

open eyes

When the blinkers came off, a wide world of yoga was revealed.

Until two years ago, my husband and I thought we had found a healthy yoga community with an enlightened “guru” at the helm. We loved and trusted the guru and for 10 years voluntarily ran one of his yoga centres. We also spent most of our holidays with him in India.

Then we started hearing allegations that our guru was secretly having sex with his disciples, some just in their teens. He was telling them he was administering divine blessings to speed up their spiritual development. They were told to keep it a secret, because others would feel jealous. But some of the girls decided to reveal what they say was abuse. The revelations split our yoga community; the guru denied the allegations and told us to shun the girls.

We personally know some of the girls who made these allegations, and they were clearly traumatised. After an agonising period of soul searching, we eventually came to the conclusion that by staying involved in the group, we would be supporting an organisation that is closed to examination and turns on members who voice dissent.

Broken-hearted, we extracted ourselves from the yoga centre and started a new life. Well, it was more complicated than that; there was a short period when we stayed with the guru in case he came clean and needed our help. But he hasn't.



With hindsight, we realise that we were in a cult. Cults are places where a charismatic leader tells followers they are the “chosen ones” and those outside the group are *kusang* (bad company). We were encouraged to mix only with members of the group, to work hard doing karma yoga and earn the privilege of serving the guru directly. Service to the guru (*guru seva*), brings his mercy (*guru kripa*), the essential ingredient for yoga's holy grail, moksha, or liberation.

Our guru broke up relationships and advised disciples against career or study choices. He even started telling us that the guru loved us more than our own parents. Thankfully, Mum still loves me and I still have friends, but they tell me they can't understand why I allowed myself to get so caught up with a guru.

I came to the guru at a vulnerable time, when my father was dying and I had just lost my job. The guru offered an exciting new spiritual life. Once

in, I threw myself into karma yoga and felt overjoyed to be part of a passionate community. Being around the guru was an ecstatic experience.

I also had moments of doubt about what the guru said, like calling people who weren't in the group "bad company". But I practised the guru's advice, "let doubt go out" and closed my mind to examining those doubts. It was like I put blinkers on in order to shut out any doubts that our guru called "negative thinking".

I have been telling people that since I left the guru, I feel liberated. When I took my blinkers off, my mind started opening. I am enjoying life like I have never enjoyed it before. I can happily embrace my family and friends despite their different life choices.

Now I enjoy attending kirtan events (the guru said "kirtan is too emotional"); I enjoy experiencing all types of yoga classes (the guru told us "modern yoga has lost its way—stick with one path"); and I no longer ask a guru for life advice (the guru advised "try to let go of your own worldly needs and focus more on service").

I no longer feel guilty if I try to have my own children rather than run fundraisers for the guru's schools in India. I no longer feel that service to my friends and family is selfish. Most importantly, I have empowered myself to question things rather than blindly follow some dogma dished out by a charismatic person.

Being in a cult was good for me, because now that I am free I can appreciate the beauty of this life.

I've written all this knowing that I'm preaching to the choir—if you are in a yoga community and reading this, you are probably having the same response that I would have had: "Poor wretch, that couldn't happen to me because my guru is the real deal and my spiritual community is healthy." If this is you, I hope that's true. But, if you have any nagging doubts about whether it is healthy, examine these doubts and follow your instincts.

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How do you know you're in a cult?

Be wary when you notice the first signs of:

Taboo topics Questions that can't be asked, doubts that can't be shared, misgivings that can't be voiced.

Secrets The suppression of information, usually tightly guarded by an inner circle.

Spiritual clones Stereotypic behaviour, such as people who walk, talk, eat and dress just like their leader. Or psychological stereotyping, such as an entire group of people who manifest only a narrow range of feeling in any and all situations (always happy or pious, or reducing everything to a single explanation).

Groupthink A party line that overrides how people actually feel; typically the cognitive glue that binds the group, for example: "You're impure, and Shiva is the answer."

The elect Shared delusion of grandeur that there is no way but this one.

The corollary You're lost if you leave the group.

No graduates Members are never weaned from the group. Often accompanies the corollary above.

Assembly lines Everyone is treated identically, no matter what their differences, for example, mantras are assigned by dictates of a demographical checklist.

Loyalty tests Members are asked to prove loyalty to the group by doing something that violates their personal ethics; for example, set up an organisation that has a hidden agenda of recruiting others into the group, but publicly represents itself as a public service outfit.

Duplicity The group's public face misrepresents its true nature.

Unifocal understanding Single world view is used to explain anything and everything.

Humourlessness No irreverence is allowed.

Adapted from "Early warning signs for the detection of spiritual blight" by Daniel Goleman.