground entrance beneath a totem pole, whose carved faces reminded me of the Negative Forces. But I was no longer bound by Atmananda's interpretation of the world, I told myself. "Sweet dreams," I said to the faces and rolled past them.

The next morning I crossed over the Hudson River into Albany and walked up the hill toward the Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller Empire State Plaza. Endowed with intricately sculptured arches and columns, the majestic New York State capitol building contrasted with the modern structures across the street, which included four towers labeled in letters of gold. I sat by a reflecting pool where I watched wavering images of pennies at the bottom. I thought about my financial situation. I was doing okay. In Boston I had stopped paying Atmananda's ever-increasing tuition, moved from a studio apartment to a small room in a house, and commuted to my

computer job each day by bicycle. I had managed to pay off one student loan and, after selling the car, to build a small buffer. Why, I now wondered as I tossed a penny in the pool, did I feel so bad?

Because it was Atmananda, I suddenly realized, who had sent me to computer school. It was Atmananda who had bought me that car. I felt bad because I still considered myself to be in his debt. I needed to distinguish, I told myself, between the effects of his unsolicited gifts and the results of my own hard-earned efforts.

Two days later, as I continued to travel, the cars whizzing by served as a constant, crushing reminder that towing a three-foot wide trailer down a country road at night was probably not such a good idea. But driven by the thought of staying with a friend in Utica, I continued despite the danger. The road gradually rose into thick, dark woods, and there were no houses in sight. To complicate matters, I was a devout believer in the excitement and mystery of a journey and carried no maps. I was completely lost.

The road began following a winding river, and it became increasingly difficult to convince myself that a town or phone was just ahead. Exhausted, I stopped at the edge of a clearing and set up the bent, many-sided tent—another gift from Atmananda. I lay on my sleeping bag and listened to the river and to voices from the past. I could almost hear Atmananda talking, back in 1979, about the pending move from New York to southern California.

"It's very important that the right people go," he had said to Rachel and me.

We nodded.

"I'm not sure about Dana and Connie," he confided. "But I'm sure I made the right decision about you two." Then he squinted and focused his gaze above our heads.

"You realize, of course, who I am," he added haughtily.

I was eighteen at the time and thought I already knew who he was: a devoted Chinmoy disciple, a respected English professor, and a kind, sensitive person. His remark had left me so confused and repulsed that I let it drop from my conscious mind.

Now, as I listened to the gurgling river, I realized that Atmananda had made the same remark two years later, when he announced that Chinmoy had fallen. I realized, too, that there were other foreshadowings of his rise to power. There were the money and the "surprise gift" schemes. There was the basement samadhi announcement, which came during a debilitating thirteen-day fast. And there were numerous times he manipulated Chinmoy's disciples through the use of images, such as when he told me to picture my parents as "two red lobsters sporting bow ties."

Why, I wondered, had I largely ignored these and other warnings? Part of the answer, I supposed, had to do with the masterful way in which Atmananda used words. Equipped with a seductively compelling voice, he built vast, virtual kingdoms which were subject to constantly changing, contradictory etiquette. One week, for instance, it was spiritually correct to save money for ourselves, to have sex with someone outside the Centre, to study with Chinmoy; the following week, it was not. It had been difficult to maintain a perspective. I sensed that another part of the answer had to do with me and my need to believe, but now, as memories and realizations grew too painful to touch, I let my thoughts swirl slowly downstream with the gurgles of the river. Soon I was asleep.

That night, I woke to the noise of a racing engine and screeching brakes.

"This is no dream," I thought. "This is real!"

Two blinding lights sped straight toward me.

"HEEEYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY!" I screamed. Suddenly, the screeching and skidding stopped. My heart pounded. No more than ten feet away was a vehicle. It kicked into reverse, spun around, and disappeared into the night in a cacophonous squeal of metal, rubber, and asphalt. It was some time before the sound of rushing water lulled me back to sleep.

The next morning, I woke to the sound of car doors slamming. From the tent I saw a family walking toward the river. They stepped past long skid marks. "Excuse me," I called out, "which way is it to Utica?"

11. Displaced

"Aren't enlightened souls supposed to be more quiet?" I thought, recalling Atmananda's

newfound access to a world without words. It was an hour or so after the coup. His voice crept through my bedroom door, interrupting my thoughts. I had been deliberating on whether I would attend the follow-up meeting, which was scheduled to begin within minutes. "Well," I thought, trying to ignore the relentless monologue, "he did claim only *partial* enlightenment."

I read from the Castaneda poster on the wall of my room a quote about following a path with heart. "Does Atmananda's path have heart?" I wondered. "Is it even a path? What the hell is going on?"

I turned toward the underexposed photo of Chinmoy still on my shrine. "What if Guru has not fallen?" I wondered, not wanting to be left bobbing in the stormy sea of ignorance.

"But then again," I thought, reminded of Atmananda's uncanny ability to see, "what if he has?" I felt overwhelmed. I realized I needed time to think. I realized I needed guidance.

I wanted to ask former Chinmoy disciples for advice, but did not want to subject them to spiritual doubts about Guru or Atmananda. I wanted to ask friends and teachers outside the group, but did not want to rely on people whom I supposed could not see. I even thought of asking my parents, but did not want to rely on two lobsters sporting bow ties. So I tried to assess the situation on my own.

I recalled some of the good times I had had with Atmananda. I also recalled Atmananda admitting to me, months before, that he wanted some day to be a guru.

I saw him as a genuine seeker on the path to Truth. I also saw him as a man whose ambitions I could not fathom.

"I need to get away," I told myself. "I need to get a perspective. It's not that I don't trust Atmananda. It's just that..."

KNOCK!! KNOCK!!

I jumped up.

Atmananda smiled as he opened my door. "Hi, kid. The meeting will start in a few minutes. Do you want to greet people—or should I find someone else?"

Simultaneously soothed and disoriented by his voice and face, I felt reluctant to give up a position of authority. "I'll greet them," I said.

Some of the fifty or so former Chinmoy disciples that I greeted seemed excited, but most, like me, seemed anxious and confused. Twenty minutes after the meeting was scheduled to begin, I closed the door and sat with the group before a barren, Transcendental-less shrine. A nervous tension permeated the room. Atmananda strode in, sat down, and fiddled with his wristwatch. Then he looked up and quickly raised his hand to his mouth—as if he were surprised that he was not alone. A few people laughed.

"There are four paths leading to enlightenment," Atmananda said. "Bhakti yoga, the way of love, is by far the easiest path because love is the strongest force in the universe."

He had described the four paths many times before, and I began to feel slightly more at ease. It was particularly reassuring in his tumultuous world that love was still so important a quality.

"Karma yoga, the path of selfless service, is perhaps the noblest of the paths if you can avoid feeling superior to those whom you serve. Mahatma Gandhi was a karma yogi, though he never actually attained enlightenment."

"How can he be so sure?" I wondered. "Maybe Gandhi *had* attained enlightenment." I also wondered if Atmananda would end up serving himself rather than the Infinite.

"Jnana yoga, the path of knowledge and wisdom, is the least traveled of the four paths. Jnana yogis face the difficult task of learning to discriminate between what is real and what is maya, or illusion."

It was extremely difficult for me to face my friend and hero, and to discern whether his was a genuine path to the Infinite or an illusory path to himself. So I thought, instead, about jnana yoga master Sri Yukteswar, whose disciple, Paramahansa Yogananda, wrote the popular *Autobiography of a Yogi*.

"Mysticism," Atmananda said, "is the path described in the Castaneda books. By living impeccably, the mystic accumulates personal power until she or he is capable of entering into the Other Worlds. Though mysticism is the fastest way to enlightenment, it is also the most dangerous. Mystics are often attacked and drained of their power by the Dark Magicians, and many end up becoming Dark Magicians themselves."

Though enthralled by this path, I was bothered by Atmananda's insistence that a myriad of beings, human and otherwise, stood poised to destroy mystics who strayed from a constantly changing set of rules—that Atmananda happened to know all about. I was also bothered by

Atmananda's seeming obsession with "Dark Magicians."

"In past lives," Atmananda continued, "I have followed, mastered, and taught each of the four paths. You should understand that if you choose to continue your spiritual education with me, it will be your resistance to the Light—not my level of evolution—that is responsible for impeding your progress."

"Where does he come off sounding so sure of himself?" I wondered, my doubts suddenly resurfacing. "I really need time to think about this."

"For me, leading people to enlightenment is old hat. Each of you have been singled out to me through omens or through dreams. It was up to me to hook you, to essentially trick you into pursuing the long, arduous path to knowledge. Hooking takes place on an inner level and can not be explained with words. Tricking is necessary because people, left to their own devices, are inherently lazy and would avoid their higher destiny."

Remembering how Don Juan hooked Castaneda, I figured that being hooked and tricked into a higher destiny was probably okay—as long as everything turned out all right. It was deeply ingrained in me to believe that things tended to turn out all right.

"It is essential that you learn spiritual etiquette," Atmananda said. "Do not hang pictures of me. Do not worship me. Do not treat me like a guru. I am a teacher, a spiritual benefactor. You will have to fight your impulses to treat me as though I were more important than anyone else."

I liked his term "spiritual benefactor." It seemed to encompass the spiritual worlds of the Guru and the mystical worlds of benefactor Don Juan. I also liked his claim that he sought no special attention.

"Needless to say, you are free to leave at any time," he suddenly lashed out. "No one is asking you to stay—believe me, you are not doing anyone any favors!"

It made me upset and confused when Atmananda flipped to his emerging, hostile personality.

"But if it is the highest good that you seek," he said, returning to a gentler tongue, "you have come to the right place."

I suppressed a yawn. He had been speaking awhile, and it was well past midnight. Exhausted, too, from the shock of Atmananda's sudden grab for power, I became mesmerized by the sound and the rhythm of the words.

"You are caught up in trying to be someone you are not, and it is clearly not working. You are fighting yourselves for no apparent reason. Look, it's easy. You can stay the way you are and continue living someone else's dream, or you can come with me on a walk to nowhere. Leave aside your petty jealousies, your hates, your desires, your attachments, your fears, and enter the worlds where I hang out—worlds of pure joy, light, and bliss."

Several minutes later, Atmananda announced it was time to meditate. I wanted to rub my eyes, yawn, and stretch out on the soft blue rug. Instead, I sat there spellbound, drifting in and out of a dreamless sleep. At one point, I woke and heard, "When you attain enlightenment, your selves dissolve in the clear light of the void. Maybe you exist, maybe you don't. It no longer matters." Then, as Atmananda rehashed the details of his own enlightenment, I dozed off again.

After the meeting, I went to my room. "I need time to think," I reminded myself. As I drifted off to sleep, I could still hear my housemate talking.

Of the original one hundred San Diego Chinmoy disciples, roughly ten formed their own Chinmoy Centre, forty set out on their own, and fifty followed Atmananda. While some aspects of Atmananda's program remained the same, others intensified. He repeatedly warned, for instance, that the Negative Forces would prey on those who did not meditate regularly, those who diluted their power with doubts about him, and those who did not regularly attend his meetings. He began holding "crucial" meetings each night to help us "combat the Forces." The meetings began at around seven-thirty p.m. and lasted at times until dawn.

I attended each of Atmananda's meetings and, with only two or three hours of sleep per night, quickly grew fatigued. Once my boss at the UCSD Computer Center found me asleep with my upper body resting on a noisy, three-and-a-half-foot-high mainframe printer. Another time, Atmananda read to me a letter that he had sent to Chinmoy: "As you know, I have been entering into highly advanced states of consciousness lately... " Unable to concentrate, I suppressed a yawn and lapsed into a long, thoughtless pause.

I was occasionally buoyed by the realization that I desperately needed rest, that I needed time to think, and that I needed to take a break from Atmananda's all-night meetings. But I was mostly slapped by waves of fear of Atmananda's Negative Forces, and pulled under by the weight of shifting etiquette, meta-rational rhetoric, and sleep deprivation.

Roughly two weeks into the post-coup program, Atmananda began to publish WOOF! The Weekly Newsletter of Anahata. Having named his organization after the anahata chakra—the

"psychic energy center of love"—he initially distributed WOOFL! to the fifty Anahatans. Weeks later, after having renamed his organization "Church of Atlantis" (C.O.A.), Atmananda decided to distribute WOOFL! The Voice of Southern California to tens of thousands of San Diegans.

WOOFL! provided work for Atmananda's devotees and helped bind the fledgling group. We illustrated, laid out, distributed, and laughed over each edition. We laughed, for instance, at Atmananda's fabricated advertisement about an imaginary bank (Issue #3; January, 1981): "Interloka Bank is pleased to announce the opening of a new branch in Mark's room. We will be giving away the first 500 customers as valuable gifts... We at Interloka are dedicated to serving you totally, and are proud to take you for all we can, whenever we can. We are the only authorized distributors of the GOLDEN GWIDcard... Interloka Bank—We Own You... " Perhaps it was the lack of sleep, the desire to believe in our friend and mentor, or the need for comic relief that blinded us to the grim foreshadowing of Atmananda's humor.

I laughed the hardest at Atmananda's ads and columns in which he satirized televangelists, Indian gurus, the Moonies, and New Age healers (see Appendix A). I felt justified in laughing at other spiritual groups, partly because they seemed to merit it and partly because Atmananda said that they needed to be laughed at. He wrote in an editorial (Issue #6; March, 1981): "WOOFL!, the all-natural and organic paper that millions use to line their bird cages, makes fun of it all. We act as a consumer's representative for you in the field of New Age consciousness. We feel that if what people have to offer is genuine then they won't mind us poking a little fun at them. And if they do mind—then maybe the products or services they offer deserve careful scrutiny, and we should re-evaluate the truthfulness of their claims... "

In my naive, sleepless stupor, I accepted Atmananda's mission of poking fun at others, and did my best to train and coordinate the WOOFL! distribution teams.

Perhaps it was to dispel doubts about his own authenticity that Atmananda proceeded to poke fun at himself. Appearing beside his photograph was the following ad (Issue #6; March, 1981): "His High Holiness SWAMI UGULA UGLE From The Himalayan Institute For The Strange will be appearing in Del Mar on March 37th at 2 a.m. for the high himalayan karmuppet hat dancing & tea ceremony. \$\$ Bring Lots Of Money \$\$ His high Holiness Swami Ugula Ugle is a direct lineal descendant of Llama Fred. He personally assisted in the baking of several LARGE rye breads at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. A devotee of Sri Ramana Maharshi and baseball, the Swami actually is a good guy. He doesn't claim to be any better than the rest of us. But he's happy. So maybe happiness can be learned? Come and find out... We may hit you for a few bucks—but we'll give you a good time... Lots of pomp and ceremony for you Western types who can't accept that enlightened souls can look and act like normal human beings... "

I liked the ad. I saw no reason why enlightened souls should not look and act like normal human beings. I liked the way Atmananda poked fun at the pomp and ceremony which had distanced Chinmoy from many of his disciples. I also found Atmananda's deflated view of himself a relief.

A number of Atmananda's advertisements, however, were of a more serious nature. In the first issue, for instance (January, 1981), he wrote: "1st WORKSHOP OF 1981... another exciting Castaneda experience at UCSD... inspired posterers—here's your chance!" In later issues, he repeatedly ran "The Experience of Luminosity" ad (Issue #6; March, 1981): "DR. FREDERICK LENZ is a spiritual Benefactor. Each month... he offers several free workshops to members of the San Diego community. At these workshops he provides solid information and techniques that will help you to gain inner peace and happiness. Dr. Lenz does this by discussing the most helpful aspects of Buddhism, Yoga, Vedanta, Zen, Taoism and the psychic and spiritual arts... During meditation, Dr. Lenz enters into Samadhi and directly channels Peace, Light, Power and Ecstasy to you... ADMISSION FREE... "

At the top of this full-page ad appeared the words, "Paid advertisement"—as if WOOFL! had been published by someone other than Dr. Frederick Lenz.

Atmananda, who at times seemed as cautious as he was bold, told me to instruct WOOFL! distribution volunteers to be highly inaccessible. I kept this in mind one Saturday afternoon as I approached a health food store with Marty, a shy, soft-spoken UCSD student with a sense of wonder in his eyes. Marty had been a disciple of Chinmoy for about a year.

Raising the WOOFL!'s to the counter, I said, "Could we leave these by the door? They're free!"

"Sure," the manager replied and he took one.

I placed my stack, and Marty, who had been lugging additional copies, placed his as well. We were almost out the door when the man said, "Say, who puts out this... WOOFL!?"

I was about to reply that we did not know, that we were only doing this for money, when Marty suddenly blurted, "What WOOFL!?" And in a flash we were gone.

When I told Atmananda this story, he seemed pleased with me. He was pleased with the large turn-outs at his public lectures, and he said I was doing an impeccable job overseeing the ten or so WOOFL! and poster distribution volunteers. Perhaps it was in anticipation of unbridled expansion that, using doubt-diffusing humor, he wrote and published the "Cult Of The Gwid

Spreads Throughout Rancho Bernardo" article (Issue #6; March, 1981): "In a seemingly unstoppable tide of fanatic cultism, proponents, adherents and admirers of the Gwid have firmly rooted themselves in Rancho Bernardo and are expanding at an alarming rate. The concerned people of Rancho Bernardo are helpless in the face of such determined behavior and many have resigned themselves to their fate and joined ranks with the lively followers of the Gwid... the Gwid reassured and won the hearts of the entire Rancho Bernardo community when he gave a public speech yesterday outlining his major beliefs and ideals. Excerpts follow: 'I do not wish to own your sons and daughters, merely to use them as a tax break. It is not the acquiring of wealth that interests me, but rather the actual possession of it. All else is useless to me unless it involves adventure, limber bodies, cunning and chocolate... In closing, I stand for freedom, a cheese in every hand, the dignity to live a free and happy life under my close supervision... '"

As the month wore on, Atmananda often stopped by my room to perform what he called "reality checks." This involved chatting and meditating with me until my consciousness was "in a good place." He was probably concerned that, as a member of his inner circle, I might unduly influence his disciples. But I was too tired, too fearful of the Negative Forces, and too busy coordinating WOOFF! and poster distribution teams to seriously reflect on or pose a threat to his self-anointed position of power.

Occasionally, though, I did think about the change. But instead of confronting guilt from having abandoned Chinmoy, and instead of confronting doubts about Atmananda, I found it easier to laugh and laugh at spiritual groups and the absurd things that they did.

12. Thwarted Escape

Months after the coup, Atmananda held late-night meetings less often, and I soon caught up on sleep. Refreshed from the rest, I tried to understand the changes that had been taking place within the Centre and within Atmananda. My thoughts were frequently interrupted by squawks from Atmananda's fourteen blue-and-gold macaws. He kept them in a room in the garage. He was unaware that they were gnawing a hole in the roof. He planned to tame them and to sell them at a profit.

One time I lay in bed thinking about *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*, a book Atmananda had recommended to me. At first I thought about the similarities between Atmananda and R. P. McMurphy, the novel's free-spirited protagonist. Both men, I realized, exuded auras of self-confidence. Atmananda, for instance, had once offered to teach me the secret of attracting women. Jutting his chin forward like a boxer's glove, he focused on an imaginary horizon and began taking long and rhythmic strides. He suddenly seemed eight feet tall, and I watched in awe as he ignored the young women who were checking him out.

Both Atmananda and McMurphy, I realized, shared their knowledge with others. Atmananda, for instance, made a special effort to make his followers feel big. "How can you become strong and self-confident?" he asked at Centre meetings. "By doing all the things I have been recommending. By meditating. By leading impeccable lives. By cutting off those—such as your family—who are draining your power. And by learning to trust in yourselves."

Both Atmananda and McMurphy, I also realized, were teachers of self-sacrifice. Atmananda, for instance, lectured on Jesus Christ, Gandhi, and McMurphy. "McMurphy," he said at Centre meetings, "leads twelve men to the sea and takes them fishing. After the fishing trip, McMurphy is worn out. He is in pain. He has exhausted his energy so that others might be free. This is the essence of self-giving. This is why I do what I do."

I reflected on the sacrifices that Atmananda had been making lately. His efforts at running a spiritual Centre appeared to leave him exhausted and in pain. Dealing with the physical and non-physical demands of a congregation was no doubt an enormous imposition. And what a spiritual leader he was! I pictured him striding about with his chin jutting forward, exuding that aura of confidence; sharing insights into metaphysical philosophies of the ancients, as well as American pop culture of the early '80s; joking and singing, inspiring and enlivening us; writing and publishing WOOFF!, as well as a book called *The Bridge is Flowing But the River Is Not*; challenging our intellects with the known and unknowable; recording and selling tapes on a variety of spiritual topics; framing and reframing the ways in which we viewed the world; issuing a recommended book list which included *The Way Of Life According To Lao Tzu*, *The Bhagavad-Gita*, *How To Know God*, *I Ching*, *The Gospel Of Sri Ramakrishna*, *Tales Of Power*, *Tibetan Book Of The Dead*, and *Walden*; distributing geometric patterns on which to meditate; and generating mystical experiences—with Light from the Infinite, of course!

But then I thought about how, unlike McMurphy, Atmananda increasingly blamed others for the role he chose to play. "I incarnated into this world of pain and suffering," Atmananda often claimed, "to help my students from past lives. Many of you don't seem to realize it, but I am in a constant state of pain as a result of the bad energy that you continuously bombard me with. I am

also constantly ill as a result of the massive amounts of bad karma that I absorb from you on a regular basis."

I began to think not about McMurphy and Atmananda's similarities, but about their differences. I recalled Atmananda saying, "When you attain my level of enlightenment, you transcend good and evil. 'Good' and 'evil' become mere words, mere concepts in a universe where only experience matters. So why be attached to the good side of the force?"

I wanted to believe that Atmananda meant: "Why worry about being good if you become goodness itself?" But other memories surfaced, and I became overwhelmed by a nauseating sense that he had something else in mind. "Do you know who I really am?" he had increasingly croaked in a low, throaty rasp, his bright eyes mocking me. "The anti-Christ. I work for the other side. Six-six-six. Think about it."

"He was only joking," I reassured myself. "Or maybe he was testing me. That's it—he was only testing me." Yet it was difficult to discount the numerous, bone-chilling times that he had adopted a credible Lucifer persona.

Vivid memories now rushed forward like water through a newly unblocked dam. There were memories of Atmananda telling students that he meditated each day at noon. "Maybe Atmananda's inner being is always in a state of meditation," I thought, recalling the numerous times that I had seen him at noon not meditating. "But then again, maybe he was just lying."

There were memories of Atmananda's recent nightmare. "Guru tried to kill me last night," he had told me several mornings before.

"Really?" I replied, certain that Chinmoy, the peace-and-tennis-loving Guru, would not want to hurt anyone.

"That's right," he continued. "The Guru attacked me in the dream plane and nearly strangled me. Fortunately, I am stronger than he is—otherwise I would now be dead!"

"Are you okay?"

"My neck and throat hurt."

But Atmananda's sore throat had not stopped him from voicing and capitalizing on what he had dreamt.

"The Guru is attempting to destroy me," Atmananda announced to his disciples at subsequent Centre meetings. "You need to understand that while the Guru has lost his spiritual powers, he has not lost his mystical powers. Until you break all mental, emotional, and psychic attachments to him, and until you develop a powerful inner connection with me, you will be completely vulnerable to his next round of inner attacks. Many of you think that this is some kind of game. Just don't come running to me when you find that all your power is gone."

Memories about Atmananda that had been suppressed for months continued to freely flow. "Do you see how my skin glows?" he had recently asked me.

"That means you are healthy," I had replied.

"True, but if you look closely you will see that the light from my body is emanating from a higher plane."

There were memories of eating breakfast with Atmananda and my other housemates. At one point during the meal, Atmananda gazed out the window and spoke as though in a trance. "The powers," he said repeatedly, "are coming back to me. I can now fill an entire room with golden light. I am not who you think I am." About fifteen minutes later, he stopped talking and went to his room.

"Is there something wrong with Atmananda?" Anne asked me as we washed the breakfast dishes.

"Something is definitely not right," I replied. We glanced at each other, but found it difficult to share our ideas and doubts in much depth. We both felt indebted to Atmananda. He had managed to convince us, separately, that had we not met him, we would now be dead. He used this tactic on many disciples. He had also been giving Anne and me special attention lately, and we therefore felt particularly guilty that we had doubts about him. Then there was the climate of distrust that he had been fostering within the Centre. He occasionally warned me, for instance, that Anne was in a low state of consciousness and that I should avoid her whenever possible; he would then tell her the same about me, and so on. Furthermore, Atmananda had worked to make communication among disciples intimidating and taboo.

