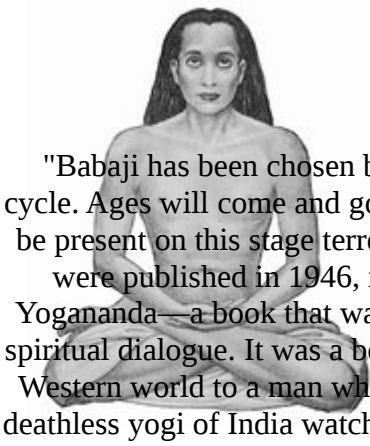


## Mahavatar Babaji



"Babaji has been chosen by God to remain in his body for the duration of this particular world cycle. Ages will come and go—still the deathless master, beholding the drama of the centuries, shall be present on this stage terrestrial." So began the legend of the immortal sage Babaji. These words were published in 1946, in the classic spiritual tale *Autobiography of a Yogi* by Paramahansa Yogananda—a book that was destined to have a major impact on the then just emerging East-West spiritual dialogue. It was a book that introduced thousands, if not millions, of aspiring seekers in the Western world to a man who, legend tells us, is perhaps the greatest of ancient saints, an immortal deathless yogi of India watching over this earthly plane like a benevolent omniscient spiritual parent—Babaji.

To read *Autobiography of a Yogi* and absorb Yogananda's lucid, almost otherworldly descriptions of the spiritual life is to embark upon a journey to a place that exists far beyond the borders of our materialistic Western worldview—a realm where miracles are commonplace and where physical laws, in the hands of the great yogis, seem as malleable and as changeable as clay in the hands of great artists. By any standard, the book is a work of genius, a masterpiece that combines an inspiring introduction to the ancient yogic path with a philosophical inquiry into the underlying unity of Eastern and Western religions, weaving it all together with the remarkable story of Yogananda's own pioneering life and teachings. Upon publication it captured the hearts of thousands and introduced Americans to the esoteric world of the Himalayan sages, inviting hungry spirits to believe in undreamed-of possibilities in the evolution of consciousness—possibilities, the yogic masters say, that lie dormant in each of us. But perhaps even more importantly, the book revealed the existence of a heretofore unknown Master residing in the Himalayas, an immortal sage offering *darshan* [audience with a Master] to a select few, a major player in human evolution hiding in obscurity amid the high peaks of Asia and guiding the unfolding drama of spiritual history—Babaji.

So who exactly is Babaji? My own inquiry into that question was sparked last year by a couple of books we received in the mail from individuals who claimed to have been personally initiated by the great Master himself. Although I was only marginally familiar with the history of this legendary yogi, as recounted by Yogananda, I knew enough to appreciate the magnitude of such a claim, and the books led to several fascinating discussions among our editorial team. Were we suddenly witnessing a surge of interest in this legendary saint, we wondered? The popularity of *Autobiography of a Yogi* has long made Babaji's name and image pop icons of the spiritual counterculture—one only needs to see his serene countenance floating above the crowd on the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's* album cover to appreciate that. But it did seem, almost half a century after Yogananda's death, that Babaji's presence in the spiritual world was on the rise. And the more we looked the more we found. From Himalayan caves to California communes, we began to see that Babaji's influence, in some form or another, was surprisingly pervasive. Books were being written about him, workshops were representing his teachings, people were channeling him, communities were dedicated to him, individuals were claiming to be his personal disciples, individuals were even claiming to be Babaji himself. This obscure, secluded, behind-the-scenes immortal sage seemed to be, in his multitudinous modern incarnations, rapidly losing his obscurity.



