

Five Ways to Salvation in Contemporary Guruism

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Man's basic problem according to Hinduism is not moral but metaphysical. It is not that man is guilty of having broken God's moral law, but that he has somehow forgotten his true nature and he experiences himself to be someone other than what he is. Man is not a sinner; he is simply ignorant of his true self. The problem is with his consciousness. His salvation consists in attaining that original state of consciousness which he has lost.

Man's true nature or original consciousness is defined differently by monistic and non-monistic gurus. The monistic gurus, who believe that God, man and the universe are ultimately one, teach that man is Infinite Consciousness or God, but has somehow been entangled in finite, personal, rational consciousness. So long as he remains in this state he is born repeatedly in this world of suffering. Salvation lies in transcending finite, personal consciousness and merging into (or experiencing ourselves to be) the Infinite Impersonal Consciousness, and thereby getting out of the cycle of births and deaths.

In other words, salvation is a matter of perception or realization. You are already one with God; you just have to perceive or realize this fact. Perceiving, in this context, is not a cognitive activity. It is not a matter of intellectually knowing or logically deducing that we are God, but rather transcending this cognitive rational consciousness and experiencing a 'higher' state of expanded consciousness which is believed to be God and our true self.

The non-monistic gurus, such as Swami Prabhupada of the Hare Krishna movement, do not believe that man is or ever becomes God. God, Prabhupada believes, is a personal being—Krishna. Man's original state is Krishna-consciousness and his true nature is to be a loving servant of Krishna. But man has forgotten this and become entangled in this material world. He has to re-establish his link with Krishna and gain Krishna-consciousness. Only then will man get out of the cycle of births and deaths and live forever with Krishna in *Goloka* or heaven.¹

Thus, to sum up, salvation in Hinduism consists in the realization, perception or experience of our so called 'true nature'. The realization takes place when we are able to alter our consciousness and attain what is called the 'higher' state of consciousness.

How can we alter our consciousness? Through the manipulation of our nervous system, because the consciousness is dependent upon the nervous system.

¹ Other dualists or qualified monists explain man's problem and salvation differently, but in almost all sects the problem is metaphysical and the solution in terms of realization.

During the preceding millennia numerous techniques have been developed to manipulate one's nervous system in order to alter one's consciousness. These are generally called *yoga*.² Here we can discuss only a few of the techniques that have been popularized by the modern gurus.

1. Hatha yoga: salvation through physical exercises

Hatha yoga, which consists of physical and breathing exercises, is a very ancient method. The belief

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that one can attain 'salvation' through physical exercises rests on the belief that salvation is a matter of perception, which depends on the state of one's nervous system, which in turn depends on one's physical condition. By physiological manipulation of one's body, the nervous system can be affected and consciousness altered.

The problem with *hatha yoga* is that it is a long and tedious process requiring much discipline and a competent teacher.

The question is frequently asked whether a Christian can practise *hatha yoga*. Many Christians see nothing wrong in practising it because it is often advertised as non-religious in nature and sold for its therapeutic values. But once a person experiences the alteration of consciousness and has a 'vision of possibilities' (Mahesh Yogi), he becomes open to the Hindu philosophy on which *hatha yoga* rests. There may be some teachers of *hatha yoga* who are not interested in propagating its philosophical basis at all, but only in teaching it to make money or impart health. I am not qualified to pronounce on the therapeutic benefits of *hatha yoga*, but it seems to me that if a person is practising for health reasons certain exercises developed in India he should not say that he is practising *yoga*. For the physical exercises become *yoga* only when they are practised to alter consciousness, or to merge into God. For *yoga* means union of the soul with 'God'.³

It may be asked, 'What is wrong with artificially altering consciousness?' By itself I do not think there is anything evil in an altered state of consciousness. Madness, hypnosis, sleep-walking, hallucination and hibernation are all 'altered' states of consciousness, which are not morally evil, even though they are undesirable. But to consider your own altered consciousness to be God is certainly evil from the biblical point of view. And to ascribe spiritual significance to physical exercises is to become prey to the deception of Satan.

