

Divine Light Mission: Cultic Commitment Over A Lifetime Story

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the commitment to the religious organization Elan Vital (whose original name was Divine Light Mission) over a lifetime through the author's intermittent correspondence with a childhood friend for over 40 years. Elan Vital was rated by the author in his previous work as having a moderate degree of cult dangers. This article gives a firsthand account of what it is like to be a lifelong committed member of this organization, from the author's perspective.

Keywords: Elan Vital/Divine Light Mission, Guru Maharajji/Prem Pal Rawat, Premi, cult dangers .

Introduction

I first learned about Divine Light Mission in 1973 when I was 23, from my boyhood friend Richie. Richie and his fiancé Linda were thoroughly enamored with the guru of Divine Light Mission, 14-year-old Guru Maharajji¹ from India, who was proclaimed by Divine Light Mission as being the lord of the universe. Over the next 5 or 6 years, I engaged in a number of get-together's with Richie and Linda as they would proselytize about their guru to me, frequently with my ex-wife Diane, as well as letters and phone conversations with Richie. Richie and I would become immersed in our heated, extensive, and repetitive guru-no guru dialogues and arguments. Of course neither one of us would convince the other to think about the legitimacy of Maharajji's guruship any differently, but this never discouraged Richie from always trying his very best to "show me the light."

These guru-no guru conversations came to a natural hiatus soon after my son Jeremy was born in 1981. Richie and Linda visited us when Jeremy was a baby, continuing to proselytize to us about their guru, and I soon became quite taken up with being a new father and earning my living as a mathematics instructor and soon mathematics professor. I had no further contact with Richie for the next 9 years, but in 1991 I visited him and Linda in Montreal with my 10-year-old son Jeremy. Richie and I got back to our old guru-no guru dialogue during this visit, as it there were no 9 year break in the action. But after one or two letters between us over the next year or two, our communications came entirely to an end.

That is, they came to an end until I received a phone call from Richie 17 years later in 2008 (see my essay *Guru Maharajji Gets Sat-Sang* below). And then another 7 years passed without any further contact with Richie, until a few weeks ago my now 33-year-old son Jeremy, who I was visiting in Hollywood, California, Googled Richie and Linda for me and found out that they were currently living close to Los Angeles. One thing led to another, I had a brief conversation with Richie, and I agreed to call him soon for us to "catch up." I am expecting that "soon" will be tonight, and I am bracing myself for another guru-no guru long conversation with Richie, over 7 years after our last one. Of course I have no doubt that this will accompany our usual topics of conversation: the "love and magic"² of Richie and Linda's relationship, Richie's advice to me about my own romantic relationships, our debates about the reality of life after death, my philosophy of natural dimension³, etc.

In my *Modern Religions* book (Benjamin, 2013), I concluded from my tri-perspective experiential analysis of Divine Light

Mission, based upon what I learned from my friendship with Richie and Linda, that Divine Light Mission has a "moderate" level of cult dangers⁴. One of the key ingredients of my analysis was Guru Maharajji's personal charisma to induce people to accept a 14-year-old overweight Indian kid as the lord and master of the universe. I rated Divine Light Mission and Guru Maharajji extremely high in the cult danger scale that I utilized in the categories of wisdom claimed, wisdom credited, and dogma⁴. I also placed Divine Light Mission in the pre-rational level of Ken Wilber's (1995) consciousness continuum, and rated him high in the category of wealth⁴. The way that Guru Maharajji accumulated his wealth through the donations of his devotees while so many of his devotees lived lives of poverty is a major source of ethical concern about Divine Light Mission/Elan Vital, as described on a number of websites⁵.

Thus this reunion conversation that I will be having with Richie is especially interesting to me, given the conclusions I have previously come to about the cult dangers of Divine Light Mission/Elan Vital. However, before I engage in and describe this reunion conversation with Richie that I will soon be having, I will convey what I have learned about Guru Maharajji¹ and Divine Light Mission through my intermittent but lifelong friendship with Richie, from the following essays I have written in the 1970s and 1980s.

On Guru Marajji (Divine Light Mission) (1977)

I have been somewhat familiar with Guru Maharajji and Divine Light Mission for about 6 years now. It all began when my boyhood friend Richie and his wife Linda became devotees of Guru Maharajji, back in the summer of 1971. At that time Maharajji was 14 years old and was proclaimed throughout India as a living perfect master, and moreover-one who was destined to bring peace to the world, in his own lifetime.