As we began to explore the subject of spiritual evolution for this issue of *WIE*, the phenomenon of Babaji became even more compelling. Some were saying that his enlightenment was a step beyond even that of the Buddha, a total transformation of consciousness, the powerful effects of which produce radical changes all the way down to the very cells of the physical body. And Yogananda's

declaration of Babaji's physical immortality had not fallen on deaf ears either. Indeed, the subject of immortality, bolstered perhaps by this impressive endorsement, seemed to have moved out beyond the New Age fringe and was being embraced by a growing number of seekers as our true collective evolutionary destiny. So what really was going on? Yogananda's story had lit the fuse over fifty years ago, and the reverberations from the explosion of interest in this legendary sage and his spiritual attainment had definitely taken on a life of their own. But did any of it have anything to do with the real Babaji? For that matter, did a real Babaji even exist? For this issue of *WIE* we decided to take up the challenge and go in search of this immortal sage, whose very existence, it seemed, would say a lot about enlightenment, evolution, and the future of God.

For those few seekers who have never cracked the covers of Yogananda's classic tale, the story goes something like this: In the middle of the nineteenth century, Babaji, the immortal "Yogi-Christ" of India as Yogananda called him, appeared in person to a postal worker by the name of Lahiri Mahasaya who was stationed in the high Himalayas. In a series of extraordinary and fantastical encounters with this Himalayan sage, Lahiri was initiated into the practice of Kriya yoga, an ancient yogic method, we are told, that was taught by Krishna to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita and is referred to by the great yogic pioneer Patanjali in his classic Yoga Sutras. The technique had been lost for centuries before being "rediscovered and clarified" in modern times by Babaji. Kriya yoga is described by Yogananda as an "instrument through which human evolution can be quickened." And he writes that through applying this powerful method of breath mastery, we quickly deepen our connection with the Divine, and our brain, spinal cord, and cells become rejuvenated. Ultimately, in the highest levels of Kriya practice, Yogananda says, our entire body can be transmuted into energy. Appealing perhaps to a Western consciousness unwilling to wait lifetimes for the promise of spiritual awakening, Yogananda introduces Kriya yoga as an evolutionary leap forward—an airplane, as he puts it, in a world of bullock carts—and, in one of the more stunning sentences of the book, goes as far as to claim that one thousand Kriya breaths practiced in eight and a half hours can give the sincere yogi, in one day, "the equivalent of one thousand years of natural evolution."

It was this technique of Kriya yoga, streamlined and updated for the modern age, that Babaji asked Lahiri Mahasaya to bring to Indian seekers of truth. And, in contrast to past restrictions, he allowed Lahiri to initiate not only ascetics, world-renouncers, but all interested householders, regardless of station or religion. Teaching in Benares, India, at the end of the nineteenth century, Lahiri helped establish a spiritual lineage that was destined to become one of the most significant in the modern age. The next teacher in this celebrated lineage would be Sri Yukteswar, a serious young student of Lahiri's who would, in his years with his master, also have several miraculous encounters with Babaji. In one of those meetings Yukteswar was informed by the great yogi that a young man would eventually be sent to him for instruction, an Indian seeker who was to be trained for a great destiny—to disseminate the Kriya yoga teachings in the Western world.

Babaji's words proved prescient. A student named Mukunda eventually arrived and requested Yukteswar's spiritual guidance, a passionate young man whom Yukteswar took as a disciple and began to prepare for the prophesied mission. Taking to the yogic path like a fish to water, Mukunda advanced rapidly under Yukteswar's strict tutelage and, after a number of years of living in his Master's hermitage, was ready to take up the Kriya yoga banner and head to the West. The arrival in America of this gifted young Indian man, educated in a Calcutta university and trained in Kriya yoga by Sri Yukteswar, was a watershed event in the development of Western spirituality. People turned out in droves to see this extraordinary yogi who had walked among the great God-realized sages of India and who was sharing his wisdom in the New World. Swami Yogananda, as he was now known, became a legend in his own time, the teaching of Kriya yoga spread fast among Western seekers, and the stories of the immortal sage Babaji, who seemed to have reached the pinnacle of human evolution, enthralled generations of Westerners, who soon placed *Autobiography of a Yogi* near the top of the modern spiritual canon.