² The word '*yoga*' has, for many Westerners, become synonymous with the physical exercises of *hatha yoga*. Physical *yoga* is only one form of *yoga*. *Yoga* means union, the union of soul with God or the merging of finite consciousness into the infinite.

³ Originally *yoga* was associated with a dualistic philosophy called *sankhya*. Its goal was separation of *purusha* (soul) and *prakriti* (nature). But ever since *yoga* has been accepted by monistic schools, its goal has been defined as union not separation.

The use of hallucinogenic drugs such as *charas*, *ganja* and *bhang* too has been an accepted method of altering consciousness for ages in India. But many of the modern gurus discourage their use because their results are unpredictable, they are addictive and can do harm.

2. Japa yoga: the 'mechanical path' to salvation

*Japa*⁴ is the repetition or chanting of a mantra which is usually a name of God or of evil spirits. The Hare Krishna movement chants the names of Krishna and Rama:

Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna
Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare
Hare Rama, Hare Rama
Rama Rama, Hare Hare.

The monistic gurus prefer to use a symbolic name of God, such as 'OM', or a *mantra* whose meaning the meditator does not know, so that the name or mantra may not create any thoughts or images in the mind by association.

Constant repetition of a sound eliminates all other stimuli thus concentrating the mind and eventually itself becoming a non-stimulus. That is the stage when the mind is aware or conscious, but not aware or conscious of any thing or thought. One may say that it is only conscious of consciousness. This is what is called Pure Consciousness or Transcendental Consciousness.

In order for this technique to be effective in 'God-realization', one has to practise it for three to four hours a day. Mahesh Yogi, the popularizer of Transcendental Meditation in the West, prescribes it only for 40 minutes a day to the new initiates. That is meant to give them a taste for it and to help them have a 'vision of possibilities'. In advanced stages the Maharishi prescribes as much as one full week of silent meditation.

Because the initiation into TM is a private affair many Christians consider it to be some mysterious thing. Actually it is very simple. A seeker who is interested in taking initiation is asked to bring flowers, sweets, a white handkerchief, camphor, *etc.*, along with a substantial amount of money as fee for a *puja* ceremony. During the ceremony the teacher worships the photo of the guru and also asks the initiate to bow before this photo. The teacher invokes the blessings of various gods and goddesses and then gives a *mantra* to the initiate. Usually the *mantra* is a short word, a name of some deity such as Ram, OM, Hrim, Sring, Aing. The disciple is asked to sit in a comfortable position, close his eyes and silently repeat the *mantra* (*e.g.* Ram... Ram... Ram...) for twenty minutes. He is told that he will first forget the

⁴ *Japa yoga* is also called *mantra yoga*. Some forms of *japa yoga* come close to the principle of *raja yoga* or *patanjali yoga*. *Raja yoga* consists of eight steps. The first five are external and preparatory. The last three are internal—concentration, meditation and experience of alteration of consciousness. One may concentrate and meditate on a photo, idol, name or thought. Focus on one stimulus blocks out other stimuli and eventually itself becomes a non-stimulus, thus giving an experience of void or emptiness which is supposed to, be the experience of Pure Consciousness or God.

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rest of the world and be aware only of the *mantra*. Then he will forget the *mantra* too and transcend all thoughts and feelings and become aware of the awareness. This is the *transcendental* state of consciousness. After some time the meditator reaches a higher state of consciousness, called Cosmic Consciousness, in which he is aware both of the world and of the Pure Consciousness. Then, after some more years of meditation, one can attain God Consciousness in which he comes to perceive the subtler levels of the objective world, which appear as personal. In this state, it is said that one can even communicate with birds, animals, plants and rocks. After this state comes the final state of Unity Consciousness in which one perceives the oneness of one's self with the universe. This is liberation.

Mahesh Yogi calls this path the '*Mechanical Path to God-realization*'. He says that it is possible to realize God in a mechanical way because 'God-realization' is a matter of perception and 'the process of perception is both mechanical and automatic'. In order to perceive external objects we just 'open our eyes and the sight of the object comes automatically without the use of intellect or emotions'. Likewise, in order to perceive the inner consciousness we just have to turn the attention inside and we automatically come to perceive it.

