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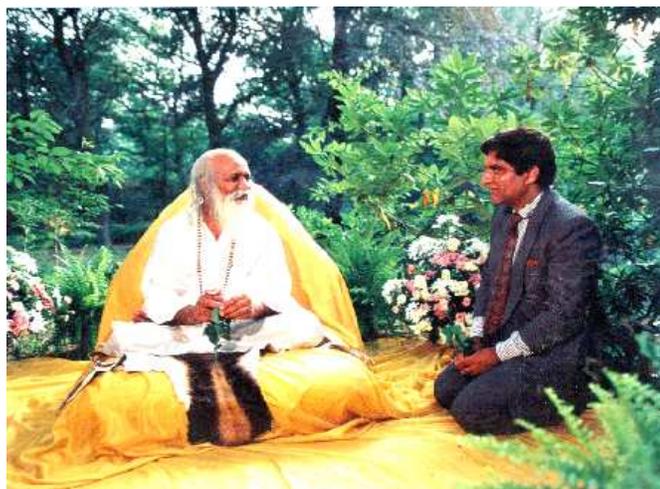
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The Maharishi Years - The Untold Story: Recollections of a Former Disciple

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August 1, 1991 saw the publication of my book, *Perfect Health*, a popular guide to Ayurveda that came at the height of my involvement with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Although I had been meditating less than a decade in comparison with TM meditators who went back to the Sixties, my association with Maharishi quickly became personal. He felt comfortable around other Indians and had a special regard for trained scientists and physicians. In return I had a deep fascination with enlightenment and the almost supernatural status of gurus. A few days before the book's publication, I was in Fairfield, Iowa to participate in a meditation course. Maharishi was supposed to address the assembly on speaker phone from India, but the phone call didn't come through at the appointed time. We all dispersed.

A couple of hours later when I was in meditation I had a vision of Maharishi lying in a hospital bed with intravenous tubes in his body breathing on a respirator. I quickly got out of the meditation and phoned my parents in New Delhi. My mother picked up the phone and told me that Maharishi was very sick. "They think he's been poisoned. Come quickly," she said. I asked to speak to my father, who was a cardiologist. She said, "Your father isn't here. He's taking care of Maharishi." This began a journey that took me to the very heart of who the guru is and who he is expected to be. The two can be in jarring opposition.

I immediately left Fairfield for Chicago, where a wealthy TM donor had been kind enough to charter a plane for me. When I arrived in Delhi, it was past midnight. I first went home. My father was not there, and my mother told me he was still with Maharishi in a house in Golflinks, a private reserve in the city. One room had been converted into an intensive care unit presided over by my father and other doctors. I arrived at the house at 2:00 am, and when I entered the makeshift ICU I saw Maharishi lying unconscious in a bed with IV tubes and a respirator just as I had foreseen. My father informed me darkly that after drinking a glass of orange juice given to him by "a foreign disciple," Maharishi had suffered severe abdominal pain and inflammation of the pancreas, along with kidney failure followed by a heart attack. Poisoning was suspected. Over the next few days Maharishi's condition worsened. The pancreas and kidney functions continued to deteriorate, and his heart didn't improve. My father was of the opinion that Maharishi should be taken to England for a course of kidney dialysis. The Indian TM organization, centered around Maharishi's nephews, Prakash and Anand Shrivastava, were adamant that no one in the movement should find out that Maharishi was grievously ill. The rationale was that his followers would panic and lose faith.

I found myself torn, because Maharishi had long presented himself as being far from the typical Hindu guru. He did not assert his own divinity. He credited his entire career to his own master, Guru Dev. He seemed indifferent to the cult of personality and the aura of superstition surrounding gurus, which includes the notion that they have perfect control over mind and body and hold the secret of immortality. But deeper than that, Maharishi wasn't a religious figure. Although he had taken vows as a monk, he brought a technique to the West, Transcendental Meditation, that was entirely secular and even scientific. Indeed, his lasting memory will probably be that he convinced Westerners of the physical and mental

benefits of a purely mechanical non-religious approach to consciousness. I was troubled that his falling ill had to be hidden essentially to preserve the image of a superhuman being who couldn't get sick like mere mortals.

