

Back in 1972, **John Macgregor** fell under the spell of Guru Maharaji, a plump 14-year-old who promised – and for a while delivered – divine peace of mind. The former follower recalls, on the eve of Maharaji's latest Australian visit, his 28-year journey to disillusionment.

Blinded by the light

"How do you find a lion that has
swallowed you?"
– Carl Jung

In 1980, it was brought to my attention that OPEC had once sparked a world oil crisis, that cricketers no longer always dressed in whites, and that someone called David Bowie had been very popular. My absence from the 1970s had much to do with a teenaged incarnation of God named Guru Maharaji, who had in 1971 decamped from northern India with his mother and three brothers – also great incarnations, though not quite as great as him – to Malibu Beach, southern California, and the West at large.

Now, 30 years on, after a long succession of sex and money scandals, most of Maharaji's "premies" – or devotees – have abandoned him. But in 1972, the plump 14-year-old persuaded me that a divine experience awaited me if I received his initiation, or "Knowledge" as he called it, which was based on four secret meditation techniques.

I'd been told about Maharaji by old schoolfriends from Geelong Grammar in September 1972. By early October, I was travelling up the Hume Highway with a group of his "premies" – Hindi for "giver of love" – whom I'd met at their Carlton ashram, to hear Maharaji speak in Sydney.

My fellow travellers were impressively euphoric. One zapped me with rapid-fire talk about my "third eye", which would duly open, she said, assuming I was pure enough.

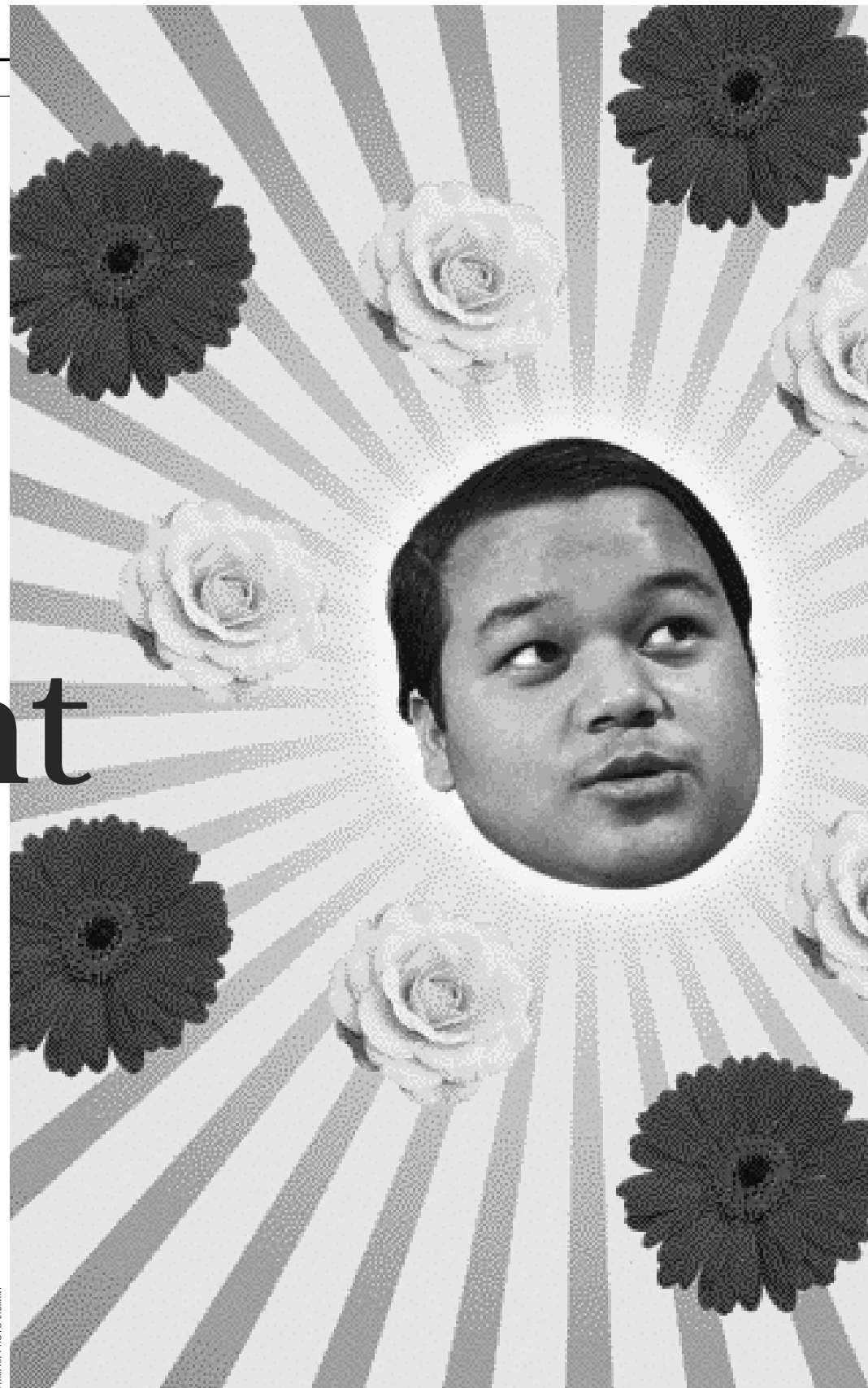
A shaven-headed Irishman meditated under a blanket for the entire 12-hour trip. Across the back seat, a girl fresh from the cast of *Hair* had the face of a Pre-Raphaelite princess, sang like an angel and didn't appear to have a boyfriend.