"If any of you break the Seven Seals of Silence," he had repeatedly warned inner circle devotees, without explaining what the Seals were, "I would not want to be in your shoes. You have to understand that there would be absolutely nothing I could do to help you. It would be awful—I don't even want to think about it."

Other surfacing memories of Atmananda revolted me. I recalled his often-stated maxim that only through revenge could one of life's greatest joys be attained. In WOOF! (Issue #3; January, 1981), he wrote: "Thousands died today in Pompeii when Mount Vesuvius erupted without warning... It was seen that the people of Pompeii had all been enemies of the Gwid in a recent incarnation and that the explosion... was the Gwid's special way of showing the populace that he is not a person to be trifled with..."

I recalled with disgust Atmananda's claim that he used to toss his dog fifteen to twenty feet into the air.

I recalled with disgust his treatment of me during one of his public lectures. "Can anyone see what is wrong with Mark?" he had asked the audience, after calling me to the front of the room.

No response.

"Look at him now."

Silence.

"The energy around his head," he told them matter-of-factly, "is not balanced. But don't worry. We are working on him."

As I grappled with the memory, I grew angry. Atmananda, I realized, probably saw me as one of his pets. Suddenly it struck me that while Atmananda might be like McMurphy, he might also be like the novel's mean-spirited antagonist, Nurse Ratched, also known as Big Nurse.

Both Atmananda and Big Nurse, I realized, discouraged their wards from exploring the outdoors. I remembered Atmananda warning me, before I went backpacking in Yosemite, that he was picking up bad vibes from the trip. Despite his grim prophecy, the trip had been a success. I had gone with three friends from the Centre, each of whom loved the woods as much as I did. We woke to the sounds of a brown bear eating our food. We played hacky-sack on top of Half Dome. We got muddy and jumped in a river and yelled and laughed from the cold. Yet when we returned, Atmananda scolded me for having picked up significant quantities of Negative Psychic Energy. "Don't worry," he told me. "I'll process the bad energy for you—though it will probably make me ill." Then, adding humiliation to guilt, he dubbed us "assholes of the mountains."

Both Atmananda and Big Nurse, I also realized, relied heavily on informants to gather data about the group that they controlled. Atmananda exposed his Big Nurse nature in other ways. He claimed, for instance, that he had to "press all the right buttons" to help people overcome their resistance to the Light and to him. And he said he never trusted a man unless he had his pecker in his pocket.

As I lay in bed remembering and reflecting, I felt overwhelmed by the extent to which Atmananda had changed. For a moment, I felt sad. I still thought of him as a friend. I found myself thinking about the time he had initiated the former Chinmoy disciples. When it came my turn, he placed his hand on my forehead and looked into my eyes. Not a grin or gesture broke his stern countenance. Seconds later he was done meditating on me, and I returned to the audience. Then he called me back.

"You are rejecting me inwardly," he accused and tried again. After the third time, he frowned.

"Next," he said.

Now I struggled with the memory and with the realization that Atmananda considered me less his friend than a subject. I had believed in him. I had loved him. I was devastated. But as I concentrated again on his other side, the sadness disappeared. Atmananda, I realized, had been using me. I grew angry and scared.

My thoughts drifted, and I found myself thinking about a bicycle trip I had taken to Palomar Mountain months before. At the top of the mountain one of my brakes had malfunctioned, so I hitched a ride to a bike shop in Escondido. A plumber had picked me up. During the ride, the plumber, who lived with his wife and kids on the mountain, had pointed out a red-tailed hawk. Now, in my room in Atmananda's Centre, I pictured the way that the hawk had soared through the clear, blue, mountain sky on a course of its own...

"What the hell am I doing here?" I suddenly thought, lifting myself out of bed. I stepped into the hall.

"What if Atmananda sees me?" I thought nervously. But the door to his room was shut. I stepped into the kitchen. Except for an occasional squawk from a macaw, the house was dead quiet. I picked up the phone. I remembered the name of the plumber on Palomar Mountain. I called information. My heart raced. The plumber remembered who I was.

"Do you need an apprentice?" I asked in a strained whisper.

"Well, come to think of it," he said, "I could use some help. But weren't you going to finish college?"

"I think I need to take a break for awhile," I admitted.

"I understand. I'll tell you what. Why don't you come on out and we'll talk it over."

I wrote down directions, thanked him, and returned to my room. I wanted to say good-bye to my friends in the Centre, but I knew that in the interest of "saving" me, they would tell Atmananda. And I knew too well that he had a knack for persuading borderline disciples not to leave. So, wishing the disciples well on their journey, I kept my plan secret. I wished Atmananda well on his journey, too. Each time I thought of him, though, I broke out in a cold sweat.

My plan was to hitchhike that night to Palomar Mountain. I stuffed some gear in my backpack, which I kept hidden in the closet. I was ready. The sun was starting to set. "It's okay, man," I thought, hugging myself. I was frightened.

Suddenly the bell rang. I remained in my room. Atmananda answered the door. It was Sal.

I heard Atmananda shout, "Salitos, take out the hot sauce!"

"Yowwwww!" I heard them yell moments later.

I opened the door to my room and saw them hopping around the kitchen. For a moment I felt nostalgic. Drinking hot sauce and hopping around with Atmananda had been one of my favorite experiences in the Centre. Returning to my room, I quietly closed the door and tried to ignore them. I imagined that I was living on Palomar Mountain by a clearing in the forest. I imagined the brilliant California sun as it pierced the thick morning fog below. I imagined the solitary red-tailed hawk as it soared through the clear, blue, mountain sky on a course of its...

The door flew open and in strode Atmananda. He took giant steps. He was followed by Sal.

"Heyyy, Sal!" Atmananda blasted. "Da baby, he'sa thinkin'-a leavin'!"

"Baby," queried Sal, "you thinkin'-a leavin'?"

"Gespacho," cried Atmananda, not waiting for my reply, "where have-a you been?"

"With-a Guacamole!" shouted Sal.

I was stunned. "How... how did they find out?" I thought.

They danced about the room singing about Guacamole, a young maiden who blushed bright green.

I did not know whether to laugh or to cry. I was doing a little of both when, a minute or so later, Atmananda asked Sal to wait outside.

"You've got to admit, kid," Atmananda said to me. "We have a good time here."

I glanced in the direction of my backpack.

Atmananda made a fist and shut his eyes.

"Watch out!" cried my rational side. But he seemed sincere and vulnerable, and I found myself gazing at him.

"Contemplate mountains—not him!" I thought. But in him I saw a man who could see; who read people's inner thoughts and feelings; who predicted the future; who glowed after I stared at him intensely for several minutes; who spent hundreds of hours teaching me about worlds of enchantment, excitement, and nobility; and who banked on a career of making millions happy.

"Sure he's got a lot to offer," I thought, "but he's got that other side—I need to get away!" But in him I saw the community I had helped build, a community which included all my current friends.

"Help build another community! Find new friends!" But in him I saw my aspiration to be a seeker of Truth—as well as my desire to wield power over others.

"He's playing a power game—run!"

Atmananda opened his eyes. He seemed displeased and hurt. He appeared as both a mother and father figure. He towered over me. He exuded self-confidence.

I grimaced. Over the past few years, I had occasionally questioned Chinmoy's authenticity in the back of my mind. Over the past few months, I had occasionally questioned Atmananda's authenticity in the back of my sleepy mind. Over the past few days, I had continuously questioned Atmananda's authenticity in the forefront of my rested mind. But now, the conflict, which pitted my rational nature against my mystical nature, became too much to endure.

He opened his fist and demanded, "What do you see?"

I saw memories of him telling me to act like a warrior before the Forces destroyed what we had worked so hard to achieve. I saw him telling me with a concerned look on his face that he had spent more time with me than with any other student.

"I... "

I had developed over the years a deep trust in him, as if he were family. I had allowed him to access and to control an important part of me, my imagination, and now I feared that without him, the window to worlds of dreams and fantasy would never open up again. There were other fears: of death, of God, of the absence of God, of being lost without a world, without a friend...

"I... "

I could not admit that I had trod what had in part become a bogus path. I wanted so much for there to be a simple solution.

"I... I see sparks flying from your hand, Atmananda," I said, allowing myself to imagine—and therefore to see—the sparks.

Atmananda left the room. I lay in bed, listening to the macaws.

"I won't let the Negative Forces take me over," I determined. "I am going to be a true spiritual warrior." When thoughts about Atmananda's other side resurfaced, I refused to confront them. Instead, I silently repeated Atmananda's recommended doubt-combating mantra: "NO!"

"NO!" I thought, after reading in a Castaneda book Don Juan's assertion that under no circumstance should you stay on a given path if your feelings tell you to leave.

"NO!" I thought, whenever I found myself questioning the process by which I censored my own thoughts.

I was still thinking, "NO," on the day Atmananda noticed the hole in the roof.

"GRAAAAAUUUUHHHHG!" squawked one of the colorful, captive birds.

"BAM! BAM! BAM!" echoed Atmananda's hammer as he blocked off the escape route with some two-by-fours.

13. Breakdown

In the months after I tried to run away, Atmananda kept me busy expanding his postering routes north to Los Angeles and to the Bay area. Once he had me plan and coordinate a campaign in which one hundred disciples distributed four thousand posters and one hundred thousand promotional newsletters across the entire state of California. He did not seem concerned that I was only twenty-one. He seemed to have faith in me. But after the work was complete, his faith regressed into stinging verbal attacks on my level of consciousness, loyalty, and sanity.

"You are mentally ill," he said. "You can hardly deal with the real world." He explained that I was a prime target for the mind-ravaging Forces because I was spiritually advanced, because I held a key position in his Light-spreading organization, and, most importantly, because I still doubted him.

"But stick with it, kid," he added. "We haven't given up on you yet."

Atmananda failed to appreciate that my doubt-blocking efforts were largely successful, except for the time that I spent with him. It was then that I saw him not as a divine incarnation with a bright golden aura, but rather as an opportunistic Ph.D. with smooth social skills. It was then that knots of tension mounted in my stomach, pangs of guilt haunted my conscience, and, only after several emotionally exhausting hours of telling myself, "NO!", the surfacing conflict appeared to short-circuit. It was then that my mind drew a blank.

One evening, in a movie theatre with Atmananda and the inner circle, the conflict had already run its course. I felt detached, numb, dumb. I gazed listlessly at the screen. Atmananda said something. Sal, Anne, Rachel, and Dana laughed. I looked straight ahead. I did not smile.

They kept giving me popcorn and candy, but I had deeply withdrawn. I did not eat. I passed the items along. I wished that it would stop.

What happened next seemed to occur in slow motion. Sal held out a bucket of popcorn. Halfheartedly, I reached for it. I wanted to be left alone. I held the bucket loosely. It slipped from my hand. Popcorn covered the floor. I stood up. Popcorn fell from my lap. I sensed that my friends had been having fun, and that I was ruining it for them. I would not meet their gazes. I

stood there, bathed by the flickering lights of the film, frightened by the resurfacing conflict.

"Maybe it's been me all along," I thought.

"That's nonsense," I countered. "It's Atmananda who is... "

"NO!!"

I grimaced. I walked up the incline toward the exit. I left the theatre in a stupor. I felt dizzy and disoriented. My mind again drew a blank.

I crossed the street to UCSD. I walked to Revelle College. To the Humanities Library Building. To HL 1402. I often reserved this room through the Meditation Club for Atmananda's public and private meetings. I sat down. I did not reflect on how his talks in this room had changed in the past two years. Nor did I reflect on how he had changed. Nor on how I had changed. I just sat there. After a few minutes, I stood up and left.

I walked to John Muir College. I saw a picture of conservationist, writer, and mountaineer John Muir. I found myself thinking about the plumber, about Palomar Mountain, about the solitary hawk...

"NO!" I said aloud and turned away.

I walked down the hill to Central Library. I remembered walking here with two friends from high school who, months before, had unexpectedly appeared at the Centre door. I had not spoken with them in years. I told them I was no longer a disciple of an Indian guru. I also told them my new spiritual teacher was different than the others. "He's got a Ph.D," I explained. "He's been on Phil Donahue. He's my friend." Despite my assertions that I was fine and that I could take care of myself, they still looked at me as if I were in some kind of cult.

"The past is dust," I now thought, recalling a saying that Atmananda had borrowed from Chinmoy.

I walked to Third College. To Third College Lecture Hall. To TLH 104. I saw Atmananda's face on either side of the front wall. I had placed the two posters. Atmananda often claimed that his photograph was a doorway to his "awareness field," and now I wondered if he was watching me through the posters on the wall. I felt uneasy and left.

I walked to a nearby computer terminal room. I logged on and played Star Trek. The E on the screen was the Enterprise. R's were Romulans. K's were Klingons. Klingons had stealth devices. I was E. R's and K's surrounded E. E got destroyed. Each time I played, E got destroyed. I logged off and walked away.

I plodded over soft, squishy lawns. The sprinklers were on. I got wet. I felt like a zombie. I felt small.

I crisscrossed campus several times more. I was tired. I thought about sleeping in the computer room. I was afraid to return to the Centre. I was afraid of facing Atmananda. I did not examine the fear. I walked home.

I opened the door. It was late. Atmananda stood in the living room. I sensed that he had been waiting for me.

"You may not realize it," he said right away, "but you are very sick. You are mentally ill. I am a professional and you are going to have to trust me."

Atmananda spoke authoritatively. He held something in his hand. He said that he was going to help me.

"Have you ever heard of Stelazine?" he asked.

"No."

"Stelazine is a drug that helps people who suffer from mental illness or depression. With the advent of drugs such as this, people who would otherwise be dysfunctional can lead happy and normal lives."

I had a flash of fear. I glanced at the door.

"Mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of," Atmananda said, holding out the pills. "You'd be surprised how many people experience some form of neurosis or psychosis. I have a cousin who took anti-psychotic drugs for years. Now he flies F-14's for the military."

The conflict sparked and it flickered and then disappeared. My mind became still. I reached for the pills.

"Western doctors don't really understand mental illness. It is a form of possession. Stelazine blocks out the lower occult worlds, which are inhabited by the Negative Forces."

I nodded. My doubts remained submerged.

"We are not about to desert you. But you have to understand that you *are* mentally ill. All along, you thought that this was some kind of game. You did not take my warnings about the Forces seriously. You opened up your consciousness to them, and now you are paying the price."

I nodded again.

"Of course, there is still hope. But you've got to stop fighting me. You've got to act *now*." He instructed me to take the drug. I had no premonition as I swallowed the Stelazine that Atmananda would later call me his "chemical experiment."

In the days that followed, Atmananda seemed to enjoy his assumed role as psychiatrist and nurse. He knocked on my door several times a day and, in a cheery voice, announced, "Hi, kid—reality check. How do you feel?"

"Dizzy," I replied. I smiled. I was enjoying Atmananda's attention and kind treatment. "I feel pretty relaxed."

"Good," he said. "Now tell me about your thoughts."

I did.

He seemed pleased that I was finding it difficult to concentrate, that my thoughts had a fuzzy, dream-like quality to them, and that my self-analyzing, authority-questioning nature had submerged beyond my control.

"You should feel good about yourself," he said pleasantly. "You are making some definite progress."

14. Bicycle Ride—St. Ignis

Two weeks into the cross-country bicycle trek, I pedaled from Utica, New York, to Rochester, where I stayed with Noah, a childhood friend. When I told him the story of my years with Atmananda, he congratulated me for having left what sounded to him like an abusive marriage. In fact, he was surprised that Atmananda did not have sexual relations with the men disciples as a way to control them. He also pointed out that while in medical school, he had observed self-proclaimed incarnations of Jesus Christ at psychiatric wards.

"How can you be sure that someone *isn't* enlightened?" I asked, puzzled by the certainty with which Noah expressed his opinions.

"How can you be sure that someone *is*?" he replied.

I thought about the visit as I continued the journey west to Detroit. Noah's reluctance to give a person or an idea the benefit of the doubt, and the scrutiny with which he questioned words such as "enlightenment," seemed bizarre but not entirely unnatural, like a trusted habit long forgotten.

Several days later, I rushed down a long hill in northern Michigan toward an oncoming truck. It was twilight. The trailer suddenly hit a bump, swung out from behind the bicycle, and slammed into my rear wheel. I nearly fell from the impact. Then I lurched forward as the trailer disengaged.

"Nuna!" I cried, glancing back, but the wheel had stopped spinning and it took my full attention to balance the skidding, swerving bicycle. Moments later the truck smacked me with a wall of air as it thundered by, and the bike quickly came to a halt. I ran up the hill to the wayward trailer and found Nunatak peering out from the doggie-carrier. She tilted her head as if to ask, "Is this something all huskies go through?"

I sat with the pup in the tall grass. I was devastated. The rig was the vehicle I had chosen to exercise and exorcise my body and mind. It was also my means of transportation. Now, it was broken. As the sky went from deep purple to black, the memory of Atmananda calling me his "chemical experiment" seemed to usher in the darkness. Other recollections bubbled up from the murky depths, only to burst into vivid, unnerving images. Here was Atmananda telling me that he was a professional, that I was extremely sick, and that he was going to help me. Here he was telling me to swallow my pride. And here he was telling me to swallow the Stelazine.

Cars zoomed by now and then, dispelling apparitions of my former mentor. Headlights flashed an angry light at the severed trailer, the pretzel-shaped wheel, and the fallen gear strewn in disarray. Then the lights were gone, leaving behind a fiery-comet afterimage.

I wondered why Atmananda had fed me the drug. Did he actually believe that he was helping me? If so, why didn't he recommend that I seek guidance outside his direct sphere of influence? It seemed more likely that, unable to tell the difference between helping and controlling people, he gave me the drug to strengthen his grip on my mind. But I suspected another motive. I knew that Atmananda had often used me as a sounding board for new ideas and, later, for LSD. He may have wanted to observe my reaction to the Stelazine before using it on others—or on himself.

As I meditated on Atmananda's possible motives, I swatted mosquitos and picked at scabs of aging stings. I did not yet know that he had given Stelazine to at least one other inner circle follower.

I tried to remember how I had felt during the Stelazine experiment. I recalled feeling dizzy. I also recalled feeling at peace with myself. The conflict between my rational and mystical natures did not seem to matter. Nothing seemed to matter.

"You're doing fine, kid," Atmananda had told me each day. "Just go with the flow and enjoy the process."

Stunned by the memory, I held the husky in my arms. Nunatak was a wonderful traveling companion. Each day she tugged and leaped alongside the rig as if she were a full-grown sled dog. She licked the drying sweat and tears on my face.

I tried to understand why I had followed Atmananda-Dr. Lenz's drug prescription. Perhaps the most compelling reason was because I was afraid not to. Since the coup, Atmananda had stepped up his effort to instill fear in his followers. He taught me, for instance, to fear the Negative Forces which he said were destroying the fabric of society. "Just read the papers," he would say. "You'll see what I'm talking about."

He taught me to fear what would happen if I left the Centre. "You know too much to leave. It's a greedy, materialistic world out there. Your soul would be miserable. Besides, the Forces would flatten you like a bug. You would lose thousands of lifetimes of evolution."

He taught me to fear, not just the Forces but people, particularly old friends and family. "It's best if you don't tell them what we do here. Believe me, they won't understand. They'll end up blocking your progress and sapping your power."

And he taught me to fear for my sanity. "You can no longer deal with the real world. You're lucky I don't drop you off at a mental institution."

Other reasons why I had felt compelled to take the Stelazine slowly dawned. I realized that Atmananda's senatorial countenance, his smooth, commanding voice, and his Ph.D. contributed to an aura of authority which I had found difficult to dispute. He had combined Western rhetoric, Eastern mysticism, and American pop culture to entice me; vague language, long pauses, and repetition to hold me spellbound; and fear, fasting, and sleep deprivation to break me down.

Had Atmananda's techniques ended there, I might have seen him as a control freak—and left. But each time he had broken me down, he built me up again with kindness and with words of inspiration. He spoke of saints, of beauty, and of the wisdom of the desert. He spoke of selflessness, quixotic quests, literature, and wonder. And he spoke of an unconditional love and of a multi-lifetime camaraderie.

Had Atmananda's techniques ended there, I might have seen him as a confused combination of Big Nurse and McMurphy—and left. But he managed, by flipping between abusive and supportive personas, to keep me off balance on an emotionally gut-wrenching roller coaster ride. Genuine spiritual benefactors were supposed to keep students off balance, he maintained, because it was only then that they could "let go and make real leaps in spiritual progress." It was primarily in his uncanny ability to read an individual or group, and to gauge the precise instance in which to flip, that Atmananda's brilliance could be found. I had been unaware that he was speaking to me, controlling me, through the rhythmic "off" and "on" language of intermittent reinforcement.

It was painful to grapple with memories of Atmananda and to see him in such a searing light. But it was far more painful to examine what it was about me that had complemented his techniques and allowed me to accept his authority. I thought about how, as a thirteen-year-old, it had been easier to journey into lives of sorcerers from the Castaneda books than it was to deal with the emotions of a family in conflict; years later, it was easier to follow Atmananda's narcotic program than it was to brave a suppressed conflict of my own. I also realized that I had grown up feeling blessed, immortal, and immune to the dangers of the world; later, when Atmananda issued post-coup etiquette and Stelazine, I found it difficult to admit that I was so wrong for so long about so many things, and that I was just another victim of one man's *other* side.

The reluctance to view myself as a victim persisted, and now, draped with a sleeping bag to protect me from mosquitos, I found it difficult to admit that the "Atmananda phenomenon" may have had as much to do with Atmananda, and with me, as it did with the balance of society. Years later, I wondered if modern American society had been replacing a system of mythology and religious dogma with a system of reason as a way to explain ourselves and the world around us. I wondered if there were a genuine need in humans not only to categorize and comprehend, but to

acknowledge and to address, in unscientific terms, the mystery of that which creates, binds, animates, and destroys. And I wondered if teachers like Atmananda were increasingly exploiting such a need in millions who, for whatever reasons, had chosen a path apart from conventional religion. Perhaps by nurturing both mystical and rational inclinations, society could explore the realm beyond the surface world of reason while keeping pace with the charismatic predators of the New Age.

But in the darkness of a northern Michigan night, still angry and upset from memories of Atmananda's experiments, I sensed that a New Age of enchantment and wisdom had passed me by. Yet I also felt cleansed and refreshed, like the air of a city after heavy rain. I stood up and began gathering the fallen gear in a pile by the trailer. Suddenly, I was staring into headlights which did not disappear. A man got out of the pickup.

"What happened, son?"

As I recounted the bicycle incident, I tried to control the quiver in my voice.

"Officer Brown," he said, showing me a badge. He dropped me, the dog, and the rig off at a motel in nearby St. Ignace. He also left me his number at the station, in case I needed help getting back on the road.

The following afternoon, the policeman pounded the wheel back into shape, fixed the derailleur, replaced spokes, and bolted steel bars over the aluminum which attached the trailer to the bicycle. When he was done, he refused to take my money.

"What are you doing now?" I asked.

"Cleaning the frame."

"Thanks," I said, "but you don't have to do that."

"Whenever you do a job, son, do it right."

Later that day, invisible currents from California, along with the weight of the baggage, continued to affect my progress west. As I rode through the woods of the Upper Peninsula, I reflected on Noah's remark that I had escaped from an abusive relationship. My story, I concluded, was not so unusual after all. Invigorated, I coasted down a long hill and squeezed the brakes intermittently.

15. The Enchanted Taco

Late one night, Atmananda met three hundred disciples in a parking lot in the desert ninety miles east of San Diego. He led us for hours over soft, cooling sand to a spot in a dry river bed. He had us form a circle around him. As we scanned for scorpions before sitting down, the desert floor lit up like a circular, gyrating constellation, until one by one the flashlights went out and it grew difficult again to see.

"If you enter a higher level of consciousness," Atmananda began from the center of the circle, "you will see the Warriors on the cliffs across the gorge. They are subtle beings from another plane of existence. They look a lot like American Indians."

Hundreds of braves, tall and unflinching, were conjured in my imagination.

"What do you *see*?" Atmananda asked the group.

I made no response. I did not doubt the images cast on the back of my eyes by my brain. Nor did I doubt Atmananda. In the months after the week-and-a-half-long Stelazine experiment, the doubts and the conflict had vanished. I was reluctant to speak because my vision had been so subtle, so fleeting.

Meanwhile, others in the circle—engineers, teachers, doctors, lawyers, students, and business professionals—also remained as silent as the rocks and hills around us.

"If you are at all serious about the study of mysticism," chided Atmananda, "you must learn to talk openly about what you *see*. If you don't, your mind will play tricks on you and you will doubt your experiences later on."

More silence. The next ten seconds passed very slowly.

"Atmananda," I suddenly announced. "I *saw* the Warriors."

Others in the circle soon *saw* them too.