Thus Maharajji came to America, and brought forth a new religion to many confused and disenchanting young Americans. At the time, Maharajji was quite a comical figure to our population at large, as to me he looked like nothing more than a plump, egocentric fat boy who had barely started to shave. This was the lord and master of the human race? A direct incarnation of God? The only thing that kept me from totally discounting this new religious fad was the respect I have always had for my friend Richie, whom I have known since I was 11 years old. I was sure that Guru Maharajji was just another phase that Richie was going through, and would soon pass over. Well this phase has lasted for 6 years so far, and if anything it appears to be stronger than it ever was. As I have

kept up my friendship with Richie, I have had no choice but to take Guru Maharaji more and more seriously, until I now feel that he deserves a proper place in my book on modern religions, right after Scientology, EST, and The Unification Church⁶. Maharaji is now a young man of 19, a husband and a father, and an outcast from his family because of his marriage to an American girl. Guru Maharaji is still somewhat on the plump side, but Divine Light mission has thousands of ardent followers all over the world, and is growing stronger every day.

A devotee of Guru Maharaji is called a "Premi," and to a Premi-Guru Maharaji is everything that Christ was to his followers, two thousand years ago. Premis proclaim that Guru Maharaji is in a class with Buddha, Moses, and Christ, and that Maharaji is here to complete the job that these other perfect masters before him began. This claim is very similar to that made by the followers of Reverend Moon, founder of The Unification Church, except for the fact that the Unification Church does not always specifically name who this living perfect master is⁷. I have been to an ashram (the spiritual place of worship for Premis) twice, and attended Millennium, the vastly publicized Guru Maharaji festival in Houston's astrodome in November, 1973, while I was living in Houston, Texas. So what have I to say about all this? Well, to me-Guru Maharaji is still little more than a plump, egocentric, fat boy, but one who is growing up fast. I have no way of knowing whether Maharaji is truly a living perfect master, or if a perfect master has ever existed. But for what my opinion is worth, I do not believe that Maharaji is any more or less human than you or I or anyone else in the world. Maharaji is from India, a country that believes wholeheartedly in reincarnation, gurus, and transpersonal beings. I think that Maharaji himself believes that he is all that he is proclaimed to be, for he has heard nothing else for his entire life here on Earth.

At first glance it might seem totally remarkable that hundreds of young men and women in a New York ashram can bow down on the floor to a picture of Guru Maharaji and wholeheartedly proclaim that he is the Lord of the Universe. But if you stop and think about it, is this really any more or less silly than the advent of Christ-or of any other religious figure who is said to be something more than a mere human being? What is important is that all these people really do believe that Maharaji is Lord of the Universe, and they find peace, comfort, and even salvation in this belief. They have given their lives to Guru Maharaji, just as their ancestors have given their lives to Christ. It is tough to live a life without some sort of supernatural religious belief, and it gets tougher as one gets older⁸. I myself have changed from a confirmed atheist to a confused agnostic. What is attractive about Maharaji is exactly what makes him appear so unlikely to be a true perfect master-his age, his fatness, and his richness. His followers defy all logic and all intellectual use of the mind, and what better way is there to stress the unimportance of the mind than to accept that which appears wholly non-rational, unreasonable, and contrary to everything the mind has always thought?

Accepting Guru Maharaji is wholly an act of faith; there is nothing logical about it, nothing whatsoever;. There is Sat-Sang-a nightly get-together where Premis take turns in opening up their hearts about all that Guru Maharaji has done for them in their lives. There is Meditation-a special kind of

meditation which is taught by the "Initiators" in a 7 hour experience called "Receiving Knowledge," whereby one is fully initiated into Divine Light Mission and promises to accept Guru Maharaji as one's savior for the duration of the universe. And there is Service-the job of every Premi in his/her continued efforts to spread the presence of Maharaji to others and to do his/her share in bringing peace to the world. The message of Guru Maharaji is pretty straightforward Eastern Buddhism; one must get rid of one's individual personality and join with the universal and everlasting. What is different about Guru Maharaji is the physical presence of Maharaji himself, which supposedly makes it actually possible to achieve or at least move close to this state.

I have grown, over the years, somewhat fond and tolerant of Guru Maharaji. I like the Premis I have met, and I definitely feel a lot of love, warmth, and good will in the ashrams that I have attended. I suspect that this religious ardor and warmth is very much lacking in many of our more traditional places of worship that exist in Judaism and Christianity. I believe that Maharaji will appear as a much more legitimate figure to prospective followers when he is in his 20's compared to when he was 15, and there is really no telling how far Divine Light Mission will spread. Followers of Guru Maharaji, aside from the inner peace of mind they gain, become part of an extended family that gets together every evening for Sat-Sang. There is much joy and happiness in an ashram; peace and love certainly do reign throughout. It seems to be a very human quality to need a transpersonal human figure to put one's faith in, and perhaps we are today witnessing a rebirth of authentic religious feeling in this country.

