BHAGWAN AND THE HUMAN POTENTIAL MOVEMENT

by

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Chandra Mohan Jain was born in a small town in India in 1931. His family were cloth merchants and, as their name tells us, their religion was Jain. Chandra Mohan's family dubbed him Raja (a common nickname meaning King); Rajneesh in the affectionate diminutive form. An intelligent lad, he could not easily accept the assumptions and beliefs of the society around him. And he enjoyed pranks. He came across as friendly but detached. In his teens, he joined the youth wing of the Indian National Army, which was dedicated to throwing British imperialism out of India. For a time Rajneesh agreed with its atheist and socialist tendencies. He studied philosophy at college. This was a disturbed period in his life. He was obsessed with long distance running and equally long hours of meditation. He irritated other people with his knowledge, argumentativeness and hypochondria. For long stretches he was depressed. He came across as a loner who read widely, was formidable in argument but who also showed some charm.

After graduation and an M.A. in Philosophy, Rajneesh took up a teaching post in 1957 at the Raipur Sanskrit College. In 1960 he was appointed assistant professor of Philosophy at Jabalpur University. In the same year, he began to give public lectures. His themes were always controversial. He attacked socialism and Ghandi as being reactionary and in thrall to poverty. He praised capitalism, technology and birth control as superior to Hinduism. Many were repelled by him. Some, especially rich business men in Bombay and some activists from India's struggle for independence, supported him. Meditation camps were set up. Rajneesh resigned his professorship in 1966 and was supported by his followers. He travelled in India and gave lectures on a range of political and social topics in a charismatic manner. Sexual feelings should be acted on; sex is divine; enjoy yourself and become liberated by acknowledging your primal energy, were the main themes. In 1970 he settled permanently in Bombay with a secretary and a small organization.

From 1970 to 1974 Rajneesh Chandra Mohan, known as acharya (teacher) transformed himself from a gifted peripatetic lecturer on themes of politics, sex and religion into an innovative guru. He claimed enlightenment (detachment from

desires and materialism) in the Eastern manner, adopted the title Bhagwan (Beloved One or God) and initiated disciples by giving them new names, a mala (string of beads with a picture of him) and told them to wear the colours of traditional Indian renunciate priests - orange and yellow. They were to meditate actively, typically, in one order or another, with hyperventilation, catharsis, free-flowing dance, and sitting still gently emptying out trains of thought. And they were encouraged to take part in Encounter Groups.

Bhagwan was well read in European philosophy and psychology and he was fascinated by Westerners and what he could learn from them. They in turn seemed unaware that he was learning about the human potential movement from them and unaware, too, of the racism which underlay their attitudes towards India. Very soon his followers were almost entirely Westerners. Bhagwan had picked up from them, and the books they brought him, the idiom of the human potential movement. He used this idiom, with its Reichian flavour, to get across his ideas, stemming from Indian philosophy, about life forces, sexuality and meditation. More Westerners came to him, some of them from the Esalen Institute, and either stayed or set up centres elsewhere. Encounter groups, primals, dynamic meditation and Bhagwan's lectures filled the daily programme along with business activities to raise money. Indians were excluded. There was something about the naked exploration of sexuality and feelings which the Westerners did not want to share with Indians. They colluded together so that they never confronted their own attitudes and fantasies about India, its people and traditions and its gurus.

The founders of Quaesitor, the first growth centre in Britain, which had close links with the Esalen Institute, joined Bhagwan. 'Teertha' stayed with Bhagwan as the leading but, by today's standards, poorly trained and unsupervised psychotherapist until the collapse of the organization. 'Poonam' founded Medina, the Rajneesh centre in Suffolk. Most British humanistic psychotherapists of the 1970s visited him for various lengths of time, some becoming sannyasins, at least for a while. Community, another growth centre in Britain, was also run by sannyasins.