Atmananda held desert trips once or twice a month and, by mid-1983, followers *saw* him walking above the ground on a "cushion of light," flying to distant mountains, sending columns of light into the sky, and causing constellations to gyrate and disappear.

On one starlit night, Atmananda raised his hands above his head. As he slowly lowered them, he made a low, whistling sound like the wind.

"What did you *see*?" he asked afterward.

"I didn't *see* anything," one new follower bemoaned.

"Advanced psychic vision is necessary to perceive what I am doing or, more accurately, not doing," Atmananda said patiently.

"I hate to sound negative," persisted the follower, "but what exactly are you doing?"

For a moment I felt tense. The disciple had unearthed a question that had badly stung me many times before.

"Sometimes I alter actual physical objects, sometimes I alter your perceptions, and sometimes I alter both," Atmananda said, dispelling the tension with his gentle, soothing voice.

"Atmananda, I *saw* you become a luminous egg," said another follower, borrowing a phrase from the Castaneda books.

"Anyone else?"

"I *saw* light from the stars pass through your body," tried another.

"Very good. Who *saw* me disappear?"

I often saw Atmananda disappear after I stared at him for several minutes without blinking. But during one desert trip in 1983, I saw him vanish independently of the dilated pupils. Then, a moment later, I saw him reappear as someone else.

"What I am about to say," he had announced that night, "is going to come as a shock to you. You see, I am not who you think I am."

The followers stopped fidgeting.

"A few days ago," he continued, "when I stopped drinking Tab, I knew something was up. This morning when I woke, I looked at my body. There was nothing but Light. I suddenly understood. It was all so simple."

He paused. "Who am I?" he asked.

Dead silence.

"Don't all answer at once."

Nervous laughter.

"I thought you were a man named Atmananda who meditated extremely well," said a man.

Atmananda did not reply.

"Are you a doorway to eternity?"

"Please—no philosophy tonight," he said sharply. "Who else?"

After several more tries, a devotee suggested that he was Vishnu, a Hindu godhead.

"Close," he approved.

I felt a rush in the pit of my stomach. Atmananda's private jet, after years of accumulating the fuel of our trust and belief, was finally taking off. I was worried. "Fastening my seat belt" would do me no good if he started thinking he was on par with Jesus Christ or the Buddha.

"Are you Rama?" someone asked.

"Yes," he replied. "I am Rama, the last incarnation of Vishnu. You people think that I am a person, but I am not. Over the years I watched my various selves fade away. I fought the process tooth and nail—like each of you are doing now. But it was in vain. I could not stop the process of dissolution. I had to admit that I was no longer a person. This morning I suddenly knew who I was. I have been cycling... I am beginning to remember... Eternity has named me Rama... Rama most clearly reflects my strand of luminosity... We're at the end of a cycle... At this time, Vishnu takes incarnation as a person... Vishnu is that aspect of God that preserves and protects life... Rama... the last incarnation of Vishnu... "

Jolted by the speed and the angle at which his jet now climbed—he *was* putting himself on par with Jesus Christ and the Buddha—I suppressed a reaction and awaited instructions from the pilot's latest persona. But the instructions, it turned out, had been issued months before. Each follower was supposed to write and submit stories—typed, double-spaced—about his or her experiences with him. Our prose, he had been telling us, was indicative of our mediocre level of consciousness, so we wrote and rewrote and we tried to revise, guided by his comments in the margin.

Stories about Rama—a figure from Hindu mythology—can be found in the classic Indian text, *The Ramayana*. Stories about "Rama" (Atmananda [Fred])—a guy from Connecticut—can be found in *The Last Incarnation*.

The words, "THE LAST INCARNATION" flash from the cover in letters of gold, above a backlit photo of "Rama," the book's editor, publisher, and focus. The stories portray Rama as a warm, intelligent servant of Truth—with enough mystical power to light up a city. A few of my stories, which also depict him as a down-to-earth demigod, appear in the 403-page collection. But there were other stories I could have written.

I could have written, for instance, the story of "Rama and the Puppets of Bliss and Profit." In 1980, Rama got a cuddly, white hand puppet which had purple feet and a purple, toucan-shaped beak. Rama called it "Bliss," and often played with it as though it were alive. He appeared to make it talk, yawn, sleep, and soar. "Bliss is soaring through the other worlds," he explained. In 1982, I asked Rama what he wanted for his birthday.

"Another Bliss," he replied with a boyish grin. So I set out on a quest with Paul to buy a Bliss for our benefactor. Together we combed the toy stores of southern California, but the search was to no avail. Weeks later, I spoke with a puppet designer in northern California.

"Sounds to me like you have a 'Take Me To Your Leader,'" she said. "Does it have antennas?"

"No."

"Then you must have an 'Uncle Lucius.'"

"Actually," I said, "we call it 'Bliss.'"

Over the next few years, Rama ordered thousands of yellow, red, green, pink, and blue Blisses.

"Oh, how adorable," said the flight attendants when they saw the grown man in first class playing with the colorful puppets.

"We donate them to children's hospitals," Rama claimed. He failed to mention that he brought the Blisses to Centre meetings, where he infused their beaks with a "special force" and where he sold them at a handsome profit.

I could have written the story of "Rama and the Token Underdog." "A large part of what motivates me," Rama once confided, "is my concern for the underdog." He displayed his concern one desert trip by accompanying a handicapped student who was unable to keep pace with the group. I recalled one of Rama's lessons: "You can tell a person's level of spiritual evolution by how they treat those around them." I felt proud of my teacher. But shortly thereafter, Rama's attitude changed. He began four-wheeling the desert sands while the rest of us walked. He also banned from all desert trips those who were unable to keep up.

I could have written the story of "Rama and the Menorah Incident." I once placed in the window of my room a menorah, a traditional candle holder used by Jews during the celebration of Hanukkah. But when my housemate and mentor noticed, he looked at me askance. "What, are you crazy?" he said. "Take it down right away!" It was inconceivable to me that behind a mask of intellectual and religious tolerance could lie so powerful a bent to control. I removed the menorah from my window.

I could have written the story of "Rama and the Satanic Billboard." In 1982 and 1983, Rama occasionally said that he'd like to place a billboard of his face above the busy intersection of freeways 10 and 405 in Los Angeles. He seemed excited about including this message: "666—We're Back".

And I could have written the story of "Rama and the Blade Runner Day." "Would you like to meet Harrison Ford?" Rama asked me over the phone in 1983. By then, many San Diego devotees had moved to the expanding Centre in L.A., based largely on Rama's advice. Centre meetings in Los Angeles were first held in a small room in Hollywood, and then in a large room with a stage in Manhattan Beach. By the time meetings were held in the ornate Beverly Theater on Wilshire Boulevard in Beverly Hills, Rama commuted each week from his ocean-view Malibu rental to the expanding Centre in San Francisco.

"You mean Hans Solo?" I asked. "You bet!" I drove west, then north, toward Zuma Beach. Twenty minutes later, I turned down a long driveway to Rama's house, which he claimed that he rented from Goldie Hawn. Hawn wanted to sell; Ford wanted to buy; and Rama, Anne, and I

wanted to see, in real life, a favorite image from the magic screen.

Rama wore a colorful shirt patterned with scenes of the tropics, similar to one worn by Allie Fox (Harrison Ford) in *The Mosquito Coast*. Obsessed with creating a world of his own, Fox bares a captive community to his innovative dreams, poisoned experiments, and diminishing sanity.

Rama suggested that we act busy, so I went outside and pushed a broom. I smelled smoke. Nearby brush fires had been fanned out of control by increasingly strong winds. The thick, yellow sky reminded me of *Blade Runner*, a science fiction film starring Harrison Ford. The recollection caused my mind to digress down a corridor of memories, smoke, and mirrors.

I pictured Rama in line at the movies, which is where he met disciples on Saturday nights. He was easy to spot. With arms folded, one foot forward, and head tilted back, he played the part of the self-possessed, insurgent general who had ordered his troops to carry on, despite the overwhelming odds. His bush of hair made him seem taller than he was.

Rama incorporated into his teachings what he gleaned from the three, sometimes four films he saw in a typical week. He taught, for instance, that he was like Mike (Robert De Niro) from *The Deerhunter*. Mike risks a game of Russian roulette in war-torn Saigon to try to save Nicky (Christopher Walken), his friend.

"You are like Nicky," Rama told me frequently.

Drawing, too, from Mel Gibson's role in *Road Warrior*, Rama taught that it was okay for spiritual Warriors to temper their valor in order to survive.

Rama taught that it was spiritually correct to see such movies as *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, *Dawn Of The Dead*, and *The Shining*, each of which he viewed repeatedly. Horror films, he claimed, were a clean way to alter our level of consciousness—"No drugs, no sex"—and were a graphic reminder that each lifetime was but a brief, fragile opportunity through which to evolve.

Citing Mick Jagger in the concert film *Let's Spend The Night Together*, Rama further taught that it was perfectly natural for powerful men to develop their feminine side. "Part of the reason why people are so attracted to Mick," he said, "is because he puts out a very feminine energy." Rama later depicted himself in posters and newspaper ads as an androgynous figure.

Perhaps as part of a doubt-diffusing lesson, Rama once invited about twenty-five inner circle disciples to see *Split Image*, a movie portraying a cult in the late '70s. When the cult leader (Peter Fonda) blatantly manipulated his followers, Rama laughed out loud. We laughed too. It was an odd moment; our laughter had a nervous edge to it. I laughed partly to fit in, and partly because I sensed, but refused to confront, the absurdity of the situation.

Another time, Rama took followers to see *Conan The Barbarian*. When Conan (Arnold Schwarzenegger) observes a cult leader raise his arms to silence throngs of "DOOM"-chanting disciples, Rama, who sat beside me in the theatre, turned to me and said, "He doesn't have such a bad set up." I figured Rama was only joking. I laughed, but laughed alone.

Rama's lessons about movies often turned my topsy-turvy world further upside down. He told me, for instance, that *Star Wars* creator George Lucas was wrong to have Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) prematurely leave a mystical apprenticeship, wrong to have evil unmasked by good, and wrong to portray Yoda as being gay.

"Yoda is gay?" I asked.

"Yes," Rama replied, "but don't worry—you are not gay. No way. Of course you're not gay. Don't believe anyone who tells you that you are. Why even allow yourself to think that you are gay?" Then, after laughing heartily, he hissed an imitation of the Emperor, Darth Vader's evil master.

Rama, who assumed broad powers to interpret reality and myth, seemed to believe that he was made of the stuff of legends. He got touchy, however, when disciples looked to legends outside the realm of his control. One time, for instance, I excitedly told him that I had seen an autographed photo of Mark Hamill.

"Here you are sitting next to a fully enlightened teacher," he said bitterly, "and all you can do is live in a world of fantasy."

Rama was right, I decided, as I pushed the broom down the long driveway in Malibu. I was living in a world of fantasy. There, shaded by billowing, yellow smoke and accompanied by a talkative real estate agent, was Harrison Ford, quietly stepping toward Goldie Hawn's house, toward the "Last Incarnation of Vishnu." Ford wore dungarees.

Rama introduced himself as the renter and as a teacher of advanced meditation.

Anne introduced herself as a friend of Rama's.

"Sure is a blade runner kind of day," I blurted.

Ford said hello and went inside with the agent. We followed.

When the entourage reached the master bedroom, Rama gazed at the ocean and declared, "The Force is strong here."

But Ford did not seem interested in Rama's assessment of the local mystical energy field. Nor did Ford seem interested in Rama's recollections about his fire fighting days. (Rama failed to mention that he had fought the fires while in a prison camp, where he had been serving time for selling drugs.) Ford was interested in the construction of the house, and now he had seen enough. He started to leave.

Rama handed him a Self Discovery, the free, promotional publication that had taken the place of WOOOF!. Rama gave him an issue that had been distributed throughout southern California. On the front cover was a blowup of Cindy, a beautiful, young, blond woman, meditating on the hood of Rama's red Porsche. Inside were stories from The Last Incarnation. On the back cover was Rama's past-life resume advertisement, in which he claimed: "1531-1575, Zen Master, Japan; 1602-1771, Head of Zen Order, Japan; 1725-1804, Master of Monastery, Tibet; 1834-1905, Jnana Yoga Master, India; 1912-1945, Tibetan Lama and Head of Monastic Order, Tibet; 1950- , Self Realized Spiritual Teacher and Director of Spiritual Communities, United States."

Ford took the issue and left.

"It's just like in Star Wars," Rama noted as Ford drove away. "He doesn't really believe in The Force."

There was more to tell of that particular story—my house burned down that day. And while disciples gave generously when Rama took up a collection, no one could have replaced my birthday gift from Rama. I found it lying on the scorched foundation, reduced from a sleek, red bicycle to a meteor-like lump of distorted alloys.

But of all the sketches I could have written for The Last Incarnation, perhaps the most telling would have been the story of "Rama and the Enlightenment of Women." "Certainly we welcome men into our organization," Rama often announced. "But our primary focus is on the enlightenment of women." His interest in helping hundreds, even thousands, of women seemed a genuine reflection of his commitment to the underdog.

When I first met Rama in 1978, his crusade for women had already begun. "Unless you are close to enlightenment," he had told potential women disciples, "you will lose a great deal of your spiritual and mystical power through sex and through sexual relationships." Over the years, Rama spent many hours counseling and persuading women seekers to leave their boyfriends and husbands in the name of gender equality and higher spirituality. In 1981, for instance, weeks after the coup, he wrote and published in WOOOF! (Issue #2; January, 1981): "Dear WOOOF!, I love the spiritual life and the vital life too. What should I do?—Sproutarina J. Prana

"Dear Sproutarina, Your difficulty is that you are burning the candle at both ends and sooner or later you are going to melt. I suggest a day in the desert alone, a good movie, or a powerful occult experience. You see, Sproutarina, God loves you no matter what you do. If you want the vital, you can have it, and if you want the psychic you can have that too. But you can't have both, at least not in our Centre. Decide which will really fulfill you and choose that one. Only you can decide what you want in this lifetime."

Rama—who preferred the term "having sex" to "making love"—occasionally softened his position on sexuality and invited followers to relax, accept their human nature, and do whatever worked for them. "Hey, Kate!" he once said in an Italian accent. "You go out with-a my boy Mark, and I'll take plenty good care a-you!" It was understood that Rama meant business when he donned his Godfather persona, and I subsequently enjoyed a several-month relationship with this young disciple. Yet when I asked Rama if it was possible for a man and woman to have an emotionally and spiritually supportive relationship, he smiled, shook his head, and said, "Even if you find a woman whose consciousness is spiritually refined, it still wouldn't work—because yours is not... "

In contrast, his relationships with women were highly refined, Rama pointed out, because for him sex had become an act of spiritual, not physical, self-giving. Nonetheless, after he got his housemate Anne pregnant in 1982, his self-giving nature was nowhere to be found. Instead of offering her wisdom or support, he sat in the lobby of the abortion clinic, sorting and counting cash from a workshop he had given on spiritual evolution.

When Anne returned to the lobby after the abortion, Rama had disappeared. Embarrassed, she approached the receptionist.

"He went to a bookstore," the woman replied. "He said he'd be back later."

Women in the Centre were not supposed to let on that they were sleeping with Rama. Anne therefore felt that she had no one with whom to share the burden of the abortion. When she appeared depressed a week later, Rama, in front of another disciple, remarked, "If it's not one, it's the other."

Rama often invited women disciples to "talk" with him after Centre meetings, Anne recalled years later. But there, in his bedroom, they frequently exchanged more than words. Rama's relationship policy, she also recalled, required inner circle women to limit their relationships to one man: himself. His justification for the policy was that it kept them from unwittingly transferring their partners' lower male energy. Male energy, he frequently complained, very much affected his finely tuned, delicate sensibilities.

Perhaps Rama sought protection from "baby energy" as well; he managed to persuade one disciple in her late twenties to leave her husband and newborn child.

Despite his ability to invoke adoration and fidelity, Rama seemed concerned that his power to control female followers was not absolute. He therefore kept certain men from the inner circle, despite my recommendations.

"Jeff," I once advised, "is really smart. He's good with people, and he's a lot of fun to be around."

Rama hesitated. "I don't know, Mark; I'm worried about Dana."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't want her falling in love with him."

Rama was in a bind. On the one hand, he knew that Jeff would be an asset to the operation. On the other, he sensed that Jeff was too bright (he had been an honors graduate student in chemistry at UCSD), too athletic (he played ultimate frisbee), and too good looking to be running around loose within the carefully controlled nest. But Rama had a plan. He encouraged Jeff to form a relationship with Karen, who had previously followed Rama's advice and turned down an offer from Stanford medical school. He then encouraged them both to enroll in a computer science Master's program at UCLA, and to gradually phase me out as the poster and newspaper distribution coordinator.

One night in a restaurant in Los Angeles, Rama's story about wanting to help women took on a new twist. He had invited me to dinner with Nick and Sarah, a handsome young couple who acted in Hollywood and who had recently joined the Centre. When the waitress came to take our orders, Rama began waving and curling his hand.

Moments later, as the waitress was walking away, Nick asked, "What were you doing with your hand, Rama?"

"I was sending her sexual pleasure directly through the inner worlds," he replied, glancing at Sarah now and again.

Stories of "Rama and the Enlightenment of Women" were all the more startling, I found, when narrated by Rama himself. There was the one, for instance, about Sue.

"Sue once came in my room," Rama told me, "took off all her clothes, and flung herself on me. 'Please don't make me go home and masturbate, Rama,' she kept saying, but I just sat there and meditated on the Infinite, until I entered samadhi."

There was the one about Harry, the main character from *Lolita*, one of Vladimir Nabokov's novels. "The point of *Lolita*," Rama explained to me, "is not that Harry repeatedly slept with a fourteen-year-old after kidnapping and drugging her. The point is that Harry really did love her."

There was the one about the UCLA students. "Sometimes I walk the streets of Westwood," he said at Centre meetings, "and drain the undergraduates of their mystical power. Now, don't get all upset. It's not like they're using it. Most of them are just wasting it on sex."

And there was the one about his former wife. "At one point in the relationship," he told me, "I had to decide whether to be of service to the one or to the many." Rama often described his dream of living in a fortified desert compound with hundreds of heavily armed women devotees. Perhaps he broke up with his "jealous" wife—"She kept imagining that I was looking at other women..."—in search of the many.

Once I invited a friend from work to one of Rama's public lectures. She was interested in meditation and had recently left her boyfriend.

"Thanks, but no thanks!" she exclaimed when I mentioned the lecturer's name.

"So, what's wrong with Rama?"

"You mean the one who lists his past life credentials—dates and all—in full-page ads? The one who *specializes* in women?"

"Uh, yeah."

"He isn't bringing women to enlightenment, Mark. He's bringing them to bed."

"Come on," I countered, trying not to admit to her or to myself what he had been doing for years. "So he has a girlfriend. What's wrong with a spiritual teacher having a girlfriend?"

"There's nothing wrong with that," she said firmly. "But he is sleeping with many, many women."

"Where did you hear that?"

"From a number of women I met at a meditation retreat in San Diego. They fell for his line about being lovers in past lives."

Suddenly I recalled Rama on stage at Centre meetings, wearing short red gym shorts, closing and spreading his legs, tonguing in a slow, circular fashion the insides of his mouth. The memory repulsed me. But the repulsion, I feared, was due to the Negative Entities within me. And it was Rama, I quickly reminded myself, who had been trying day and night to imbue the many with the fullness of his enlightenment.

"Well, I have been good friends with him since 1978," I replied, "and he's just not like that."

When disciples Giles and Claire, a couple living in Los Angeles, heard similar stories about Rama's sexual exploits, they spoke candidly with one another.

"We were not judging him," Claire recalled years later. "But we were concerned about what would happen to him and to our community if the press found out. I wrote him a letter saying that he looked much more human than divine when he approached women at Centre meetings for sexual, rather than spiritual reasons."

"And I decided to phone him," recalled Giles. "A member of his staff said that he was not at home and would call me back. Several days later at three a.m. the phone rang. It was Rama. We spoke for about an hour. When I suggested that he consider exercising more discretion, he was reasonable and polite. We discussed the issue like human beings. After all, I am old enough to be his father. He told me, 'Of course I like girls. I'm just an ordinary guy. You don't know what it's like. They throw themselves at me. What's a healthy man to do?'"

"At the next Centre meeting," Claire said, "Rama gave us the cold shoulder. And at the one after that, he distributed the tape 'Sophisticated Sexuality' (see Appendix C). During the break, Rama approached me. His eyes became small, like hard, little bullets. He was furious. He told me repeatedly that my letter was self-indulgent nonsense."

"Then he asked to see me outside," said Giles. "Alone. Grabbing me and digging his fingers into my shoulders, he shouted, 'I'VE BEATEN YOU! I'VE BEATEN YOU ALL!'"

"After the break," Claire continued, "Rama lectured for thirty minutes about how people had been constantly throwing him bad energy—all the while glaring at Giles."

During the next few weeks, Giles and Claire fearfully recalled Rama's threat that deserters would look and feel like hell. Nonetheless, they stopped attending meetings and trips to the desert, where Rama kept trying to disappear.

"Some of you still harbor doubts that I can disappear," Rama accused the several hundred disciples who sat around him in a circle. "But perhaps if I dissolve someone else, you will find it easier to see. Tonight I will be dissolving an old friend of mine. Mark, would you come up here, please."

I walked toward him. I was thrilled. My heart was pumping fast. I loved being the center of attention.

"Now, close your eyes," he said, placing his hand on my forehead. He flashed me a devilish grin. "This won't hurt a bit."

I closed my lids. After several seconds, I felt detached from my thought process. It was as if I could visually observe a thought as it formed, connected with meaning, and vanished. One thought had been: "What is going on?" As I tried to anticipate my next thought, I ended up instead observing the thought of anticipating a thought—when suddenly a volley of words jarred me out of the trance.

"Earth to Mark. Come in Mark."

I opened my eyes and saw Rama towering above me, laughing softly. I looked away and saw liquid gold specks lining the blackness. I had managed, until now, to avoid thoughts about time and had no idea how long the experience lasted.

"What did you see?" Rama asked the group.

"It looked like Mark was dizzy, and you caught him right when he fell."

"I didn't see anything," reported another. "But I felt very peaceful. I found it easy to slow my thoughts."

"You dissolved him, Rama," offered another.

As we prepared for the journey back to the cars, Rama invited me to walk with him at the front of the line.

"That was fun, wasn't it?" he asked several minutes later. As he scanned the path for rattlesnakes, his powerful beam cut a sharp tunnel through the darkness.

I agreed. It had been a blast. Over the past five years, moments of deep meditation had been typically interrupted by thoughts such as, "Hey—I'm meditating!" But moments earlier, I witnessed thoughts objectively, as if they belonged to someone else.

"Tonight I helped you see a beautiful world," Rama said. "My intent is to show my students how to fly through these worlds on their wings of perception. It is easy to show you because you like me. Many of my students fear me or hate me—or, even worse, they worship me." Suddenly he flipped off the light, and a fifteen-foot high ocotillo shrub vanished.

"I don't perform miracles to show off my powers, but to expand your view of reality. If my students can accept that I disappear, just imagine what they will be capable of."

Though I was learning to fly on my wings of perception, and though in the months after the Stelazine trip I continued to deeply suppress part of my rational side, I never fully accepted Rama's world in its entirety. I never accepted, for instance, the story of "Rama and the Enchanted Taco." The Enchanted Taco, Rama said, was an immense, luminous, and other-worldly treat. It could be seen in the desert, hovering casually over mystical power spots, garnished with divine light, knowledge, and guacamole. But in a parking lot at four a.m., I saw Rama wave to three hundred bleary-eyed disciples, get in a black Turbo Carrera, and disappear.

16. Ride To Heaven

"I didn't do well enough to remember," wrote Donald Kohl in 1984. "Bye, Rama, see you next time."

Months later, Donald's father called me. "Do you have a few minutes?" he asked. I knew that Rama would not want me to talk with Mr. Kohl. But I was shocked by the image of blood spurting from Donald's wrists.

"I have time," I said. "I'm sorry about your son."

Mr. Kohl asked about Rama and the organization.

"I know what you're thinking," I said. "But Donald was not involved in a cult. We're not like that. Rama teaches us to accept or reject his recommendations based on our own perceptions. He teaches us that he's no more important than anyone else." I did not mention that Rama had distributed to each devotee a larger-than-life poster of his face.

"Rama asks that we help cover the cost of room rentals and things like that. But we're in charge of our own money." I did not tell him that Rama actively sought gift money to supplement the skyrocketing "tuition." Nor did I tell him that Rama worshipped and had named the organization "Lakshmi," the Hindu goddess of beauty and prosperity.