But for the record-in my opinion Guru Maharaji is a pleasant trap. A trap to give up on life-to give up prematurely. There is no more self-imposed growth once one accepts Guru Maharaji, for there is no more self. It is tempting, but luckily not tempting enough for me. I believe there is a better way. A way in which all of our potential mental abilities can be respected and utilized, but a way in which our spiritual centers do transcend our minds. This way rejects any one human figure as being the representation of God. This way stresses that the path is where it always was-within the individual, and then across to other individuals. This way explores anything and everything in life that is worth exploring, and calls it knowledge and experience. This way is not new- it is as old as Socrates and it persists in some of us die-hards, some of us who love life too much to ever give in to the conventions of repressive society or to the dogmas and mind-destroyers of proselytizing religions, whether they be modern or traditional. I am by no means saying anything unique when I talk about this way, for I am merely following in the line of a rich cultural heritage, but I do wish to stress that my life will be lived to indeed do my share to see that this line does continue. Natural Dimension has no need of a name when one is in the woods, doing theoretical mathematics, playing the guitar, or watching a bird. However, Natural Dimension does have need of a name when one is sitting in a mind-molding classroom, working at a mind-lulling job, and witnessing a mind-shattering religion. And so I have decided that more-much more-of my philosophy of Natural Dimension will be making its way from my own personal self to the selves of others-as an alternative, an alternative to everything "un-natural" that is around you³.

Letter from Richie (1978)

What more can I say about Guru Maharaji? I didn't intend to write a second essay on Guru Maharaji but I have just received a letter from my aforementioned friend Richie, in which there contains such a beautiful illustration of the experience of being a Premi, that I wish to share it with everybody who is interested in learning more about Guru Maharaji and Divine Light Mission. I know that Richie will not be offended by my inclusion of parts of his personal letter to me in my book, and to give any sort of an authentic account of what it means to be a devotee of Guru Maharaji the message must come straight out of the horse's mouth, so here it is.

"Dear Elliot,

Well it seems to be about that time again; it's never an easy thing to write to you because I can't just scribble off a "How are you, I am fine" letter. But since I've started I'm sure the momentum will carry this through....Linda and I just got back 3 days ago from Rome, Italy. We had a 5 day festival there with Guru Maharaji. 15,000 people from 50 different countries, and simultaneous translating headphones in 15 different languages. So much love-such concentration on one person. 15,000 hearts meeting just to see him smile. Love is all there is and love is infinite. God is love. I'm learning that in my relationship with Linda I only glimpse the possibilities of love; but with Guru Maharaji I can't even comprehend the magnitude. I see him totally transforming so many souls that for me to not call him Lord or Master would be a gross ingratitude. And I warn you, Elliot, if you dare write anything about Guru Maharaji without first receiving knowledge, all you'll be doing is drawing a paint by numbers picture without the colors. It's like looking into the wrong side of binoculars; all you'll be defining is something that's too far away for you to grasp. The further I dive into Maharaji the less I understand and the more I realize that the key to God Realization is to experience it and not to intellectualize about it. You can read all the books you want about love but that will never give you the feeling you get when you look into Diane's eyes. And the feeling I have with Linda is nothing compared to the love Maharaji has in store for me. I'm learning that the more I love him and open myself up to him-the more I feel that love inside of me. The more love I "feel" the more love I can "share"....I haven't written a song for months; in fact, this is the first time I've taken pen in hand for this length of time. But I feel totally satisfied-Maharajji must be filling me up-he "is" filling me up....love to Diane-write.

Tell me everything soon,
Richie"

Well-that's Richie. This is the kind of thing I've been hearing from Richie for the past 6 years. In regard to the possibility of me ever "Receiving Knowledge," the last time I saw Richie-about 7 months ago in New York, I told him that I would be curious to experience Receiving Knowledge. His response was that before I would be able to Receive Knowledge I would have to be ready to accept Guru Maharaji as Lord of the Universe. In other words, Receiving Knowledge only works if you

already have utmost faith in Guru Maharaji. Thus, I cannot see how I will ever be able to experience Receiving Knowledge. But it is true what Richie says about my not Receiving Knowledge being a severe detriment for me to convey an authentic picture of Guru Maharaji and Divine Light Mission. This is much of the reason why I am including this excerpt from Richie's letter and writing this follow-up essay to *On Guru Maharaji*. I hope that Richie has added significantly to your understanding of what it is like to be a devotee of Guru Maharaji.