'Whether perception is outward or inward,' writes the Maharishi, 'it is automatic and mechanical. Perception in the outward direction is the result of a progressive increase of activity in the nervous system; perception in the inward direction is the result of diminishing activity until the nervous system ceases to function and reaches a state of stillness, a state of restful alertness. This is the state described in the words: Be still and know that I am God.'⁵

3. The Surat-shabd yoga: the path of sound and light

'God is light' many gurus affirm, and add that this light is within us. 'In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God', declare many sects, and add that this word is within us. When the soul establishes a contact with this word, the word takes it back to Godhead, its original home.

The Divine Light Mission⁶ and Radha Swami Satsang (Beas)⁷ have been chiefly responsible for popularizing the *Surat-shabd yoga* in the West. *Surat* means soul and the *Shabd* means the Word or Sound. *Yoga* is union. So the *Surat-shabd yoga* is union of soul and the Word.

⁵ *The science of being and the art of living* (An International SRM publication, 1966) p. 302.

⁶ DLM has now split into two groups. One group is headed up by Bal Yogeshwar or the Guru Maharaj Ji, and the other by his older brother Bal Bhagwan.

⁷ Radha Swami Satsang started in Agra (North India) in the middle of the last century. Later a breakaway group was formed at the bank of the river Beas in Punjab (West India). The latter is more influential today.

The sects that teach this path try to keep their techniques completely secret. The techniques are called by various names, such as *nam* (name) and *updesh* (knowledge), deliberately to mislead the non-initiants. The 'name' and 'knowledge' actually refer to techniques of physiological manipulation of senses and meditation on one's breathing.

Unlike TM, the sects that teach the path of sound and light do not initiate everyone who asks for it. One has to be spiritually 'ready' for initiation. There is no definite criterion for judging whether or not a person is ready; it depends on the arbitrary feelings of the initiator. Some sects stipulate a few objective conditions too, such as giving up of liquor, non-vegetarian food, drugs, *etc.*

After a person has been chosen for initiation, he is taken into a closed room, where the initiator explains to him the importance of the 'knowledge', *satsang* (the weekly gatherings for fellowship and teaching) and *sadguru* (the True Teacher). The would-be initiate takes a vow of secrecy and of following no other guru except his own. Then he bows, kneels or prostrates himself before the guru or his photo and worships him/it. Then the initiator teaches him the techniques of meditation.

In the Divine Light Mission the following four techniques are taught:

In order to show the 'divine' light, the initiator asks the devotee to close his eyes, then he places his middle finger and thumb on his eyes and starting from the corner of the eyeballs he presses the eyeballs up from the bottom, so that if the eyelids were open the centre of the pupils would be looking at the point between the two eyebrows, on the forehead, just above the nose, which is supposed to be the location of the 'third eye'. If the initiate concentrates on this point he can see a light. Some people see only a small point, others see a blinding light, some others see a psychedelic movie of moving patterns and brilliant colours, whereas some do not see anything at all. The reader can try it himself and most probably he will see the light. I have done this myself. Some devotees train their eyes so that they are able to see this light without manipulating their eyes with their fingers.

In order to hear the 'divine' music or 'the sound', the person is asked to block his ears with the thumbs so that one does not hear any external sounds. When one listens long enough to his inner silence he can eventually hear some noises. To some devotees this sounds like celestial music whereas

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others think that they are hearing their favourite tune played on some heavenly instrument.

The third technique in Divine Light Mission is a difficult yogic exercise to taste the divine 'nectar'. Usually one experiences the nectar after much practice. You have to try and curl your tongue to come up to the back of the throat and then have to swallow the tongue in such a way that it points upwards. Here the tongue is supposed to hit a point and make contact with the

'divine' nectar that is constantly flowing through one's body. It is claimed that this nectar is the 'living water' of which Jesus spoke and it is indescribably tasty. Some devotees claim that this nectar is the 'bread of life' and that after making contact with this ever-flowing stream of nectar you can live without water or food.

The main meditation is a breathing exercise called hearing or contacting 'the Word'. The devotee is asked to sit in a lotus position (if possible) with both hands on the knees, and concentrate on his breath going up and down, up and down. This is supposed to tune one into that 'primordial vibration', the Word or Logos, which has created the universe and sustains it. By constant meditation one reaches the *samadhi* or the expanded state of consciousness. According to the Divine Light Mission, when you reach the state of *samadhi*, you become full of the divine light. At initiation the light may appear as a small dot, but in *samadhi*, it overtakes you and you feel (or perceive) that you have become that Light.