## The Monk and the Avatar

The word "avatar" in Indian philosophy refers to the appearance in the world of a deity in human form. It is an Indian term traditionally reserved for showing great respect to extraordinary human beings who bless us with their presence on this earth. But today, in a spiritual world where it sometimes seems as if you can't throw a stone fifty feet without hitting yet another self-declared avatar, one has to appreciate Yogananda's foresight in distinguishing Babaji as nothing less than a *Mahavatar*. Qualifying for this much greater "scriptural classification," as Yogananda called it in his book, is apparently no small matter. Swami Satyananda, a long-time monk of the Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF), the organization Yogananda designated to carry on his teachings after his death, explained the distinction to me last November.

"Throughout human evolution we're evolving physically, but we're also evolving spiritually. And the pinnacle of spiritual evolution is a cosmic consciousness that unites our awareness with all three worlds [physical, causal, astral], and beyond. At that point, we have the power to consciously leave our bodies and transcend this material world. But if we then come back for the purpose of helping others spiritually, and yet we ourselves have no more karma, at that point we are an avatar. Paramahansa Yogananda said that he himself was an avatar because he came back for that purpose. *Mahavatar* Babaji would be an avatar who attained that status long ago and has received a dispensation from Cosmic Spirit to remain incarnate, that is, in a form on earth, but in a hidden way, for the purpose of helping the spirituality of mankind."

In my talks with Satyananda, it was clear that he was convinced that the words of his Guru regarding Babaji were entirely factual. Leading me on a brief tour of the world of Babaji according to Yogananda and the SRF, he corrected some common misperceptions regarding the legend of the immortal yogi, including the notion that spiritual enlightenment and evolution is leading us all to an eventual state of physical immortality.

"Once we have attained liberation, cosmic consciousness, all things are possible. But it would not be the ultimate goal to then retain a human body for the purpose of living forever. Actually, the Vedic scriptures tell us that there are three bodies. We have the physical body, we have an astral body of energy and light, and we have a causal body of consciousness. So the ultimate goal of evolution has always been, and will always be, to be free of all bodies."

"Including the physical?"

"Including the physical. It would not be the apotheosis of incarnations to remain immortal in the physical body."

"Do you mean that our ultimate evolutionary destiny is not really as a human in a body on this planet?"

"That's right. It would be pure cosmic consciousness. The idea of an avatar coming back to retain a body for an indefinite period of time is the unique role of Babaji."

So Babaji was the exception rather than the rule of evolution, according to Satyananda, and our most likely evolutionary destiny lay far beyond this world.

What about Satyananda himself? I wondered. "Have you ever met Babaji, had a vision, felt his presence?"

"I've had an experience with Babaji. It was a very powerful personal perception that made it clear beyond a doubt that not only is he a spiritual presence in the world, but that there's a unity between him and my group [SRF]. The experience was unsought, but deeply, deeply needed, and left a lifelong imprint. But I don't really want to put it into print. I'm sure you respect and appreciate that."

Understanding his reluctance, I also found myself wondering if his experience had occurred in the physical realm. Indeed, did people today ever see Babaji's physical body? Would I have to travel all the way to the Himalayas to have that opportunity?

### **The Southern Gentleman**

"You have to make contact with Babaji on the inner planes," the voice on the other end of the line told me. "Yogananda, Yukteswar, and Lahiri all encouraged their devotees not to go to the Himalayas in search of Babaji but to find him on the inner planes in deep meditation and contemplation." The gentle Southern accent belonged to one of the few surviving teachers of Kriya yoga who can genuinely claim to have studied with Yogananda and been authorized to guide others on the path—Roy Eugene Davis. A seventy-one-year-old Southern gentleman with a sweet conversational style and an obvious devotion to his teacher, Davis met Yogananda over fifty years ago and caught fire with a passion for the yogic path to enlightenment. And even though I initially felt slightly uncomfortable asking him questions like, "Are you convinced that Yogananda did actually intend everything he wrote about Babaji to be taken as fact?" Davis's relaxed manner quickly put me at ease. It was clear that, for Davis, the traditional idea of enlightenment is one glorious step along the way to an even more glorious possibility that Babaji represents as the pinnacle of human evolution. He told me:

