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News

It is, in a sense, a collision with the infinite. And many are not prepared for the clarity it brings. Partho Kumar narrates how it happened to him eight months ago: "I've been a journalist with Zee News and Amar Ujala. I used to write a lot of critical stories on godmen who amass wealth. One day a swami came while I was on a visit to my hometown. I was skeptical. He held my hand and said, 'Make me one promise.' I asked, what. He said, 'You would take the Art of Living course once.' It was a small thing to ask, so I agreed. I enrolled in a six-day course. When it was over I returned home. Six days without meat or liquor was a bit heavy. So I called a friend over, bought some whiskey, and got some fish fry. I dimmed the lights. I am a Bengali and love fish. I took a bite of the fish. It had a bad smell and a bad taste. I spat it out and took a sip of whiskey. I was shocked. It tasted like the first ever time I drank. So I said to myself that I must have beer instead. The same thing happened. I was like a virgin drinker. I couldn't do it. Since then I've been in the Art of Living. I feed my son meat. But I'm a vegetarian now."

From the moment he experienced the change, Partho Kumar says he was gripped by a desire to devote his days to piety and virtue. He says he feels liberated now and sees his conversion as a mandate to free people from material and emotional bonds.

Says Noah A. Samara, chairman and ceo of Worldspace satellite radio: "My entire being seems to dissolve and everything seems to seep into me. I am one with the animate and the inanimate. Sudarshan Kriya is the highest form of communication. It has transformed me, as it will others. One breath at a time. One person at a time."

And it isn't just Ravi Shankar who is doing this. There has been a massive spiritual revival globally with India at its centre. Ravi Shankar's Art of Living (AOL) Foundation has centres in over 141 countries. A good indicator of AOL's following is the composition of the congregation. Until a few years ago, spiritualism was a refuge for the retired. At Jakkur, nearly 60 percent of the attendees were youngsters. The stress of daily life — at work, at home, in relationships — is affecting the young more and more.

Ravi Shankar's following is so large that he has taken a whole hill 40 km from Bangalore on a 99-year lease from the Karnataka government

Exercises like Sudarshan Kriya help 'detoxify' the mind and the body of negative emotions; they help release stress and rejuvenate the individual. Wellness is the mantra here, not gods and goddesses. Which is why, perhaps, a great many AOL volunteers come from the upper strata of society, with a generous sprinkling of the Page-3 type, who are not attracted to religion but take hugely to emotional repair.

So there are art dealers, bankers, financial consultants, journalists and CEOs. Ravi Shankar's following is so large that he has taken a whole hill 40 kilometres from Bangalore on a 99-year lease from the Karnataka government. A sprawling, three-storeyed modern Ashram is situated there. There's a lake, a helipad, dining halls, a cyber cafe, a bookshop and residential quarters. There are so many people milling around that it seems like the whole world is around. People from more than 125 countries attended AOL's silver jubilee celebrations. Ravi Shankar has a dedicated channel on Worldspace radio, and plans to start an online university soon to teach Vedic math. And Ravi Shankar doesn't come cheap: delegates had to pay Rs 5,000 each to attend the AOL celebrations. The fee for a basic AOL course is Rs 200 if it is part of a special promotion drive, and Rs 1,000 for a full-fledged course. At a rough enrolment estimate of about five lakh, the total fee amount would come to Rs 50 crore.

Sathya Sai Baba of Puttaparthi in Andhra Pradesh has long attracted devotees from all over the world. He has an even bigger set-up in Puttaparthi; he runs a university and hospitals. To his followers Sai Baba is divine, with miraculous powers. He commands several lakh devotees worldwide. When it comes to popular following today, Swami Ramdev of Hardwar, comes closest to Ravi Shankar. Ramdev is a television star, and his yoga and pranayam lessons have an audience running into millions in the 10 countries that receive broadcasts from the Aastha television channel.

Then there's Mata Amrithanandamayi, the 'hugging saint' of Kerala. She's the lone woman among the top seers in India. More remarkably, despite her low-caste origins, she too has a huge following among the elites. She runs her own Amritha television channel, and has assets running into crores of rupees. The two famous Bapus — Asaram Babu and Murari Babu — are also television stars, known for their discourses, but their following though massive, is less than that of Swami Ramdev and Ravi Shankar.

A spiritualist of an entirely different sort is Swami Agnivesh, who calls himself a heretic and follows his own brand of spiritualism. Agnivesh is a well-known activist, who has campaigned against superstition and religious dogma all his life. He is one of Asia's leading campaigners against child labour. "Let my voice be the voice of a heretic. I practice proactive social spirituality. I have in the past wondered how to relate to the Creator until I realised that the best way was to relate to his creation. I have also understood that to be truthful within, I must challenge the untruth outside."

Mar 04, 2006

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- **CONFEDERACY OF JOY**

More than a million people gathered at Bangalore for a mammoth show of music, meditation, and oneness to celebrate the silver jubilee of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's Art of Living Foundation. [VJAY SIMHA](#) went to check out what the fuss was all about