NOTE: For a fictional portrayal of the experience of becoming a devotee of Guru Maharajji, see *Excerpts from "The Maturation of Walter Goldman,"* particularly the excerpt entitled *Alienation*, in my *Modern Religions* book (Benjamin, 2013), where the main character Walter is modeled after myself, and Walter's friend Zachary is modeled after my friend Richie.

Diane Gets Sat-Sang (September 22, 1978)

Well I have finally seen Richie again, as myself, Diane, Richie, and his wife Linda got together for an interesting evening in New York a few nights ago. Guru Maharaji is now going on 21 and has two kids. Richie and Linda were wearing Guru Maharaji teashirts when we greeted them, with pictures of Guru Maharaji all over their bedroom and living room. If anything, their devotion seems to be growing stronger over time. They want to follow Guru Maharaji all over Europe and then follow him around the U.S.on his periodic Divine Light Mission festivals. They no longer talk about making it in music and they no longer talk about having kids and a family. Linda seems so spaced out on Guru Maharaji that she is not able to be interested in or relate to anything that Diane and I say about our own lives. She indeed seems to be falling into the trap that I wrote about in *Moonies and Premies*⁹, i.e. not being able to see anyone else's path as valid.

Of course this might be an inaccurate projection I am making, but this was my experience. Richie was made Food Service Coordinator for Divine Light Mission in New York City, and he considers this to be a divine privilege and honor. However, I am happy to say that my friendship with Richie is still intact, as he was able to be quite open to both myself and Diane.

But what was most interesting for me during this evening was to see Diane's experience of receiving Sat-Sang from Richie. Diane listened very attentively to everything Richie said. In fact, she listened so attentively that Richie ended up saying how beautiful it was to finally be able to relate his blissful experiences of Guru Maharaji to a non-Premi who truly gave him space to share himself, and that he was now willing to give us credit for having something special and maybe he could learn something from us. Believe me, coming from my old friend Richie this was truly an incredible statement to hear. For so many years, I have been trying to convey to Richie that I too know something, and he finally has given me the space to live and breathe on my own terms.

Richie realizes that the Premies in Divine Light Mission have much to learn about love, as their own personal relationships leave much to be desired, from Richie's experience. Richie says that Premies are only human, and he has many objections to much that goes on in the Premi community. Richie feels that

his relationship with Linda is his way of learning how to love Guru Maharaji, and he believes that marriage should be a sacred path for all people to learn how to love. He says that marriage gives you a direct mirror into your own self. Yes-much of what Richie says is very true to me, as I have expressed so many similar ideas in my own philosophy. But then Richie goes on and talks about the necessity of having a Master in order to find out who you are in your deepest self. The Master knows where you want to go and sets up the conditions for you to go in exactly that direction. Diane retorts that she has no need or desire to have a Master, as she and I learn from each other. Finally, Richie accepts that perhaps it is our fate in life to walk a spiritual path without a Master, and a dangerous impasse gets resolved. Diane says she is able to understand everything that Richie has been saying, in a way that not many people would be able to understand. Richie says that he knows this and appreciates this greatly.

What did "I" do this whole evening? Well, I played the piano a little bit (my old piano which I had given to Richie and Linda as a wedding present), and I listened a whole lot. Richie and Linda were totally flabbergasted at my silence after their opening of their hearts about Guru Maharaji. They expected me to argue and debate like I always used to. No-I no longer have anything to argue with them about. That's them- and this is me. If we can all accept each other, there does not have to be any one right or wrong way for everybody. Only time will tell what is really "real," and I think a few more years will be necessary before we are able to formulate any definite conclusions about Richie and Linda and Guru Maharaji.

Elliot Gets Sat-Sang (March 17, 1979)

About 5 weeks ago I had a telephone conversation with Richie. I must tell you a little bit about my circumstances in order for you to fully appreciate the impact that this conversation had upon me. Diane and I had just celebrated the 9th anniversary of our falling in love, and as an anniversary present I gave Diane enough money to go for a long weekend personal retreat to Mendocino, California (we were living in the Berkeley, California area at the time). This was a very significant few days for us, and marked the beginning of a whole new era in our relationship. However, it was a long few days for me, and it felt pretty weird being in our five room house all by myself. I went through many deep insights about my life and our relationship, and soon before Diane was expected home I decided to call my friend Richie in New York. To really appreciate the meaning of my calling Richie, you should realize that I have a general aversion to the telephone and that I virtually always write letters rather than call friends. Well, the phone call has cost me \$20, so I figure I at least better try to get another essay on Guru Maharaji out of it, so here goes.