"Our goal is to teach people to meditate." I did not mention Rama's stated interest in finding students from his past lives, filling stadiums, and starting a world religion. Nor did I mention that Rama actively pursued these interests. He paid many thousands of dollars, for instance, for promotional photographs featuring a back-lit aura. He shifted his advertising copy and name to reflect a growing sentiment that gurus were out while Zen masters were in (he called himself "Zen Master Rama"). And he persuaded thousands in the two years since the Stelazine experiment that he was a living legend, a rare presence, and a direct line to God.

"We normally meditate on our own for forty minutes in the morning, fifteen minutes at noon, and fifty minutes in the evening. Once a week we meditate with Rama at a Centre meeting. Sometimes we'll attend a public lecture or a field trip to the desert. Sometimes we'll help out on a project like office work or postering. But that's pretty much it. Basically, we're just a group of healthy individuals who happen to meditate. It's not like we live in an ashram or anything." I did not mention that Rama had been initiating disciples with names—Prema, Hanuman, Arjuna—taken from Hindu mythology. Nor did I mention that Rama had been teaching us to flip between various "caretaker personalities." He taught, for instance, that within the hostile environment of the "outside world" we should adopt the shrewd powerful personality of a warrior, whereas within the safe environment of a Centre meeting we should adopt the gentle, trusting personality of a child. Nor did I mention the details of Rama's spiritual etiquette, some of which he described in his tape, "Welcome To Lakshmi" (see Appendix B).

"Rama teaches us a combination of spiritual paths like Taoism, mysticism, and Christianity." I did not describe what might happen at a typical Centre meeting. Rama, who usually arrived about forty minutes late, might begin with a discourse on the teachings of Lao Tzu, Castaneda's Don Juan, or Christ. Then, couching parables in modern terms, he might proclaim: "Short is the path of the fast lane on the freeway to enlightenment." Or he might say: "As the coyote tries to catch the road runner, so too tries the seeker to comprehend the life of a fully enlightened teacher through rational means."

He might make the several hundred disciples laugh with: "Many are cold (called) but few are frozen (chosen)."

He often lectured the men in the Centre that our untamed sexual energy had been stunting the spiritual growth of our sister disciples. He often lectured the women in the Centre that they needed to learn how to emotionally detach themselves from men. And he often lectured both sexes that he attracted very powerful souls, that we were way too powerful for our own good, and that we had been making him physically ill by relentlessly attacking him in the inner world.

He lectured, too, about the inevitable eclipsing of the world's spiritual light, a process which seemed to be perpetually accelerating. "Haven't you been feeling it?" he asked.

"Yes, Rama," came the inevitable response. "I feel it."

Rama quoted Chaucer, Roethke, and Shakespeare. He also told a story (from *The Martian Chronicles*, by Ray Bradbury) about a Martian who, when approached by humans, transformed into the object of their desires. The Martian became a woman's dead son, for instance, until someone else walked by. "I am like the Martian," said Rama. "I am constantly being called upon to fulfill your desires."

Rama might question disciples with a portable microphone, a la Phil Donahue. "Why don't you share what you saw tonight," he said, roaming the aisles. He seemed to enjoy interrupting us when our response was spiritually or grammatically incorrect.

Then Rama sat in front of the auditorium, wiggling his toes and fielding questions, a la Chinmoy.

"Rama?" a woman might begin.

"Yes."

"The men where I work are constantly sending me sexual energy. Each day I come home completely drained."

"What do you do for a living?"

"I'm a receptionist."

"Why don't you study programming?" he suggested. "Software professionals tend to be less visible and, therefore, less prone to psychic attack."

Rama often lectured on the nature of consciousness: "Consciousness, like a complex system of software, has thousands of levels of nested, self-accessing subroutines." He taught that the next step along the path to self-knowledge was to debug those subroutines hidden in our minds at an early age by our teachers and, in particular, by our parents.

Rama lectured on the nature of words: "Words are inaccurate pointers to reality and should by no means be trusted." Logic, he said, was based on the shaky foundation of words and was of primary value to those who could not access Truth directly. Since he had transcended these limited tools, attempts to comprehend his actions on a rational basis were meaningless. In fact, those doubting his behavior through a framework of words and logic were merely reflecting their own mediocre level of awareness. Those who concluded that he was greedy were, therefore, guilty of greed themselves.

I felt confident as I listened to Rama's words that I was learning new, valuable ways of understanding knowledge. Just as often, though, I felt confused by the belief that words had no fixed, real meaning. It was as if Rama were yanking the rug on which my descriptions of the world were centered. But then I recalled that confusion was an essential part of the process through which the Infinite dissolved our countless selves in the clear light of the void. "If you think you have it figured," Rama often pointed out, "you have what we refer to as an inflated ego."

At one point during a typical Centre meeting, Rama frowned and said, "Okay, what's up?"

No response.

"Hello, friends. What's going on out there?"

The silence and tension grew.

"Let's talk!"

It occurred to me that I did not like his tone. Suddenly, a hidden, mental "subroutine" activated, reminding me that those who questioned his methods were asked to leave the Centre.

"Fess up!" he snapped.

"Rama," started one disciple, "I don't know what it is, but... "

"Of course you know. Look—you're fooling no one but yourselves. C'mon people—fess up!"

"Rama, are we focusing on the l.o. [lower occult] again?"

"What do you think?"

"Yes, Rama."

"Look, none of you realize what you are getting yourselves into. Once you open the door to the Negative Entities, it is nearly impossible to get rid of them." He read our expressions and paused, as if to assess the point at which to start building us up again.

"Eternity is all around us at every moment," he said gently, "be absorbed. Nirvana is a world of unlimited ecstasy, be absorbed. Go see the new Schwarzenegger movie, be absorbed. You are doing much better lately, be absorbed. Don't forget that we will soon be meditating together on the golden beaches of Maui, be absorbed. Be proud that you are taking a stand against the Negative Forces, be absorbed. Don't be so hard on yourselves—give yourselves a break—be absorbed. Learn humility and you will learn the secret to happiness, be absorbed. A desert trip is coming up soon, be absorbed. Forget not that our mission is to spread light in the world, be absorbed. Our friends from past lives will soon be joining us, be absorbed."

Rama asked that we sit up straight. He put on electronic music, slowly scanned the audience, and raised his hands above his head. Many of us gazed at him intensely. It didn't matter that those occupying the same room as him were, during meditation, supposed to evolve hundreds, even thousands of lifetimes. We still tried to absorb as much spiritual light as we could.

Then, he might end with a quote from the teachings of Lao Tzu, Castaneda's Don Juan, or Christ.

At the next Centre meeting, Rama might announce that everything had changed and that we were in an extremely poor state of consciousness.

"At the weekly Centre meetings," I told Donald Kohl's father, "Rama teaches us to realize our full potential. He teaches us to love and respect life." I did not describe, however, Rama's fixation on death.

"Someone in San Diego is trying to kill me," Rama once told devotees in a turret of the castle he was renting. "I am moving to Los Angeles. I suggest that you do the same."

Another time Rama turned to me and said, "Do you realize that I can kill you at any moment?"

"He's only joking," I thought.

"No, really," he went on. "I am extremely strong and could kill you in an instant!"

Repeatedly during the '80s and early '90s, Rama expressed a desire to take disciples for a ride in a Lear Jet into a snow-capped mountain, into the other worlds. "That would be a clean way to go," he said.

One time after a beach meditation, Rama asked five or six disciples, "What do you see?"

"I see red," said Sal. "I see blood, destruction, war, global apocalypse."

"Very good," said Rama.

Repeatedly during the '80s and early '90s, Rama slept with numerous women devotees, several of whom claim that he took no measures whatsoever to prevent the potential spread of AIDS.

Also in the 80s, Rama encouraged followers to secure software contracts in ADA, a computer language used to control the United States' hardware of war.

On the night before his thirty-fifth birthday, Rama invited thirty or so disciples to a party. He had been either ignoring or abusing many of us, so the invitation came as a welcome surprise. Unlike other recent events, there was an upbeat feel to the party. He had asked Anne, for instance, to spend time decorating the room with colorful balloons. "Maybe," a few of us thought, "things are going to get better." During the party, though, Rama demanded that a handful of us confess, one by one, before the other disciples, that the demons had succeeded in talking over our souls.

"Anne is the worst," Rama proclaimed, lashing out at her. "She either looks like a witch or a whore." Then, in a seeming attempt to exorcise the demons, he told us to meet him the following day at the Los Angeles coroner's office. He wanted us to witness an autopsy.

The next day I watched two men saw the skull of a "John Doe" hit-and-run victim. The saw whined. They peeled off the face. The air smelled acrid. My stomach felt bloated. "That could be me on the table," I thought. I wanted to retch. The pathologist measured the brain. I found myself thinking about life. Not in terms of Rama's increasingly fearful descriptions of the world, but in terms of my gut feelings. "Something happened," I wrote in a journal that I had recently started. "I felt it, a change inside me... "

After the autopsy, I noticed the way I breathed. I noticed the way my blood pulsed through me. I slept more; I had been sleeping only five or six hours a night. I watched the way light played off ripples in a body of water. Rama had failed to appear at the coroner's that day. Until the next Centre meeting, his world seemed small.

Mr. Kohl listened to my descriptions of Rama and of the organization. "Tell me, Mark," he said. "Does Rama pressure the disciples to be a certain way?"

"Well, technically we're not really disciples. We're students. Think of the organization as being like a university. Sure, there's some pressure, if that's what you want to call it. But it doesn't come from Rama. It comes from each of us wanting to do well."

I did not mention that Rama often threatened to spend less time with his disciples because we maintained an abysmal level of consciousness and because we bombarded him with Negative Occult Energy. "You should understand that I will still love you no matter what you do," Rama lectured. "But when you ignore my suggestions, when you succumb to the Forces, when you don't keep up with your tuition payments, you are setting yourselves up for a multi-lifetime pattern that will be extremely difficult to break. You are also letting down those we were sent here to help. Many of you don't seem to realize that you can easily be replaced. Believe me, there are plenty of seekers out there who would genuinely appreciate the opportunity that the Infinite is providing here."

Nor did I mention to Mr. Kohl that Rama followed through with his threats of replacement. In 1984, for instance, he kicked out four hundred followers after looking at their photos and reading their recently submitted essays. The purge gave him greater control over the remaining four or five hundred, who now lived in constant fear of getting kicked out. As for the outcasts, many had developed psychological dependencies on Rama. They continued to write him letters, to appear regularly at public lectures, and to send him money. Because he maintained their names and addresses in a database, he could always swap them back in when the current batch burned out.

Nor did I mention that, in response to the intensifying pressure, I had dropped out of UCSD a year before Donald, a sensitive, bright UCLA undergraduate, committed suicide.

The longer I spoke with Mr. Kohl, the more I became aware of—and uneasy about—the discrepancy between what I knew and what I was willing to admit about my teacher and my organization. I felt particularly uneasy knowing that at one Centre meeting, Rama had promised to take closer devotees for a ride through the death worlds in a Porsche. After I hung up the phone, the uneasiness did not disappear. Though I did not openly entertain doubts about Rama, my ability to separate myself from his world, and to view myself as an individual, was suddenly infused with new life.

17. On High

"How would you like to get out of the spiritual rut you are in?" Rama asked me in the spring of 1984.

"I would like that very much," I replied. I knew that there was something wrong with my life. For years I sought enlightenment, but was no longer happy. For years I sought the Spirit, but was no longer animated. For years I sought the Self, but was no longer me. I was ready to try anything, I told him.

He offered to give me LSD. "I suggest that you take it," he said. "But you should only take it if it feels right."

In the past he had used Chinmoy's line that hallucinogens damaged the subtle body. But the potential benefits, he now explained, outweighed the risk, provided that a fully enlightened teacher was around to supervise. "Don't worry," he added with a smile. "I am very familiar with the drug."

I was startled by the offer. As a teenager, I had responded to similar solicitations with: "I'm

high on life—drugs would just bring me down." But the buzz of youth had long disappeared, and I knew that the rut ran deep. Sensing, too, that three years before Rama had diffused my internal conflict with Stelazine, I wondered if LSD could quell my recently resurfacing doubts.

There were other factors involved. Months before, Rama had asked Tom, the bass-guitar-playing disciple who had finally moved west, to compile a tape of songs from the late '60s. "I want to tap into the people who had been involved in the early consciousness movement," Rama explained. Subsequently, the list of musicians whose songs Rama played at Centre meetings and at public lectures—without regard for copyright law—grew from Tangerine Dream, Walter Carlos, Jean Michel Jarre, Vangelis, and the Talking Heads, to now include the Beatles, Cat Stevens, Traffic, and Jimi Hendrix. Perhaps my decision regarding the LSD was affected by the music. Perhaps it was affected by my fascination with the drug scenes in the Castaneda books. Perhaps it was affected by my realization that, according to the dictates of Rama's etiquette, there were grave karmic consequences for those foolish enough to ignore his suggestions. I told him it felt right.

Roughly one hundred fifty miles east of the beaches of Los Angeles, in Joshua Tree National Monument, was a rock climbing route called "Therapeutic Tyranny." Less than ten miles away, by the edge of a mountain, the five or six disciples probably did not see Rama handing me a tiny stamp. On it was a picture of Mickey Mouse dressed as a wizard, waving a wand.

I was slightly apprehensive. LSD was supposed to be a powerful drug.

"Chew it for a few minutes," Rama whispered.

It was as bitter as he said it would be. I soon noticed the deep blue sky turn to bands of crimson and yellow and orange. I noticed the lights of Palm Springs twinkle like stars thousands of feet below. I noticed the mammoth peaks of Mount San Jacinto gradually fading away. So stark and surreal was the scene before me, that I had to remind myself that this was how the desert appeared at twilight ordinarily.

"How do you feel, kid?"

"Fine, Rama," I reported, enjoying the attention. "Nothing yet." About fifteen minutes later he gave me another stamp when I found myself noticing that I was noticing that I was noticing that I was

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I gazed at the lights of Palm Springs. I did not blink. I did not breathe. I lost awareness that I was on a mountain. I lost awareness that I was tripping. I lost awareness that I existed. The points of light grew fuzzy and bright.

Time touched the mountain world. I blinked. I inhaled. I turned from the light. "I am alive in this desert," I thought. Through the powerful, rose-colored lens of the initial rush, the thought magnified and blossomed into a stunning realization. I blinked again and exhaled.

I turned and saw Rama and the disciples. I knew that I was *seeing* on a different level than they were. This made me happy. A large, silly grin took hold of my face. The joy gradually receded, but the facial muscles held. I knew the grin was out of sync. I laughed.

I turned to some rocks. I grew serious. "The rocks," I realized, "are part of the Earth. The

Earth is sacred." I did not realize, as I continued to astonish myself with my own profundity, that I had finally entered a world similar to the ones described in the Castaneda books.

Suddenly Rama raised his arms and made a whistling sound. The disciples looked at him as if he were a god. I felt detached from the scene, as if I were observing myself observe the disciples observe the man acting like a sorcerer. Soon I detected a faint glow from the corner of my eye. I gazed at what I felt was an incredible source of power, beauty, and wisdom. It was the rocks. They were glowing.

On the drive back to Malibu, Rama was perhaps experiencing flashbacks from the late '60s, because he "let me do my own thing." As a result, I rode with him in front, but focused on Cindy in back. Her flowing, blond hair and radiant face had made an impression on me long before she appeared on the cover of Rama's newspaper. I turned around often to smile at her.

"Hey there!" I said at one point.

Cindy looked slightly embarrassed. "Hey there!" she returned sheepishly.

This is fun, I thought. For the first time in years, things were looking up.

18. Where's My Tribe?

In the fall of 1984, Rama took twenty-eight disciples for a ride around the western United States. The purpose of the trip, he said, was to *see* which city we were supposed to move to. I was glad that he had invited me. I liked the idea of searching for a home. I loved to travel. And I looked forward to an exercise in *seeing*. "This is going to be fun," I thought.

The trip began in a parking lot in southern Malibu. Rama raised his arms, made a whistling sound, and said, "The ocean is your friend. You do not know how long you have left in this world. You may never see the ocean again in this lifetime. You should say good-bye."

It was a poignant moment for me. I loved the ocean. "Good-bye," I thought. Then Rama strode to his Turbo Carerra.

It no longer bothered me that Rama owned two Porsches at a time when many disciples were struggling to meet the increasing tuition. If he got what he wanted, I figured, maybe he'd go easy on us during the scorching demon-and-brimstone monologues. Besides, at three a.m. in northern Malibu, he once took me over one hundred and twenty miles an hour. The acceleration had been breathtaking; the ride, smooth.

The disciples now turned from the ocean to their cars. Anne, Dana, and I walked to our gifts from Rama—two Mazda RX-7's and a Honda Civic Wagon, respectively. Then we drove east by northeast into Los Angeles, the high desert, and southern Nevada.

Rama had divided us into four groups, with three cars per group and two or three disciples per car. The groups caravanned separately, and we met two or three times a day, typically at a Denny's restaurant or at a Best Western motel. I rode with Alexander, a spare, devout UCSD recruit who had impressed the Centre with his ability to place second or third in a marathon. Perhaps from a lack of social self-esteem, Alexander never said much, but he spoke with me, and I enjoyed his company.

The following day, Rama invited me and Alexander to ride in his group. It was at a rest area in southwestern Utah that Rama approached me and said, "You had better stop vibing Laura. I am fucking her."

A UCSD recruit in her early twenties, Laura had large, dark eyes and ample social self-esteem. She spoke so fast that she often slurred her words. She was currently riding with Rama.

"Sorry, Rama," I said, startled by his raw honesty.

We pushed on to Denver and then to Boulder, where we stayed in a motel near the university. We assessed the city in terms of jobs, housing, computer courses, and mystical power spots. Two or three days later, Rama asked us to *see* if we should stay or move on to Boston. He seemed pleased that we voted to stay. Boulder, after all, was commuting distance to computer jobs in Denver; it had a respectable university; it was beautiful in the winter and cute the year round; it felt at least a mile high until several days later, when Rama accused us of destroying it with our powerful Negative Energy Field.

"Pack your things," he ordered, and we cut a path south toward Albuquerque along the Rockies' edge.

There was something about the open road and the blue Colorado sky that absolved us of our guilt from having decimated a city, because Alexander and I were anything but upset. The Beatles' White Album was playing Sexy Sadie, a song satirizing an Indian guru. I asked him if I could turn up the volume. "Sure." Soon he asked me the same. Before long, the music was blasting, and we were singing Helter Skelter at the top of our lungs: "WHEN I GET TO THE BOTTOM I GO BACK TO THE TOP OF THE SLIDE, AND I STOP AND I TURN AND I GO FOR A..."

Several nights later, near Tucson, Arizona, the disciples looked out from a hill at the lights of the city below. "This is a real moment of power," said Rama. "It is essential that each of you speak with power and with respect for the spirit of the land."

I typically spoke very briefly at such a gathering unless I knew in advance what Rama wanted to hear. But now I went on and on about how in Tucson there was a healthy balance between people and nature, and about how if we moved here, we would heal. When I was done, Rama took me aside and said, "Kid—you're going to be all right." But Tucson was not the right city, he later announced, so we continued the drive west.

In a motel just east of San Diego, Rama left us one evening to conduct a Centre meeting in Beverly Hills. When he returned, he berated us for not working together and for not even *trying* to maintain a decent level of consciousness in his absence. "You are acting like a hoard of angry sorcerers," he snapped, borrowing a phrase from a Castaneda book. But he was wrong. Paul, Karen, and I had stayed up late that night trying to come up with a catchy name for his proposed software company. Furthermore, we had meditated together, we had maintained something of a meditative consciousness, and we had tried to *see* which city we were supposed to move to.

In the past when Rama contradicted the facts, I had assumed that he was right while my *seeing* was wrong. But riding across America's west was making me feel big. And memories of traveling rogues from Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*, which I had read and reread in high school, was making me feel good and rebellious. And Tom Wolfe's experimentally:::punctuated, day-glowingly humorous, sa-tir-ically lyr-i-cal *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, which Rama had recently assigned, was making me want to view the world through the sharp, detached eye of the narrator. "Maybe Rama really can't *see* all that well," I suddenly thought. "Maybe he's making it up as he goes along."

The following day, Rama asked the group to *see* if we should stay in San Diego, return to Boulder, or move to Boston. When our vote was split, mostly between Boulder and Boston, he gave the word to move on. So we drove around again to Los Angeles, Nevada, Utah, and Colorado, where, by the intersection of Interstate-70 and Route 82, he announced that we had arrived at a crossroad: we could continue the search for a home, or we could take a side trip to a posh resort in nearby Aspen.

By now the disciples had been out of work for nearly a month, and a few of us were running low on money. The majority voted to continue the search. He led us instead to Aspen.

I told Rama that I felt uncomfortable having him pay my way.

"Look," he retorted, "it's my experiment."

"Does that make us your guinea pigs?" I wondered.

Later that week, in front of a handful of disciples, Rama harshly accused me of indulging like a child, of attacking him in the inner world, and of ruining the experience for the others. Then he issued a compassionate smile. "Don't take it so personally, kid," he said pleasantly. "Your consciousness got stuck, so I fixed it." Then he swaggered away with the confidence of a heavyweight champion.

Rather than accepting the abuse as I had done in the past, I found myself thinking about *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. I thought about how main character Ken Kesey convinced himself during a drug experience that he could access god-like powers. Kesey, writes Wolfe, was able to step back and realize that he was only hallucinating. Rama, who often claimed that he took so much LSD in the '60s that he never came down, also convinced himself that he could access god-like powers. But Rama went further than Kesey. Rama professed to be an actual incarnation of a god. Rama professed that a few dozen disciples were causing extensive, invisible damage to a metropolitan area. "Maybe Rama has been hallucinating since 1969," I thought. "Maybe, unlike Kesey, he can't step back and get a perspective."

During the drive from Aspen to Boulder, I also realized that Kesey never charged "tuition," never tricked followers into buying lavish gifts for himself, and never claimed to be the anti-Christ. Kesey drove around America with his community in an old school bus. Rama led us separately in cars. Kesey brought diverse groups of people together. Rama made a special effort to keep friends, lovers, and families apart. Yet despite their differences, I sensed that Rama had been shaped in his youth by Kesey's pioneering experiments with Eastern culture and Western counter-culture, consciousness and drugs, expression and art, and freedom and control. I wondered if Rama, by assigning the book, had been trying to reach out vicariously to his past and to an influential leader of his generation.

When we arrived in Boulder, Rama seemed to flip between supportive and abusive personas more rapidly. One moment, he was calm and kind; the next, he was ranting about how the Negative Forces, which had been co-inhabiting our bodies, were causing his hair to fall out and affecting the health of Vayu, his advance-souled Scottish terrier; then, flipping again to the other extreme, he encouraged us to move to a new condominium just outside of Boulder where "we could all live close to one another." No one reminded him that only weeks before, we had left the city in psychic shambles.

The dream of living and working together—of community—lingered on, and Rama had us fill out rental applications. When he found out that I had signed up for a less expensive condo unit, he gently chided me. "You just don't get it, Mark. That's your old self trying to reassert itself. You need to have more space. You need to live in a clean, healthy environment."

I tried to explain to him that I needed money for Centre expenses and also for food.

"Don't worry, kid," he said. "I'll subsidize you. I want you to be happy."

So I switched to the most expensive unit and I was happy, and the other disciples seemed happy, and Rama seemed happy. Boulder, after all, felt at least a mile high until a few days later, when Rama shouted at us for having once again destroyed the dream, the Light, and the city.

"This is crazy," I thought. After the meeting, I went for a walk. I thought about how, earlier in the trip, Cathy had approached me and said, "This may sound funny, but is Rama... *okay*?"

"What do you mean?" I had replied.

"He's... well... it's just that something doesn't feel right."

"Rama is fine," I told her. "He just *sees* on a different level than we do."

But now, as I strayed from the condo grounds, I wondered if Cathy had been on to something. I thought about how the other disciples had seemed pensive lately, as if they too shared her concern. I thought about how, during the trip, Rama seemed to be flipping out of control. "Maybe Rama is not okay," I thought.

Meanwhile, my readings and reflections on Kesey had located Rama within a cultural context which, like the knowledge that the Wizard of Oz was a man behind a curtain, largely deflated his projected images and metaphors. This enabled me to question elements of his world without fear of reprisal.

I questioned the Negative Forces. The Forces, I realized, had never affected me before I met Rama. Furthermore, they seemed to disappear as soon as I stopped thinking about them. "Maybe the Forces only exist in my mind," I thought. "Maybe they are a part of Rama's trip—Rama's experiment."

I questioned Rama's claim that I was mentally ill and that I could hardly deal with the real world. I recalled my success as an undergraduate at a competitive university, as a computer operator and programmer, and as Rama's distribution coordinator. I recalled his claim that nearly *everyone* on the planet was mentally ill. "Maybe Rama isn't qualified to diagnose mental illness," I thought. "Maybe playing doctor is his way to control people."

