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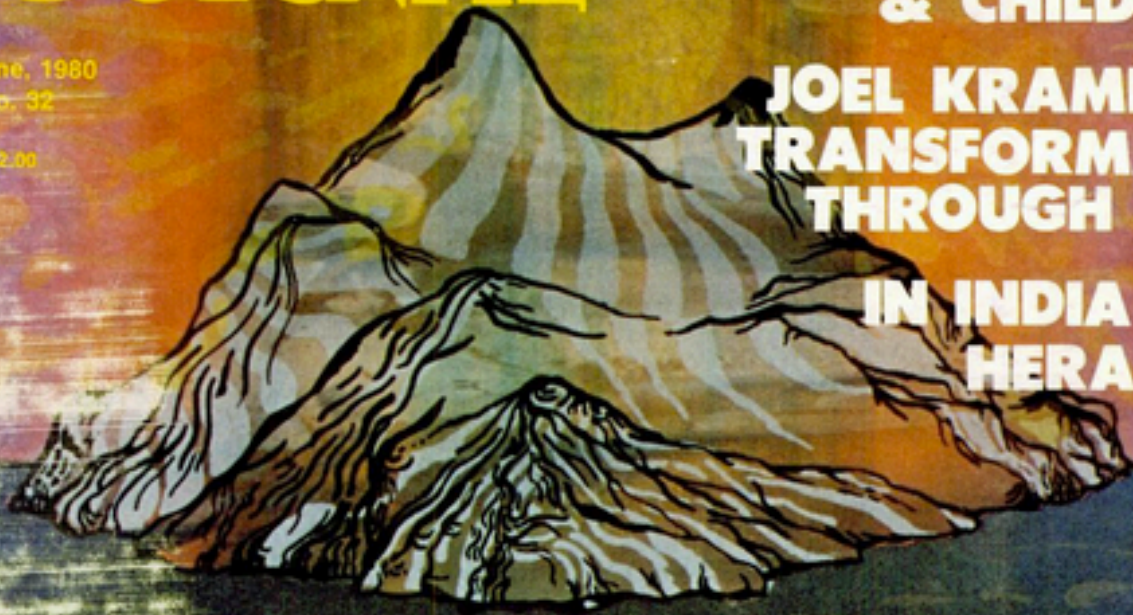
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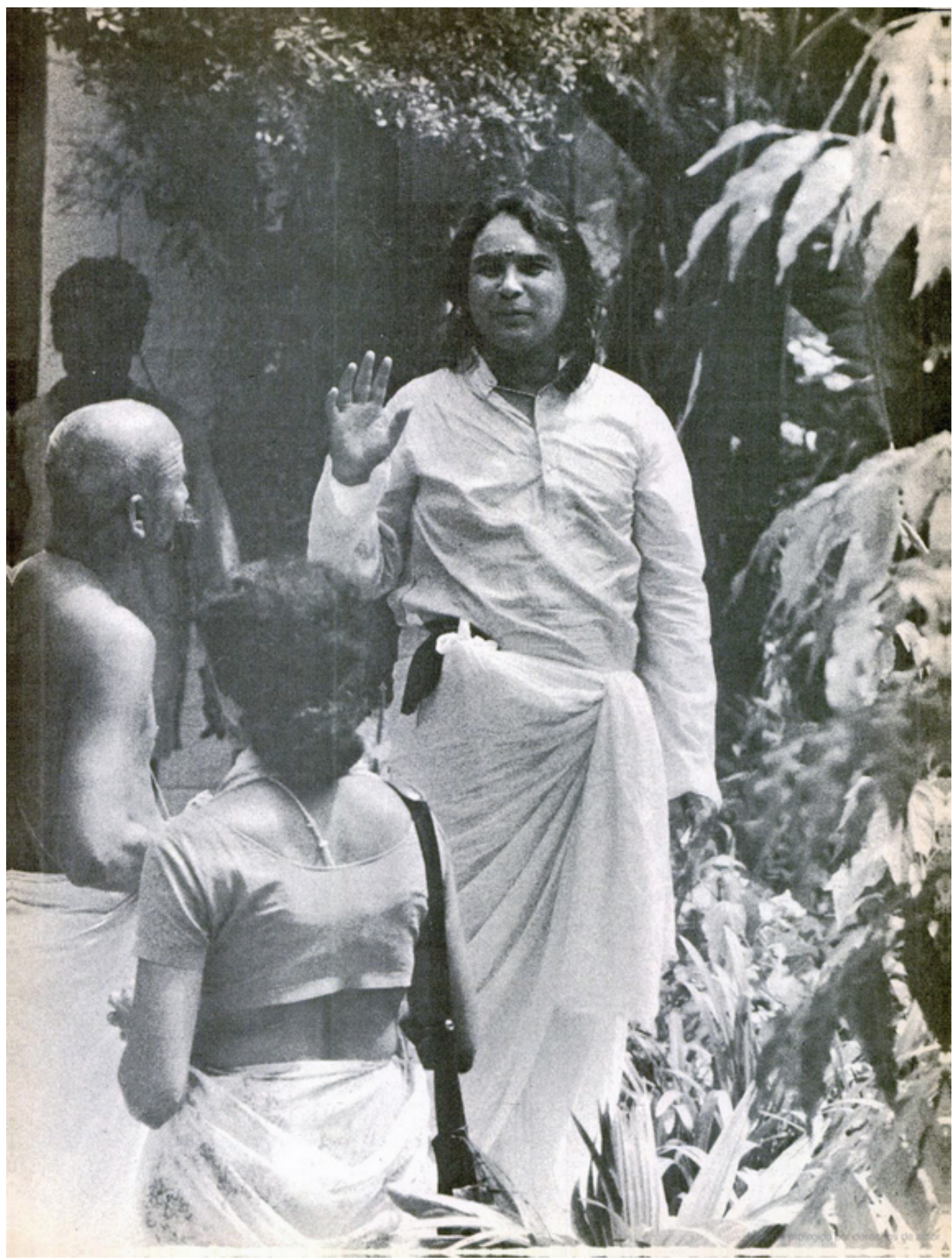
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**ENERGY CYCLES
IN PREGNANCY
& CHILDBIRTH**