Someone gave me a *Divine Times* magazine, published by Maharaji's organisation, DLM or Divine Light Mission.

As we roared northward, I read Maharaji's words: "If you come to me with a guileless heart you will surely receive this most ancient spiritual Knowledge, which, if practised upon, will give you perfect peace of mind." (His English was far more circuitous than that, I was soon to discover, but his editors were Oxford graduates.) It was an impressive claim from someone six years younger than I was. So who was Maharaji exactly?

"Every ear should hear that the saviour of humanity has come!" he'd proclaimed. "When human beings forget the religion of humanity, the Supreme Lord incarnates ... If you want to give devotion, give it to Guru."

Compared with the other possibilities on offer (devoting myself to law or accountancy, for example), I wondered if it was such a bad idea.



Premies ate no meat, and en route to Sydney we wondered how we'd find vegetarian food. In Albury, the first thing that loomed into view was a health-food shop – a rarity in 1972.

"Maharaji! You are incredible!" my colleagues shouted to the thin air. A few hours later we ran out of petrol in a deserted backstreet of Yass. Almost immediately, an NRMA van materialised. "Oh, thank you, Maharaji!" my premie co-travellers chorused.

Gurus weave their spells, but devotees do a pretty good job on each other. By the time I reached Sydney, I'd been well primed for the big night – October 6 – when the purveyor of all this magic would address us at Sydney's Lower Town Hall.

On the night, the hall overflowed, and hundreds were turned away. Maharaji strode quickly through a path of rose petals to a throne at centre stage, and scanned the audience with what I thought to be a shifty, calculating look. (I later had it explained that he, being perfect, reflected all your defects back at you.) A throng of premies dived to the floor before him, flat on their faces.

Maharaji talked – sometimes obscurely, often repetitively, but always with transcendent self-confidence – of the divine experience that awaited me if I received his Knowledge. Arrayed in the seats around me like seraphs, those who'd received the Knowledge looked like the calmest, happiest people I'd ever seen.

Maharaji offered all the certitude an adolescent could ask for. Within his racked and tortured syntaxes, I gradually discerned the message I'd been waiting to hear since the end of childhood: life was not random.