At one point during the walk, I wondered what the consequences were for doubting the "Last Incarnation of Vishnu." But Rama had encouraged us, in the early years, to question him and to think for ourselves. "Besides," I thought, "I haven't burst into flames yet." So I went right on remembering, questioning, and thinking.

I thought about *The Razor's Edge*, a movie about one man's attempt to walk the narrow path between the spiritual and the mundane. What struck me about the film was that the man does not have a guru. Life is his teacher.

I recalled the hour-long conversation I had had with Donald Kohl's father, and suddenly the dam burst open and a flood of suppressed memories washed over me. I pictured Rama shouting "Fess up!"; announcing his name change; telling me to swallow the Stelazine; bursting into my room on the night that I wanted to leave...

I walked briskly back to the condo and knocked on Rama's door. "Things don't feel right," I told him. "I think I need to take some time off."

"You have to do what is right for you," he replied.

I wanted to make a clean break. I still had a few hundred dollars. I told him that I wanted to give him back the car.

He frowned. "Your desire to return the gift," he said, "is proof that you are mentally ill and that you can not function in the real world."

I did not want to stand around and argue. "Okay, Rama," I said and left. I felt primed for action. I was not scared. I felt sure I was doing the right thing. I said good-bye to the disciples,

packed, and started to back out of the lot, when I saw Laura in the rearview mirror, signaling me to wait.

"Rama wants to see you!" she exclaimed.

My impulse was to press the accelerator. After all, he might try and get me to stay, as he did years before in La Jolla. But I felt that I had come a long way since 1981. I felt confident that I could handle myself. Besides, I was curious. I let Laura lead me to him.

Rama, Anne, and a few others were in the room. They looked somber. Rama had us stand in a circle and hold hands. He told us we were a tribe. It felt odd, holding hands. It wasn't the sort of thing he'd normally have us do. After a brief meditation, he took me to another room and gave me a long hug. I drove away feeling sad.

For the next few days I rode east, driven by childhood memories of New England, and by the notion that I had *seen* Boston as the target city. In Nebraska and Iowa, I felt good about my decision to leave. But I had developed no system with which to support my new interpretation of the world, and the decision seemed more distant with each passing state. I had devised no language of rebellion, forged no icons of discontent, and, on a more practical level, had no sense of what I wanted to do or whom I wanted to be. I had met Rama when I was seventeen. Now I was twenty-four. I had never experienced successes or failures from following a path of my own design. I had been deprived of this ritual of passage into adulthood. I had come of age in a destructive cult.

The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test was packed away somewhere in the back. I arrived in Massachusetts feeling frightened and confused. I felt drawn to southern New Hampshire where, eight years before, I had worked one summer on a farm. I found Rico, a younger friend from the farm days who was now a senior in high school. I had not seen him in years. I wanted to tell him about Rama and the organization but did not know where to start. "There are bad people out there, Rico," I told him. "You have to be careful. Whatever happens, always follow your heart." I drove away, Rico later recalled, with a frightened look on my face.

I called my parents in New York and asked them if they wanted to see me. They flew to Boston, and we went to a restaurant near Gloucester, Massachusetts. I felt happy to see them but could not share the burden of my new found freedom.

Days later I sat in traffic in the suburbs of Boston. I felt completely alone. I missed the disciples. It was true that we had fallen for Rama's line about stealing one another's power. It was true that we had allowed Rama to foster, through ongoing whispering campaigns, a climate of fear and competition. But I didn't care. The disciples spoke the same language as I. They were my friends.

I missed Robert, a UCLA graduate who, in 1982, was drawn to a lecture on the works of Carlos Castaneda. Months after joining the Los Angeles Centre, he was approached one night in Pacific Palisades by two white men. Robert was black. The men were angry that his girlfriend was white. They each pulled out a gun and took aim. They said: "Get out of the car." Robert was concerned that they would rape and kill his girlfriend. He made a quick decision. He slammed down hard on the accelerator. When the bullet entered his head, he kept driving. He passed familiar streets. He had grown up in Los Angeles. Blood streamed down his face. He drove to a hospital where, in the weeks that followed, he did miraculously well. The experience cemented his devotion to Rama, who took credit for the recovery.

I missed the Stony Brook disciples. I missed Paul, the computer wizard with the silly grin. Sal, another computer genius, had taken to heart Rama's caveat that disciples were stealing his power. But beneath his fears was a gentle, humorous soul, and I missed him. I missed Rachel, the doctor, who had continued to support the Centre financially, and who had apparently forgotten about the "Garage Door Opener Incident." Dana, the former model and occupational therapy student, often grew icy with the power that Rama gave her over other disciples. But I knew that as Rama's office manager, hers was a particularly trying position (she typically slept three or four hours a night), and I missed her. I missed Anne, the nurse, who had known Rama the longest, and who was also under intense pressure to perform. Once I overheard Rama advising Anne to accept her "true" cold and callous nature. Despite his remark, she mostly lived up to her spiritual name, Prema, which symbolized a higher form of love.

I missed the disciples whom Rama had dubbed "assholes of the mountains." I missed UCSD recruits Doug and Eric, whose adventuresome spirit and love of the outdoors was evident in their winter assaults on 12,000 foot peaks. And I missed Mike. Tall, with thick red hair, Mike looked, ate, and at times acted like a wild Viking. In reality, he was a wild UCSD medical student. Once he told me that he occasionally slept in his Volkswagon bus in campus parking lots.

"You really do that?" I asked.

"Yeah. The cops don't like it, though."

"What do they do?"

"They shake the van and try to get me to come out."

"Do you?"

"Nah. I usually go back to sleep."

Perhaps Mike's unique way of doing things, as well as the pride with which he questioned authority, contributed to his standing in the Centre as a less-than-model disciple. "I'm glad that you are friendly with Mike," Rama once told me. "But you should understand that he's not really into our program. I can see that he's in it for himself."

I missed Tom, the bass-guitar-playing disciple from Stony Brook whom Rama had put in charge of security. (Rama, based on fears that his psychic vision excluded those who wanted to shoot him, had assembled a team of volunteer disciples and professional security guards.) Tom, one of Rama's closest disciples, was the first high-profile follower to leave the Centre. He left largely as a result of the "Omelet Incident."

The "Incident" occurred in Rama's kitchen in Malibu. Rama sat with Tom and Fran, a tall, young UCSD recruit with a long, powerful stride and a glint of the wild in her eye. Rama liked to say that Fran had spent past lives in Africa as a hunter, and that she was one of two disciples with the potential of attaining enlightenment in this life (I was the other). At around 2:30 a.m., Rama asked Fran to cook him an omelet. Perhaps she was tired from having accompanied Rama and Tom that night to the San Francisco Centre meeting. She burned the eggs.

"You are in a lousy consciousness," Rama accused her, stewing over the omelet. "Your level of spirituality has been plummeting!" Then he continued to lambast her.

Tom was struck by the contrast between Rama's lofty language onstage and his crass behavior at home. After mulling over the double standard for several days, he sent Rama a note that he was leaving the Centre. Rama called him and shouted at him for roughly twenty minutes. Rama told him that he was a low life and that he was blowing it for future lives. Despite Rama's warning, Tom left his apartment and prepared to move back to the east coast. A day or two later, Dana told me that Rama wanted me to track Tom down and have him call the Centre. When I succeeded at my "Warrior's task," Tom spoke with a very different Rama.

"Don't worry about all the negative karma," Rama assured him. "I'll absorb it for you." Rama also told him that he was not really leaving so much as he was being kicked out. But I did not yet know the details of Tom's sudden departure as I sat in rush hour traffic in Concord, Massachusetts, feeling dejected and lonely.

I missed Fran. I missed Kate and Pat, each of whom I had gone out with. I missed Ed, a quick witted UCSD recruit with a passion for mysticism and Jimi Hendrix music. We had studied together at a computer school in Los Angeles and, back in 1982, we had bicycled from San Luis Obispo to Monterey, California. I missed Alexander and Marty and Elizabeth and Carl and Karen and Jeff and...

I missed my brother. Dan had already left Chinmoy to join Rama's Centre in San Diego. But the closeness we once shared was buried by too many months and too many miles, by unspoken resentments on his part, and by a lust for power within Rama's organization on mine. Ultimately, though, it was the acquired belief that "the past is dust" that kept us from searching and sifting through finer elements of memories' shifting sands.

In 1983, my brother nearly left the Centre. He had been hanging out with Bill, a burly, bearded, freedom-loving forest ranger who decided that Rama was taking advantage of women disciples or, to put it in his words, Rama was "dipping into the company ink." My brother, too, decided that Rama was out of line, and the two of them were planning to leave. When Rama found out, he summoned me to his house.

"Your brother is about to blow it in a big way," he told me. "This is your big chance to help him. Get him to call me." I did, and Rama persuaded him to stay.

I missed my friends and my brother and now, as I roamed the streets of Concord, I wondered if I would ever see them again. I thought about contacting pre-Rama friends but I feared that we shared little in common. Besides, I had treated several of them as if they were spiritually unrefined, and now it felt awkward to ask for their support.

Later that day, on my way to Walden Pond, I saw a man in his seventies walking slowly toward me. "It's an omen of death," I thought nervously. Quickly turning back toward the car, I saw a brief flash of light—a reflection from something I could not see.

"It's the Forces!" I told myself and slipped down a fearful stretch of imagination back toward a nightmarish state of mind. Rama's Forces were back. I got in the car and locked the door. I was scared. I meditated a few minutes. I asked the Infinite for protection. I drove around awhile. I had no destination. I recalled something Rama used to say about reflections. "I am like a perfect mirror. If you ever perceive me in a negative light, you are seeing nothing more than a reflection." I pulled into a parking lot of a motel. I found myself looking for cars from Rama's tour group. I found myself wondering where the disciples—my friends—were and what they were doing. For years we had been close, like a tribe. Suddenly I had an inspiration: set out across America and rejoin my tribe! And how my spirit soared! And through the sleepless days and

nights, I searched Howard Johnson's, Best Western, and Denny's parking lots across America for a black Turbo Carerra.

I had not forgotten the problems with Rama. But I remembered him telling me that through the good times and bad, we would always be family. "And what family doesn't have problems?" I asked myself.

I drove south to Stony Brook but did not find the group, so in New York City I paid a surprise visit to Tom. When I told him about my quest to find my tribe, he seemed to understand what I was going through. But he had left the Centre roughly nine months before and had no interest in returning. That night I saw for the second time The Razor's Edge. "Maybe I can rejoin the group and be independent at the same time," I told myself as I began the drive west.

Days later, in San Diego, I was showering at the UCSD gym, when I asked a guy if I could use some of his shampoo.

"Sure, Mark, take as much as you want," was the reply.

Wiping the soap from my eyes, I recognized Gary, a disciple who had left Rama years ago. I was glad to see him. We decided to go for a hike on Palomar Mountain. I told him during the ride that I had lost my tribe.

He gave me an understanding smile. "I hear they have moved to Laguna Beach."

"No kidding!" I said. "Would you like to go there instead of to Palomar?" In less than two hours we sat eating cheesecake in Laguna Beach. Suddenly I saw Paul drive by.

"They're here!" I exclaimed and chased the car down Pacific Coast Highway. But I soon lost sight of my old friend from Stony Brook. I walked back, polished off the cheesecake, and drove Gary back to San Diego. The next day I returned to Laguna Beach. I decided to wait by a twenty-four hour banking machine, an appropriate place it seemed to stalk members of Rama's tribe.

Alexander and Marty soon appeared searching for cash. I was jubilant to see them. They were wary of me. After a few minutes, though, they seemed to forget that I was taboo (Rama had put me down at one of the Centre meetings). They told me when and where the meetings were being held.

They did not tell me what had happened after I left them in Boulder. The twenty-eight had continued their journey east to Lincoln, Nebraska, where Rama declared that they should move to whichever cities they as individuals *saw*. But when it looked like the group was going to splinter, Rama changed his mind and instructed them all to move to Laguna Beach, California.

The next week I drove to the Beverly Wilshire in Beverly Hills. I asked Al, who was now in charge of security, to ask Rama if I could rejoin the Centre.

I shuffled about nervously. "It may not be perfect," I told myself. "But at least it's where I belong."

Al returned after a few minutes. "Rama said 'okay.'"

"Did he say anything else?" I asked, greatly relieved.

"Yes," Al replied. "Rama said that it's a tough world out there."

19. I'm Okay

When I rejoined the Centre, I was determined to be a good disciple. I got a programming job in Newport Beach. I studied advanced topics in computer science at UC Irvine. I rented a condo for seven-hundred-twenty-five dollars per month, based on Rama's suggestion in Boulder. I worked hard, meditated deeply, and stole three eggs from a supermarket after Rama hiked the tuition again.

Rama treated me with kindness. Perhaps he believed that this time I was really with him. He invited me to his house. He invited me to the desert. He invited me to partake in his chemical experiments.

Roughly one hundred fifty miles southeast of the beaches of Orange County, in the Anza Borrego Desert State Park, was a peak called Split Mountain. More than thirty miles away, by the edge of the park, was Casa Del Zorro, a cottage-renting resort catering to the upper middle class. Here, Rama divined, was a good place to drop acid in a group.

During the drive to Casa Del Zorro, a fast-food restaurant triggered a flashback of Rama

giving Sal and me LSD and taking us to MacDonal'd's. "Whatever you do," Rama had said, "don't order a strawberry shake!" Rama and Sal proceeded to repeat the warning as if it were a mantra. Perhaps the drug magnified my sensitivity to the way Sal parroted Rama. Perhaps it magnified my sense of independence. Perhaps I was not in the mood for chocolate or vanilla. I stumbled to the counter and ordered a strawberry shake. It was delicious. Rama and Sal looked at me disapprovingly. I couldn't have cared less.

The memory of the MacDonal'd's trip made me smile. Later, as I approached Casa Del Zorro, I had a flashback of Rama giving me acid at his home in Malibu. I had been sitting on a rug in the living room. A Beatles record played. ("You never give me your money... ") Rama entered the room.

"How are you doing, kid?" he asked.

"Not so good." I had been thinking about money. The world of my finances had appeared as menacing walls of debt that were surrounding and closing in on me. I felt miserable. Tears formed. I told Rama what I was going through.

"Listen to the words of the song," he said. ("Oh, that magic feeling, nowhere to go... ") "See, kid? Nowhere to go."

I gazed at the floor.

"You need to take time and rethink your life," he went on. "Somehow you got entrenched in the dark side. But life does not have to be that way. Life can be wonderful."

Typically, I would have felt elated by the attention he was giving me. It had been years since we were close. But through hallucinating eyes he seemed distant and small, and his attempt to cheer me up made me feel worse.

"Why don't you go jump in the pool," he finally said. Years before, in La Jolla, he had often suggested "Pool Therapy" as a way to douse the flames of a conflict burning within. In Malibu, as in La Jolla, my woes soon diffused among ripples from the impact of one hand slapping.

I played in the shallow end during that LSD trip until Rama asked Sal, who was not tripping, to drive me home. When we arrived at my apartment I felt lucid, creative, fearless. I started to say whatever popped into my mind. Sal looked surprised. He looked at me as if I were someone else.

Sal offered to take me for a walk. With my arms dangling and torso bent, I moved like an injured ape. But gradually I slouched with Sal's support down the hill to the beach.

"Look, Mark," said Sal. "There's the ocean."

I looked to the frozen snapshot of the sea. I blinked and the waves rolled closer—then they froze again. Then I saw whales diving and breaching in slow motion. I found myself among them. We swam together. We spoke a silent language I thought I never knew. I felt complete. They accepted me.

"Are you okay?" asked Sal, holding me up.

I longed for the freedom to roam. I longed for the support of community. I looked to the sea, but the whales were gone.

Later that day I overheard Sal say to Rama, "You know, Mark is really bright."

"Of course he is," Rama replied, snapping his fingers. "He's quick."

I appreciated the compliment. But I wondered, "How could I be bright and quick if I was also possessed and non-functional?"

The memory of the Malibu trip was fresh on my mind when I arrived in the Anza Borrego Desert and approached Casa Del Zorro. Soon I sat waiting in the cottage with Sal, Bill, and Al. Rama arrived late. He looked doughy faced and haggard. He said he was stressed out and exhausted. Perhaps he was in more of a rut than we were.

Rama distributed the stamps. Later he drove us to the top of a hill where he had us watch him. At some point I threw up. My awareness that I was me faded in and out. Behind my opened or closed lids flashed continuous, multi-colored explosions. From the chaos formed a spot, and the spot became shapes, and the shapes became symbols. I startled myself when I realized that I had been gazing in my mind's eye at the word "eliot." Perhaps, as the rug of my ordinary perception was wrenched out from under me, I needed something solid, such as my middle name, to hold on to.

I found myself sitting in the cottage, observing the way in which I thought about my thoughts. I noticed that my thoughts arrived in the form of words. I could read and understand them, or I could hide from them and let them pass. When Rama started to speak, his words were tightly packed, and it was difficult to hide. He talked for what seemed an eternity. Hours later, when

Rama decided to drop acid—which he may not have done since the early '70s—I had for the most part come down from my trip.

Roughly forty-five minutes after Rama took the drug, he called me into his room. He lay in bed. His hair was messy. His face was contorted. He seemed disturbed. "Is it okay?" he asked meekly.

"It's okay, Rama," I said.

"Are you sure?"

I looked at him tossing and turning. I remembered how he had repeatedly knocked me down psychologically, helped me, and knocked me down again. I remembered how he had often told me that revenge was worth waiting for. I had the sudden urge to help him up—and knock him down. But my anger quickly dissipated when I realized that trembling before me lay not ruthless Rama, but rather the shell of a thirty-four-year-old man named Fred Lenz.

"I'm sure," I said.

I had an idea. "A beautiful, blue bird is here, Rama," I whispered. Birds, I knew, were something he genuinely loved.

He looked confused.

"Yes, it's a beautiful, blue bird, and it's large and friendly, and it's flying all around—there it goes! Rama, don't you *see* it?"

He followed my finger with his eyes as if he were *seeing* the imaginary bird, and soon he fell asleep with a smile across his face.

As he slept, I thought about what had just happened. An incarnation of God, I realized, would not have had a bad LSD trip. Rama was not who he said he was. He was not one of twelve fully enlightened souls on the planet. He was an ordinary man, he was vulnerable, and I wanted to believe he was my friend.

After about thirty minutes, Rama awoke. He lifted his quivering hands above his head. "Did you *see* that?" he asked.

"See what, Rama?"

"I am filling the room with light. The powers are cycling through me. I am reattaining enlightenment."

"Uh-oh," I thought. "Here we go again."

Rama seemed utterly fascinated by his hands, which he wiggled and waved in front of his face.

An uneasy feeling permeated my gut. I recalled the aftermath of his last enlightenment. "Just because he believes that he's perfect," I thought, "why should I suffer?" I recalled a few of his more outlandish claims. He had lectured a doctor about the nature of illness: "Disease is merely the result of a difference in vibrations." He had taken credit when his father survived a coronary bypass operation. He had taken credit when disciples got decent jobs.

I now realized that if I were to remain a disciple, I would need to humor myself about Rama's claims—lest I rekindle the debilitating conflict between my rational and mystical natures. I had the impression that Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters kept a sense of humor about their experiments, and I wondered how they might deal with someone afflicted with Rama's particular brand of enlightenment. I recalled reading in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* that one prankster often said: "Yeah! Yeah! Right! Right! Right!"

"That's it," I decided. "When Rama starts getting out there, I'll say to myself, 'Yeah! Yeah! Right! Right! Right!'"

At that moment, Rama raised his arms again. "Do you *see* it?" he quavered.

"I *see* it, Rama. Golden light is filling the room." ("Yeah! Yeah! Right! Right! Right!" I thought.)

Rama waited for me to continue describing the Light which I did, and though I was lying and probably fanning the flame, I supposed this would beat an ongoing dark night of the soul.

Rama now looked directly into my eyes. I could not recall him doing so, except during lectures and meditations, since 1981. "We used to be friends," he murmured. "What happened?"

"Rama, I don't know."

"Should there be any problems between us?" he asked.

I felt that this was Fred trying to break through, and I struggled to hold back the tears.

"You and I used to be friends," he continued. "But then something happened. We should be friends. Would you like that?"

"Yes, Rama."

He smiled at me with big, puppy eyes.

I told him that Sal, Bill, Al, and I had maintained a high consciousness earlier that day, before he arrived. "We talked about what we hoped to gain from the power drug, Rama. It was as if we were spiritual warriors."

Rama looked at me resolutely. "You are spiritual warriors," he said. Then he lay back down and fell asleep. I felt happy and self-confident.

When Rama awoke, he turned to me and said, "You are okay. You are on the net."

"On the what?"

"The net. The network. The psychic energy network."

"Really?" ("Yeah! Yeah! Right! Right! Right!")

"Yes."

Rama, who wanted to see who else was on the net, hobbled out to the living room where Sal and Al quietly sat.

"Are you on the net?" Rama asked them.

"Yes," replied Sal, who had always been adept at learning rules to new games.

Rama looked at him suspiciously, when suddenly the phone rang. It was Dana. Rama told her that she was on the net, seeing as how she had called at so auspicious a moment. "So," he told her, "it's me, you, Mark, and Sal..." He paused and said, "Sure, Mark is on the net. He's quick like mercury. He's right there."

I realized it was less a network than it was Rama's net, but I was happy because the man I had once been friends with was back. I was also happy because my conflict-diffusing strategy seemed to be working.

The following morning, I greeted Rama.

He squinted his eyes and looked away.

"Is anything the matter?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," he answered, haughtily. "I know all about it."

"About what? I thought we were friends."

"Oh, sure," he replied. "I know all about that part of you. That's the part that wants to control me."

"Rama," I said, looking him squarely in the eye. "You have two very different sides. And I like the other one better."

In the weeks that followed, Rama mostly ignored me until he uprooted the four hundred or so disciples from southern California to the suburbs of Boston. At the last meeting in Beverly Hills, he called me to the stage, put his hand on my forehead, and said, "The Infinite is naming you Agni."

The entry in my journal for the following day, April 4th, 1985, reads, "yea! got my spiritual name... AGNI... Fire... Breaker of Illusions... Vision... Third Eye... Now, everything is totally fresh & new... I feel good."

I liked the name. It represented the spiritual progress I had made despite the difficulties of the past few years. As I caravanned across America in Rama's group, the new name boosted my confidence.

It was springtime in New England. Rama rented a large house in Needham, Massachusetts, and held Centre meetings in a church in Boston. Many disciples followed his suggestion and moved to Concord, Lincoln, or Wellesley. I moved to Wayland.

One day I bought a copy of Walden by Henry David Thoreau. My journal entry for June 15th, 1985, reads, "Economics chapter in Walden... didn't provide any answers, but caused me to ask questions which lead to a variety of possibilities..."

One question I asked myself was: how can I pay off my debt? One solution I came up with was: commute to work by bicycle. The entry continues, "By driving to a free lot in Arlington, parking, and bicycling the remaining 7-8 miles... save \$100/month; instill spirit back in me; get exercise & strength; pass Harvard & MIT daily for brain power; bike around Boston lunch time. meet girls at Faneuil Hall; be independent, mobile, self-reliant!"

The following day I bought a used three-speed for forty-five dollars and put the plan into effect. Each weekday I parked in a free lot, pedaled several miles along the Charles River, and braved downtown traffic as I sped to work, which was located two blocks from the site of the Boston Tea Party. I began to think of myself not as Rama's disciple, but as a bicyclist. On June 29th, 1985, I wrote, "i am a bicyclist. that is my nature. swift. light. strong & sure. motion. speed. agility. pivotable. flexible. colorful. self-propelled. motivated. bad forces beware. i am back. and i'm riding high. that's me. Agni. free spirit. go, now. and do not look back."

It felt good to be pursuing a dream of my own. But I sensed that Rama would equate my project with the Negative Forces, so I chose not to tell him about the daily commutes and my newfound esteem.

Perhaps as a result of my new, street-wise sense of self, I grew increasingly critical of Rama. Another entry for June reads, "What really pisses me off is that Rama changes everything he says, contradicts himself, turns a situation around completely—so you never have a handle on him."

The following week, Rama invited me to a group LSD trip at his house. On July 7th, 1985, I wrote, "... may be a picnic [LSD trip] tomorrow at Rama's. my intent is: to change my view of reality completely, with particular attention given toward: *becoming someone who has a girlfriend, *becoming my own person, i.e., my happiness & well-being is not hinged upon the absence (parents) or presence (Rama)(girlfriend) of any person(s)... to regain my kinship with the earth... to renew my excitement in life, to regain my integrity, self-reliance and confidence... "

The next day Rama distributed drug-soaked stamps to ten or so followers in his living room. He let us wander around the house. Hours later, he called us to the living room and began to talk. And talk. And talk. I tried to understand how his words were affecting us. I thought in terms of computers. I decided that he had rebooted us with LSD and now, as we were coming down, he was downloading his wordy operating system to our unformatted, receptive minds.