**JOEL KRAMER ON
TRANSFORMATION
THROUGH YOGA**

**IN INDIA WITH
HERAKHAN
BABA**





BIRTH & IMMORTALITY

The legend of Herakhan Baba

By Dio Urmilla Neff

Babaji," I whispered intently, as though daring him to appear. I glanced around the lobby of my parents' condominium. It was 1966, and I was curled in a chair, glued to Paramahansa Yogananda's classic, *Autobiography of a Yogi*. I was fascinated by the phenomena it so matter-of-factly presented. I'd just come to a quote by the renowned master Lahiri Mahasaya: "Whenever anyone utters with reverence the name of Babaji, that devotee attracts an instant spiritual blessing."

"Babaji," I intoned again, trying to feel reverent. Nothing seemed to have happened in the lobby; I saw no lights, heard no ethereal voices. How silly, I thought. What did I expect? I would have been astounded to learn, however, that Babaji had heard me, and twelve years later would tell me so!

Babaji was Yogananda's guru's guru, who lived in the Himalayas and reportedly teleported from peak to peak with his small band of devotees. Yogananda described him as the originator of Kriya Yoga, a system of meditation techniques. Supposedly hundreds of years old, Babaji was said not to be a human at all, but an "avatara," a divine being, descended into flesh to help humanity.

Autobiography of a Yogi described Babaji as stern and formidable: he supposedly thrust a flaming brand into a devotee's shoulder, then healed the burn immediately with his hand, explaining to his alarmed followers that the man would have otherwise died by fire as his karma dictated. I read of another time where it was said Babaji ordered an aspiring disciple to jump off a cliff to prove his devotion. The man jumped. Babaji

reportedly brought him back to life and accepted him as his devotee.

Right now Babaji is living in his ashram in the remote village of Herakhan, by the Gautam Ganga River in the Kumaon Hills of Uttar Pradesh. Although he has been there since 1970, relatively few Westerners have visited him. It is as though only those who happened to discover his whereabouts could go, and the rest of us would assume he was still unapproachable, living on some uncharted Himalayan peak.

My husband and I first learned of Babaji's location from a young woman in San Francisco who'd spent eight months with him. We were filled with a longing to see him, and with the conviction he was indeed the Babaji of legend. Although we didn't

at first know how we could finance such a trip, some family money that had been tied up in legal squabbles was suddenly released to us. Three months later we were in India.

Meeting Babaji

At Babaji's hilltop ashram in Herakhan we found a delightful compound of white and peach-colored buildings, banana groves and flower gardens on terraced levels overlooking the clear streams of the Gautam Ganga. The tiny octagonal temple, with its narrow red, white and green dome, nestled among the banana leaves; a faded red flag hung from its steeple. All was clean, well-swept and peaceful.

On either side of the ashram were terraced fields of corn and rice, dry green-brown hills, several stone farmhouses. To the right was the village of Herakhan, with its tumbling stream and miniature bridge. Directly across the wide riverbed was a cave and the towering Mt. Kailash, traditionally sacred to the Hindu god Shiva. In the distance, more hills shouldered the river's white stony bed. A few villagers worked in the hot fields; others herded black-skinned water buffalo along the narrow trails.

The afternoon we arrived, I was hurrying down the ashram steps to

"In *Autobiography of a Yogi* it says if you say your name with reverence, you will get a blessing from you, Babaji. Do you hear this?"

"Absolutely."

"Many of the Western devotees I've talked to have read that part and said your name, and then ended up here at your ashram. Is that partly the reason they come here? Does saying your name like that draw them to you?"

"Absolutely. It is because of the power."