"If what Yogananda says is true, and I believe it, Babaji is an accomplished Siddha, a Master of the elements. He can materialize his body, and he is in a permanent super-conscious state. I would say that's sort of the peak experience that we can aspire to. I think the potential is in all of us for that."

Davis, in his unassuming manner, was more candid than many, particularly about what he did not know. Never straying far from his own experience, he was not inclined to speculation, and when I pressed him for more about the real nature of Babaji's attainment, he finally said simply, "I have never seen him."

After spending weeks immersed in a subject that is so imbued with the mysterious, Davis's frankness and honesty came as a relief. Especially as it was becoming clear to me that while Yogananda's exalted reputation and respected authority in the spiritual world had convinced many of the truth of Babaji's existence—especially those connected to his own lineage—actual encounters with the great yogi were rare, and the flesh-and-blood variety almost nonexistent. Was it simply not Babaji's currently preferred method of manifestation? Perhaps. But it was somewhat curious, I thought, that physical encounters with the great yogi seem to get progressively more scarce as one moves forward in history from the date of Lahiri Mahasaya's first meeting with Babaji. It is, without a doubt, always a good idea to make a lot of room in the spiritual life for that which lies beyond the rational mind, and the phenomenon of Babaji may indeed be a prime example. But I had also heard that some highly respected figures in the yoga scene have long suspected that many of the more remarkable stories in *Autobiography of a Yogi* were embellished, if not entirely imagined. Even Roy Davis himself seemed unwilling to declare that the entire book was factual, saying that while Yogananda was no doubt telling the truth, much of the content consisted of reports of anecdotes he had been told and had taken on faith. As questions began to swirl in my mind, the philosophical implications of the issue suddenly struck home. On one hand, if you believe in an immortal sage named Babaji, you are inherently making a strong statement about the reality of immortality and other miraculous powers of mind and consciousness. And on the other hand, if you tend toward

skepticism, you are calling into question the authenticity of a sacred icon whom respected authorities in the modern spiritual world revere as a symbol of perfect divinity. While Davis's words stayed with me—"I have not met anyone here or in India who has seen him in recent years"—my search was far from finished, and I was soon to meet several people with very different stories to tell.

## A Different Lineage

Sightings and stories of Babaji have never been the exclusive domain of the lineage begun by Lahiri Mahasaya in the nineteenth century. In some ways, one could say it is almost *de rigueur* if you are a North Indian yogi to have had a Babaji encounter. Famous figures in the yoga scene such as Baba Hari Dass, Swami Radha, and Yogi Mani Finger have all passed on anecdotes of Babaji encounters over the years, although most were brief and did not involve any kind of initiation or transmission of the lineage. One exception to this rule occurred in the early 1950s, shortly after Yogananda's death, when Babaji is said to have initiated and empowered two Indian seekers to spread his teaching of Kriya yoga: S.A.A. Ramaiah and V.T. Neelakantan. Ramaiah was a young university student in Madras, India, when a series of miraculous events convinced him of Babaji's living presence in his life. And Neelakantan was a famous Indian journalist, already steeped in esoteric knowledge through his friendship with Annie Besant of the Theosophical Society when Babaji began to make regular appearances to him. When the two met in 1952, a new Kriya yoga lineage was born and, although their partnership did not last long, it was productive. They published several books allegedly dictated by Babaji, and Ramaiah began a long study of a relatively unknown ancient order of yogis called the Siddha yogis, a South Indian tradition that thrived in the ancient Tamil culture. It seems that many of these historical Siddhas—a term used for great saints who have mastered certain yogic powers or *siddhis*—were not quite as interested in traditional conceptions of yogic Samadhi as they were in something a little more down-to-earth—the evolution of the body. They envisioned radical physical transformation as a crucial part of the spiritual and evolutionary process. In their work and writings, the holy grail of immortality found perhaps its greatest champions.

