

ESCAPE... The Orange Way

by Dean C. Halverson

When it is necessary to get away, where do you go? Some escape by seeing a movie, sailing, reading a mystery, eating a pralines-and-cream dessert, watching Monday night football, or doing absolutely nothing.

A group of people in Oregon are taking the idea of escape to new

extremes. They wear orange clothes and are disciples of a person who will be one of the most influential gurus of the near future—Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. Their reasons and means for escape provide significant clues for discerning the direction of our society.

Escape from Social Concern

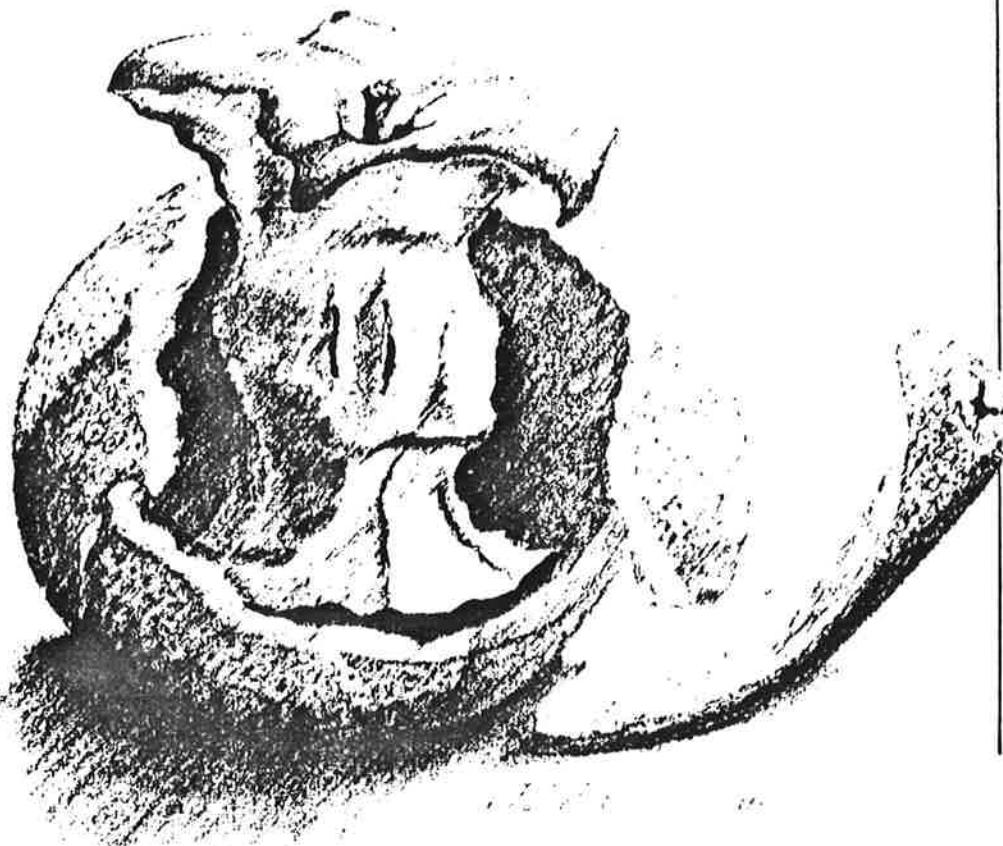
One aspect of Rajneesh's teaching marks him apart from other gurus. That is his use of humor. In his discourses jokes serve many purposes. First, they break down barriers. If you come to Rajneesh with doubts or fears about him, the jokes will likely alleviate misgivings and win you over. It is difficult to dislike a person who makes you laugh.

Jokes also elevate Rajneesh in the sense that beside him nothing is sacred. In one particular jest, Jesus is portrayed as a stutterer.¹ Third, jokes give the impression that Rajneesh has special insight into our times. Anyone who can look seriously at this age of despair and still laugh must be above it.