*Interview with Babaji,
Summer, 1978*

retrieve my bags when I almost bumped into a group of Indians led by a tall, plump person in a violet silk shirt and dhoti. The leader had a youthful, round golden face and black, shoulder-length hair, combed back and oiled, Indian style. I was momentarily confused — I couldn't identify the person as a man or woman; he or she seemed to combine the best of both. The face was so appealing . . . so splendid.

"Oh!" I cried, realizing who it was. Babaji asked me my name, then passed by and walked quickly into the garden, where his followers had

gathered for afternoon singing.

I sat at the back of the garden, staring in wonder at the figure in violet silk. He looked almost like an American Indian, with his high, domed forehead and deep-set, dark eyes. His nostrils flared slightly; his lips were beautifully carved. His cheeks were full and rosy and he glowed with health. There was something compelling, wonderful, about his face. He was the most beautiful being I'd ever seen.

Babaji sat on a low wall at the end of the garden, receiving the devotees who lined up to greet him. Women in

saris knelt down and touched their foreheads to his feet, then rose, and, beaming, said a few words to him. Men in dhotis and men in business suits approached him, many laying fully prostrate on the ground in pranam, the Indian gesture of respect to one's guru. The people who'd arrived that afternoon brought him presents, and Babaji unwrapped shirts and dhotis, watercolor sets and drawing paper, packages of fruits and Indian delicacies. Some devotees brought fragrant oils to massage into his feet, or incense to burn nearby. They obviously all adored him.

The next day began the ashram routine that would be daily life for the next ten weeks. We'd rise at four to take a quick bath in the crystal streams of the Gautam Ganga below the ashram, and assemble in the tiny cement kirtan hall for devotional prayers and songs. Babaji would arrive to receive us, and we would line up to greet him or stand by his raised seat and talk with him. Afterwards we'd go to our rooms, sit with Babaji in the garden, work in the kitchen or carry buckets of water up from the river. At noon we'd assemble in the courtyard for lunch and afterwards sleep in our rooms. We'd take our second bath in mid-afternoon and then sit in the garden for afternoon singing and visiting with Babaji. Once it was dark we would again meet in the kirtan hall and sing. Sometimes at night Babaji would have one of us make a speech; sometimes he'd clown and play with a devotee, or pull someone into his lap and hug and rock them like a mother. And often he would simply sit, not speaking, and we'd sing continuously until it was time for bed.

Herakhan Baba

According to his Indian devotees, Babaji is available in a physical body for a period of time, then he vanishes and appears to his followers only in visions. When he manifests physically again, he has a new body, they say, and a different appearance. They say he does not incarnate, but materializes; he is not born — but appears full-grown.

Yogananda's description of Babaji* in his book apparently refers to a time in the mid-1800's. Another book, by

*Autobiography of a Yogi by Paramahansa Yogananda (Self-Realization Fellowship, 1971, LA.).

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Baba Hari Dass, covers Babaji's life between 1890 and 1920 in the Kurmachala region of India, adjacent to Nepal.** Babaji was most often called "Herakhan Baba" then, because of his long association with the village.

Photographs show Herakhan Baba to be tall, with a relatively light complexion, short dark hair, and noble features. It was said he didn't sleep at all, had no hunger or thirst, and was unusually strong. He emanated a sweet, musklike scent.

Herakhan Baba reportedly performed miraculous acts in front of large groups of people. He was said to heal the sick, raise the dead, appear in two places at once, sit in sacred fires without a scorch. Eventually he had thousands of followers in various parts of the Kurmachala region, and wherever he went crowds of people gathered to receive his blessing. In 1922 (or 1920 by another source) he walked into the water at the confluence of the Gori and Kali Rivers in front of a group of devotees and was not seen again.

One morning a few days after I arrived, I was returning to the ashram after washing my saris in the river. Babaji called me over to him as I approached the ashram steps. He was

**Hariakhan Baba: Known, Unknown by Baba Hari Dass. (Sri Rama Foundation, 1975, Davis, CA). Note alternate spelling.

"Do you have a special message for the devotees of Yogananda or the practitioners of Kriya Yoga in America?"

"No message. All are doing Kriya. All who are here are doing Kriya."

"What is Kriya now?"

"Ab nam jap." (Translated roughly, this means, "Mental repetition of the name of God" or "... of any name of God.")

"I have heard you've said everything about you in *Autobiography of a Yogi* is true, except the part about your sister, that you have no sister. Is that a true thing I heard?"

"It is worthless. Only ten percent is truth and ninety percent is falsehood."

"I should write that?" I asked the translator.

"You have to," he said. Babaji nodded.

*Interview with Babaji,
Summer, 1978*

sitting with a few people in a tree-shaded garden near the riverbed and reached out his golden hand to help me up beside him on the low rock wall. He related the simple message he gives to all his devotees.

"Live a life of truth, simplicity and love," he said, "and mentally repeat the mantra 'Om Namaha Shivai' continuously."