There was one person the Indian inner circle chose to trust, however. He was Neil Paterson, a Canadian who had been chosen by Maharishi as chief spokesman and de facto head of the movement. Neil and I flew to England and made arrangements for Maharishi to be admitted to a private hospital on Harley Street. My father and two other doctors chartered a plane and brought Maharishi to London. I remember standing outside the London Heart Hospital, watching an ambulance navigate the snarled traffic, sirens wailing. Just before it arrived on the hospital's doorstep, one of the accompanying doctors ran up with the news that Maharishi had suddenly died. I rushed to the ambulance, picking Maharishi's body up -- he was frail and light by this time - and carrying him in my arms through London traffic.

I laid him on the floor inside the hospital's doors and called for a cardio assist. Within minutes he was revived and rushed to intensive care on a respirator and fitted with a pacemaker that took over his heartbeat. The attending physician felt that Maharishi was clinically dead. My father suggested that we keep him on life support, however, until the family gave permission to take him off. As fate would have it, after 24 to 36 hours the attending informed us that Maharishi was recovering miraculously. His kidney function was returning to normal, his heart was beating independent of the pacemaker, and he had started to breathe on his own. Within a few days he was sitting up in bed, drinking milk with honey. The doctor could not explain this recovery; everyone in the hospital, including his nurses, were awestruck, not just by the turn-around but by his presence, which induced a sense of peace in anyone who came near.

Let me pause here to reflect on the strange juxtapositions at work. I genuinely felt in the midst of the crisis that I was fulfilling a purpose beyond myself. A series of circumstances had brought me to the very moment when someone had to intervene to save Maharishi's life, and it was as if the universe had conspired to carry me to that moment. At the same time, he exhibited both the all-too-human qualities found in every holy man and other qualities one associates with the superhuman. I had the distinct sensation of standing on the border between two worlds, or should one say two versions of the human condition? It was easy to believe that other disciples in another time felt much the same in the presence of Jesus or Buddha.

Maharishi's complete recovery happened slowly. There was a point where the doctor informed us that he had severe anemia and needed a blood transfusion. When they typed and cross-matched Maharishi's blood, I turned out to be the only match - this, of course, only increased my sense of being a participant in a drama shaped by forces outside myself. When he was informed about the situation, however, Maharishi refused to accept my blood but would give no reason. Considering that much had been made of how he had studied physics in college and had insisted on the scientific validity of TM, this was a baffling decision. Then I had a sudden insight. He didn't want my blood because he didn't want my karma. After all, I had been a smoker, had indulged in alcohol and sex and had even experimented with LSD years before. I went to Maharishi and confronted him with my realization. I asked if he believed that karma could be transmitted in the blood. He responded reluctantly, "That's true." I told him that red blood cells do not have a nucleus and therefore contain no DNA. Without genetic information my blood would only be giving him the hemoglobin he needed without karmic infection. At first he was suspicious, but I had the hematologist explain to him that memory and information is not transferred through a red blood transfusion. Eventually he accepted my blood. As he regained strength, we removed him from the hospital, and he was brought to a London hotel to continue recuperating.

This began a period of increased intimacy between us. We would go for long walks in Hyde Park, which felt strange given the complete blackout of news to the TM movement, which was told that Maharishi had decided to go into silence for the time being. On one occasion, a stranger ran up to us in the park and asked, "Aren't you the guru of the Beatles?" My wife Rita, who had joined us that day, quickly interjected, "He's my father-in-law. Please leave him alone." In the end we felt that staying in London risked unnecessary publicity. So Maharishi was moved to a country home in the southwest of England where I spent hours personally nursing him. He took the occasion to give me deep insight and knowledge about Vedanta. He also gave me advanced meditation techniques. Those languid weeks and months alone with Maharishi, except for the servants who cooked and served his meals, were the most precious days of my life. I grew very fond of him and he evoked a love in me that I had never experienced before. In turn, I realized that he was also getting fond of me. We discussed just about every topic in the world from politics (on which he had very strong opinions) to human relationships (which he thought were full of melodrama) to the nature of consciousness (his favorite subject). Yet I still remained on the cusp of an uneasy truce between the physical frailty of an old man who at times could be fretful and worried and a guru whose mortality was like an admission of imperfection.