Rajneesh's humor is central to his teaching. He has likened that centrality to an archer who shoots an arrow into a tree and then paints a bull's eye around it.² Often he builds his spiritual teaching around a new joke that he has heard. Paradoxically though, Rajneesh himself *never* laughs because he is "serious only about jokes! I am not serious about anything else. That's why you never see me laughing at jokes."³ His basic view on life is that life "is not a tragedy, it is a comedy."⁴ In fact, existence "is a cosmic joke; it is not a serious affair."⁵ "My religion is rooted in playfulness, in nonseriousness."⁶

The fact that people are attracted to a man who thinks life is a comedy and existence merely a joke is significant. Laughter is healthy, but laughing at existence can be a form of escape from despair.

The average age of a Rajneesh disciple is 35.⁷ Members of that age bracket are part of a generation that experienced alienation from the institutions in which people had previously found security—institutions such as government, church, and family. Perhaps the Rajneesh disciple of any age has peered into the future and seen only nuclear threat, a volatile political environment, overpopulation, technological complexity beyond control, and the inherent evils of



industrialization (pollution and the expanding use of decreasing, nonrenewable resources). That is a familiarly bleak reality from which Rajneesh appears to offer something better—a view of life as comedy.

In the process of becoming a devotee, followers of Rajneesh have closed their minds to the suffering around them. The ashram (or living area around a guru) in Poona, India, discouraged the feeding of beggars at its gate.⁸ The followers of Rajneesh (called *sannyasins*) are trying to escape the troubles of the world; they are ignoring reality through laughter.

Escape from Reason

Even though Rajneesh owns a 150,000-volume library,⁹ skims approximately 10 books a day,¹⁰ and is fluent in the teachings of most philosophers, he uses intellect only as a jumping-off point. His discourses are intended to be more experienced than understood. One can see this through his common use of two types of communication that are among the most difficult to translate into one's own words—humor and paradox. Both types strike a deep chord within that is not entirely encompassed by the intellect.

A sign that hung above the entrance to the meditation hall in Poona had this written on it: "Shoes and minds are to be left outside."¹¹ Swami Prem Amitabh, director of the Rajneesh Center in Lucerne Valley, California, has said,

We're tired of being in our minds. We're tired of having our lives run by our minds and though we still do have them run by our minds, [Rajneesh] keeps offering right along the side of the road an alternative.¹²

That attitude reveals the existential despair many are experiencing, and their desire to jump into the ineffable. Rajneesh offers a leap into the unknown, and he does it in a way that gives the appearance of esoteric and profound wisdom. Frances Adeney, an SCP researcher, said, "A lot of it doesn't make sense but [it] doesn't make sense in a very intellectually attractive fashion."¹³

The attraction of the intuitive and the experiential exposes an underlying distrust in the value of

Rajneesh state that we must assert our freedom from the limiting effects of reason, and experience the infinite unknown that is beyond the mind, where bliss can be found.

Escape from Restraint

On July 10, 1981 the Chidvilas Rajneesh Meditation Center, a nonprofit organization in New Jersey, bought 64,229 acres (more than 100 square miles). Previously called the Big Muddy Ranch, it is located in north-central Oregon (120 miles southeast of Portland). The purchase price was \$6 million, \$1.5 million of which was paid in cash. The Center also leased 14,889 acres from the Bureau of Land Management.¹⁴

The Center's intention is to make a city focused around Rajneesh and to occupy it with 50,000 *sannyasins*. As of November 4, 1981 permission was received from the county courthouse to bring the matter to a vote by those living in the area; those living in the area happen to be 150-170 *sannyasins*.¹⁵

Last June, on the first of the month, Rajneesh left Poona unannounced and flew to the U.S. His departure was caused by a number of things, among them tax trouble, assassination threats, an overcrowded ashram, and poor personal health.¹⁶ He now lives on his new land in Oregon, which is to be named Rajneeshpuram ("expression of Rajneesh").¹⁷