Soon afterwards I talked about the mantra with a young photographer from Gwalior, a long-time devotee of Babaji. The photographer told me of the time he'd accompanied Babaji to the province of Bihar, where Sri Yukteswar, Yogananda's guru, had taught Kriya Yoga to thousands of people. Most of the devotees they

met still practiced Kriya, and they knew who Babaji was — the originator of the technique.

"Teach us more Kriyas," they demanded, crowding around Babaji. They would hear of nothing else. So Babaji directed the people to sit in several rows, and told the photographer to go up to each one and instruct them in the correct Kriya technique for this age. I asked him what he'd done.

"I just whispered, 'Om Namaha Shivai,'" he said.

The story of how Babaji appeared in his current form really begins in the 1920s when a five-year-old boy in Bihar had a vision. A splendid,

Babaji presides over the fire at his ashram in Herakhan village.



glowing young man briefly appeared before him and gave him some prasada, blessed food. The boy was filled with devotion for the youth, and until he was a grown man he wandered on foot all over India, Nepal and Tibet, searching for his shining vision. Finally he spotted a photograph of the legendary Herakhan Baba on a Kurmachala family's altar, and thus came to know the guru he'd been seeking.

In 1949, in an ashram dedicated to Herakhan Baba, the devotee locked himself in a room and vowed he wouldn't eat or move from his yoga

position until his beloved vision again appeared to him. And Babaji did appear, so the story goes, and rewarded the man's devotion by making him his harbinger. The newly christened guru was called "Mahendra Baba." He established ashrams for Babaji throughout all of India and drew together the remaining devotees of Herakhan Baba in Kurmachala, revealing that their beloved Herakhandi and the historical Babaji were one and the same—and that he would appear again.

• • •

As I became accustomed to ashram life, learning to find the riverbed "bathroom" in four a.m. darkness and mastering the art of bathing fully clothed, I turned to what seemed the major occupation of the ashram—watching Babaji.

His activities seemed to consist, as far as I could tell, of a special pre-dawn fire ritual, attending the morning and evening singing sessions, meeting with devotees in his room, and periodically supervising Vedic rituals. Sometimes he would sit in the garden and have a leg massage, paint with watercolors or play chess with a group of Westerners. Other times he would vigorously direct devotees in a project: planting a tree, clearing an overgrown trail, or carrying riverbed rocks to a building site. He would often appear at lunchtime, briskly moving among the sitting diners, asking a question here and there . . . how did they like the rice, were they comfortable, etc. His energy seemed inexhaustible.

One might well be puzzled by Babaji's rather simple daily routine. He didn't appear to perform spectacular miracles like Herakhan Baba or seem forbidding and strict as in Yogananda's description. How do we know he's the one?


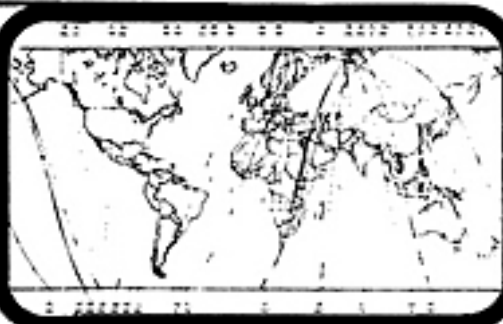
I'm not help at all on this issue, for I felt I "knew" him to be the historic Babaji the moment I heard of him. My husband once playfully asked Babaji if he was the man in a photo of Herakhan Baba.

"Yes," Babaji said, smiling, and autographed the picture.

Mahendra Baba had predicted Babaji would be called "Bhole Baba," "Simple Father," because he would not perform obvious miracles. And so he doesn't—at least, most of the time.

I learned of the occasion when the ashram was suddenly visited by a busload of one hundred devotees from the nearby town of Haldwani. It was noontime, and the guests had filled the courtyard, the steps, and even the paths in the garden, waiting in the hot sun for lunch. The Indian cook was very concerned, for she had only prepared enough food for twenty people and knew she couldn't possibly feed them all.

"Serve the food," Babaji ordered, over her protest. So the serving staff waded into the throng of sitting villagers and began ladling rice and vegetables onto their banana-leaf

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plates. They ladled their way through the packed courtyard, down the steps and into the garden. They filled the plate of the last guest and went back to the courtyard to serve seconds. The cook realized Babaji had intervened somehow, but she couldn't prove it. Babaji, characteristically, pretended ignorance.

My friend from San Francisco told me another loaves-and-fishes story from the time she'd served as ashram cook. And I heard many stories like these: Babaji bi-locating to heal a farmer's wife in a distant village; Babaji speaking fluent English or German when alone with certain devotees; Babaji making himself suddenly lighter when an ardent devotee would insist on carrying him across the river.