The best way to describe Yogi Ramaiah, at least from my brief exchanges with him, would be to say that he is dedicated. Overseeing centers supporting the work of Babaji and Kriya yoga all around the world, from America to South Africa to India, he maintains a personal schedule that is, according to reports from exhausted students, near-Herculean. He is constantly circling the globe teaching, leading retreats, organizing conferences, and sharing his knowledge of the Siddha yoga tradition even as he continues to supervise the construction of a major new hospital and medical college in South India. Our conversation took place from one until two o'clock in the morning, one of the few times he was available to speak. Ramaiah is a passionate believer in the yogic path as envisioned by the Siddha sages, and all I had to do was mention the term "evolution" and that was the last word I got in for more than half an hour.

"According to the theory of evolution, the highest level of development is human beings. But according to yoga, that is not so. According to the Tamil Siddhantham, or the teachings of the Siddhas, something greater is happening. No doubt we are the most advanced physically, nobody is denying it. But by practicing yoga, we are going to evolve to a higher state. We don't stop with human beings. That is the reason why I advise everybody: practice yoga, practice yoga, practice yoga! Because yoga doesn't confine itself to the physical plane. There are five bodies—physical, vital, mental, intellectual, and spiritual. Beyond the physical plane, there is the vital, beyond the vital, the mental, beyond the mental, the intellectual, and beyond the intellectual, the spiritual. So if you want to understand, you have to practice the fivefold path of Babaji's Kriya yoga. When you practice yoga, you start evolving on all five planes.

"So when that divinity, whom you call God, whom you call Shiva—call it by any name that you like—manifests itself in the spiritual plane, the greatest of criminals becomes a saint. And when that divine consciousness manifests itself in the intellectual plane, you become a sage, you become a *jnani*. When it manifests itself in the mental plane, you become a Patanjali, who gave us the Raja Yoga Sutras. When that divinity manifests itself in the vital plane, you become a Boganathar, who is the guru of Babaji, you become a yogi Jesus Christ. And when that divinity manifests itself in the physical plane, you become a Babaji. Now do you understand the importance of Babaji?"

While I thought I could probably infer the importance of Babaji, I couldn't say I totally understood it. But it did sound similar to Yogananda's own descriptions of Babaji's attainment, when he speaks in his autobiography of Babaji surrendering to the Divine all the way down to the physical cells of his body.

Ramaiah seemed to be telling me that the qualities of any given spiritual realization depended on what plane of existence that realization was manifesting on. Therefore, a spiritual realization that manifested on the physical plane would theoretically result in a transformation that would cause divine qualities to be expressed in the physical world. As Ramaiah put it:

"God, as you know, has no birth and no death. And when that divinity manifests itself in the physical, then the physical body does not die. You see how simple it is?"

Yes, in some respects, it did seem simple—that is, until I tried to *really* understand it. But attempts at further clarification brought only adamant injunctions to "practice yoga," and to awaken the five bodies. Then everything would be clear.

Miraculously healed of bone tuberculosis at a young age by what he says was a divine intervention from Babaji, Ramaiah is nothing if not convinced that his life is not his own and is solely given over in service to his teacher. Calling himself "only dust on Babaji's lotus feet," he encourages others to practice Kriya yoga, but only in the context of a deep surrender to Babaji himself.