The purpose of the city is to establish a self-sufficient, isolated society where inhabitants will not be fettered by the morality of other social conventions and where they will be free to "let go." The group therapies at the ashram are a mixture of Eastern yogic techniques, New Age psychotherapies, and human potential movement methods. His therapies are another distinction of Rajneesh, and one reason why many people are attracted to him. In his group sessions Rajneesh offers Roling, encounter, massage, intensive enlightenment ("tell me who you are"), breath watching, primal therapy, tantric therapy, rebirthing, Gestalt, centering, psychodrama, satori, Tao, zazen, acupuncture, shiatsu, and use of samadhi tanks.¹⁸ One description of these sessions by a *sannyasin* is

are allowed/ and encouraged to fight/ shout act out/ suppression/ violence/ anger/ rage/ regression/ sexuality/ depression/ with an absolute maximum/ of permissiveness and/ encouragement/ this sometimes results/ in black eyes/ broken bones/ shattered egos/ and an amazing degree/ of release/ growth change/ and clarity (emphasis added).¹⁹

The key theme is permissiveness. Rajneesh believes limitations must be removed so that one's limitless potential can be realized. He doesn't think that is possible, however, in a society ruled by moral and social convention.

Escape from Conformity

Three physical changes are required for a person to take *sannyas*, or "renunciation," the initiation into discipleship under Rajneesh. The *sannyasin* (1) must always wear "orange" clothes (the actual colors range from maroon to yellow); (2) must also wear a *mala* (a necklace

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SCP

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made up of 108 beads and a picture of Rajneesh); and (3) must change his or her name to one given by Rajneesh.

The act of becoming a sannyasin is often spoken of in terms of rebirth. The old person has died and the new person now lives. Rajneesh says, "Sannyas means living moment to moment, with no commitments to the past... You are no longer the old."²⁰

Once again the idea of escape from limitation surfaces. In the past, both the individual and others have placed obligations of conformity on people. Taking sannyas is a statement: one is rejecting all obligation to that old way and accepting the mission of discovering a new way.

Escape from Accountability

Rajneesh claims,

The moment you are a *sannyasin*... you are totally at freedom. It means that you have taken a decision, and this is the last decision; to live in indecision, to live in freedom.²¹

Freedom, however, does not come at a small price. Unconditional and complete trust must be given to Rajneesh to do with one's life what he feels is best. The sannyasin must not question or doubt anything Rajneesh commands:

There is no "if," and you totally surrender. Now you say, "Do whatsoever you like. I am in your hands. Ask me to jump into the well, and I will jump."²²

Rajneesh is viewed by his disciples as one who is awakened, one who has become detached from all false identities, who has seen his true nature which is nonego, and who is experiencing limitless power. Only a person who has experienced ultimate reality can lead others to the unknown. Rajneesh says that all must have a guru to guide them although he himself discovered enlightenment on his own. Complete trust and surrender is required of the sannyasin; the guru becomes the sole source of truth and authority. As Rajneesh puts it,

Once I have given you *sannyas*... once I have initiated you, I have become in so many ways responsible. In a way, you have surrendered to me. I must look after you.²³

The sannyasin gives all decision

and responsibility for his or her life to Rajneesh. But rather than being a statement of bondage to Rajneesh, it is a statement of freedom from responsibility for one's own life—it is the ultimate escape.

Even though Rajneesh says that his goal for the disciple is nonego, his system leads to an exaltation of the individual above all else, as evidenced by the five escapes mentioned. What the sannyasins find in Rajneesh is total permissiveness. They are allowed to give up all limiting aspects of existence, social concern, reason, restraint, conformity, and accountability, and still pursue the experiential search for their true natures. The individual's bliss becomes more important than anything else. Nothing is allowed to interfere with one's attaining of enlightenment. That is a complete assertion of the self, rather than a negation of it.

Escape is often both necessary and healthy. But the sannyasins of Rajneesh represent an ominous movement within our society of people who are escaping into themselves to the complete exclusion of all else. They have become the center of their own reality.

That escape into the self inevitably happens when the existence of a personal, transcendent God is denied. As the individual stands in judgment over God, he or she then replaces him. Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh represents the need of those who have denied God's existence, his authority, and the need for a vertical relationship with him. Bhagwan literally means *god*.

In Christianity, the individual is neither denied nor asserted to the exclusion of all else. Each person, however, has worth, although we recognize that we have become less than what each of us was intended to be. The original intention was for humans to have fulfilling fellowship with God, but we asserted our independence from him. The self declared its importance. God did not break that fellowship—we did.

People's efforts to find God through the self is total misdirection. In the sannyasins' efforts to find God, they have found a man who offers mindlessness and a lack of ego. They have not found life—they have escaped it.