The closest I got to witnessing "miracles" was when Babaji appeared to read my mind—an act considered very ordinary by ashram standards. I was told that I could petition him mentally, and he would sooner or later answer my request. And I found, to my amazement, that I only had to request some understanding of a concept or some insight into a problem, and the answer would come a few days later in some subtle way, by a flash of understanding or by someone else suddenly telling me the answer. This was often followed by some small physical manifestation as well. I would "know" an answer or get a small realization, and suddenly I'd get a mango from Babaji. It seemed that everytime I was on the right track mentally, I got an instant confirmation from him: a quick look, a raised-palm blessing, a gift of prasad.

The more I saw of Babaji, the more wondrous he seemed. When he'd walk into the kitchen compound the place would suddenly come alive. The sari'd ladies would jump up from cleaning the rice and greet him. The youthful cook would emerge from his wooden hut, beaming, his bubbling vegetables temporarily forgotten. The kitchen workers would crowd Babaji, their faces lit with the radiant "He's here" look I came to know so well.

In June of 1970, so the story goes, a Herakhan farmer named Chandramani dreamed he should cross the Gautam Ganga and enter a cave at the foot of Mt. Kailash. He did, and once inside, found a beautiful youth sitting in

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a lotus pose. The youth was tall and slender, with dark, shoulder-length hair and a fair complexion. Chandramani went home and returned with some milk for the young man.

The farmer continued to bring milk each day and soon moved into the cave to better serve the youth, to whom he'd become very devoted. Shortly thereafter they climbed Mt. Kailash. On this holy mountain the youth sat in a perfectly still yogic posture for 45 days, neither eating nor drinking nor ever opening his eyes. Later, he and Chandramani crossed the river to the small octagonal temple built by Herakhan Baba decades before. They lived in a nearby hut, and one by one the awe-struck villagers came to pay their respects to this remarkable young man, believing him to be their own Herakhan Baba, returned at last.

About a year after he appeared in the cave, the young guru began to travel to various villages and cities in Northern India. In this way many more people became aware of him, and soon there was a steady stream of city people hiking to the remote temple in the Kumaon Hills.

An Indian friend from Bombay told me how she first met Babaji in those early days, and how he revealed himself to her. My friend is a rather Westernized, no-nonsense sort of person who had first read *Autobiography of a Yogi* in 1959. She felt an intense yearning to find Babaji, and so set out for the Himalayas to find him. She didn't find him then, and so tried again in 1965—still without success. One evening in 1971, she was sitting with her father by their family altar which was covered with pictures of deities and saints. A relative came to the door and insisted on bringing a young guru in to meet the family. My friend had given up on Babaji and on gurus in general by then, and didn't want to meet another one. But her father, ever hospitable, agreed to see him.

The relative came in with a strikingly beautiful youth who walked straight over to the altar and sat down. Looking intensely at my friend, and not speaking, he pointed to a picture on the altar that, most oddly, she had not seen there a moment before—the small line drawing of Babaji from *Autobiography of a Yogi*. Then he pointed to himself. Still



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silent, he pointed to the picture and to himself twice more. Moved to tears, my friend fell at his feet. She'd found Babaji at last.

This woman told me, as did other Indian devotees, what Babaji was like in the early years at Herakhan. In 1971 and 1972, they said, he would sit for hours in a lotus pose with his eyes closed, apparently in a deep meditative state. Even when not in meditation he hardly spoke, they said, and then only in monosyllables. His eyes seemed to radiate a light, and often his gaze was so bright and penetrating people couldn't look at him. Photographs of Babaji at this time show a slender, beautifully-featured youth of about twenty, with dark, arresting eyes and a mass of tangled hair. He looked in some photos like a Sioux warrior, and in others like a madonna.

Theatrics

The first storm of the pre-monsoon season broke, swelling the lazy riverbed streams into a muddy torrent. The air became cool and soft, and everything—the peach-colored buildings, the cement pathways, the profusion of banana leaves—was wet and glistening.

You couldn't get much of an understanding of Babaji from watching him, I thought. I'd sit in the back of the dripping kirtan hall, trying to piece together what I knew of the legendary Babaji and this enigmatic guru before me. He was different with each person and, sometimes, different from moment to moment. He'd be delightfully childlike, an affectionate playmate, then suddenly go blank, as if he'd just been called away and left his body behind. He'd be serious, then stern, then loving, then ridiculous. With a beautiful Punjabi mother and her children he was consistently attentive, hospitable, cuddly. With an elderly village woman, he was always teasing, laughing and yelling the Hindi equivalent of "Boo!" To others he appeared indifferent or even angry. To many devotees he was all of these in turn. I didn't understand this kaleidoscopic behavior. I began to seek out Babaji's long-time devotees for an explanation.

"I've seen him operate for six years," a London-based writer told me one morning in her cozy room. "And he always serves us and always

from infinite love and compassion for us, regardless of what appears on the surface." She was a tall, graceful, very poised young woman who was apparently a favorite of Babaji's. He praised her often and kept her near him every day.