"He's formatting us like floppy disks!" I thought. I was about to plug my ears with my fingers when suddenly I remembered that I had brought my journal. I retrieved it and sat back down. Rama was still talking. In the upper right hand corner of the page, where I typically included the date, I wrote, "***timeless". I was still high. Then I wrote, "... the basic Agni Operating System: boot: breath deeply 2x. Take your time. where is your stomach... who has control of it? NOTE: nothing else matters. who ever is letting or not letting you take deep breaths of air—>if this is someone other than me, eliminate them. you breathe. You take it ez. get good exercise. Learn ANYTHING at a pace healthy for you! So, 2 traps to avoid: 1) other people... who live my life (not me living my life); 2) people trying to help me, but i take it wrong (due to #1). whatever TRIP you're on, remember breathing. remember who you are... never look to others to patch... Agni... You must be strong... even now, i am drawing upon a very healthy basic energy that supports me. That so is good. But over the last 7 years, i have been always rushing to meet someone else's gap. No thanx... Everyone is the same. Some people think they are special. No... "

Rama was talking about American Indians. "They weave people's attention," he said, "to help sell their products."

I wrote, "always be moving ON YOUR OWN STEAM! accept NO substitutes. everything has power. some things are good, others not."

Rama asked what I was doing.

"I'm writing in my journal," I replied.

"What have you written?"

I read the last few sentences aloud.

"Some things have more power than others," he editorialized. Then he began talking about me. He spoke about how, when I had lived with him, I made shakes in the blender with all kinds of "strange" ingredients.

"Why did Agni make these shakes?" he asked the disciples.

No one answered.

"One," he continued, "there was power to them. Two, to attract attention. Three, this boy is an asshole."

I wrote, "Asshole," and drew a circle around the word. Then I wrote, "ok but it is me. so, fine."

A few minutes later Rama said, "Fake obvious things fool everybody." Then he said, "Humans are continually knocking on your door. As long as they are alive, they try and suck your power. You need to get strategic and learn to intensely dislike them. Cut them. Push them away—anything to get them to fuck off."

I wrote, "cold."

About an hour later, Rama had us watch *The Adventures of Buckaroo Bonzai* on the VCR. I sat several feet back from the group. After the movie Rama announced, "Someone is way off. Can anyone see who it is?"

The disciples glanced at me.

"Of course, you all know that it's Agni. Now what's the matter, baby?"

I told him that things in my life were not working out. I told him that I needed to try something new.

"If you wish to leave, please don't bring everyone else down."

"Sorry, Rama."

When I got home, I wrote, "good. i feel much better already. keep breathing. slow. keep remembering Mark Eliot, is the breather. Before he met any of these people he was the breather; so too after. Before he dreamed himself into a don Juan/CC [Carlos Castaneda] world extravagansa... Fred—he's cool. But he was formatted improperly by a bad occultist. Simple. He also wanted to be a Guru, told me so in a UCSD parking lot. But cool guy. Powerful attention level. Controls every situation impeccably. cares about others what seems to be an enormous amount. Yet detached. cold. warm. whatever he was projecting. A master illusionist. Created/s dreams & realities with the flick of a wrist. This has not been healthy for me. 7 years occult training school has wiped me. Nothing wrong with it—taught by an impeccable 8th degree Black belt; only, I don't handle it too well. So, I recognize i tried something, and it didn't work. I have the humility to realize that it isn't working for me. And for God sakes, try new things in your life, as FDR says. But Fred is definitely bent out of shape. 'Let your hate grow,' devil ref's, paranoia... Not to blame him. Had weak 1st attention as a kid. Dad... Teacher bent. Important: i believe that the good side of Fred respects what I am doing & wishes me well. i have no desire to speak or see anyone with whom I didn't know 7 1/2 years ago... Still coming down, here, from 3 hits of 6-7?th Acid trip. Good thing. boy does that stuff make me sick! good for changing though. thrown away much unk stuff!... The journey, Eliot Mark Laxer, has just begun! Don't turn back! Go! & keep moving. I have graduated (7 yrs) an EKATEST [Electric Koolaid Acid Test]! Congrad!"

That night I wrote to Robert, the disciple who had gotten shot, "... the past 4-5 years have been a bad trip, a bad format. i was getting sicker, weaker. it is necessary for my well being that i live off my own power. i have no need to convince you of this. this my body knows. my body has been telling me for years to leave Rama. Finally, he stopped convincing me to stay. Then i couldn't make it on my own. So i left & came back. Now i'm stronger; off my own steam... unlike past times when i left Rama's Attention field, i'm not going to waste thoughts & power on the past. The past, people's thoughts about me, my thoughts about me—are all like Nately's Whore, in *Catch-22*; only she misses, and i jump... "

About a week later, Dana called me with a "Warrior's task." Rama, she explained, wanted me to get former disciple Tom to call him.

I told her that I was not looking for a Warrior's task—or any task for that matter. "You know I have left the Centre," I said.

"Don't you think you might be following your gut feelings?" she asked.

"You bet!"

I also followed my gut feelings during the group acid trip earlier that month when Rama asked the disciples to remain inside. I had walked outside and watched the small birds fly. "The bottom line is that he's wrong about me," I thought, my self-confidence germinating the way pine seeds flourish when their cones are scorched by fire. "I'm not possessed by demons, mentally ill, or bent on destruction. I'm okay."

20. The Last Supper

In August, 1985, I began spending time with old friends and with people from work. I felt awkward. I did not know what to talk about. They used words like concerts, bar hop, chaser, dive, dude, hot babe, married, pregnant, job security, tax break, investment, global economy, third

world, cold war, Reagan, Saturday Night Live, and Letterman. Their language felt alien to me. They used "party" as a verb, not as a noun. They used "to see" as a way to describe what they did with their eyes and with their mind, not what they did with their inner being. I learned to navigate within their world, but felt like I did not belong.

The initial reentry into society was difficult in other ways. I found myself constantly reverting back to Rama's world of fear, isolation, and self-doubt. When I had eye contact with someone, for instance, I had to remind myself that my reservoir of mystical power was not being drained. When I saw a flicker of light, I had to remind myself that the reflection was not Negative Forces. When a non-disciple told me of his or her hopes and dreams, I had to remind myself that theirs was not simply a world of illusion. And when I thought of my own hopes and dreams, I had to remind myself that I was not a mentally ill zombie unable to deal with the real world.

I realized that Rama had taught me to think this way. I also realized that I could, in time, unlearn these associations. I told myself I was doing okay. I was doing well at my job. I was saving money and paying off loans. I was commuting to work each day by bicycle. I was slowly getting stronger.

One day I had a conversation with the vice president of my company. I respected him. He seemed to be creative, bright, and energetic. He told me that he read a great deal. "I try to learn many different philosophies," he said. "A philosophy that discourages you from learning other philosophies is a good one to avoid." I liked his approach to knowledge. I was impressed that such wisdom was available in an office building in downtown Boston. I was impressed that in his own way, my boss was a seeker.

Another weekend a childhood friend invited me to a beach party in New York. There I met Christina, a young woman with long legs and deep blue eyes. I started driving to New York often. One evening, the phone rang. I had been expecting a call from Christina.

"Hi, Agni," said a woman's voice. It was Dana.

"I should have changed my number," I thought.

"There's going to be a meeting at Rama's for the Stony Brook group," she said. "Can you make it?"

"I'm doing okay on my own," I reminded myself. "I don't need to see Rama."

"Rama said it's going to be our last meeting together," she added.

I nearly laughed. He had been holding "last meetings" for years. I wondered if he were trying to suck me back into his organization. I thought about the disciples and about my brother. I had not seen them in weeks. "I'll be there," I told her.

Late the following night I rode my three-speed toward Needham. Rama typically conducted business between two and four a.m. because "the world's psychic energy was calm" and, perhaps, because disciples at that time tended to be tired and off balance. Yet as I pedaled through the dark and empty streets, blood pulsed quickly through my veins. I felt alert. I wore all black. Black for me was a symbol of power. I wore around my neck a string with a bicycle lock key. I had worn such a string during bike trips of my youth, before locking on to Rama's path. The key was a reminder that waiting just outside Rama's door was the trusted three-speed.

I entered the house. The disciples seemed friendly toward me. Rama approached. He said, "You look much better, Agni."

I offered him a classical music tape. This was my way of saying that I harbored no ill feelings.

He accepted.

It was well past midnight and the twelve had arrived. Actually there were only ten but we counted Tom's spirit. We also counted Lakshmi, the Centre's patron goddess.

Rama served a red wine which he said was expensive. I recalled that weeks before, he had counseled disciples to avoid alcohol.

He showed us a cake decorated with the image of a frog. "You will get some cake after the meeting," he said, as though addressing a group of children. The decoration reminded me of Kermit. I wondered if he had reincarnated the symbol as part of a spiritual lesson, or if it was just icing on the cake.

A few minutes later Rama put on electronic music, picked up the original Bliss puppet, and started to dance.

The disciples watched, their faces aglow with adoration. I wondered if I used to look like that. "Don't watch," I thought and walked away. In a corner of the room, I quietly danced with a Bliss of my own.

The music stopped. Rama instructed us to sit in a circle in the living room. I hesitated.

"Something about this doesn't feel right," I thought. I sat down, nonetheless, and meditated with the group.

Roughly forty-five minutes later, Rama began to speak about the rapid deterioration of the earth's psychic energy field. His language sounded strange to me. Terms such as "Entities" and "occult attack" no longer seemed natural.

Several minutes after that Rama's bright, friendly eyes suddenly hardened. "Instead of aspiring to the higher worlds," he accused, "you are evolving into a horde of angry sorcerers."

"What am I doing here?" I wondered. "I don't have to listen to this."

"You are trying to increase your personal power by attacking each other—and me—in the Dream Plane," he charged. "I have no choice but to disband your Circle Of Power."

"This is why he called us here?" I thought. The tension in the room felt like nails in my stomach. I glanced at the door.

Rama explained that our final task, before he disbanded the Circle, was to take turns confronting one another. "It is very important for each of you to voice what is *really* going down," he said.

The people in the original inner circle had been through a lot together. The first few seemed reluctant to adopt his suggested role as angry, finger-pointing sorcerers. They said things like, "I think you may be sending me some bad vibrations in the inner worlds."

Rama frowned. "You think you are acting like Warriors, but you are really acting like wimps. If you don't *'fess up* now, it will be extremely difficult for you to continue making spiritual progress later on."

"You've been attacking me in the Dream Plane!" my brother accused me and several others.

"You've been trying to steal my power for years!" countered Sal when it came his turn.

"Yes," approved Rama.

Instead of listening and preparing for my turn, I recalled the way Big Nurse inspired patients to rat on each other. "Rama is manipulating us," I thought. "He's getting us to turn on one another. He's dividing us. Divide and conquer."

Suddenly it was my turn. I did not know what to say. I stood up. The others had remained seated. I turned to Rachel. ("I have always liked you," I thought.) I said, "We have gotten along well. I don't see any problems between us."

Rama looked surprised. This was not the kind of response he had in mind.

Rachel smiled at me.

I turned to Suzanne. ("You say that I suffer from delusions that I'm Luke Skywalker. Perhaps.") I said, "I hardly even know you."

I turned to Dana. ("I've had a crush on you since the time in the San Diego airport, under the palms.") I said, "I don't know if you've been sending me sexual energy or what, but for years I've been very attracted to you."

She raised her eyebrows. So did Rama. So did the others. I had broken a taboo. Sexual attraction was not something we were supposed to discuss, particularly in a group, particularly with Rama, particularly regarding one of Rama's women, and *particularly* regarding Dana who, along with Anne, was Rama's closest disciple.

I turned to Anne. ("If only I were older.") I said, "I feel the same way about you."

More looks of surprise.

I felt exhilarated. I was not accustomed to voicing my gut feelings. I turned to Sal. ("No, old friend, I'm not trying to steal your power.") I said, "You have gotten a little paranoid over the past few years. I hope you can work it out."

He frowned.

I turned to Donna. ("Are you still planning to marry Rama?") I said, "I have no problem with you."

She nodded.

I turned to Paul. ("What's the penguin doing on the tehlee?") I said, "We are friends."

He grinned.

"In other words," Rama interrupted, "you have Paul wrapped around your finger. You have learned much." His twisted compliment threw me off balance, and I failed to defend the seven-year friendship.

I turned to my brother. ("Love ya, bro.") I said, "I am not attacking you in the Dream Plane."

"Oh no?" Rama interrupted again.

"I'm not conscious of it."

"Oh, sure you're not," mocked Rama. Then, in a professorial voice, he explained how, in each family, only a limited amount of power could be passed to the offspring. "Typically, one child claims most of it. The others are often so drained that they don't even notice it's gone."

"Rama is an only child," I thought.

"Agni used to have the power," he went on. "Now Dan has it. They will have to fight each other for the rest of their lives... "

"That's bull!" I shouted.

The disciples looked shocked. No one spoke that way to Rama.

Now I was angry. It was still my turn. I turned to Rama. My heart was pounding. ("Why do you tell Dana to tell me to tell Tom to call you? Why can't you call your old friend on your own? You're playing power games.") I said, "You're a grown man. You have a Ph.D. You run a computer company and a spiritual organization. Given three phone numbers, I think you should be able to contact Tom by *yourself*." I sat down, stunned. I had spoken honestly to Rama. It was invigorating.

"That's going to be a tough act to follow," admitted Rama. Then he began to speak. Within minutes he transported me with a tranquilizing voice and abstract language inside a fuzzy, familiar bubble where words were not questioned and consciousness seemed high. I found myself being drawn into his world. It was comforting being back. Earlier, he had given me some play. That made me feel important. I let my thoughts drift aimlessly about. I found myself gazing, without blinking, into his eyes. I found myself mesmerized by the sound and the rhythm of his words. Somewhere far away, I found myself floating... my vision blurred... things went fuzzy...

"Hey!" I thought, bursting the mental bubble. "He's formatting us again—only this time without the LSD!"

I stood back up. I was ready for action. I did not know what to do.

Rama stopped talking, squinted his eyes, and aimed his index finger at me.

I recalled a scene from *The Last Wave*, a movie Rama once took me to see, in which a sorcerer kills a man by pointing a "death bone" at him.

I now saw Rama as both friend and foe, mentor and tormentor, Christ and anti-Christ. I was frightened and confused. Estranged, yet held by his seductively androgynous, authoritative face, I lapsed into a meditative stupor...

A glint of light caught my eye and snapped me out of the trance.

Rama was chanting something in a low, monotonous tone.

I seized the string with the bicycle lock key. I pictured bright purple sparks and blue lightning bolts radiating in all directions from the key. The light shielded me from attack and lit the path to the door.

"Gotta go," I said and slowly walked away.

"I've got your number," Rama replied, still pointing his crooked finger.

"You're full of it," I returned and stepped outside. Here the light was soft and grey. A morning dove cooed. The bicycle was there for me. It was 1985, and I was twenty-five.

In the months that followed, I occasionally bicycled to Walden Pond, where I read about Thoreau's experiment with self-reliance. Distracted by haunting memories, I gazed at the water in search of calm, but the wind spawned new waves and the surface swelled with complexity. "There's plenty of time to sort it out," I reassured myself. "Maybe I'll take myself for a ride across America and do some thinking."

21. Bicycle Ride—The Continental Divide

Three months into the cross-country bicycle trek, I pulled off the road west of Walden, Colorado. I was stuck. The problem was not so much the physical journey. True, I was towing additional weight because towns were farther apart and because Nunatak was no longer a pup. But my leg muscles were rock solid from the miles in Massachusetts, New York, the southern tip of Canada, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, South Dakota, Wyoming, and Colorado, and I felt confident I could ride to the coast.

The problem was more the inner journey. The more I thought about Rama, the more I understood. The more I understood, the more I wanted to write. If I wrote, I might publish. If I published, I would betray Rama. If I didn't publish, I would betray those whom I might have warned. I thought, "Damned if I do, damned if I don't." I became emotionally exhausted. I decided to end the bike trip, return to school, and take a break from the past.

But I still wanted to believe that Rama was a powerful incarnation and that I was an advanced soul of sorts. I did not yet understand that only when I checked my desire to soar, like Icarus, too close to the sun would the impasse disappear, and I would accept who Rama was and who he was not.

That night on a bed of wildflowers, I petted the husky and gazed at the canopy of stars. A warm breeze carried the scent of pine. I felt at peace. I was proud and relieved that I had used my rational side to alter the course of my bike trip when my world was in need of balance. I looked forward to hitchhiking west with the dog. I looked forward to school. I took slow, deep breaths and listened to the silence of the valley. My thoughts ebbed into a sea of calm. Flecks of starlight grew brilliant and close. I felt complete. I lost awareness of the passing of time. Suddenly, I realized I had been meditating. I felt surprised. I had not consciously meditated since leaving Rama one year before. Yet the state of mind felt oddly familiar, and I tried to understand why.

I thought about the meaning of meditation. To meditate, I supposed, was to concentrate and reflect on thoughts, images, or phenomena. It was to work in a garden or stand in a subway and listen to currents of the mind. It was to lose track of time completely, absorbed in memories of a friend. It was to gaze down the highway of light where the sun lit into the sea. There were as many ways to meditate, it seemed, as there were facets on the jewel of the human condition.

It occurred to me that I had meditated on the first day of the bike trip at Walden Pond. I had become immersed in watching waves rise and fall and in listening to them lap the shore. Their pattern suggested a rhythm unlike any I had followed. When a friend asked which route I would take, I smiled. My plan was to follow the setting sun.

Now, stretched out on a sleeping bag in northern Colorado, I realized that I had started and ended the bike trip in spontaneous meditation. I recalled other times during the journey that I had meditated. I gazed, for instance, at the bands of bright color which arched from drenched cow fields to the luminous Wisconsin sky. I gazed at the blur of the Minnesota pavement when the wind was strong and at my tail. I pondered an encounter with a young, six-pack-carrying Native American who, when I mentioned the spirit of South Dakota's land, told me he had sold his for a bundle of cash. I contemplated an encounter with a Vietnam veteran in Rapid City who said his death was near and whose shirt read, "AGENT ORANGE KILLS." I meditated on the meaning of a bumper sticker in Wyoming that read, "MY OTHER CAR IS A HORSE." I reflected on Nuna's response when I encouraged her to help pull the rig. The nearly full-grown husky had sat down and scratched her ear.

The primary focus of the bike trip meditations, though, had been on my years with Rama. I had meditated, for instance, on the LSD trips. During the intense rush of the drug, my acquired knowledge of myself and of the world around me peeled away like layers of an onion. It was as if I saw the world through the eyes of a child. Hours later, as the effects of the acid began to wear off, it was as if I saw the world through the eyes of a young man whose self-confidence had not yet been shaken. Rama, who observed me during each trip, mostly let me re-form the layers which made up "me" on my own. The next wave of subjects in his chemical experiments would not be as fortunate (see Epilogue).

I meditated during the bike trip on how, over the years, Rama flipped between "caretaker personalities" more frequently and how, starting in 1984, the flipping grew sudden and extreme. This unnerving phenomenon could be seen in the stages of his LSD trip. Perhaps, inadvertently, he had designed a multi-leveled, persona-flipping program of "sophisticated spirituality" to mask advanced symptoms of schizophrenia.

I meditated on what had happened the night I left the Centre. When I followed my gut feelings and spoke honestly to Rama and to the inner circle, Rama responded by turning my brother against me.

It did not matter to me, during the meditations on my brother, that Rama's childhood had been difficult. Rama had told me that his father was "power hungry" and "cold" and that his mother was "wacky" and "liked to take drugs." Nor did it matter that Rama had probably sought to fill the vacuum of his early years with promiscuity, LSD, devotion to a guru, money, expensive

cars and property, and consummate power over hundreds of peoples' lives. Nor did it matter that his confusing set of personalities had probably developed from a simultaneous belief that he was a hustler on the one hand, and a living legend and god incarnate on the other. Nor did it matter that I wanted to forgive him.

When I meditated on the casual, diabolical way in which he pitted my brother against me, my understanding and forgiveness vanished. I tensed my gut and wrestled with a primal image. The water was red. I shuddered. I saw my brother clearly. He had an open, bleeding heart. I knew how that felt. I saw him treading water. There was no bottom. I knew how that felt too. A great white shark circled, rising effortlessly from the depths. I clenched my fists. There was nothing I could do. Dan could not hear me.

I meditated on what had happened later that night, after Rama rooted his divisive legacy in my brother's mind. When Rama pointed his finger at me, I knew that he was trying to intimidate me. I also knew that he was trying to maintain some semblance of control. But I feared that he might be a sorcerer. I intentionally visualized sparks and bolts of protective lightning radiating from the bicycle key. I understood that the colorful explosions were emanating from the world of my imagination. But that did not stop me from *seeing* them. The scene unfolding before me was, after all, not just another ending to a Castaneda book. It was real. And I needed all the inspiration I could generate.

The meditations during the bicycle journey helped me comprehend and come to terms with an earlier journey. When I was sixteen, I sought fellowship, Truth, and that which lies beneath the "surface" world of reason. I came to believe that I could find these things by studying with a sorcerer in a desert in Mexico, by gazing at an underexposed photograph of a *fully* enlightened Indian man, and by following the etiquette of a warm, funny, brilliant, persona-flipping man with a Ph.D. in English. I later looked to Gandhi and to William Shirer for answers. But as I rode west from Concord, Massachusetts, I found a teacher inside myself, and the lessons worked for me.

I learned that it is important not to follow someone blindly, even if he is truly childlike, humble, self-giving, and "Self-Realized"; even if he is a friend; and particularly if he is reluctant to openly admit that he can be seduced by his power over others. Genuine teachers encourage their students to question them throughout the *entire* apprenticeship, because genuine teachers accept their own imperfect human nature.

I learned that it is important to balance the mystical with the rational. Meditation tends to open the mind to suggestion. The art of the mystic seems to be, therefore, to know when to let go, be spontaneous, and open up to the universe, and when to gain control, use the power of reason, and protect the body, mind, and soul.

I learned, too, that it is not necessary to focus on a leader, a philosophy, or a technique to contact deep mystical currents. By facing intense sunlight and storms during the bike trek, I was in direct contact with the ancient, transcendental kingdom of nature. By observing my thoughts clarify as they projected and pulsed over fields, lakes, and mountains, I drew closer to the land, to the creation. By wrestling with winds born of colossal power, I was forced to make constant leaps of faith to merely carry on. But now, sitting by the Eskimo dog, I contemplated the awesome blackness of the night. I was unaware that the bicycle journey itself had been a natural expression of mysticism.

The following day, I ascended the purple peaks of the Continental Divide. The sky was clear; the wind, calm. A sign indicated that waters to the east flowed toward the Atlantic, and to the west, the Pacific. It did not indicate that the waters might return and follow a different path. I dismounted the 12-speed. Fragments of Rama's deepest hooks still lurked in my heart. But I was doing better now. The healing process had begun. Facing the east while walking backwards to the west, I quickly retracted my thumb whenever a vehicle or driver seemed unsuitable or unsafe to take me for a ride.

Epilogue

Hidden between UCSD and the Pacific Ocean were burial grounds, Rama said, that were sacred to Native Americans. Surfers on their way to Black's Beach passed through this land of cliffs and ravines. They pointed to a graceful, white mansion and said, "Heyyy, duuuude, that's Atkinson's place, duuuuuuuuude." Several properties south of the UCSD Chancellor's mansion lay a burned-out car abandoned on a charred foundation. The address seemed to be 951, but in my mind the missing tile was in place: 9514 La Jolla Farms Road, where Rama became "enlightened" and where I moved into darkness.

It was 1988. I parked my Volkswagon Bus at a mall one-and-a-half miles east of campus and walked with Nunatak toward the sea. I had cut through the not-yet-bulldozed chaparral just east of Interstate-5 many times since returning to UCSD—a twenty-seven year old undergraduate—

but now the sun was setting and the air seemed heavy. Suddenly, I had a sense of where I was going. During the past two years I had dealt with my Rama experiences intellectually. But you can only sit coolly, unmoved and protected on the cap-of-things-that-were for so long before the cap blows and sends you tumbling. There are many ways to grapple with the enormity of what lies beneath the surface world of reason. I approached 9514 La Jolla Farms Road.

The last time I got near the place had been the year before, with a friend. "I lived there once with some radical people," I had told her. "One of them became... enlightened."