I didn't tell Richie the details of what was going on between Diane and me, but I did tell him that we were still in process, and have not attained nirvana yet. This was all Richie needed. For the next half hour I got Sat-Sang. Of course Richie and Linda were the same, were living in total bliss and harmony, were like little children with each other, etc., etc. We went through our old guru-no guru controversy, and I totally made up for having played the piano during our last Richie & Linda get-together. I once again succumbed to Richie's exhortations

and proselytizing excitement. It made me realize how long it had been since I had actively searched for God. I told him that I still believed in Natural Dimension; i.e. in Mutual-Internalness¹⁰ between me and Diane. I told him that Diane and I were almost "there." Richie has been in on our journey from nearly the beginning, and he understandably took my reassurance with somewhat of a grain of salt. He stressed the importance of sharing your self with a community of other people, and I stressed the importance of making Diane into a happy human being. I told him that this was my life work, and if I could achieve this aim then I would also become a happy human being. I asked him if he could accept that he had his way and I had mine, and perhaps they were both O.K. His reply was remarkably brilliant. He said that when I tell him that I am living in love and bliss, then he would affirm my existence. I had nothing left to say. I could not say that I was living in love and bliss, and I could not say that I did not want to be living in love and bliss. I said that it was "Internal"¹⁰ for me and Diane to have children soon, and he minimized the importance of this to me, saying that nothing in external circumstances was necessary to be happy. I disagreed with him in this respect, and we said good-bye in a very distant place.

So what have I learned from my spiritual telephone conversation with my friend Richie? I learned that I am still vulnerable to authentic spirituality. It is still something that is very much a part of me. I am still on a search, although I spend much less time actively searching than I used to. But it just takes a few real words from a real friend to remind me of who I am. I need to conquer materialism first; this is the only reason I have taken a rest in my search for truth and for God. But I foresee that I will be moving again shortly, as the quest for authentic spirituality is as valid in my life now as it ever was. Thank you Richie for giving me Sat-Sang.

Richie Gets Sat-Sang (April 15, 1979)

I'm now at a small private public beach in the town of Mendocino, California, which I have just made into a nudist beach. Natural Dimension is alive and well, as Diane and I are recapturing who we truly are; God is Mutual-Internalness¹⁰ Do you hear that-Richie? Last weekend I wrote you a letter which I don't expect you to answer, for you are too wrapped up in your Guru Maharaji to really see me for who I am. But in my letter I said that although I love you both, you and Linda are two of the most closed-minded people I know. I said some stuff about truly being open and susceptible to what life has in store. This is Natural Dimension, Richie. Sometimes I'm uptight, and sometimes I'm uninhibited. I seem to work in extremes. But put me in nature with Diane for a few days, and I inevitably find out who I am. If I believed in past lives, I would say I'm Albert Einstein reincarnated. Am I happy? I'm on the road to being happy. I'm almost content, and that is a nice place for me to be in. And whatever I have achieved and will achieve in life, I have done it directly to life itself. You my friend have cheated; although you think you know all the answers, you know absolutely nothing. For I know that I know nothing, and therefore I know far more than you. You'll say you know nothing, nothing except that Guru Maharaji is Lord of the Universe. What kind of weakness is it that needs a guru-the way you and Linda need Guru Maharaji? Why is true love not enough for a human being? It is enough

for me-more than enough, and I am thankful to be alive. The challenge, the mystery, and the ecstasy are all experiences in life that I feel privileged to have had. I could not have experienced one without the other. So now my friend-I am giving "you" Sat-Sang. I don't expect you to ever listen, and that is why this is going down as an essay for my book-instead of as a letter to you. I know you don't care, but I am sorry that I feel you aren't there anymore. I'm no guru; I'm only a human being. But it's good to be alive.

Guru Maharaji Gets Sat-Sang (May 31, 1982)

I truly do believe that this will be my last essay on Guru Maharaji. I had lost touch with Richie for over 3 years, when one night I came home from my Men's group meeting and who do you think was on the phone with Diane? It turned out that Richie was still very interested in us and was not able to locate us the past few years, but finally managed to find us through a mutual friend. He had heard that we had a baby, and he seemed to be genuinely interested in us all getting re-acquainted. And so we all got together in New York for an evening last Thanksgiving, and then Richie and Linda visited us at our home in Easthampton, Massachusetts for 3 days-just a few days ago.