Other people were impressed too. Although they did not join the movement, Bernard Levin, Terence Stamp and Alan Whicker, all spoke highly of it. Those who joined were, according to Rajneesh enquiries and according to researchers from Oregon University, from middle or upper middle class families (fathers professional or in business). 80% had some further education, 70% were graduates, 12% had doctorates, 25% were Jewish, 25% Roman Catholic. Virtually all were white. Many had qualified and practised in professional careers. This was a group of talented 'haves'. They said they were attracted by the cooperation, dedication, comradeship and high spirits which contrasted with the drudgery and downbeat nature of much of life lived in families and at work.

Curiously, a high proportion of them smoked cigarettes.

Those who became Sannyasins for any length of time and who lived permanently in one of the centres, seem to have swallowed some of the myths which were tangled up with the beginnings of the human potential movement: thought is bad (headstuff), expression of feeling is always good, organizations are the result of fear and are bad, 'communitas' is good.

When humanistic psychology began, in the 1950s, it was a reaction against the oppressive and distorting hold that dyed-in-the-wool psychoanalysis and rigid behaviourism had gained over psychology, in education and in psychotherapy. The philosophy that it seemed to embrace and the practices it developed were crude by comparison with today's emphasis on emotional competence, organizational openness, awareness of projection and exploitation. But it offered an experience of life which was not mechanical or pessimistic. It emphasized that we continue to grow as adults and that we can explore, through various therapeutic systems, our own potential as people with awareness and feelings. The 1960s provided a social climate in which centres sprang up to explore these things often in an uncritical way. The Sannyasins never developed beyond that stage and got more and more out of touch with humanistic psychology as it developed in the 1970s. Indeed, they seem to have fallen into several of the traps which humanistic psychology has since weaved its way around or climbed out of.

Perhaps one of the least recognised traps in hymanistic psycyology is to use feelings as a defence against the threat of reality. Our culture sets thought above feeling and encourages theories and arguments all of which can be used to block off unpleasant feelings such as fear, anger and grief. Getting in touch with blocked off feelings is a useful therapeutic process but it is counterproductive to do this as a way of repressing thought. A synthesis of thought, feeling, action and spirit is a better goal: harmony of head, heart, hand and halo without any one of them being repressed. Bhagwan's followers institutionalized a tendency to rush into feelings as a way of blocking off painful thought. The following is an example.

In 1983 there had been one of the recurrent public discussions of nuclear weapons. On a weekend visit to Medina, I asked one of the resident Sannyasin school teachers (they ran their own school) who I had got to know on previous visits, what his views were. All he could say was that he had once been on a CND rally and he had **felt** great. I would have valued a reasoned argument from him. He was, after all, a graduate of a respected university and a committed member of an organization dedicated to peace, love and laughter. I was disappointed. He answered my enquiries about how to reduce the chances of thermonuclear war (a difficult problem) by recounting the elation and sense of oneness that he had experienced on a demonstration. He seemed to be frightened of reasoned dialogue and jumped into feelings in order to avoid it.

Another trap in humanistic psychology, indeed in all psychology, is to be so person-centred as to be sociologically naive and to imagine that all social structure is harmful and unnecessary. Sannyasins seemed to aim at 'communitas' instead. Communitas is fine. It is a state without group structures and roles, with an emphasis on openness, spontaneity, expression of feeling, nakedness and being at one with humankind. Vic Turner described it well in several of his books. In order to grow, we need periods of communitas in which to recharge and reaffirm our higher selves. But we need society and organized groups too in order to develop as part of a culture which is created and maintained by the roles of teacher, priest, healer, professional, trader, craftsman and farmer and so on and in families which nurture children. These structures are also oppressive, sometimes extremely so. But by rejecting them and opting for a maximum of communitas, we deny ourselves half of our human potential. Rajneesh's followers seem to have caught hold of this tendency, which I believe was once deeply rooted in humanistic psychology, and made a world-wide organization out of it. Because they did not debate structures and procedures with one another but left Bhagwan and his appointed co-ordinators to rule by decree, they created communitas wherever they could. They seemed frightened to take responsibility for the social structure of which they were a part. It had the unfortunate effect of leading the Rajneesh organization to parody the extremes of the society it sought to better. It became greedy, hostile, duplicitous and cruel.