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked.

"That's where Atkinson lives," I said, pointing away.

Now, as the sun sank in the Pacific, I stood with Nuna on the edge of the property. I took a few steps forward but quickly stopped cold. I could almost hear Rama saying in his Kermit-the-Frog voice, "Make millions of people happy." I stepped to where my room used to be when suddenly, superimposed over blackened concrete slabs, images appeared. Rama was in the kitchen cooking for a hundred spiritual seekers. Rama was in the meditation room giving a talk beside a larger-than-life photo of an Indian guru. Rama was at the same spot giving a talk beside himself. Rama was in the garage surveying stacks of WOOF! Rama was offering me cookies to cheer me up because I doubted his enlightenment—my *friend's* enlightenment. Rama was hopping around the house like a kangaroo, and I was right beside him, and we were laughing like children, and at that moment, in the fading light, the cap blew and tears streamed down my face.

* * *

Over the next few years, I grappled with conflicting images of Rama. Sometimes I saw him as a friend. Other times I saw him as a semi-enlightened seeker or as a powerful sorcerer. But the more I researched his past, the more I discovered he was human.

He was born Frederick P. Lenz III on February ninth, 1950, in Mercy Hospital, San Diego. He was raised Catholic in Connecticut where he lived, alternately, with his grandparents, aunt and uncle, and father. His parents divorced when he was a child. His father remarried, joined a yacht club, and, in 1974, was elected mayor of Stamford.

In 1967 Fred graduated from Rippowam High School. The following description of him appears in the yearbook: "A streak of the unusual—chasing the beautiful, hiding from the known. Cut-rate philosopher—monopoly on the side... "

At seventeen, Fred left the east coast and experienced the mushrooming of the psychedelic movement while living in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district. It was during the subsequent year, which he spent in prison for selling drugs, that he was handed a promotional brochure for Indian guru Chinmoy Kumar Ghose. Chinmoy, whose path was paved with "peace, light, and bliss," had several hundred followers worldwide, including rock musicians John "Mahavishnu" McLaughlin and Carlos "Devadip" Santana.

Fascinated by Eastern philosophy and meditation techniques popularized in the late '60s, Fred returned to the east coast where he studied the art of quieting the mind with Chinmoy. He also studied English at the University of Connecticut at Storrs. While still an undergraduate, he married and divorced a Chinmoy disciple named Pam, built dulcimers in a wood shop in his basement, joined the university debating team, and began hosting free public lectures on meditation.

Chinmoy, who often asked disciples to start "divine enterprises," asked this well-spoken, Phi Beta Kappa graduate to start a laundromat. When Fred chose instead to enroll in a Ph.D. program in English at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, Chinmoy kicked him out of the Centre for roughly one year in an apparent attempt to teach him obedience and humility.

By the time I met Fred several years later, Chinmoy had dubbed him "Atmananda" or "Bliss-of-the-Soul," whereas the State University of New York at Stony Brook, after accepting his dissertation ("The Evolution of Matter and Spirit In The Poetry Of Theodore Roethke"), had bestowed upon him the title "Frederick Lenz, Ph.D."

* * *

Fundamental to my research on Rama were my discussions with former disciples, some of whom I tracked down, and some of whom I happened to meet at movie theatres, airports, and gatherings of Amnesty International. Talking and writing about my experiences helped me to work out much of the emotional pain. Listening to what others had gone through also helped a great deal. But as I listened, I realized that my darkest fear had come true. Rama had been getting progressively worse.

In the fall of 1985, weeks after I left the Centre, Rama disbanded Lakshmi and encouraged roughly one hundred followers to move from Boston to Los Angeles. He directed these disciples to donate their time to his software company, Vishnu Systems.

In 1986, Rama moved from Boston to Seattle with about eight men and three inner circle

women: Laura, Cindy, and Anne. Once they arrived in Seattle, Rama informed the three women that he had asked them along specifically to satisfy his sexual appetite. He told them that they were to be his "Geisha's." By then, he explained, he needed to sleep with two or three women at a time; an individual, he maintained, had too little "energy" to stimulate him.

He confessed to Anne that for most of his life something had been hurting him, keeping him down. He told her that during a recent trip to a family event, he saw that his aunt and uncle had been using their psychic powers all along to make him deathly ill and to try to kill him. He told her that I had been sending him a great deal of Negative Psychic Energy and that, in response, he had been sending me Entities so my life would be "miserable on a daily basis."

Also in Seattle, Rama repeatedly administered LSD to the three women. During their hallucinogenic trips he kept them up all night, shouted at them, told them that they were possessed, and tried to get them to confess that they had incarnated on earth to destroy his mission. Then he threatened their lives.

During one such episode described by Anne as "nightmare weekend," Rama fed them acid—five or so hits each—and showed them his new puppy.

"This dog is possessed," he claimed, citing its frequent need to urinate, and its habit of whining when confined alone in the basement. Rama then fed the dog seven hits of LSD. "Look—it's still standing!" he said in an effort to substantiate his claim. Rama placed his hands around the puppy's neck and began to squeeze. Earlier he had claimed that the Evil Forces were trying to get to him through his pets. All of his pets, he complained, became demonically possessed. Now he continued to choke the puppy to the brink of death. Then he scowled at the three women and boasted that he had just used his *willpower* to stop himself from eliminating this "enemy." Through the sleepless night and following morning, Rama repeatedly told the women that the puppy's situation was remarkably similar to their own. He reminded them that they had better confess.

"Barbara confessed!" Rama finally snapped. "Barbara has come clean! If you want to study with me in this or in any future lifetime, you had better come clean!"

After Rama left the room, memories screamed across horror-fried synapses of Anne's acid-drenched brain: the puppy... he's strangling the puppy... can't breath... it's possessed—EVIL... like us... —EVIL... like us... five hits of acid... the room... the furniture... me... focus... the Forces... the puppy... he's strangling the... "Anne, I will send you to hell for thousands of lifetimes!"... can't breath... "What you will experience will make AIDS look like fun!"... he, he threatened to kill me... "Cindy, I have a special place for you in hell!"... —EVIL... like me... "Consider your future lives!"... the puppy... "Barbara confessed!"... like me... "Come clean!"... —EVIL... "Confess!"...

When Rama returned to the room, the three young women confessed.

Weeks later, when the women asked Rama about the health of the puppy, he replied that it had passed on to another world.

"Do you know how I did it?" he whispered. "With my *will*."

Months later, Rama announced to hundreds of followers: "No, friends, I am not paranoid. In fact, three students recently confessed to me that they had incarnated on earth to destroy my mission."

Also in 1986, Rama wrote to followers: "A very close friend of mine, Jack Kukuluan, died several weeks ago. I know Jack was a friend to many of you. We will miss him. Jack was the best part of all of us. His tremendous help and economic support of the spread of meditation has benefited many. Jack died a warrior's death."

A squat man with dark, curly hair and a sardonic smile, Jack had applied to be a student shortly after Rama's 1982 Berkeley lecture series. He had allowed the Bay Area postering crew to use his house as a base of operation, and seemed willing to help his new spiritual teacher in any way that he could. When Rama closed the San Francisco Centre, Jack sold his house and moved to southern California, where he continued to run an Oakland-based fruit distribution company.

Each week I stopped by Jack's Malibu apartment to pick up a crate of fruit for Rama, who lived down the block near Point Dume. Before I left, Jack slipped me a small, brown, paper bag.

"That's for you," he said.

"Thanks," I replied and I pulled out a plum.

One time I asked him how he could run a company that was hundreds of miles away.

"By making a lot of phone calls."

Another time I invited him to see a movie.

"Can't make it," he told me. "I need to take a client out to dinner."

I nodded. "Big deal coming up?"

"Yeah."

Rama began spending time with Jack. In 1986, they went on a trip to Japan where, Rama told him, they had spent past lives together. Meanwhile, Jack had donated to Rama not only numerous crates of fruit, but well over one hundred thousand dollars. In fact, Rama announced at fund-raising dinners that the disciples were "off the hook" because Jack had donated yet another hundred thousand.

On August 2nd, 1986, forty-year-old Jack Kukulán was found in his apartment, partially decomposed before the shrine. According to the police report, white powder was found on a nearby piece of paper and on the blade of a knife from the kitchen. According to the autopsy report, Jack died of "heroin/morphine intoxication."

In August, 1986, Rama left Seattle. Four months later, he returned to Boston, where he reunited dozens of former followers. "You should forgive each other and start anew," he told them. Four months after that, he instructed them to call and invite other former followers to a "very important" meeting in Boston.

Hundreds responded by flocking east from Los Angeles and from other areas of the country.

At the meeting, Rama divided the congregation into the "NO," "YES," and "MAYBE" groups as a way to determine who could come back into his new, nameless Centre. He put the women who had been with him the longest in the "MAYBE" group.

"They are the worst," Rama declared, explaining that they would be required to "pay off" their bad karma with checks ranging from \$1200 to \$2000 a month each. He then informed the "MAYBE" as well as the "YES" disciples that if they wanted to study with him in this or in any future lifetime, they should prepare to move to Silicon Valley.

Several hundred disciples made the move and attended Rama's first gathering in Palo Alto, California. Anne and Rachel, followers since the Stony Brook days, drove west together from Boston and arrived a month later, in time for the second meeting. Rama asked them and seventeen other inner circle women to work at the second meeting. They would check attendance lists and sell his books and tapes, which they had done many times before.

During the meeting, Rama warned the disciples in the audience to make a mental note of the nineteen women working that night. "*They* are witches," he explained. "*They* have been incarnating together since ancient Egypt. *They* have been trying to destroy my mission." He cited as evidence the times he had gotten sick, that some of his hair had fallen out, that past-life students had been kept from finding him, and that current students had been sapped of their energy.

Briefly flipping to a less abusive persona, Rama announced that the nineteen women also happened to be his best students. "But," he said firmly, "they have been seduced by the dark side of the force... they seduce people... they band together in the demon world."

Rama knew the women had recently left their homes, quit their jobs, and traveled three thousand miles to be with him. He knew their devotion ran deep. He then kicked them out before the entire Centre.

"Rama?" started a woman disciple from the audience. "I recently dreamt that seven of the nineteen flew around me like witches."

Rama nodded. "Recently," he said, "they have networked and conspired to murder Jack Kukulán."

Several months later, Rama gave Karen a "Warrior's task." He told her to call and instruct each of the nineteen to attend a private meeting. The meeting was to be held hundreds of miles south of Palo Alto, in an obscure park in the mountains of Malibu. It was scheduled for December 5th, 1987—the following night.

They showed.

Under the guise of helping them protect their careers, Rama warned the approximately thirty people—the nineteen women and about eleven other disciples—that newspaper articles targeting him in a negative light were in the offing.

He spoke to them about the case of Annie Eastwood. A former follower, Ms. Eastwood reported that during one encounter, Rama had misled her spiritually, abused her psychologically, showed her a gun, and demanded that she have sex with him. Rama later told the press: "At no time during our evening together [with Annie] did I brandish a hand gun." But now, at the 1987 late night Malibu gathering, he admitted: "I did have a hand gun with me that night with Annie... but I did not wave it around."

Later that night, Rama asked five or six people to walk back to the cars and wait in the

parking lot. Anne and Rachel remained.

Rama faced the remaining disciples, roughly half of whom had participated in one of his group LSD trips. "If anyone asks you about LSD," he said somberly, "you all *know* that I gave you a placebo."

Then Rama, perhaps nervous about what I had observed in 1984 and 1985, told the disciples: "Mark was always a little young, a little naive, a little stupid... he thought that I actually *had* given him LSD... we all used to indulge him... we all knew that it was just that goofy Mark again... "

Rama went on to say that one day they might have to explain "all this" to a judge and jury. But under *no* circumstance, he warned, should they speak to the press.

Toward the end of the meeting, he told the nineteen that if they wanted to return to the Centre in this life, they must first hand in an essay—typed, double-spaced—in which they were to confess to and apologize for their hurtful, wicked deeds.

After the meeting, Rama returned to his latest project: staging a national, six-month, six hundred and fifty thousand dollar "Zen" seminar promotional campaign. The effort included the placement of a two-page spread in the Sunday New York Times. One page was a photo of himself; the other advertised his free talk on Zen and success at Alice Tully Hall, Lincoln Center (see Appendix D). The full-page spreads also appeared in the L.A. Times, L.A. Weekly, Los Angeles Magazine, Vanity Fair, and in more than a dozen college campus newspapers across the country, including MIT, Harvard, Columbia, UCLA, UC San Diego, San Diego State, UC Berkeley and UC Santa Barbara.

Rama's aura of allegations came to light in the press in the midst of his national speaking tour: Newsweek, "Who Is This Rama?—The master of Zen and the Art of Publicity is now having some very serious problems", 2/1/88; The L.A. Weekly, "The Cosmic Seducer: How Frederick Lenz Got Rich, Built A Clientele And Seduced Women", 1/28/88, and "Rama Redux", 9/1/88; The San Francisco Chronicle, "Zen and now: The gospel according to guru 'Rama'", 11/8/87, and "Sex, Fear Broke Guru's Spell", 11/27/87; The San Diego Union, "YUPPIE GURU: Ex-Disciples Turn On 'Master'", 1/10/88; and New Age Journal, "The Rama Drama", 6/1/88.

When articles began to appear, Rama cancelled several talks. When more appeared, he stopped giving public lectures altogether.

In the spring of 1988, Rama had Karen call and instruct the nineteen to attend a middle-of-the-night meeting in the Mohave Desert, scheduled for the end of April.

Rachel and Anne individually expressed doubts about whether they would attend.

In the past, Rama had used the fear of Entities and of bad karma to discipline his disciples. Typically, he had explained that he would try to protect those who strayed from his path. But by now his role had dramatically changed. No longer the protector, he told disciples that if they disobeyed him, *he* would see to it that they had a car accident or that they came down with cancer. He had Karen warn Rachel and Anne that if they did not attend the meeting, they would come to "serious harm."

They showed.

At the Mohave Desert meeting, Rama announced that the nineteen could return to the Centre, move to Boston, teach yoga, and bring him new students.

"Who does *not* want to come back?" he asked.

Anne, Dana, and Rachel reached their hands into the desert sky.

Afterwards, the devotees stopped at Denny's restaurant for coffee. The dissenters sat together. Rama approached. Anne mentioned that the brakes of her car were not functioning properly, and that she had had difficulty getting to the meeting. Rama took credit for the problem. He said: "Let that be a warning." Then he told the three women that they had better not send him any bad vibes.

"One out of twenty women gets breast cancer," he told them. "Five out of twenty women could get breast cancer. Twenty out of twenty women could get breast cancer. Some women get cancer of the uterus... "

* * *

I was shocked when I learned how Rama had treated Rachel, Dana, and Anne. I was shocked that Rama's world had gotten so out of hand. But according to what I read in the press, the experiences of my friends were by no means isolated.

In 1990, Anne and I sat together and read Rama's seven-page "Statement To The Press." Near the start of the "Statement," Rama lists the names of "credible persons who can verify the truth of my assertions." I glanced at the names. "Karen Lever." True, she had been accepted at a

number of medical schools, including Stanford. She *was* extremely bright. But as Rama's mouthpiece, she was the one who had threatened dissenters with serious harm. "Dr. Wayne Surdam" and "Dr. Ermano Rambaldi." True, they were an award-winning UC Berkeley scholar and a UCLA geologist respectively. True, they *had* taken the study of spirituality to heart. But they had never gotten close enough to Rama to observe his *other* side. "Richard Loftin." I did not know him. But during nightmare weekend in Seattle, he reportedly sat across from the three tripping women and giggled.

Rama continues in the "Statement":

Annie Eastwood alleges that we had a single sexual encounter over five years ago in my home in Malibu, California. She has told the press that in hindsight, she now views the sexual encounter we had together as forced. She has alleged that during the course of an evening together I brandished a hand gun. She then states that she had sex with me out of fear.

Rama then claims:

... at no time during our evening together did I brandish a hand gun.

Anne looked up from the "Statement" and said, "But Rama explicitly told us at the meeting in Malibu that he *did* take out a hand gun that night with Annie."

"Maybe," I replied, "Rama is playing off the difference in meaning between *holding* and *brandishing* [waving] a hand gun."

"What Annie perhaps did not know," Anne added, "and what Rama fails to mention, is that he nearly *always* slept with a gun by his bed."

Rama writes:

Ms. Eastwood continued to attend my seminars for another year after our night together. This would not seem to be likely behavior on the part of a person who was allegedly forced to have sex at gunpoint.

"No," I thought. "But perhaps on the part of a person who has been psychologically and sexually manipulated and abused."

Rama continues:

Now, five years after the event and in concordance with a group of persons affiliated with Cult Awareness Network, she has decided that a gun was present during our encounter and that she was forced to have sex with me. Her story is absurd and untrue.

... Lisa Hughes has asserted in a variety of interviews that I forced her to take L.S.D. while she was a guest at my home during the summer of 1987. She also alleges that in some way, which is not fully clear in her accounts, I coerced her into having sex with me. She further alleges that I bought her presents and that while she was on L.S.D. I tried to convince her that she was possessed by 'demons.'

I never gave Lisa Hughes L.S.D. nor did I, as Lisa Hughes asserts, take L.S.D. with her.

For a period of time during the summer of 1987 Lisa and I traveled together. I purchased some clothing for her, and some luggage which she desperately needed.

I recalled, from press accounts, that Rama had bought Lisa \$17,000 worth of clothes. I also recalled how, in 1984, Rama had told me I was mentally ill when I tried to return the new car he had bought for me.

During that summer while Lisa was a guest

in my home, Lisa and I were frequently joined for dinner, videos and an occasional soccer game by our mutual friend Mr. Richard Loftin.

Shortly before I started spending time with Lisa, a close female friend of hers was killed in a brutal knife attack in a parking lot in Santa Barbara. Lisa told me that she 'knew' that the killer was also stalking her. She told me that he was following her on campus and knew where she lived.

Lisa shared a small house in the Santa Barbara area with several men and one other woman. She told me that she was certain that the killer had come into her house when no one was home. She told me that this was possible because her housemates never locked the doors. She said that it was only a question of time before she would be killed.

Out of concern for her welfare I gave Lisa some money to rent an apartment in a gated high security condominium complex so that she would be safe. Just before Lisa graduated the killer was apprehended and I did not give the matter any more thought until she brought it up over the summer.

During the summer Lisa told me about the demons. Her first revelations occurred in the early part of the summer. As the summer progressed 'demons' became all that she talked about.

One evening, in the presence of Mr. Loftin, she said that she was convinced that demons had been directing the killer in Santa Barbara. She also asserted that my home was filled with demons.

Anne turned to me and said, "I don't know whether that is true or not, but he makes it sound as if he is perfectly normal—as if *he* is not obsessed with demons."

I recalled how Rama had increasingly preached that most of his disciples—and most of the human race—were possessed by "Negative Entity" demons.

"And I know for a fact," Anne added, "that Rama told us there were demons in his house in Seattle."

Rama writes:

She [Lisa] led Mr. Loftin and I down into the basement and pointed to areas of the vacant air where she asserted that the demons lived. She was also convinced that a demon lived on the second to the top stair of the upstairs staircase. She told us that the demon that lived on the stair had caused her to fall down the stairs once and was continually trying to trip her.

I recalled, from press accounts, that it was Rama who had climbed a stepladder to clean invisible demons off the ceiling, it was Rama who had swept the stairs with his hands to avoid being tripped by demons, and it was Rama who, wearing raingear and Indian beads, had spent hours in the basement grabbing at the air.

Rama claims:

On another occasion while the three of us were chatting in my backyard, Lisa told Richard and I that she had taken L.S.D. and other drugs as a student at U.C. Santa Barbara.

She asked Richard if he knew where she could get some L.S.D. and cocaine. When

he informed her that he had no knowledge of where she could get these drugs she became belligerent and angry.

I recalled reading about Rama's treatment of Lisa. He had allegedly given her LSD. Then, as he had done to the three women in Seattle, he screamed at her for hours, repeating that she was evil and that she had been trying to hurt him.

Rama writes:

Lisa told me she was afraid of her parents. She was convinced that they were trying to psychologically control her. It was only after I had repeatedly requested that she call her parents and inform them that she was staying with me as a guest that she finally did so.

I recalled how Rama had instructed me to avoid speaking with my parents, unless I needed money.

Rama continues:

Finally, it became clear to me that it was time for us to separate. I suggested that she return home to her parents, and she insisted that the demons were possessing them too.

After Lisa's refusal to return to her parents, we agreed on a solution. Lisa had expressed a desire to go to a local computer school. I agreed to pay her tuition, purchase her a car and give her enough money to get an apartment. It was my hope that this would give Lisa a new start and help her to gain some perspective on her life.

Rama goes on:

Nancy Knupfer, a woman in her early forties, attended some of my seminars a number of years ago. She also, entirely voluntarily, donated a sum of money to help defray the cost of offering meditation classes free or at low cost to the public...

Anne said, "Free or at low cost to the public? Rama has a funny concept of what 'free' and 'low cost' actually mean."

Rama describes Steve Putnam, who:

... made a number of public accusations regarding the validity of the teaching process I engage in. My seminars are frequently attended by Buddhist monks and teachers. Dr. Wayne Surdam, an award winning Oriental scholar from the University of California at Berkeley, also regularly attends. I certainly feel that Dr. Surdam is a better judge of the validity of my presentations of the Buddhist and Hindu philosophies and methodologies than is Mr. Putnam.

I recalled that the editor-in-chief of the Vajradhatu Sun, an international Buddhist newspaper, once wrote of Rama, "Nobody within the Buddhist tradition, as far as I know, has ever taken him seriously." (New Age Journal, "The Rama Drama", 6/1/88.)

Rama continues:

Donald Kohl was a young man who at one time attended a number of my seminars in meditation and self-development. In the Buddhist philosophy we strongly counsel persons against taking their own lives because of a negative karma that can be generated by this action. I was touched by the fact that Donald said good-bye to me in the note he left before he died, and I was deeply

saddened to hear of his suicide. I did not know Donald and I never spoke to him personally, except in passing to say hello.

Anne said to me, "Donald did not just attend a number of seminars. He was a student. He saw Rama on a weekly basis. He came to Rama's house and ate dinner with us. He came to parties. He went on desert trips. He came to movies with us on Friday nights. Rama is trying to make it seem as if Donald had been some kind of stranger."

I replied, "Mr. Kohl called me after Donald's death. I spoke with him for more than an hour. I figured Rama would not want me talking with him, but I did anyway."

Anne said, "I was at the Centre when Rama found out that Donald had taken his life. At first he looked very sad. But the first thing he said was regarding protecting himself from blame. He told us not to speak with Donald's parents except to say we were sorry."

Rama writes:

I can understand Donald's parents' grief over the tragedy of their son's death. In their pain they are understandably inclined to search for events and individuals they can use to explain or rationalize Donald's death. However, to attempt to attribute his death to his interest in meditation or to his attendance at some seminars I conducted on meditation and self-development is far-fetched at the very least.

When examined individually the charges that these six persons have made against me have little validity or impact. But when all of these people walk into a newspaper office together and tell their stories, an avalanche effect occurs. I can well understand how all of these allegations, when presented at the same time, could raise questions in someone's mind regarding my conduct and character. And until Jennifer Jacobs told me the story of her kidnapping, I too was at a loss to explain how these individuals, who attended my seminars at different times, had come to join together in an orchestrated effort to discredit me.

Rama begins the "Kidnapping Of Jennifer Jacobs" section of the "Statement" with:

It wasn't until I encountered Jennifer Jacobs, a woman who at one time attended some of my classes, that I understood why I had become the target...

Anne said, "At *one time* attended *some* of my classes? She was in the inner circle. She worked for him. She was one of the nineteen 'witches.' He recommended where she should live, and gave her other personal advice... "

Rama writes:

Jennifer's mind was violated in a variety of horrible ways. She was kept awake for extended hours and forced repeatedly to view videos of Charles Manson... Jennifer was screamed at, ridiculed and degraded. She was constantly surrounded by guards and was never allowed to leave the motel... Jennifer was told that she would not be released until she gave up her beliefs in the Buddhist faith... her kidnapers also threatened that if she went to the police they would kidnap her again and that her family would have her committed to a mental institution for the rest of her life.