Back in Melbourne after the Divine Visit, as Maharaji's Sydney appearance was called, I moved into the ashram in Carlton, renouncing sex, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes and meat. I wrote to the Commonwealth Bank asking them to make over my \$3.46 to Divine Light Mission. From now on, I disdainfully informed some no-doubt startled clerk, I was storing up my treasure "where moth and rust do not corrupt".

Why one might worship a person who to everyone else was a transparent fraud may lie in a comment evolutionist Richard Dawkins once made about religious nutters: "It is as though the faithful gain prestige through managing to believe even more impossible things than their rivals succeed in believing."

It sounds far-fetched. But in 1973, the world-famous author of *The Inner Game of Tennis*, Tim Gallwey – today one of Maharaji's closest disciples, and a hugely successful corporate trainer – was asked why he believed Maharaji was God, as opposed to a con artist. He answered: "A good con artist wouldn't wear a gold wristwatch or give such stupid answers." But all this is retrospective analysis. What was going on in my head in 1972?

Movies have now reinvented '70s youth as zany, happy-go-lucky and wildly experimental. In reality, vast numbers of us were paralysed by black angst. Personally, I was all at sea in a post-war world whose goals meant nothing

to me. Like his rivals, Maharaji capitalised with a vengeance on this Western malaise. And happily for him, he arrived at the height of an anti-rational era.

Maharaji's ashrams were very quiet places – indeed, within them, whole troubled parts of ourselves fell silent. Ashram life afforded freedom from the need to "succeed" in a society few of us could relate to. There was no peer pressure to get drunk or take drugs. The prohibition on relationships and sex was, for the first year or so, a welcome holiday from the disasters of dating, fumbling and sexual inexperience. And suddenly I had a new family – in fact, a whole international tribe.

As well as the conditioning which rained down on us daily from tapes, magazines and *mahatmas*, we all conditioned each other. Premies brought *prasad* (fragments of food Maharaji had discarded) and *charanamrit* (phials of water he'd bathed his feet in) home in suitcases from his international programs, like drug smugglers. Anything he'd touched was sacred. We once raffled a set of his mother's dental X-rays.

But for all that, Maharaji's "Knowledge" did deliver. It gave me peace, euphoria, love and certainty that I hadn't known were possible. It took away anxiety and even loneliness. It *had* to be divine, eternal, all-knowing.

During the '70s, for thousands of young Australians like me, devotion to the "Perfect Master" became known as the "hidden treasure within". But Maharaji wasn't short on hidden treasure of his own. Wherever he went – Australia, Taiwan, Japan, Fiji – there was a *darshan* line, where premies would queue to kiss his feet and deposit gifts of cash. The latter were spirited off to Hong Kong in suitcases by premie "couriers" – sometimes \$US300,000 or more at a time – and transferred to Maharaji's Swiss banks.

"There were also special fundraisers for the extravagant birthday gifts," recalls Michael Donner, former US national director of Maharaji's Divine Light Mission. "People flying around collecting bags of cash – often over \$US100,000 – for a new car or whatever. The use of the organisation to collect and solicit this money was no doubt not too legal."

Across the world, thousands gave away money, possessions, relationships, drugs and alcohol to move into his ashrams, where life was reduced to spare, elemental habits.

Daily ashram life consisted of singing a devotional prayer to "the Superior Power in person" (Maharaji, of course), meditation and "service" (work) – in my case establishing DLM's legal and tax status. Evenings were given over to *satsang*, where often hundreds of premies gathered, in floor-length dresses and poorly cut suits, to express devotion to Maharaji – or a gigantic photo of him, to be precise.

Though sex was banned, there were some dramatic elopements, and many of us, after a time, began secret sexual liaisons, racked by guilt and fear. Numerous premie children were conceived on car seats, lawns and *satsang* hall



“Every ear should hear that the saviour of humanity has come! ... If you want to give devotion, give it to Guru”: the 14-year-old Maharaji arrives in Sydney in October 1972.

floors in the middle of the night, under the forbidding gaze of “the Lord all-powerful”, as Maharaji had described himself.