The other sects which teach salvation through this path describe their experiences differently. According to some sects, such as the Radha Swami Satsang, during meditation your 'third eye' is opened, the soul gets out of your body through this eye with the Sound Current (logos) and travels up to heaven; on the way it has many wonderful experiences and finally it merges into God.

4. Kundalini yoga: salvation through the 'serpent power'

Hindu psychology teaches that in the human body, three centimetres above the rectum and three centimetres below the genitals, at the base of the spine, is a beautiful triangle in which lies the *kundalini sakti* or the Serpent Power. What *kundalini* really is nobody knows, but it is supposed to be red and white in colour. It is also described as 'coil power' or the 'creative sex energy'. Normally, it is taught, the *kundalini* lies coiled and dormant in most humans, but when it is awakened, it rises up and begins to travel upward. In its journey from the base of the spine to the top of the head it passes through six psychic centres called *chakas*. When it passes through the *chakra* it gives various psychic experiences and powers. At last when it reaches the top *chakra*, called *sahasrara chakra*, one can attain power to perform miracles and also achieve the liberation.

Many means are used to awaken the *kundalini*. They range from breathing exercises like *pranayam* to the homosexual handling of genitals. The most influential guru today who preaches *kundalini yoga* is Swami Muktananda of Ganeshpuri, near Bombay. He calls *kundalini yoga*, *naha yoga* (great yoga) or *siddha yoga* (perfect yoga), for he says it is the only *yoga* in which the aspirant does not have to do anything. He just surrenders to the guru and the guru's grace does everything for him.

Thousands of people have testified that Muktananda has awakened their *kundalini*, but the method he uses is still a secret. The *kundalini yoga* has not been very popular in India because many of the experiences it gives are what William James calls 'diabolical mysticism'. It gives

pain, makes people depressed and even produces madness. Describing his own experiences Muktananda says:

'On reaching my destination I sat for meditation. Soon after sitting for meditation I started feeling restless and uneasy. Within moments strange things were happening to me. I could not understand it. I was perturbed mentally and emotionally. My mind seemed deluded. By the time evening came this delusion became worse. Generally, I am a man of great courage but that day I was overcome by fear. I felt I would soon become insane. My mind was terribly agitated.'⁸

That evening, at about nine o'clock, Muktananda sat again for meditation.

'I felt there was great commotion around. My entire body started aching and automatically assumed *padmasana*, the lotus-posture. The tongue began to move down the throat and all attempts to pull it out failed as I could not insert my fingers into the mouth. My fear grew; I tried to get up, but I could not, as my legs were tightly locked in *padmasana*. I felt severe pain in the knot (*manipur chakra*) below the navel. I tried to shout but could not even articulate. It seemed as if something was stuck in my throat. Next I saw ugly and dreadful demon-like figures. I thought them to be evil spirits.

I then saw blazes of fire on all sides and felt that I too was burning. After a while I felt a little better. Suddenly I saw a large ball of light approaching me from the front; as it approached, its light grew brighter and, brighter. It then

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entered unobstructed through the closed doors of my *kutir* and merged into my head. My eyes were forcibly closed and I felt a fainting sensation. I was terrified by the powerfully dazzling light and it put me out of gear.'⁹

5. Tantra: salvation through sex

Tantra is often said to be the opposite of yoga, but they both aim at the same end. It is opposite of *hatha yoga* because the latter is the path of great discipline and effort, whereas *tantra* is the way of free indulgence. The tantrics claim that *tantra* is the easiest and original way of salvation. The possibility of *samadhi* or Unity Consciousness must have appeared to sages during sexual intercourse. In orgasm you transcend rational consciousness and have the pleasurable experience of oneness. *Tantra*, among other things, is a system of techniques of prolonging orgasm in order to experience 'God' or the Unity Consciousness.

