

The Rush of Gurus

Summary: The 1960s and 1970s mark the popularity of the guru or swami movement in the United States. In the late 1960s and 1970s, new streams of Hindu religious life came to the United States with the arrival of new gurus or spiritual teachers.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, new streams of Hindu religious life came to the United States. The term *guru*, or spiritual teacher, became a household word. Becoming a *swami* or a *guru* is not a matter of academic degrees or book learning, but deep spiritual insight that must be confirmed by the authority of one's own teacher.

Many *gurus* came from India to America in these years. In India, it is taken for granted that some *gurus* are more genuine representatives of their traditions of learning than others. In America, all had a chance to attract a following. Some came and went quickly, sometimes amidst controversy. Others came and settled into the American landscape, where their influence is still felt today.

Among the first to arrive was the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, a student of the Shankaracharya of Jyoshimath in the Himalayas, who became the *guru* of the Beatles and started the Students International Meditation Society (SIMS) in 1965. He was the first to popularize a discipline of meditation he called TM, Transcendental Meditation, insisting that it was not "Hindu," but scientific and universal. In the fast-paced, stress-filled life of mid-20th century America, a simple and accessible meditation routine came to many as a welcome relief. By 1975, Dr. Herbert Benson of the Harvard Medical School had monitored TM meditators and confirmed the physiological benefits of the hypometabolic state produced by meditation. The TM movement continues today in what it describes as a "secular," and not specifically Hindu, form.

A very different guru of the 1960s was Swami A.C. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada whose teacher in India had instructed him to carry the message of Krishna to the West. His story is, in one sense, a great "American" story. Having arrived nearly penniless in New York in 1965, he began chanting "Hare Krishna, Hare Rama" in Tompkins Square Park. Within a few months, he opened a storefront temple on Second Avenue, which was America's first Krishna temple of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON).

The movement became known more popularly as “Hare Krishna” for its public chanting of Krishna’s name. Unlike other groups that emphasized meditation or yoga, this was a distinctively *bhakti* style of Hinduism, emphasizing the devotional love and service of Lord Krishna. Such a fervent piety did not, at first, seem a likely magnet for young Americans in the turmoil of the sixties, but, astonishingly, it attracted a dedicated group of young people. The Krishna temples of the late sixties and seventies were all devotional communities in which the daily round of *pujas* honored Lord Krishna and his beloved Radha with incense and bells, oil lamps and flowers, and song and dance. When post-1965 immigrants came from India, the Hare Krishna temples were often the first, and usually the only Hindu temples they found.

The 1960s and 1970s saw many other *gurus*. There was the young Guru Maharaj-ji, whose meteoric rise began in 1971 and started to decline almost as quickly after a disastrous rally in the Houston Astrodome in 1973, which left his Divine Light Mission deeply in debt. Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh also attracted a visible following, both at his *ashram* in Pune, India and in the United States. His fortunes began to decline in the wake of controversy when he and his followers moved en masse to the small town of Antelope, Oregon, which they renamed Rajneeshpuram. The *ashram* disintegrated in 1985.

Swami Satchidananda was another leader who helped to shape this spiritual trend in the United States. He spoke at Woodstock in 1969 and later taught *yoga* at his Yogaville ashram in rural Virginia, the headquarters of Integral Yoga International. In 1969, Swami Rama came to the United States and demonstrated the voluntary bodily control of *yoga* at the research department of the Menninger Foundation. He started the Himalayan Institute in Honesdale, Pennsylvania to bring East and West together in the practice of holistic health and *yoga*.

Swami Muktananda came to the U.S. and launched the Siddha Yoga Dham Movement in 1970. By 1976, Siddha Yoga had eighty meditation centers and five *ashrams*, and claimed thousands of followers. His second visit lasted from 1974 to 1976 and saw the institutionalization of Siddha Yoga Meditation in America with the establishment of the SYDA (Siddha Yoga Dham Associates) Foundation. It continues today under the leadership of Muktananda’s spiritual successor, Gurumayi Chidvilasananda, an Indian-born woman who leads the SYDA central *ashram*.

In addition to *gurus* from India, there were American-born seekers who themselves became *gurus* in the 1970s. Richard Alpert, a professor of psychology at Harvard University, found his *guru*, Neem Karoli Baba, in the Himalayas and became Ram Dass. He became a teacher himself, drawing on both Hindu and Buddhist *dharma* to articulate a teaching of service in a growing organization called Seva, simply “Service.” Joyce Green was a Jewish housewife in Brooklyn when she became a student and devotee of Christ, Swami Nityananda, and Neem Karoli Baba. As Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati, she was the spiritual teacher of Kashi Ashram in Florida and, like Ram Dass, directed her teaching toward service, especially to those living and dying with AIDS. Swami Chetanananda of the Nityananda Institute, based in Portland, Oregon, is a student of the late Rudrananda. Rudrananda, an American, had an eclectic background, studying with the Shankaracharya of Puri, with Swami Nityananda, and then with Swami Muktananda, before striking off on his own path as a teacher.

Despite the sometimes controversial histories of the many Hindu teachers who have attracted an American following, one thing is clear: *yoga*, meditation, and a Hindu “turn of mind” have had an impact on America far greater than any one teacher or *guru*.