She'd gone through all kinds of misery in the beginning, she said. After her first visit, she came down with a strange, undiagnosed malady and lay in bed with a fever for six months. She felt the illness—and its miraculous cure—were all Babaji's doing. At a later visit, he threw her out of the ashram, bags and all, in a furious monsoon downpour. On subsequent visits he would alternately ignore her, treat her kindly, appear to forget her. I asked about his current behavior.

"Just the other side of the coin, I'm afraid," she said, laughing. "I'm

under tremendous pressure," she explained, not to let my ego get caught up in all this attention." She believes Babaji first works on people psychologically, purging them of their various hang-ups, and then uplifts them spiritually in the traditional role of a guru to his devotees. She felt all the attention was just another test he was putting her through.

I spoke with a lovely middle-aged Delhi woman one afternoon while we sat in the kirtan hall. The wife of an affluent Delhi businessman, she had been with Babaji since his early days.

"Babaji is here to serve, and believe me, he does! He may pretend to ignore us, but behind it is an all-encompassing love." She told me that over the years Babaji had put her through some trying times, but she always gained some essential



Babaji with garlands presented by his devotees.

priest, Shastriji, to answer the question. Shastriji gave a long recitation in Hindi, translated roughly as follows:

"God has placed 'satya,' truth, above all. The Vedas and other ancient scriptures describe God as the embodiment of eternal truth. And truth creates success, for one who speaks the truth and lives according to truthful principles is successful in whatever he does. This is because truth evokes will-power. A person in a struggle, for example, who lives and speaks the truth, will automatically have the will-power to win that struggle. Therefore truth, with its attendant will-power and success, is the first principle of Babaji's formula."

"Does 'simplicity' mean living close to the earth with few possessions?"

"It means to be devoid of self-possession and egotism."

"Does 'love' mean to love other people and to love God?"

"To love other people is to love God."

"What does 'Om Namaha Shivai' mean?"

"It has a very deep meaning." He again called Shastriji over, who said:

"It is a 'mahamantra,' great mantra, a shortened and more powerful version of the mantra central to all four Vedas. It is called a beej mantra, a 'seed' mantra. The smaller and more concentrated an object, the more powerful it is. A seed contains within it all necessary power to create a mighty forest tree, and so, by comparison, it is much more powerful than the tree. So it is with 'Om Namaha Shivai'; it is the beej, seed, of the longer version, and thus is a very, very potent mantra."

"It is also symbolic," Shastriji continued. "Both in its sound and in the way it's written. 'Om' contains the sounds and symbols of the three aspects of God: Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, and also the Mother Goddess, and the Absolute Principle which underlies all of existence. 'Namaha Shivai' symbolizes the five principles that make up all of creation: air, earth, fire, water, and prana, or 'breath.' 'Om Namaha Shivai' was the very first sound spoken by God, and out of that first sound, or Word, all of creation unfolded."

*Interview with Babaji,
Summer, 1978*



"Om Namaha Shivai"

Shiva

Although many of the Western devotees saw Babaji as a grand psychological master many Indians saw him in a different light altogether—as an avatar of Shiva.

Shiva is one of the three aspects of God in the Hindu cosmology. Brahma, they say, is the creative

aspect, Vishnu the stimulating or maintaining aspect, and Shiva the destructive aspect. The Hindus also believe these aspects of God can incarnate or materialize in human form as avatars. Incarnations of Vishnu, it is said, are mortal—they must eventually die, but incarnations of Shiva are thought to be immortal.

The Indian devotees I talked to were certain of Babaji's avatar status. First of all, they said, Mahendra Baba had often told his awed followers that their beloved Herakhan Baba and Yogananda's Babaji were none other than Shiva incarnate. And Hindu seekers had long predicted that when Shiva next appeared in human form he would have a scar on his lower right leg, another on his upper left arm, and Shiva symbols and signs of the zodiac on the soles of his feet. Sure enough, Babaji has the requisite scars, and after years of reluctance, finally allowed his feet to be inked and photographed. And there they were, scattered across his heels and the balls of his feet: a tiny bull, a cobra, the Shiva trident, an "Om" in Brahmic script, the sign of Leo, an Aries ram.

My friend from Bombay told me how she and other women had often seen light radiating from Babaji's forehead, and sometimes the light would form various Shiva-symbols: an open, vertical eye; the "Om" in Brahmic script; Shiva's three-pronged trident.

The snake is a particularly significant Shiva symbol. A retired Indian Air Force commander from Allahabad told me of a time when Babaji took a group of devotees to the headwaters of the Ganges. As the crowd gathered on the water's edge, the commander saw a mythic-sized cobra with three glistening heads rise slowly out of the water. He was speechless and tried to catch Babaji's attention.

"Did I really see that?" he later asked Babaji.

"You did."