Well I would have to say that Richie and Linda will always be our friends, but with serious limitations. Richie and I go back a long time, and neither of us wants to throw that away, but there is virtually no change in their effervescence over Guru Maharaji. However, to do justice to their faith, I must say that there have been some interesting and positive developments in the Premi community. It turns out that Divine Light Mission no longer exists as the organizational structure of the religion, and that the term "Guru" has been dropped; he's now referred to simply as Maharaji. It seems that Maharaji honestly does not want any more of the circus antics and fanfare that overrode all the festivals in their old days. The whole thing seems to be simplified to such an extent that it is nearly impossible for anyone to locate Premies on their own, without knowing someone first. I welcome these changes very much, and I am nearly tempted to stop calling Maharaji a cult. However, when I look at the intrinsics of what is really going on, I nearly want to vomit.

To backtrack a little, when we got together with Richie and Linda in New York last Thanksgiving, I was very affected by the beauty and happiness that Richie and Linda had preserved in their 10 year marriage. Diane and I have been through so many struggles, and we have preserved the special ingredient of our love, but we by no means live day-to-day life in the honeymoon stage, which is how Richie and Linda seem to live every day. I've had a long-standing jealousy of their relationship, but it always was that Diane and I were on the path of reaching our potential. Well this time it didn't seem like we were on too much of a path. I was having tremendous difficulties in supporting my new family, my in-law problems were intense, and we were not at all happy. Richie and Linda were truly caring and helpful. I will always appreciate their sincere interest and wisdom in regard to what I needed to do to get back on the track. But the personal details are not relevant right now; the point is that I felt a very real bond with Richie and Linda; a couple bond. This couple bond was the motivation that led me to acquire more learning

experiences with Maharaji. Richie had changed his tune about Receiving Knowledge over Thanksgiving. He said that the Initiators were giving out Knowledge much more easily now, and that you did not first have to believe that Maharaji was Lord of the Universe in order to Receive Knowledge. Soon after our New York visit I wrote to Richie that I would like to experience Receiving Knowledge-this summer in Boston. After a few tumultuous months of bad communication about this matter, Richie and Linda came to visit us, and Richie and I talked and talked and talked. It was very draining on me-both mentally and physically, and I knew that if I was going to keep some kind of a friendship with them, I had to put a stop to Richie's unceasing unwanted advice that he would continuously give me. And so it was left that I was going to check out Maharaji for myself.

And now I have checked it out enough to satisfy any lingering curiosity that can possibly still be in me. Receiving Knowledge is just as it always was-you have to first open your heart to Maharaji, as a child to the Lord. This is the only way in which the meditation techniques of Receiving Knowledge have the effect they are noted for¹¹ I verified this quite personally, having spent a few intensive hours with an Initiator in one-to-one dialogue, both in the Hartford, Connecticut ashram and in the car ride from Hartford to New York, and there is no way that I could ever Receive Knowledge. It is so very obvious to me how Maharaji fills the hearts of those who are at their dead-end; those who do not have the courage to face life on their own. I had a very sad firsthand experience of this while spending the night in the apartment of a very pitiful Premi.

Enough! I can stand it no longer. I saw continuous pictures of Maharaji in the slide show at the Hartford ashram-a fat egocentric young man. I feel a repulsion towards him-and I always will. Yes his followers are sincere, including Richie and Linda. They believe that they have found God, and there is no changing that.

But for me, I choose to meditate on my own special form of God-the gift of my family, i.e. me, Diane, and Jeremy. I have my own mission in life, and it is to be worthy of the gift I have received, and to make all the potential beauty inside my gift come out. To hell with everything else. I am now content, and I foresee the day when I will be happy. If God is not in me, then there is no God. For I have preserved the ultimate meaning of religion: LOVE¹²

Afterword #1: 9 years later I visited Richie and Linda in Montreal, Canada with my then 10-year-old son Jeremy in 1991, and it was evident that Guru Maharaji continued to be the ultimate source of spiritual meaning and happiness in both of their lives, as they were still living in total bliss and harmony. As of 2005, Divine Light Mission is alive and well.

Afterword #2: 17 years after my 1991 get-together with him, I received a surprise phone call from Richie in April, 2008, after not having heard from him in all these years.