Footnotes

¹Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, "Laugh Your Way to God," *Rajneesh: Foundation Newsletter*, 1 December 1981, p. 6.

²Ma Satya Bharti, *Death Comes Dancing: Celebrating Life with Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 9.

³*Newsletter*, p. 3, 4.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁷Mark Albrecht, ed., "A Spiritual Tour of India," *New Religious Movements Up-date*, May 1981, p. 16.

⁸Sally Belfrage, *Flowers of Emptiness: Reflections on an Ashram* (New York: The Dial Press, 1981), p. 77.

⁹Russell Chandler and Tyler Marshall, "The biggest ashram in Oregon," *Oakland Tribune/Today*, 6 September 1981, p. B.

¹⁰Albrecht, p. 14.

¹¹Mikkel Pade, "Shoes and Minds are to be Left Here at the Gate," *New Religious Movements Up-date*, July 1979, p. 59.

¹²Doug Johnson, "Rajneesh's Geetam: Lucerne Valley retreat lives for Indian guru," *Victorville Daily Press* (CA), 18 September 1981, p. B-1.

¹³Frances Adeney in Doug Johnson, p. B-1.

¹⁴Chandler and Marshall, p. B.

¹⁵Holly Carter, "Crowd hears presentation by Rajneesh," *The Madras Pioneer* (OR), 8 October 1981.

¹⁶Chandler and Marshall, p. B.

¹⁷Wayne King, "Red-Clad Disciples of an Indian Guru Build a Farm Community in Oregon," *The New York Times*, 26 September 1981.

¹⁸Bernard Gunther (a.k.a. Swami Deva Amit Prem), *Dying for Enlightenment: Living with Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), pp. 6, 7; and Albrecht, p. 12.

¹⁹Gunther, p. 7.

²⁰Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, *Meditation: The Art of Ecstasy* (San Francisco: Harper Colophon Books, 1976), p. 110.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, *Secrets of Discipleship* (Bombay: A Life Awakening Movement Publication, 1972), p. 16.

²³Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, *I Am the Gate: The Meaning of Initiation and Discipleship* (San Francisco: Perennial Library, 1977), p. 47.

Film Review

Ashram

Ashram is a documentary produced by a German filmmaker named Wolfgang Dobrowolny. It is about life at guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh's ashram in Poona, India. Dobrowolny used to be a disciple of Rajneesh but because he had ideas of his own regarding the filming of his movie, a split ensued. The German filmmaker was left with little or no sympathy for Rajneesh and his cult.

Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh has been the center of much controversy recently. His followers, estimated to be nearly 200,000 worldwide, are attracted to his mixed bag of "esoteric Christianity," Zen Buddhism, and any number of Western psychological techniques (for example, Gestalt, encounter, and primal scream therapies). The controversy seems to lie in how that mixture gets played out. Much of the activity at the ashram includes overt sexual acts and violence, all condoned as means to enlightenment.

The film covers various aspects of ashram life, including such details as who cooks and how, and daily schedules that include a variety of meditations and Rajneesh lectures. Also offered are opportunities to meet "the Master" face to face and to get vicariously involved in some of the kinds of group sessions that provide the bulk of what passes for "reality" at Poona.

Ashram gives a picture of people with little or no interest in ideas, people who are tired of trying to figure things out for themselves. C. S. Lewis addressed what I believe to be the crux of the problem in his book *The Abolition of Man*. He states that "without the aid of trained emotions the intellect is powerless against the animal organism."

It is Lewis's assumption that "the head rules the belly through the chest—the seat of emotions organized by trained habit into stable sentiments." In other words, a person's mind, or sense of reason, and their use of logic all play *the* major role in determining one's approach to life.

I heard Rajneesh say, "The head is farthest from the heart." With statements like that he is seemingly capable of triggering a multitude of activities, including the much talked of encounter and sex workshop groups. The film takes you inside the session rooms; voluntarily and with permission from Rajneesh or the group leader, *sannyasins*, or disciples, engage in fist fights (with and without boxing gloves), screaming, kicking, convulsions, a near rape—you name it, they've got it.