Jennifer Jacob's parents maintain that their daughter was not screamed at, ridiculed, or degraded. Although neither Anne nor I knew what had actually taken place with Jennifer, Anne recalled too well some of Rama's methods: "Our minds [during nightmare weekend in Seattle]

were violated in a variety of horrible ways. Rama kept us awake all night. We did not see Charles Manson videos. We got to see Rama strangling his puppy instead. Rama repeatedly berated us. He claimed we were reincarnated demons and were out to get him. He did not hold us prisoners, but then again, I would not advise running off into the night on five hits of acid. Rama said we could 'come clean' if we, like Barbara, confessed that we were trying to destroy his mission. He threatened that he would send us to hell for thousands of lifetimes... "

Rama claims:

Cult Awareness Network and persons associated with it are participating in the very practices that they purport to be dead set against. They are encouraging the abrogation of the personal and religious freedoms of adult American citizens through brainwashing methods and techniques similar to those employed by the North Koreans and North Vietnamese against American P.O.W's... I certainly am not in favor of cults—who is? But I do not believe any person or organization has the right to incite the kidnappings of persons who are part of small religious organizations that are not cults... This is a money making racket. This [Cult Awareness Network] is nothing more than McCarthyism in a new form.

Anne and I read and reread this last section of the "Statement." We glanced at each other for a moment—but said nothing.

* * *

In 1990 I spoke with the three English professors who, in 1976, had served on Rama's doctoral dissertation committee. Louis Simpson, a Pulitzer prize winning writer, told me he had written a poem about a student, a brilliant lecturer, who creates his own system rather than working within an existing one (Simpson, Louis. "Herons and Water Lilies." In *The Room We Share*. New York: Paragon House, 1990). Paul Dolan told me that Fred's performance on the Ph.D. oral exams had been slightly above average. Gerald Nelson told me that while he had taken a liking to this graduate student, he had never thought much of Fred's get-rich-and-famous schemes, including the one to boost his credentials via a mail-order minister's degree.

"Fred once asked me what I thought of his idea for a book called *The Thirteen Mystics*," Nelson told me. "I joked that he would already have a built in market for the sequel, *The Return Of The Thirteen Mystics*." But Nelson had not taken lightly the way young Frederick had been affecting undergraduates during his free lectures on meditation. In 1975, Nelson recommended that Fred read about Ken Kesey and about Charles Manson. The lesson was that while both charismatic leaders had experimented with drugs and with young peoples' lives, Kesey learned to check his power over others. Manson did not.

"Yet it was difficult for me to guide Fred," Nelson explained. "Though he was my student, he was Chinmoy's disciple."

Professor Nelson was a tall man with a strong, kind voice. I wondered if Fred had been drawn to him in his search for a caring father figure.

I asked Nelson if he had read the newspaper accounts of Fred's recent schemes. He nodded sadly. "This is the sort of thing you would expect from an intelligent, sensitive, abused child from a well-to-do family. Fred quite obviously needs help, but is probably too far-gone to realize or admit it."

In the mid-eighties, Rama sent Nelson self-promotional brochures, tapes, and books; in 1986, Rama wrote in a brochure that Nelson had been one of the three most influential people in his life; in 1988, Rama confessed to Nelson that he only wanted to make some money, that he no longer maintained a following, and that he had finally learned his lesson about Ken Kesey and about Charles Manson.

Yet the more I learned about Rama through my continuing research, the less I was heartened by Rama's confession to his former mentor.

In 1988, Rama persuaded many of the roughly three hundred disciples to move to Reston, Virginia, and then to Westchester, New York. He founded two for-profit organizations: National Professional and Personal Development Seminars (NPDS) and Advanced Systems Inc. (ASI) During regular meetings of NPDS and ASI he continued to teach his disciples about spirituality. He continued to experiment with mind control. He also experimented with new ways to make money.

Rama had been strongly encouraging disciples to study software at the Computer Learning Center (CLC), a six-month technical school which typically prepared people for entry-level programming jobs.

Several disciples, including my brother, Sal, and Paul, had developed impressive track records in the software industry. But many were only CLC graduates. During the meetings of NPDS and ASI, Rama told disciples to share their knowledge of state-of-the-art software technology. Then he told them to lie. According to the San Francisco Chronicle ("Yuppie Guru Finds Cash in Computers: Devotees pay \$3,000 a month to sit at his feet", 7/30/92), Rama, in 1989, wrote a manual for disciples in which he encouraged them to think of a resume as "a mandala that reflects your new self." Rama wrote: "They will believe anything you say, even when you intersperse unrealities, because they feel the truth of your experience. When you have your stories and images in place, arrange for your references. Choose people from our group who are comfortable on the phone, who sound professional and who have had data processing experience. Give them a few notes about who they were."

In 1991 Rama told New York Newsday's William Falk ("The Yuppie Guru", 7/30/91), "It's the most amazing career that I know of. You can start in the mid-30s, and in a year or two you can make \$100,000 to \$150,000 a year."

From 1988 to 1991, Rama's individual tuition rose from roughly one thousand to three thousand dollars per month. He told followers that since NPDS and ASI were actually furthering their careers, they should deduct the increasing payments from their taxes. This enabled Rama to dramatically increase his "surprise" gift reservoir—while bilking the IRS of millions, in a way that would be difficult to expose.

In 1989, Rama justified to the disciples his rising tuition. "I nearly killed myself by accepting your Negative Occult Energy," he said, "and now you are going to have to pay for it."

In January, 1990, Rama announced that disciples had until March 21, 1991, to donate additional money—from \$50,000 to \$1,000,000 per person, depending on his or her "capacity." They didn't have to participate, he told them. But it would be their last year in the Centre if they did not. He gave them each "charmed" marbles. The marbles, he said, would enable them to accomplish any task he suggested. The charm, he added, would fade for those who left the Centre—who had not already lost their marbles.

At one meeting in 1990, Rama claimed that his students were treating him with disrespect by being late with their tuition payments. "Better to owe your creditors than to owe me," he told them. He suggested that they move in together, sleep on apartment floors, and not pay their other bills for awhile.

Rama increasingly used fear tactics to control the financially hard-pressed, sleep deprived followers, many of whom worked more than one job. He told them that if he stopped protecting someone who left the Centre, they would suffer forever in the "seventh level of hell." He told them that he wielded the power to create and demolish the universes. He told them that he was no longer the "Last Incarnation of Vishnu The Cosmic Preserver," but of "Siva The Cosmic Destroyer." He emphasized that those criticizing him would invariably get hit by a car or contract cancer.

Rama, who had not held public lectures since early 1988, required most students to bring at least three new potential initiates per year. He spent hours during the NPDS and ASI "computer" meetings coaching disciples about what kind of people they should recruit and about how they should go about recruiting them. He also told them of his plan to have them recruit at universities in every state in North America.

Rama came up with many new ideas between 1989 and 1991. He told the disciples, for instance, that his former Guru was really "a great big spidery Entity from hell." He did not mention that ten years earlier, he had billed Chinmoy as "the Seventh Avatar... the highest soul to incarnate on earth..." He told a few disciples to infiltrate and destroy Microsoft Corporation (one devotee actually landed a job at the software giant as a recruiter). He told disciples that he was ordaining them as Buddhist monks. He did not mention, however, that he was having unprotected sex with a substantial number of them under the guise of advancing their souls.

In 1991, articles on Rama appeared in New York's Newsday, "The Yuppie Guru", 7/30/91; The L.A. Weekly, "Rama Rerun", 11/29/91; and in several issues of the Consultants' & Contractors' Newsletter (CCN). I read in CCN (July/August, 1991 issue) how Rama's followers had become known in the computer industry as the "California Raisins." The Raisins apparently had been causing companies, recruiters, and agencies in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut to lose a substantial amount of time and money. In the same issue, I read: "... we think it only fair to put cult members on notice that knowledge of their activities is widespread... local area recruiters are now circulating a list of those known to be cult members, which is regularly updated as new names are added... In other words, local recruiters, typically thought of as competing with one another, are acting in unison when it comes to fighting the onslaught of this group... if you want to adhere to a certain faith or religion, go ahead, it's what our country was set up to protect. But don't continue trying to raise money through fraudulent behavior which neither the courts, nor most religions would condone... Further info. available from (201) 299-1535."

Also in 1991, I read in Newsday that Rama did not permit disciples to live near him because he did not want them to "lower the vibe" of Long Island. I read about one follower who committed suicide after "speaking incessantly about Rama and about making enough money to get back into

the group." I read about Brenda Kerber, a follower who disappeared from her White Plains apartment on October 9th, 1989, and who, at the printing of this book, is still listed as "missing." I read about Rama's claim that those who had not done well in his program were "simply unrealistic or lazy." And I read about Rama's claim that he merely wanted to teach, travel, meditate, and, when time permitted, date women. "I have a great life," Rama was quoted as saying. "I'm one of the happier people I know."

In 1992, Rama regularly held private meetings for his computer company "monks" at the Performing Arts Center at the State University of New York at Purchase. Christopher Beach, director of the Performing Arts Center, told *The New York Times* ("Mentor to Some, Cult Leader to Others", Westchester edition, 6/20/93) that Lenz is "no more than a Dale Carnegie of the 90's." Dr. Sheldon N. Grebstein, president of SUNY Purchase, also defended Lenz in *The Times* article: "At SUNY Purchase we have directly witnessed none of the alleged cult activity."

From the stage of this prestigious auditorium, Rama, whom Grebstein described as a "model client," instructed the hi-tech monks to fan out to different parts of the country, form front organizations, and give talks on meditation. On the east coast his recruiting arms included: Boston Meditation Society (Massachusetts), Hartford Meditation Society (Connecticut), Philadelphia Society for the Meditative Arts (eastern Pennsylvania), Diamond Mind (Washington, D.C. and Maryland), New Jersey Meditative Society (southern New Jersey and Princeton area), Virginia Meditative Society, and Manhattan Meditation Forum (New York City and Westchester). On the west coast: Banzai Tantric Institute (Silicon Valley), RCF (San Francisco, Marin County, and East Bay area), and Pacific Meditation Society (Los Angeles). He told disciples to promote their talks by postering universities. He told them to pay particular attention to bulletin boards around engineering and computer science departments. He told them to invite certain seekers to meditate with him (at SUNY Purchase on the east coast and at a rented hall in Oakland, California, on the west coast). It was no secret what type of person Rama wanted to attract. Many of his posters found at universities across America contain this message: "All workshops designed for individuals 29 and under."

According to one disciple who left the group in 1993, Rama's recent, indirect recruiting method attracted roughly four hundred new disciples.

When a group of disciples' parents—known as the "Rama Mamas"—found out about Rama's active quest for fresh material, they alerted the press. Articles began to appear: *The Santa Fe New Mexican*, "Controversial guru coming to Santa Fe", 3/24/92; *Santa Fe Reporter*, "Computer Cult: Is the Leader Here?", 3/25/92; *Heart Dance: The Bay Area's Most Comprehensive Events Calendar for Contemporary Human Awareness, Spirituality & Well-Being*, Editorial: "RAMA? UH-OH", 4/1/92; *The Daily Californian* (UC Berkeley), "Zen master a fraud, followers say", 6/26/92; *San Francisco Chronicle*, "Yuppie Guru Finds Cash in Computers: Devotees pay \$3,000 a month to sit at his feet", 7/30/92; *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, "As guru's disciples hit town, critics cry beware: Truth and light, the followers promise. Fraud and suffering, the watch group warns", 8/31/92; *The Portland Oregonian*, "Is Brenda Barratt reading this? If so, phone home", 9/5/92; *The Ramapo News*, "College Authorities Alerted of Cult Leader", 10/15/92; *The Hartford Courant*, "Guru mixes money, mystique: Ex-followers say students exploited", and "Traveling along the path toward enlightenment", 10/18/92; *The Wesleyan Argus*, "Cult Recruits Students Via Meditation Group", 10/30/92, and "Arguses Stolen", 11/3/92, and "Cult Faces Obstacles Elsewhere; None at Wes", 11/6/92, and "Self-Discovery Club Loses Group Status", 12/4/92, and "Wes Investigates Meditation Group's Activities", 12/4/92; *The Trinity Tripod*, "Alleged Cult Sponsors Workshops On Campus", 11/3/92, and "Meditation Workshops Exposed", 11/10/92; *Peninsula Times Tribune*, "Manipulative... or merely meditative? Zen Master Rama faces serious charges", 11/7/92; *Baltimore City Paper*, "Software Svengali: Yuppie Guru Frederick Lenz Wants You For His Army Of Meditating Computer Programmers. Step #1: Bring Your Purses And Wallets", 11/13/92; *Yale Herald*, "Meditation group accused of cult recruiting", 11/13/92; *Westchester Gannett Reporter Dispatch*, "ZEN and the ART of COMPUTER MAINTENANCE", and "Flim Flam Artist or Hindu Deity?", 11/22/92; *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "Insidious Recruiting or Innocent Seminar? Colleges Police Meetings of So-Called Cult: Meditation group forces administrators to confront questions about student safety", 12/2/92; *New Age Journal*, "The Return of Rama", 1/1/93; *Family Circle*, "Do You Believe In Magic? New Light on the New Age", 2/23/93; *The Trenton Times*, "Meditation or manipulation? Guru called cult leader", and "Disciples carry Rama's word by meditation class", 2/28/93; *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, "HIGH-TECH Rama: Frederick Lenz offers a vision of affluence, for a price", 2/28/93 and "Guru's Disciples teach campus clubs: Is it a 'hustler's' scam, or an invitation to enlightenment?", 3/1/93; *The New York Times* (Westchester edition), "Mentor to Some, Cult Leader to Others", 6/20/93.

Rama's response to the waves of negative publicity was no different than his response years before on "The Larry King Show" and "A Current Affair." He professed, through spokeswoman Lisa Lewinson, that money-seeking deprogrammers were persuading former disciples to fabricate accusations. Yet the individuals whose accounts appear in this book share their experiences as individuals. These individuals are members of no such anti-cult conspiracy. These individuals respect and defend the freedom to practice religion in its myriad forms. These individuals have a simple message. Fly East. Fly West. But don't fly into the cuckoo's nest.

* * *

Yet in the spring of 1988, stung by memories of friendship and deceit in Rama's nest, I

stumbled my way past the burned-out car abandoned on the charred foundation of 9514 La Jolla Farms Road. I let Nunatak lead me in the fading light through the parched chaparral. She gently tugged me back to the present. One-and-a-half miles east of campus, I opened the door of my Volkswagon Bus. I was still crying.

Inside the van I saw my fish-net "bulletin board" which reminded me where I had been and where I was going. On it I saw an article about a bicycle ride I had taken two years before with Nunatak. I saw the cover of a book about Mohandas K. Gandhi, autographed by its author, William L. Shirer. I saw a brochure from the Peace Corps and a miniature American flag. I saw a sticker for UCSD, John Muir College. I saw a quote from Thoreau: "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music that he hears, however measured or far away." My father sent me that.

I saw a picture of anthropologist-explorer Thor Heyerdahl standing at the bow of Ra I, a papyrus reed boat which he and six others sailed across the Atlantic. The journey had proved that "primitive" people could have crossed the great waterways which connect the continents. My mother sent me that.

And I saw, next to an inflatable globe, written on a small piece of paper, the name of the chariot: "Sunped I, a solar electric/human powered vehicle." Below that I saw the name of the quest: "Tour Del Mundo." I was starting to realize that by leaving Rama's dream, I had gotten back my world.

Nuna rode shotgun in the passenger seat, I turned the key and—it started. Leaving the mall, I slowly gained momentum.

Appendix A: Excerpts from WOOF!

In a fabricated advertisement (Issue #4; February, 1981), Atmananda poked fun at televangelists: "Dear Friends in Christ... I want to offer you my secrets of success so that you can make fantastic profits before the world ends! This offer is good for a limited time only, so act now. Send \$500.00 for my new book, Better Living With Jesus Through Voodoo. You will receive your copy in a plain brown bag. Here is a brief selection of some of the wonderful topics my book covers: 1) How to make Satan work for you, 2) Selling religious trinkets to the poor, 3) Using television to rake in the millions, 4) Fourteen genuine fake miracles you can impress your congregation with, 5) Using guilt to pry the last pennies from your friends' pockets, 6) How to make your own religion look good while defaming all the others, 7) Convincing people that you once took Jesus to lunch, 8) Seven great strategies to win at pinball, 9) How to give a fire and brimstone sermon that will cast fear into the hearts of all Christians, 10) Tax shelters to protect your new fortunes. All this and more can be yours if you act now! Don't delay. Send for my book today. Yours in Christ and Heavenly Bucks\$, The Right Reverend Armageddon T. Thunderbird, Esq."

In "Swami Muktaneeshprabhphada's Thoughts For Clean Living & Laundry" (Issue #6; March, 1981), Atmananda satirized Indian gurus: "Greetings on you, my favorite little people! Today I am going to discuss things with so much spiritual significance... You all want to attain Illumination, I know that you do. You are good children. But at the same time many of you have dirty and disgusting thoughts about sex, sex and sex. Now you must put these rotten thoughts away. You can't achieve Enlightenment thinking about sex. You must think about me. If you meditate on your dear old Swami then you will become pure—like your laundry... "

In "Constipation Cure" (Issue #7; April, 1981), Atmananda struck out at the Moonies: "Constipated? Can't go at all? REAM YOURSELF with Reverend Mune's Original Korean Holistic Reamer. All Natural, Heavy Metal, Available in decorator colors."

In "Polarity Institute For The Criminally Insane—Formerly Twingle's Military Academy for the Criminally Insane" (Issue #6; March, 1981), Atmananda lambasted New Age groups: "Dear Holistic Friends, It is with the greatest joy that I can invite you to a free weekend of fun and kinkyness at the GRAND OPENING of the Polarity Institute for the Criminally Insane. We know that if you will come to one or two of our free sessions we can hook you into a long term program which will cost you thousands!... How do we manage this? By putting pictures in our ads that are filled with subliminal sexual stimulation, by filling our ads with a lot of nonsense about the types of therapies we offer. And last but not least, by relying on your own insecurity and lack of faith in your own natural healing abilities. Choose from any of the fine therapeutic programs we offer to

you: 1) QUESADILLA WRAPS. Imagine your naked body being wrapped in warm cheese-filled Quesadillas. Very good for gout and ingrown toenails. 2) Luxuriate in a GUACAMOLE HOT TUB. Wonderful for mild psychosis. 3) LIE ON ONE OF OUR EXCLUSIVE 'Clam Beds' and be stroked with a flamingo feather by Ultra Violet, one of our staff 'workers.' 4) TEQUILLA & GINSENG BODY RUB Wonderful for asthma, heart attack, cerebral hemorrhage and mild back aches. Located in Beautiful Downtown Tijuana, The Home Of The Stars. Gwiddard accepted."

Appendix B: Excerpts from Rama's Tape "Welcome To Lakshmi" (1982)

"During the first year, you will in effect become a new person. Even your personality structure will alter... we're just trying to cleanse your being... to just wash away those layers of maya, to teach you enough of our language so we can begin to communicate in a more sophisticated manner spiritually..."

"Initially, the first few years, we're just trying to get basic obstructions out of the way, get your ideas of selfhood out of the way, just open you up to your own perfection. And as we remove more and more of these obstructions, then I am able to do more and more for you."

"You must keep a journal... of your spiritual experiences... when you write it down, it brings it very much into the physical consciousness... in other words, it will imprint the experience on your mind. Then, you should read your journal over from time to time... You see, the mind refuses to believe a lot of what we do... but when you bring the mind into the action of writing it down, the mind agrees and accepts these things..."

"A large part of our program has to do with self-giving. Self-giving is totally important in my estimation. Everything we do is predicated upon it. You can only meditate a few hours a day, but you can give of yourself constantly. You should feel your whole life is nothing but self-giving... there is a great deal of self-giving you can do around the Centre, which will help you. Naturally, whenever you give to a spiritual organization, you enter into that circle of light, and you gain much more for it than if you had just gone out and helped one of your neighbors, from a karmic point of view. The way that you can give of yourself at the Centre, well, there are a few ways. Naturally, the most important is economically. Money is necessary in this world to run a spiritual organization. The more money we have, the more people we help. It's a very simple equation..."

Appendix C: Excerpts from Rama's Tape "Sophisticated Sexuality" (1983)

"As the years went on, I found that my relationships got better. They changed, though, as I changed... The love became very pure and then it was no longer painful. As I went on, relationships got better and better. And they meant less..."

"I found that love and sexuality continued to be one of many doorways that seemed to continue to help me in evolution. It just seemed to be there. I had no choice in the matter. As I have no choice in anything that happens anymore..."

"I no longer could love one person. I just found that I loved everyone. Equally..."

"It's no more special to sleep with one person than another. What's the difference? It's all a dream anyway..."

"So I decided the best thing to do was to avoid the Watergate mentality. And to be in full disclosure. Without the sense that anyone would understand. Most people and most of you are threatened completely by your own sexuality. You don't know how to deal with it. You're terribly afraid of it. And it's a terrible threat to see someone who is at ease with it..."

"So I knew it wouldn't be easy. But at the same time I... had to be myself... I was never particularly interested in impressing others. Otherwise I would not have been part of the Woodstock nation. I rejected society ages ago, and came back to it because it seemed like an interesting thing to do..."

"I began to hear rumors that well, I was—I don't know what I was doing—I haven't listened to much of the rumors but I guess, umm, I don't know, that I was making love to millions of women, or something like that, uhh, I don't know. That hasn't been the case; it might be a wonderful idea, but to be quite honest, I haven't the time because I'm very busy; it's very demanding running a spiritual community. It might be a heck of a lot more fun than some of the things I do..."

"I've been very fortunate without one exception; all of the women I have ever met and have been involved with have been wonderful. Remarkable. Absolutely remarkable. And I feel they have all been my teachers. As are all of you my teachers..."

"But I think it's time everybody grew up. And stop being so petty. About their own lives or other people's lives. And instead, turn their attention towards what matters: money! Sex is the preoccupation of adolescence. Money is the preoccupation of adults. And Lakshmi is the goddess of money..."

"So I think it's time everybody adopted a more professional attitude about their lives. In other words, don't focus so much on your relationships. Have fun with them. Or if you don't have them, you don't want them, have fun with that. But don't bother with what other people in the Centre do so much..."

"Sexuality, I think, is a little different for me than it is for most people in that there is almost no body awareness whatsoever. It's just light..."

"If you can't handle the fact that someday you might be enlightened, and still fall in love with people and love them and be with them, and if you can't deal with that, if you hate yourself so much and hate your sexuality so much that you think it has no light in it... If you think it makes a difference if I have ten thousand sports cars, and ten million girlfriends, and lead a very flashy life, and eat at only the most fashionable restaurants, which I don't, but if that would make a difference in what we do, in other words, if you can carry my lifestyle to the most absurd proportions in your mind, and that would make a difference in the meditation process, then you shouldn't work with me. I don't think you should work with any teacher. 'Cause you don't know what it's all about yet. You should come to the fashionable restaurants with us and have a good time. 'Cause we have a good time. 'Cause God is in everything..."

Appendix D: Excerpts from Rama's Advertisements and Brochures

(from a full-page spread in The New York Times)

The Still Center of the Turning Worlds

"There is a still center of Eternity. A place where all pasts, presents and futures meet. This intersecting point of knowledge and experience, pleasure and pain, mortality and immortality has been described and referred to in a variety of different ways by mystics, prophets and teachers who have experienced it.

"Some have described it as God or Heaven. Others have referred to it as Nirvana or Tao. In Zen it is called Zen mind or Enlightenment.

"While names, descriptions and methods for reaching the still center of being vary greatly, the ultimate worth of this awareness is agreed upon by all who have shared it. The experience of the still center of being brings freedom, self-control, balance and power to those who have attuned their lives to it.

"Zen is the study of the Ten Thousand States of Mind and of Enlightenment, the still center which lies beyond the Ten Thousand States of Mind. It is a highly personal study which brings clarity and purpose into the lives of those who practice it.

"Zen Buddhist thought has had a profound influence upon Chinese and Japanese history and culture. A great deal of the current success of the Japanese corporate mind stems from the effect of centuries of Zen practice in Japan. Martial arts, dance, poetry, the tea ceremony and many other forms of personal, athletic and artistic expression have been given birth to by Zen mind.

"Zen is a highly refined and artistic approach to the meaning of life. It isn't necessary to learn Oriental customs or to speak the Japanese language to successfully practice it. All that is required is an open mind, patience, a good sense of humor and an intense desire for self-improvement.

"I have written a free booklet about Zen for the 'computer age' called 'The Zen Experience.' (sm) In it I discuss Zen in more depth and describe both contemporary and traditional methods I employ in teaching Zen at seminars and in private practice.

"If you would like to learn more about Zen and the wonders of your own mind, call or write for this free booklet..."

* * *

(from a RAMA SEMINARS notice; June 7, 1987)

"The cost of Saturday's Desert Excursion will be \$500. If you choose to attend both the Saturday and Sunday Excursions the rate will be \$1,000... No personal checks will be accepted..."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TAKE ME FOR A RIDE: COMING OF AGE IN A DESTRUCTIVE CULT ***

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