In all, Maharishi was out of circulation for almost a year; few in the TM movement knew where he was, and almost no one was willing to concede that he had been sick. After he was fully recovered we flew him via helicopter back to his chosen residence, which wasn't in either India or the U.S. but the obscure village of Vlodrop in Holland. It would be impossible to calculate how many disciples and even casual TM meditators would have given anything for personal time with Maharishi. Because of his mass appeal and his undeniable presence, there were many who cherished a moment with him as the most precious in their lives. Yet I was growing increasingly disturbed by contradictions I couldn't reconcile.

Maharishi had spent decades traveling the globe to promote TM; now he remained permanently in Vlodrop while I was sent, as one of his main emissaries, on a routine of almost constant jet travel. He aimed at ever-increasing expansion. Eastern Europe and the Soviet bloc were opened up to meditation. Gradually so was the Islamic world, which resisted TM in large part because the initiation ceremony included a picture of Maharishi's teacher sitting on an altar, which went against the Muslim prohibition over depicting God or holy men. Everywhere I went I was given the respect accorded to my guru, bringing with it a level of pomp and ceremony that verged on veneration. Not only did this make me uncomfortable personally, but I wondered why Maharishi, the first "modern" guru, allowed and encouraged it. It seemed inconsistent with Vedanta's central theme that the material world is illusion, not to mention the freedom from materialism that is expected of one who is enlightened.

Ironically, the respect shown to me in his name came to be my undoing. Maharishi started to give me the perception (perhaps that was my own projection) that he felt I was competing with him in a spiritual popularity contest. On more than one occasion, he casually mentioned that I was seeking adulation for myself. This was odd considering that he had been the one who thrust me forward in the first place, and who insisted on piling tributes on me that I had no choice but to accept whatever my embarrassment. The situation came to a head. In July, 1993, during the celebration of Guru Purnima, I went to see Maharishi in his private rooms to pay my respects. It was close to midnight after all the day's public ceremonies had ended. Rita and I entered the room in near darkness. Besides Maharishi, the only person present was a TM higher up, Benny Feldman, who kept silent as Maharishi said, "People are telling me that you are competing with me."

At that point I had only heard indirect reports about his displeasure; this was the first time, in fact, that Maharishi had shown anything but the highest trust in me. It was true that after his medical crisis he refused to discuss his health and took pains to indicate that where once I had been his physician, now I was to consider myself in the former position of disciple. Actually, I admired him for this. It would have been impertinent for me to take any other role. To be in the presence of someone like Maharishi is to realize an immense gulf in consciousness. His physical status continued to be amazingly strong considering what he had been through.

Here he was now, in my eyes, playing the part of an irascible, jealous old man whose pride had been hurt. For my part, I was dismayed that he might believe the rumors. Then he made a demand. "I want you to stop traveling and live here at the ashram with me." He also wanted me to stop writing books. After delivering what amounted to an ultimatum, I was given twenty-four hours to make up my mind.

It was a critical moment. Then and there I had to consider the entirety of the guru-disciple relationship. To anyone outside India, much misunderstanding surrounds the whole issue of taking on an enlightened teacher. To begin with, there is a Western predisposition to doubt that enlightenment could be real except as personified in Buddha or a limited number of saints and sages who existed centuries ago. There is also a

sense in the West that following a guru is tantamount to surrendering your personal identity, your bank account, and your dignity. None of these issues concerned me, however. In the role of guru Maharishi was authentic, dignified, respectful, and accepting. In addition, he was personally lovable and a joy to be around (even if one had to suffer patiently through discourses that lasted many hours and that circled around the same basic points.) The dilemma I faced was more fundamental: Can a real guru be unfair, jealous, biased, and ultimately manipulative?