In 1973, Maharaji announced a program – Millennium 73 – to be held in the massive Astrodome in Houston, Texas. Still blissfully free of false modesty, he promised it would be “the most holy and significant event in human history”. His lean, dapper eldest brother, Bal Bhagwan Ji, said that beings from other planets would visit to pay homage to Maharaji.

But Millennium was a flop. Only 15,000 people turned up, not the expected 144,000, and all were from Earth. My Millennium high point was coming across Maharaji sitting on his golfcart at the top level of the Astrodome, at two in the morning, surrounded by a group of premies. His designer clothing was in marked contrast to the hand-me-downs worn by those around him. But more than that, he was the only person in the group who seemed to be himself. The women encircling him had their hands clasped rapturously to their breast, as if protecting themselves from his radiance. The men stood tensely, their hands clasped tightly in front of their genitals. Everybody sported fixed grins and, whenever Maharaji spoke, heads nodded up and down furiously. His jokes – most of them inane – were laughed at uproariously.

At the eye of this surreal tableau, my portly, golfcart-straddling deity struck me as unique, divine. But for the first time, the premies – until now my boon companions – appeared to be just sheep. I was still only 21: it never occurred to me that I was a member of the flock.

In 1970, Maharaji had said, “I will rule the world!” The world saw it rather differently. Press coverage through the 1970s was uniformly bad: Maharaji’s hospitalisation with ulcers; his marriage at 16 to a shapely blonde; the massive unpaid debts from Millennium. Then there was the Detroit journalist who’d thrown a cream pie in Maharaji’s face and been beaten nearly to death with a crowbar by a *mahatma* named Fakiranand.

Maharaji continued to have significant sums transferred to his Swiss banks. Mansions, luxury cars and the first of many private jets all materialised. An early Divine 707 boasted a gold toilet, says American ex-premie Cynthia Gracie, who worked to refurbish it – “though I don’t know if it was solid or plated gold”. Today, those assets which Maharaji’s aggrieved former devotees can trace

have been conservatively valued at \$100 million.

But even if we early premies had known the sheer volume of the loot, it probably wouldn’t have disillusioned us. I hadn’t noticed the rows of empty seats at Millennium, nor, when he addressed us from a throne so high it gave me a crick in the neck, Maharaji’s slurred, circular speech: “So it seems that apparently something is guiding something else, and something is guiding something else, and something is guiding something else, and then something is guiding something else. And it’s just like seems [*sic*] to be a series of things in this world that are making one or the other thing go.”

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Bob Mishler was for five years Divine Light Mission’s president and Maharaji’s personal secretary. Years later, as an ex-premie, he explained the performance. The Perfect Master, he said, had been “sloshed”.

After a bitter 1974 power struggle, two of Maharaji’s brothers and his mother denounced him as a fraud. Over the next decade, Maharaji – sensing a growing wariness of cults – closed the ashrams, dropped the “Guru” from his name and ceased to wear the jewelled crown of Krishna, the great boy-God of Hinduism. Premies worldwide were instructed to hand in their tapes and magazines. The Holy Family, and Maharaji’s claims to divinity, were consigned to the flames.

By the mid-’80s, Divine Light Mission had re-emerged as Elan Vital. (It’s the same organisation I incorporated in 1974, with a name-change and a more corporate veneer.) The Lord of the Universe had morphed into “someone who speaks about life”, as Elan Vital rather blandly described him. The idea of his divinity, Maharaji explained, had been a “misunderstanding” propagated by his *mahatmas* (senior lieutenants).

By now I was no longer a renunciate: full-blown devotion had given way to marriage, children and career. But I still meditated daily, gave regular money, and volunteered for the organisation.