Within a few minutes it was the same old story-Richie urging me to check out Maharaji and Receive Knowledge that is now available through the guru's CDs that can be done at home, etc. Maharaji and Divine Light Mission both have new names (check out Prem Pal Rawat and Elan Vital at www.elanvital.org) but the more things change the more they

seem to stay the same. As of May, 2011 I have had no further contact with Richie or Divine Light Mission/Elan Vital.

Conversation with Richie 7 Years Later

And 7 years later Richie and I have had another conversation. Yes Richie and Linda are still devotees of Guru Maharajji/Prem Pal Rawat and Divine Light Mission/ Elan Vital, but I must admit that I was very surprised (and relieved) that this time Richie did not plagiarize to me about his religion. We talked for an hour and fifteen minutes, and nearly all of our conversation was about Richie's music and art, his living alone in California for the past 8 years while remaining close with Linda, his very involving platonic friendship with a woman who lives near him, his health challenges, and a bit about my own artistic development over the past 20 years. However, in passing Richie mentioned something about his old friend, who I knew from Brooklyn when I was a kid, having "received knowledge." But it actually took a few prompting's before I got Richie to tell me about his current involvement in Divine Light Mission/Elan Vital, as he was obviously much more interested in telling me about the immense changes that have taken place in his life. And when he did finally describe to me what his current meditation practice is like, he emphasized that the focus of his 2 hour daily mediation was on going deep inside himself, without his usual plagiarizing way of describing to me how sublime and magical Guru Maharajji/Prem Pal Rawat was. What he actually said was that Prem Pal Rawat now conveyed that his followers should not focus upon him as an "inspirational speaker," but instead should go deep inside themselves to attain spiritual wisdom⁵.

When Richie talked about the meditative quality of his music and art, I told him that this was similar to how I practiced meditation myself with my mathematics and music, and that this sounded similar to me to the practice of mindfulness mediation¹⁶, which was what my fiancé Dorothy's meditative practice is. Richie listened to me well and did not minimize what I was saying in the way that he always used to, as in the past he would always try to convey to me how much "higher" his meditation on Guru Maharajji was after "receiving knowledge." No-I must admit that there was no more proselytizing in this conversation. All things considered, this conversation felt pretty much like an old friend telling me about his life, and included a description of his religious/spiritual practice, but without trying to convert me.

I don't know if Richie has truly become as mellow as he sounded to me on the phone, in regard to accepting that others have their own legitimate spiritual paths that are different from his own. Perhaps in our next conversation Richie will once again get back to his proselytizing/trying to convert me mode of conversation. But for now, I must say that I was quite surprised and relieved to feel that I reconnected with my old boyhood friend Richie without our usual intensive guru-no guru conversation. If anything, it makes me feel more open to reevaluating Divine Light Mission/Elan Vital and Guru Maharajji/Prem Pal Rawat. But to consider all possibilities, perhaps this is what Richie wisely decided to do; i.e. to not put pressure on me to "receive knowledge," but rather to let me gradually feel more favorable to his guru. However, at any rate, I must give credit where credit is due, as at this time I must honestly say that I feel relatively calm when I think about

Divine Light Mission/Elan Vital and Guru Maharajji/ Prem Pal Rawat. Perhaps it's time for me to check them out on the internet and see what I can find out from what others have experienced.

Afterword: 8/9/15

Before I check them out on the internet, I would like to briefly describe what has taken place for me with Richie over the last few weeks since our recent phone conversation. I received an e-mail from Richie about a week after our conversation, saying that he read my *Experiential Skepticism: An Exploration of Mediumship and Life after Death* essay¹³, and describing his and Linda's experiences with "psychic surgery," which I had described from an experiential skepticism perspective in my above article. In this e-mail, Richie said that he was focused upon connecting with spirits in "this" lifetime rather than with ones who have passed on, and he sent me some of his music CD's. We exchanged a number of e-mails over the next few days, about topics such as him having a bicycle accident soon after his recent move to Florida, and my remarking that I liked his music and artwork that I had recently checked out. Richie did mention briefly about how wonderful it was for him to be able to connect with a spiritual master in his daily meditation, but once again for the most part our communications were not focused upon his guru.

However, in the last e-mail I received from Richie, which was over a month ago, he asked me if I would ever have an interest in coloring in black and white creative drawings, which is what I knew he was trying to promote on the internet to sell his artwork. I responded that Dorothy and I had enjoyed coloring in mandalas when we were vacationing in the Caribbean, but I made no mention about buying any of his artwork, as I had no interest or intention of doing so. And this is when our immediate back and forth e-mail communications have come to an end.