I was musing over these anecdotes while cleaning the library one day, when I found a book about Satya Sai Baba, the South Indian master so famous for materializing objects from the air. The book said that in 1963, before an audience of thousands, Sai Baba healed himself of a serious illness following an eight-day coma. He revealed that he was an incarnation of both Shiva and his consort Shakti, saying he'd been fulfilling an ancient prophecy that

realization from it, a deeper understanding of her spiritual purpose. She became psychologically much stronger, she said, and was filled with gratitude to Babaji. "I'll never forget what he told me once," she whispered. "He said, 'I only came here to give.'"

"If you come to doubt, I'll give you reason to doubt," he once told my San Francisco friend, who at first was quite suspicious of him. "If you come suspicious, I'll give you every reason to be suspicious. But if you come seeking love, I'll show you more love than you've ever known."

Soon the monsoon season was upon us in earnest. Almost every day it rained fiercely for hours, transforming the sparse hillsides into lush, gleaming jungle and our rooms into water-soaked caves. We huddled by candles for light, our lines of limp clothing criss-crossing overhead. The smell of damp cotton hung everywhere.

"Don't be fooled by the outward drama," my London writer friend told me another time, as we sipped hot tea in her room. "He is basically impartial and unbiased. No matter what one does, one cannot . . . influence him. He is," she searched for the word, "unbriable."

"And remember," she added, "Babaji's messages are always very subtle. He communicates in . . . symbolic language. He gives hints, clues." I told her of an incident a few days earlier when Babaji had helped me wrench open the moisture-swollen doors to my room.

"I am your helper," he'd said in English.

"That's it, exactly," she said. "He is helping you; he's opening doors for you."

And so I gathered anecdotes and opinions from Babaji's Indian and Western devotees. I heard plenty of pet theories about his sometimes incomprehensible behavior. He would puff up egotists, they said, praising them lavishly, making them his "favorites." When they were enormously proud, he'd appear to demolish them, by throwing them out of the ashram or staging some particularly humiliating experience for them. Insecure people Babaji would push even lower, usually by ignoring them. And with indecisive people, he would answer their pleas for advice different ways at different times, confusing them hopelessly.

An explanation offered for this

phenomena was that when someone's psychological hang-ups (or tapes, sanskaras, ignorance, stresses or karmas, as they're variously called) come up in the presence of a spiritual master, they're dissolved by his purifying influence. It seemed that Babaji stimulated these to come up, so they could be dissolved. I was told that the egotists eventually lost their arrogance but retained their confidence, the timid realized the inner strength they had all along, and the undecided learned to make decisions. This analysis is purely theoretical, of course. No one knew what he was really doing.

Many of us called these theoretical maneuverings "Herakhan Theater." My own experience with Babaji was a case in point. One of the main reasons I'd gone to see him was for help in a tremendous fork-in-the-road decision—I didn't know whether to stay married or leave my husband. Babaji bounced me back and forth like a ping-pong ball, from one side to the other of my dilemma. On some days he told me to stay married and on others to leave, plunging me further into my sink of indecision and self-pity. He usually ignored me outwardly, answered all my questions inwardly, gave me numerous hints that he was really helping me, honored me with a request to write about him, and couldn't seem to remember my name.

When I returned to California, I, too, fell mysteriously ill, and just as mysteriously recovered. And in the course of the next six months, my life altered dramatically for the better. I also found myself much happier, and able, finally, to make my own decisions. Had Babaji done something to me? It is all speculation, of course.

"Of the thousands of people that will come to Herakhan," Babaji once told another American friend of mine, "only a handful will ever know me."

His Message

As active as Babaji was, he rarely made a speech, or held forth in spiritual discourse. He simply instructed us to live lives of truth, simplicity and love, and repeat "Om Namaha Shivai."*

I knew something about "nam jap," the repetition of a mantra, from my studies of the Vedanta philosophy

"If you come suspicious, I'll give you every reason to be suspicious. But if you come seeking love, I'll show you more love than you've ever known."

years before. It is believed that Sanskrit terms are of the same vibration, though on a different frequency, of the objects they name. So the Sanskrit name for "light," for example, is made of the same stuff, vibration-wise, as actual physical light, but on a different octave, so to speak. It is further believed that if one repeats the name of God in Sanskrit, one will then very precisely attract His attention, and thus evoke or create, that divinity within one's own consciousness. Evoking God's presence so immediately, it is believed, is one way to enlightenment.

I had heard "Om" describes in books as the underlying sound of creation. To me, "Namaha" translated as "I bow down to Thee" and "Shivai" as the Hindu god Shiva, or that aspect of God that destroys our neuroses, our ignorance. I also learned that "Shiva" in Sanskrit means, "one who gives happiness," and thus can refer to all gods or God in general. The mantra invoked God no matter what one's religion, I was told. It therefore meant to me, "Om, I surrender to you, God," or "Om, rid me of this ignorance, God!"

• • •
"What is your message to Americans?"

"The same as to all mankind. To follow the principles of truth, simplicity and love."

"Does 'truth' mean more than speaking truthfully?"