Paul writes that when men suppress the truth in unrighteousness and begin to worship creation instead of the Creator, God gives them up to a base mind or 'in the lusts of their hearts to

⁸ Amma, *Swami Muktananda Paramhansa* (Ganeshpuri, 1971), p. 32.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves'. And their base minds and lusts lead them to unbelievable depths of filth and foolishness.

Before the spread of Christianity in India and the consequent Hindu renaissance, tantricism had sunk to such levels of crudity and cruelty, witchcraft and superstition that in any sophisticated society the descriptions would appear unthinkable. But now that the Christian influence has diminished in India the old tantric cult is coming back openly on the surface. There are around fifty-two known centres in India where *tantra* is taught and practised. In its crudest forms it includes worship of sex organs, sex orgies which include drinking of blood and human semen, black magic, human sacrifice and contact with evil spirits through dead and rotting bodies in cremation grounds, *etc.*

In its more sophisticated forms it is being advocated by gurus like Acharya Rajneesh and authors such as Professor Aghenanda Bharati, an Italian convert to Hinduism who lectures in anthropology at Syracuse University in America.

Both Rajneesh and Professor Bharati are amongst the most brilliant of Hindu thinkers. Before becoming a guru, Rajneesh was a professor of philosophy for nine years. His writings have been on top of the bestseller list in India for many years and continue to be so. He has published over a hundred books already. This to me is an indication that the sexual path of salvation will be one of the most popular paths in the coming days.

Some time ago Rajneesh gave twenty-one lectures on Jesus Christ in the city of Pune, West India, in which he argued that Jesus taught that the way of salvation was through sex. His lecture on 'new birth' would be a typical example of his thesis.

Reality is one, he argued, but our problem is that we perceive other things to be different from ourselves. This is our fundamental problem—that we perceive reality as dualistic. The ultimate reality is sexual. We see everyone either as a man or a woman. We realize Oneness only when we transcend this duality. Jesus taught that the way to enter the kingdom of God is through the new birth. And we experience this new birth, or the kingdom of God, when the two 'become one flesh'.

The role of the guru in granting liberation

The role of the guru in the liberation of a devotee is described differently in different sects. Generally speaking, the guru's task is only to teach the technique of achieving liberation. The devotee has to achieve liberation by his own efforts by practising the technique. Some sects, however, also teach that at initiation the guru takes the *karma* of a disciple upon himself. Without getting rid of *karma*, the disciple will be forced to take repeated rebirths in order to reap the consequences of his *karma*. *Karma* is defined as 'action'. According to the 'law of *karma*', each man has to take the consequences of his good and bad actions. For this he has to be continuously reborn into this world. But if the guru takes the *karma* the necessity to be reborn vanishes, and

one can attain deliverance from the bondage to the cycle of births and deaths. It is taught that the guru takes the disciple's *karma* upon himself out of love and grace. And therefore it is believed that without the guru's grace one cannot be saved.

This concept of grace and the guru taking the disciple's *karma* is a recent development in Hinduism directly borrowed from Christianity. The only difference is that Jesus took our sin and its consequence (death) upon himself. The guru says he takes our *karma* upon himself, but he does nothing about it. The devotee is acquitted of his *karma* without anybody paying the penalty or reaping the consequences. Thus, the law is not satisfied but simply set aside. It is not fulfilled but broken. The Hindus do not see the need for atonement or the necessity for Christ's death because they do not view the law of *karma* to be an absolute moral law, rooted in God's character, whose demands have to be met. God is not a moral being, man is not

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morally guilty, therefore the need for propitiation does not arise.

The talking-point

The Hindus interpret our 'one way' preaching to be narrow-mindedness,¹⁰ because there truly are many ways to alter consciousness and attain to 'salvation' if salvation is what they think it is. Therefore a meaningful conversation about salvation must come to grips with the question: what is man's problem and what is salvation? Once we can help a Hindu to see that man's basic problem is moral, that we are guilty of breaking God's law and deserve punishment, it will be easier for him to see that Christ is the only way to salvation, *i.e.* forgiveness and reconciliation, because he is the only one who has died for sin.

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<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

¹⁰ Many of the present Hindu sects do claim uniqueness and exclusiveness. But what they say is that 'in this age our way is the best and the easiest' not that this is the only way.