Basically I am relieved at this break in the action between me and Richie, as it felt like it was too much day-to-day continuous contact with him. But it also feels rather strange to me if there is legitimacy to my feeling that this break in the action was directly related to me not responding to his hope that I would be interested in buying his artwork on the internet. It makes me wonder how genuine our friendship truly is. But in all fairness to Richie, I should at least give him the benefit of the doubt and candidly ask him if he was hurt or disappointed about this and if this is why he stopped sending me e-mails. At any rate, this is now nothing more than a personal aside about the relationship I am having with an old friend from Brooklyn, and it does not change anything in regard to my evaluation of Divine Light Mission/Elan Vital and Guru Maharajji/Prem Pal Rawat.

Conclusion

I am not at all surprised to learn from information and articles on the internet, in particular from the Rick Ross Cult Education site and the International Cultic Studies Association, that there has been continuous disillusionment and concerns about the legitimacy and ethical practices of Guru Maharajji/Prem Pal Rawat and Divine Light Mission/Elan Vital for many years⁵. However, I believe that my very personal account from my lifelong friendship with Richie adds

a rather unique dimension to these reports. I concluded in my *Modern Religions* book (Benjamin, 2013) that Divine Light Mission had a moderate degree of cult danger, and I still believe that this is the case⁴. The accumulation of wealth on the part of Guru Maharajji/Prem Pal Rawat at the expense of his impoverished devotees is certainly cause enough for me to be very concerned about the ethics of his guruship⁴. Giving one's life to this guru at the expense of one's freedom of thought, as I have described in the series of essays in this article in regard to my friend Richie, is another concern I have about the cult dangers of this organization. As I conveyed in my *Modern Religions* book (Benjamin, 2013), there are certainly modern religious organizations, such as Scientology and the Unification Church, both of which are still in existence today, that I have far more cultic concerns about than I have in regard to Elan Vital⁶. But the dramatic reduction in proselytizing behavior about his religion and guru from my friend Richie is not a reason for me to have any less cultic concerns about Pram Pal Rawat and Elan Vital than I described in my above 1977 essay. The traps remain the same as I wrote about nearly 40 years ago, and I must strongly discourage anyone from partaking of them.

Notes

1. See Chapters 1: pages 37-41 and Chapter 3: pages 198-212 of my book *Modern Religions: An Experiential Analysis and Exposé* (Benjamin, 2013).
2. "Love and Magic" is the phrase which Richie and Linda has used to refer to their music and to the name of their performance as a musical duo.
3. See my book *The Creative Artist, Mental Disturbance, and Mental Health* (Benjamin, 2014) and my article My Conception of Integral (Benjamin, 2006).
4. See Chapter 1: pages 37-41 in my *Modern Religions* book (Benjamin, 2013).
5. See the following websites:
<http://www.ex-premie.org/papers/Evital.htm>
<http://www.cultnews.com/category/elanvital/divinelightmission>
<http://culteducation.com/group/1219-divine-light-mission.html>
<http://www.icsahome.com/system/app/pages/search?scoop=search-site&q=divine+Light+Mission&offset=20>
6. See Chapters 1, 3, and 4 of my *Modern Religions* book (Benjamin, 2013).
7. However, I have since learned that as one progresses in the Unification Church organization, it is indeed made quite clear that Reverend Moon is the second Messia. See for example Underwood & Underwood (1979).
8. See my personal experiential essays in Chapter 5 of my *Modern Religions* book (Benjamin, 2013), and my essay *Life, Death, Meaning, and Purpose* (Benjamin, 2014b).
9. See my essay *Moonies and Premies* in my *Modern Religions* book (Benjamin, 2013), pages 204-206.
10. See my essay *On Internal* in my book *The Creative Artist, Mental Disturbance, and Mental Health* (Benjamin, 2014).
11. See for example the book *Sacred Journeys: The Conversion of Young Americans to Divine Light Mission* (Downton, 1979).
12. The nature of God being within the individual as well as in the world is very much a part of various modern and new age spiritual interpretations of God, including Neopaganism, Avatar, and Conversations with God. See my related essays in Chapters 1 and 2 of my *Modern Religions* book (Benjamin, 2013), and Huston Smith's (1991) book *The World's Religions*.
13. My essay *Experiential Skepticism: An Exploration of Mediumship and Life after Death* (Benjamin, 2015) is also available on my website: www.benjamin-philosopher.com

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8. Underwood, B., & Underwood, B. (1979). *Moonstruck: A Memoir of My Life in a Cult*. New York: William Morrow & Co.
9. Wilber, K. (1995). *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*. Shambhala.