For a devotee, the answer is unquestionably yes. The role of a disciple isn't to question a guru, but the exact opposite: Whatever the guru says, however strange, capricious, or unfair, is taken to be truth. The disciple's role is to accommodate to the truth, and if it takes struggle and "ego death" to do that, the spiritual fruits of obedience are well worth it. A guru speaks for God and pure consciousness; therefore, his words are a direct communication from Brahman, who knows us better than we know ourselves. In essence the guru is like a superhuman parent who guides our steps until we can walk on our own. Was Maharishi doing that to me?

I never found out, because practical considerations loomed large at that moment. I had a family with children in school, a wife who decidedly did not want to live an ashram life, and no visible means of support if I stopped producing books and giving lectures. I told Maharishi that I didn't need twenty-four hours to make my decision. I would leave immediately and not return. With some surprise he asked me why. I told him that I had no ambitions to be a guru myself - the very idea appalled me. I was dismayed that he would believe such rumors. It was beyond my imagination for anyone to compare me to him or that I would have the gall to do the same.

It's only after his death that I feel free to divulge this final parting of ways. To outsiders it will seem like a tempest in a teapot, but in my leaving the TM movement it was widely rumored that I wanted to be the guru of my own movement. While the media casually refers to any spokesperson from the East as a guru, but that doesn't diminish the fact that Maharishi actually was a guru and great Rishi of the Vedic tradition, while I am a doctor who loved the philosophy of Vedanta and also loved articulating it for the man on the street. I said goodbye to Maharishi, took Rita's hand, and walked away. We drove from Vlodrop to Amsterdam in the middle of the night and took a plane to Boston. When we arrived home in Lincoln, Massachusetts, the phone was ringing. A contrite and forgiving Maharishi was on the line. He said, "You are my son, you will inherit all that I have created. Come back and all will be yours."

I replied that I didn't want what he was offering. I loved the knowledge of Vedanta and wanted to devote myself to it. By the end of the conversation, however, I relented and told him that I would think about it. In the ensuing months I was approached by medical institutions and universities to introduce Ayurveda and TM as part of their programs. However, when I contacted Maharishi and the movement with these promising prospects I was told that I shouldn't pursue these offers. At the same time decisions were made to raise the cost of TM astronomically, putting it out of reach for ordinary people. On January 12, 1994 I went back to Vlodrop for the annual New Year's celebration and told Maharishi that I was leaving permanently. I expressed my immeasurable gratitude to him and told him that I would love him forever. When we parted, he said, "Whatever you do will be the right decision for you. I will love you, but I will also be indifferent to you from now on."

At first his being indifferent felt very hurtful, but then I realized that Maharishi was offering love with detachment, the mark of a great sage. I remembered one of his favorite remarks, which he once directed to me: "I love you, but it's none of your business." What followed for me was the arc of a public career that became more acceptable to the outside world once I was no longer aligned with a guru. In some people's eyes I dropped Maharishi in order to launch myself. This perception has led to recriminations in the TM movement. One is faced with the sad spectacle of people striving to gain enlightenment while at the same vilifying anyone who dares to stray from the fold. Nothing I did after leaving Maharishi was premeditated. I later visited the Shankaracharya of Jyotir Math and told him about my situation. His response was sympathetic: he told me that I remained an exponent of Vedanta for the West and was therefore true to the tradition.

I believe that Maharishi would have been the first to agree. It's not possible to stray from the one reality, and if Maharishi the personality couldn't give his blessing, at a deeper level Maharishi the guru was doing his job of coaxing consciousness to expand. There was no way for me to reconcile the two opposites back then, but I have come to realize that I never needed to. All opposites are reconciled in unity consciousness, the state that Maharishi was in and the state I aspire to every day.

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