"Truth has many meanings." Babaji then called over his chief

*Om Namaha Shivai" is pronounced "Om" (rhymes with "home"), "Nah-mah-hah" (the "a" in "father") "She-vai" ("vai" rhymes with "bye"). Swami Muktananda, a renowned siddhi yogi beloved by many Americans, also teaches this mantra, pronouncing it "Om Namah Shivaya."

foretold the pair would reincarnate and undergo just such an eight-day illness. That night I mentally asked Babaji to clear up the issue—just who was this Shiva anyway?

The next day a young Englishman stopped by the ashram library where I was cleaning the books. He told me the story of the time he and a group of devotees had gone to Delhi, where Babaji had been asked to perform a purifying fire ceremony by the temple prophets of the Book of Brighu. This book, he said, was one of the wonders of India, a series of ancient book leaves in a barely

translatable tongue that would tell the names and needs of any visitor who happened to come to the temple—even up to the present day. It seems the Book had presented a spontaneous reading one day, recommending that a little-known saint from the village of Herakhan be called to perform a Vedic fire ritual. And when Babaji arrived, the Englishman said, the prophets found his name in the book and read the following: "Shiva has returned to us, manifest in three forms: Shiva alone, in that sadhu there," the priests indicated a white-bearded holy man

watching them from the corner. "And Shiva and Shakti together in Satya Sai Baba, and as Nataraj, the dancing Shiva of destruction, in the form of this young guru, Herakhan Baba."

The Dancing Shiva of Destruction

Of all the facets of himself that Babaji presents to us, the idea of the god of destruction is most puzzling.

Yet he does present something of this aspect to his devotees, for what he consistently tells his devotees is that there will be very severe worldwide calamities—natural disasters and war—and that they will happen very soon.

He says, in fact, that "Om Namaha Shivai" (or the repetition of any name of God) and the practice of truth, simplicity and love, is the very antidote to these calamities, and that the people who do this practice, regardless of their spiritual path or religion, will be protected.

Babaji's Indian devotees even go so far as to say that, as Nataraj, the most terrifying aspect of Shiva, Babaji is personally responsible for this destruction, and it is his task to destroy the ignorance in the world and bring about a new spiritual age. He is now gathering together his devotees from past lives, they say, to teach them the new Kriya, repetition of "Om Namaha Shivai," and provide them with the necessary spiritual armor to withstand the coming events.

I knew of this prediction and this belief about Babaji before I left for Herakhan, and was familiar with the fierce and warlike Nataraj Shiva portrayed in Indian art and mythology. But nothing in Babaji's round, golden face or mutable behavior seemed anything like that apparition of destruction. The more I saw of his playfulness and underlying compassion, the more I speculated about this strange prediction and the whole Shiva issue. I mentally asked Babaji to resolve this puzzle, and a few nights later had a vivid dream about it.

I dreamed I saw a candle flame burning in a heart, and knew it represented love and devotion. The candle grew into a hotter, brighter flame, and I could see that it burned and purified all that was not-love. Any

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dark, low things that did not match the love-intensity of this flame were consumed and destroyed by it, but only, it seemed, to make way for the good and the whole that would take its place. I then felt I understood that the "destructive" Shiva aspect of God was actually an extremely intense vibration of love that passed unharmed through objects of a similar love-nature but, also, destroyed immediately all that was of a low vibration—greed, cruelty or selfishness, for instance. And it seemed that Babaji's designation of "Om Namaha Shival" as a protective mantra now made sense. If the Vedantic conception about mantras was correct

and repeating this mantra evoked the Shiva aspect of God in a person, then he would naturally remain unharmed when the Shiva-energy passed through him, since that every energy would already be present within.

I woke up, filled with the images of this odd dream. Was it another "message" from Babaji, an answer to my question? Was it possible this destruction/new-spiritual-age notion was true? Was Babaji really working to inform and protect all those he could reach? I remembered his words to my lovely Delhi friend in her early days at the ashram. "I have so much to do," he told her quietly. "And so little time to do it in."

I have heard that the Book of Bhurghu people had a reading that Shiva has materialized in three places now: Shiva and Shakti in Sai Baba, Shiva alone in a sadhu, and the dancing Shiva of destruction in you. Is that true?"

"You have heard what you have heard. Believe what you know in your heart."

"It seems such a contradiction that the aspect of God who has come to destroy radiates so much love and kindness. Is this destruction basically a loving act to the earth?"

"Many people in this world are very treacherous. It is in the best interest of the world to remove these treacherous people. A certain amount of destruction is necessary. It is in the best interests of mankind and the world at large."

"Do you have devotees in America from previous births that you want to find?"

"Yes."

"When someone feels a yearning to see you, a yearning to be with you, does that mean possibly he or she is an old devotee of yours?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to bless them and protect them and get to them before the destruction comes?"

"Yes. They will be protected."

Interview with Babaji,
Summer, 1978 ★

Dio Omilla Neff is a writer living in Berkeley who is particularly interested in the phenomena of consciousness movements, religions and gurus.

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