"When you receive the grace of a great Siddha like Kriya Babaji Nagaraj, then you really start flying like a jet plane. That's the goal. When you try to do it on your own, trying to follow your ego, it is like crossing the ocean with a boat. That's why I used to tell people all the time: 'Why do you worry? Just get into the jet plane of Babaji and leave the flying to him.' "

While Ramaiah made it absolutely clear that I could not understand Babaji or his yoga through "telephone talk," I was intrigued by his work, and by the Tamil Siddha tradition he passionately champions. And he is not the only one who sees, in this ancient tradition, crucial insights into spiritual evolution as well as into the life and times of Babaji. Indeed, one of his former students, American author Marshall Govindan, has been inspired to take up the cause of the Siddha sages as well.

If you already believe in the legend of Babaji, then it won't be a stretch to take a brief tour through South Indian history with Marshall Govindan. A dedicated Kriya yoga teacher and practitioner himself, Govindan is, without a doubt, keeper of the esoteric knowledge of all things Babaji-related. A serious scholar of yogic history who has earned the praise of noted yogic scholars such as Georg Feuerstein for his dedication to the field, Govindan tells a version of Indian history that is part scholarship, part speculation. It goes something like this: The Siddha yogis stem from an ancient tradition located on a lost continent below Sri Lanka that was once connected to Australia but was submerged in the ocean by a great cataclysm around ten thousand years ago. The tradition survived into modern times through the teachings of a long lineage of great saints, the names of whom are well known to Indian ears. And if you're wondering what all of this has to do with Babaji, here is

the answer: According to Govindan, Babaji was actually a part of this tradition, trained by one of the great Siddha saints in the second century—which makes him not quite immortal, just eighteen hundred years young. Moreover, it is this tradition, Govindan tells us, that has performed the most radical experiments in evolutionary development so far, and in so doing, has brought to life a concept that seems to be capturing the attention of more and more in today's world: physical immortality through the attainment of what is usually referred to as the "light body." And if this doesn't sound like the Hindu Vedantic goal of *moksha*, or liberation, that you learned about in Eastern Religion 101, fear not. It isn't. The goal of this path is different from what we normally think of as enlightenment, as Govindan pointed out when I spoke to him last November:

"Sri Yukteswar, Yogananda's teacher, said that Babaji's attainment was inconceivable. It didn't fit the paradigm of enlightenment as he knew it, which is *moksha*, liberation. The goal of *moksha* is very characteristic of North India, which is largely Vedantic. The Northern yogis look at the Siddhas of South India and scratch their heads. 'Why would anyone want to stay on this physical plane indefinitely? They must have some bad karma.'

"When I started going to India thirty years ago, that is the response I got from even great swamis in the North—people like Yogi Bhajan and Swami Muktananda. I met Swami Muktananda in 1973, in a private interview, and I asked him, 'What's the difference between your yoga and the yoga of the Siddhas and Babaji?' And he asked me about some of these Siddhas, and I mentioned that they were immortals. And he said, 'It's impossible for anyone to become immortal.'

"This is a very common difficulty that people who have been brought up in the Advaita Vedantic tradition have, because for them the world is something that is illusory or really not worth much—a big distraction. But the Siddhas saw that the world is divine, and that it's all in a process of evolution—whether it be inert matter, or animals, or whatever. We're all part of this process of evolution.

"So when I train people, I show them not only how to go up into spiritual enlightenment, but I show them how to transform themselves intellectually, mentally, vitally, and physically. It's a complete transformation. Now this is a very tall order, and I tell people right in the introductory lecture that if their goal is simply to go to heaven or to find some *moksha*, there are lots of easier paths. This is not an easy path. It's a long process. It takes many, many births, but the rewards are much more complete. I mean, do you think that the cells of the physical body are interested in your enlightenment?"