In 1991, Maharaji’s mission gained a new lease of life when an international meeting place for him and

"If you will come to me with a guileless heart you will surely receive this most ancient spiritual Knowledge": after his arrival in Sydney, Guru Maharaji is whisked away in the holy Roller.



his devotees was set up on 800 hectares of reclaimed farmland outside Brisbane. For the first time, Australia became the centre of his global activities.

Amaroo, as the property is known to premises – publicly it's called Ivory's Rock Conference Centre – hosts gatherings once or twice a year, with up to 5000 attendees pouring in from every continent. (Another is being staged next week.) The property has tens of millions of dollars in infrastructure, including kilometres of fibre-optic cabling, a million-dollar meeting hall, a tiered outdoor amphitheatre seating 4500, and 20 shops, including food outlets and a clothing shop selling expensive, Maharaji-endorsed caps, mugs, T-shirts and trinkets. Funds for all this are raised by Elan Vital via fees to attend programs (up to several thousand dollars to camp, for instance) and millions in gifts and loans from its "major donors".

As well as giving daily addresses, Maharaji spends a lot of his time at Amaroo "resting", and partying at his luxury camp site. He goes for the occasional walk, shoots rabbits (an official secret) and meets with his international organisers.

A highlight of Amaroo programs is the *darshan* line – the foot-kissing ritual which he has quietly revived. These are now entered via a metal detector, and held on days when no outsiders are present, their existence publicly denied.

By the '90s, I was experiencing some "drips" – an ex-premie term for anomalies or wrongs which penetrate one's thick mental armour, enabling doubt to grow, and one's addiction to Maharaji to loosen.

A major drip came in 1997, when most of Amaroo's managers complained about the autocratic style of its top leadership. Maharaji sent an envoy from the US to put 40 people, including the mutineers, through intensive self-criticism sessions, amid confessions of unworthiness and guilt. The strangest thing was that those who tearfully – at times hysterically – confessed to the most thoroughgoing unworthiness had done nothing wrong. (The worst offenders, like myself, stayed dry-eyed.)

I left Amaroo and Queensland after this, somewhat troubled, but returned for a week-long "training" session in September 1999, run by Maharaji himself.

It was an exercise in confusion and fear. Maharaji seemed to be on a hair-trigger the entire week, and descended into violent rages on small provocation.

Pointless tasks were repeated. Unwinnable team games were played. Endless messages about independence,

respect and honesty were hammered in – then undercut by demands for obedience, by abuse, and by secret deals between the trainers and particular attendees.

I finally grasped that Maharaji thrives on the mixed message: independence/devotion, honesty/secret, trust yourself/trust the master. One half of the mixed message empowers and expands, the other half intimidates and reduces; one half provokes love, the other half fear; one half liberates, the other half enslaves.

The mixed message thus strategically confuses.

Finally I was digging through the surface logic – the premise – which had been installed all those years before in my 20-year-old skull.

Today the contradiction between freedom and slavery which Maharaji embodies is blindingly clear. But for

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the years that it was not, it troubled me in strange, unconscious ways: an inability to explain Maharaji to outsiders, ethical lapses I would not normally have been prey to, clinging to "safe" channels of thought, the sapping of ambition.

In 1996, Canadian lawyer and ex-premie Jim Heller was cruising the early cult newsgroups on the Internet, looking for some mention of Maharaji. Nothing. Then, slowly, other ex-premies materialised, including one who happened to have web design skills: www.ex-premie.org was born. As bits of information – recollections, documents, photos – trickled in to the web site from all over the world, an entirely new picture of the Perfect Master began to emerge.

As Heller argues, "Without [the Net], I'd have been just another guy with some quirky past who, if I was lucky, *might* get a chance to hash it all out in an airport bar with some other former comrade 20 years down the line. But the Net has spurred us all on to being cold-case detectives – scrutinising our collective past with the benefit of maturity, hindsight and relief from the information-deprivation all cults seem to thrive on."

An early eye-opener was an interview with the late Bob Mishler, whose disclosures covered the waterfront: Maharaji "drank heavily ... to the point that he was stewed every evening".