Which brings me to another trap which caught the Rajneeshes and which, for all I know, I and all my friends in the AHP are in danger of falling into. It is a sort of arrogance. The idea that humanistic psychology embraces values and practices which are superior to the other psychologies, carries a danger with it. We might begin to have fantasies of improving the world by offering our psychology as a rescue package as no other psychology is valid. The ancient Greeks had a word for this: hubris. It means the arrogance of taking on yourself that which belongs to the Gods, in this case casting others in the role of victim and, contrary to their wishes, persecuting them with humanistic psychology in the name of liberation. The Rajneeshes went to the final stages in the Rescuer Game, as it is known in Transactional Analysis, and got to feel well and truly persecuted themselves.

Interest in spiritual and transpersonal psychology seems to have increased in recent years especially among people who are interested in humanistic psychology. The followers of Bhagwan did not notice that one of the central aspects of Eastern spiritual life was lacking in Bhagwan's approach. There was no disciplined spiritual practice, requiring a guide, of any kind. Meditation and psychotherapeutic group work were carried out in a haphazard, here and now, sort of way without any sense at all of progression. It was also not transpersonal for this requires retaining a sense of self, even of a strong self, whilst recognizing it for what it is, a necessary mind-created illusion. Bhagwan encouraged a

surrendering of self in his will, which is neither a spiritual nor transpersonal development.

With hindsight, it is easy to see how some of the themes of the 1960s set people up to follow a guru. It was OK in that decade to deride traditional institutions without acknowledging that they also served good purposes. The family, according to R.D. Laing and David Cooper and others, was a seat of violence which often destroyed some of its members by scapegoating. Psychiatry, according to Szasz, used medical interventions to assault deviants who annoy current orthodoxies. Education, according to Illich, stunted the development of people by processes of conditioning. Medicine robbed us of our autonomy. Prisons, according to Stan Cohen and Laurie Taylor, were places where inmates were psychologically at risk. It was the era of being anti-organizations. The authors of that period ignored the fact that families also love their members, psychiatry also provides residential space for some who seek it, education provides a chance to discover and develop, medicine cures disease, and some people must be imprisoned stop them raping and pillaging the rest of us. Armed with the anti-ethic and with a psychotherapeutic system which at that time did not examine transference, exalted communitas, and encouraged people to give up their jobs (middle class employment was high), it is understandable that some people would join Bhagwan's organization and blind themselves in the fact that it was an organization.

I found it difficult to understand how intelligent, well-educated Sannyasins, who were experienced psychotherapists, could be so unaware of what they were projecting on to Bhagwan. They used to say that this aspect of their life was misunderstood by non-Sannyasins. I was present when some 'news' of Bhagwan was passed on at the end of an evening encounter group. The 'news' was that one of the females who was scheduled to dance before Bhagwan a few days earlier, had had an embarrassment. She realized as she waited, on stage, to perform a very swirling dance, that she had no pants on. This news seemed to be rooted in sexual fantasy. Yet, the idea that sexual fantasies lay in the transference of feelings between Sanyasin and Bhagwan did not seem to any of them to be worth exploring. Nor did they explore fantasies of 'good parent', 'permissive parent', 'benevolent parent', 'parent of the holocaust' and other projections which would not be swept aside these days by psychotherapists, of whatever school, who take part in peer assessment and supervision arrangements.

Many who visited Bombay or Poona or a European centre, became Sannyasins, wore the orange sometimes but carried on with their careers, seem to have gained a lot from it. Cooperative warmth and love, exploration of sexuality, meditation, whole-food, good humour and detachment from competition and jealousy are valuable things to experience and lead to personal growth. Those who

entered the organization on a permanent basis seem to have done so wholeheartedly. They denied themselves any awareness of the institution itself and of themselves as people and so their self-development ceased.

Indians, I have discovered, take their gurus with a pinch of salt just like the British take government and the Royal Family. Janus-like, one face surrenders, the other remains detached and aware, in opposition, even, to the all-protective, all-knowing and loving Sovereign, God or Queen! Bhagwan revelled in his erstwhile imperial overdogs surrendering both to him.

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