I had to admit, it wasn't a question that had ever occurred to me. But since we can hardly walk further out on a limb, spiritually speaking, let's assume for a moment that my cells were interested. That would make me a prime candidate for what the Siddhas would see as perhaps the ultimate goal of spiritual evolution—the transfiguration of the physical body into light, i.e., the attainment of the light body. If the idea sounds somehow vaguely familiar, it might just be because it is reminiscent of another radical transfiguration that took place thousands of miles west of India a couple of hundred years before even Babaji was born: Jesus' resurrection. The connection is not as far-fetched as one might think. Even respected Christian authorities like Brother David Steindl-Rast have pursued similarities between Eastern conceptions of the "light body" and the Christian faith in the "resurrection body." And the interfaith similarities don't stop with Christianity. As author John White points out (see page Enlightenment and the Body of Light this issue), the light body is a concept talked about in some form or other in almost all of the world's great religious traditions. Of course, there is an obvious catch: there simply aren't a lot of individuals walking around showing off their light bodies and proving in real time the truth of these esoteric teachings and the destiny of human evolution. And therein lies the importance, for many, of Babaji. His legend has helped to stoke the fire of believers who are convinced that the impossible might actually be possible, and

that our cells might be destined, through the evolutionary fast-track of Kriya yoga or some other equally effective method, to evolve into light. As Satyananda, the monk from SRF, put it in our talk:

"The process of Kriya yoga itself is a transmutation of physical energy into spiritual energy, spiritual energy into consciousness, consciousness into higher consciousness. And in that sense we are working within Kriya yoga as a scientific *pranayam* [breath control]. We're working with refining the cells of the body into spirit so to speak. And the person in meditation, through this pranayam, has the experience of almost being dissolved in that light of God. And as we go into greater experiences through this, ultimately all of us want to have that liberating experience of dissolving our physical selves into the light of God."

"Do you think that we would actually physically dissolve?"

"It can happen on the physical plane, and that leads to some of the prophetic stories about saints dissolving their bodies or materializing themselves and dematerializing themselves. . . . In death, or even in life, an accomplished yogi can offer his cells, in this sense, to the cosmos, and literally dissolve his physical cells into light particles. It's pretty awesome. And, in fact, in *Autobiography of a Yogi*, Yogananda talks scientifically, and he describes how meditating yogis can actually create a state of infinite mass within their physical body cells, and how, once this expansion into infinite mass occurs, we are no longer bound by the constant in the universe that is the speed of light. And then the pervading consciousness of the yogi has the power of complete control over the physical universe."

He was making cellular evolution sound like an idea whose time has definitely come. My only question was, What about Babaji? Our yoga scholar Marshall Govindan is convinced that Babaji and others have passed through some version of this process and come out on the other side enlightened, both literally and figuratively. But had he actually ever seen Babaji in person? Did Govindan have some actual experience of Babaji's living presence to confirm his theory, or was this all academic? The question turned out to be more complicated than it first appeared.

You see, Govindan actually claims to have had several meetings with Babaji, which he says were extraordinarily powerful and which left him profoundly and permanently changed, and I would not doubt his sincerity for a moment. Yet the question of actually *seeing* Babaji was never quite resolved.

"I saw Babaji in the Himalayas two years ago," Govindan told me. "He appeared on the vital plane."

"On the vital plane? Not the physical?"

"It was the vital plane superimposed on the physical," Govindan replied.

Having absolutely no idea what that meant, I tried a more direct route. "Could you physically touch him?" I asked.

"No, I did not actually feel him physically, but there was like this parallel reality. In order to perceive things on the vital plane, there's a certain opening that has to take place in your third eye. It's a difficult thing to describe."

I was beginning to appreciate that fact.

Of all those to whom I spoke for this article, Marshall Govindan must be commended for his impressive efforts to bring some historical and intellectual rigor to the phenomenon that is Babaji,



and for his conviction in the evolutionary benefits of serious Kriya yoga practice. Also, much to his credit, he cautioned against having a "goal-oriented," materialistic relationship to any of these exalted attainments, a danger that seems to go with the territory. Interest in these matters must always be balanced, he told me, with "the practice of surrender" to the Divine. Otherwise, as he put it, "it's just the ego talking."