For years Rajneesh has taken in Westerners: the frustrated, repressed, neurotic, aggressive, rich, intelligent, sex starved—and just plain folk burned out on Western materialism. To see him move among the multitude of young white faces (ages range from infants to grandmas, but

most are around 30-35) is to see and hear an attractive, wily individual. Women claim they are captivated by his personality and big brown eyes, and men seem to be captivated by the women.

Having spent some time within "the group" in California, I came away from the film feeling a little sick. So much talk of the "useless ego" and "individuality as a barrier to true consciousness" left me with the impression that *Ashram* is really a film about chaos—about a place where people go because the world on the outside with all its relative and hypocritical values has left them with apparently no other alternatives. The self is seen as purposeless. Rajneesh is the epitome of that belief and *Ashram* shows his influence. Somehow the people on screen did not come off as having real personalities; I saw the film and doubted their vitality off screen.

A German devotee interviewed in the film said that the Poona ashram seems like "a madhouse with cosmic connections." The madness has a special appeal for Westerners driven by frustration, intellectualism, anxiety, and alienation.

As long as the madhouse was in India, we Westerners could shake our heads, and even smile at the antics of Rajneesh and his orange-clad people. Now America has to think again because Rajneesh and his disciples are here in this country, spreading the message of *Ashram*.

—John Ephland

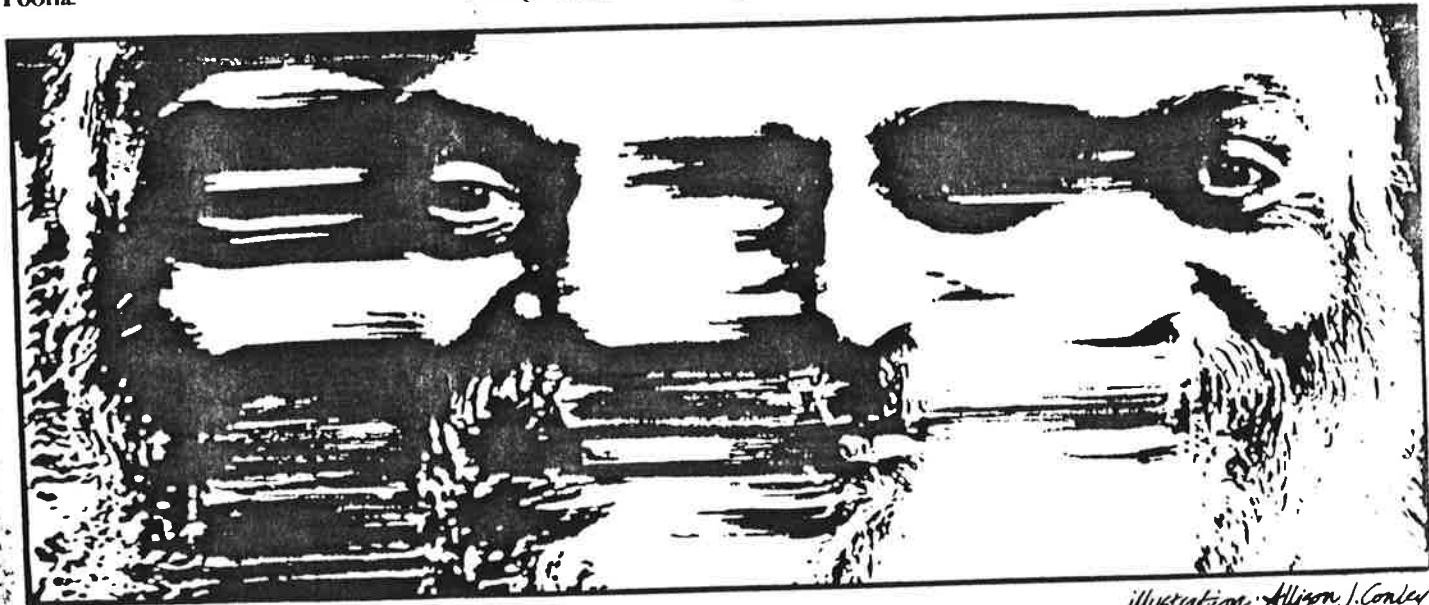


Illustration: Allison J. Conley