"He would find ways to charge off things that we'd bought – for him – to various Divine Light Mission departments ... Consumerism is like a disease with him."

Mishler had one recurrent theme: "Most of the members ... have only seen Maharaji under very well-staged and planned conditions."

The www.ex-premie.org site went on to reveal that Maharaji has fabricated his lineage as a master, that inner-circle premies were formally gagged about his profligate lifestyle (a process known as "X-rating"), and that he'd

The Perfect Master, it's claimed, was an abusive alcoholic who smoked pot and had an aide arrange for premie women to provide sexual favours.

accidentally run down a cyclist in Delhi and had a houseboy take the rap.

But the scandal which came to cause Elan Vital's international PR team the most grief surrounds the Indian Mahatma Jagdeo, 20 years ago described by some as "Maharaji's closest *mahatma*".

Via the ex-premie web site, two women came forward claiming that as children in the 1970s they were sexually assaulted by Jagdeo. One, Susan Haupt, says several other victims are unwilling to speak out publicly. Twenty years ago and more, Haupt says, she twice sent word of Jagdeo's misdeeds to Maharaji personally. But Jagdeo remained prominent in the

organisation, his access to children continuing unabated. Elan Vital now acknowledges that Jagdeo offended and several ex-premies attest that stories of Jagdeo's pedophilia were known at senior levels as early as 1978. I saw Jagdeo at Maharaji's Delhi ashram in 1997. Elan Vital now says he has "disappeared".

Worse was to come. The indefatigable Jim Heller tracked down Michael Dettmers, who'd managed Maharaji's assets, personal affairs and "presentation to the world" from 1975 till 1987. The Perfect Master, Dettmers disclosed, was not just an alcoholic, but often an abusive one. While insisting that people in ashrams abstain from drugs, alcohol and sex, Dettmers claims Maharaji had smoked pot four or five nights a week at Malibu, and had Dettmers arrange for premie women to provide sexual favours. Invariably, the women were quickly dropped, with "upset and confusion" resulting.

Those who spill such beans do not get off lightly. In January, cyber attacks on www.ex-premie.org twice disabled its host server, paralysing scores of businesses. Web sites put up last year by premies still faithful to Maharaji suggested that Dettmers, Donner and 21 other prominent ex-premies were mentally ill, kidnappers or pedophiles.

In India, Maharaji is still announced as a deity; in Australia, his devotees include psychiatrists, businessmen and journalists. But in the West, overt devotion is confined to the *darshan* lines, and what ex-premies call the "Backstage Vestal Virgin Cult": those super-devoted premie women who shower and meditate before scrubbing

clean every inch of his backstage floor. Maharaji still tours the world, often several times a year; though maximum program numbers are down from 20,000 in 1979 to 5000 now. Even in India his popularity has waned. In Delhi in 1970, he drew a crowd of one million; today his Delhi programs draw about 70,000.

You can stay in denial for only so long. Finally I went to the web site and read the revelations I'd been hearing about – and rebutting – for so long. I chased them down to primary sources and verified them. Thereafter, I dissociated myself from Maharaji, quickly and publicly.

Equally quickly, two 30-year friends launched onto the Internet – one stating that I might be "on the verge of a nervous breakdown", the other that I was "schizophrenic" and "a drug addict".

Leaving was, indeed, what I imagine coming off heroin to be like: for months my nervous system laboured mightily to catch up with my intellect. It was as if I'd taken the door off a cave of bats, which were now flying, shrieking, into the daylight.

The "bats" were long-repressed feelings and disused analytical skills – and judgements about the treachery I'd seen around Maharaji which were so secret, so inadmissible, that I'd hidden them even from myself.

But when that turbulent few months had ended, the dominant feeling was sheer relief.

When I told them the news, my non-premie friends uniformly said: "Thank God!"

Masters, they already knew, were for dogs. ■