So where did all of this leave me with Babaji himself? Although I was understanding more and more of what we might call the theory of this immortal sage, the facts remained elusive. And I still had not yet spoken with anyone who had actually physically seen him. Time was growing short, but I had a few more people left to talk to.

## **An American Swami**

"Few in our culture realize that living Gurus walk among us" are the words written across the cover of Dr. Donald Schnell's recent book *The Initiation*. Dr. Schnell is an American spiritual teacher who now goes by the name of Prema Baba Swamiji. He claims to have had his own recent encounter with Babaji in India—in the flesh. And during their meeting he asked Babaji, among other things, the question that has become this magazine's trademark: What is enlightenment?

"It's like chocolate," Babaji told Schnell. "I can't tell you what it tastes like, but I can share it with you, and then you can share it with the whole world." Repeating these words over the phone to me last December, Schnell did his best Babaji impression, complete with an Indian accent, and he conveyed a tone that might most accurately be described as playful. Indeed, Schnell's book is much lighter fare than many of its counterparts, and his portrayal of Babaji more colorful.

"We have all these images of Babaji where he is kind of locked in lotus posture. But he's the opposite of that from my experience. He's like a kid at a rave."

"A kid at a rave?"

"He's youthful, he's dynamic, he's energetic, he's in motion, happy. He's more plantlike than human."

"Plantlike?"

"First of all, he's got like these perfect Hawaiian teeth. And what I mean by 'plantlike' is that there are plant stalks that are full and verdant, filled with water, and they don't look as if they have any bumps in them, because they don't. And Babaji's limbs—his arms and his legs—were like plant stalks. And there was a quality from him, from his *ahimsa* [nonviolence], which was more like plant than animal. When you go to a nursery and you're just surrounded by plants and you stop, connect, and breathe, there's a certain vibration—as opposed to when you're with animals. So, around Babaji, there's more of a plant vibration."

Dr. Schnell, by his own account, has had an unusual life. Spiritually passionate from a young age, he had always felt deeply connected to Babaji, and *Autobiography of a Yogi* was the first spiritual book he read at the age of eight. A student of the famous yogi Swami Muktananda and later closely involved with several other Indian teachers, Schnell writes that in 1997 he was summoned telepathically to India where he underwent a series of initiations with Babaji that are easily on a par with the most miraculous elements of Yogananda's autobiography. And Schnell stood by the veracity of his story even when I pressed him on it, claiming that Babaji asked him to bring to the West an updated version of Kriya yoga, or what he calls *Prema* yoga. While there are many aspects to Schnell's *Prema* yoga—he lists the four main principles as *Prema* [love], *Shanti* [peace], *Ahimsa*

[nonviolence] and *Mukti* [liberation]—fasting and proper diet also seem to play a key role, perhaps due to the influence of his wife, Marilyn Diamond, author of the well-known nutrition book, *Fit for Life*. And the goal of their yoga, as best I could tell, is a spiritual and physical evolution to an eventual state of such purity of body and soul that, like Babaji, we would no longer have to rely on food to sustain ourselves; our cells would be self-sustaining. As Schnell described the process:

"You give up meats and move into the vegetarian lifestyle, and maybe eventually beyond that you might even consider a raw food or live food diet, and then you move into breatharianism. As you move through that spectrum, your foods are getting purer and purer, creating less and less debris in the body, and your cells are becoming less toxic or more purified."

I suspected that this state of purity was somehow connected to the plantlike appearance of Babaji that Schnell had described.

According to Schnell, who says he is still closely in touch with Babaji at a psychic level, the great Master also has a lot to say about our post-September 11 world, much of which will be included in a forthcoming book. Asked for a hint about the new material, Schnell was tight-lipped about details, alluding only to important political commentary by Babaji on the current state of world affairs.

### **The Baba of Haidakhan**

Thus far I had only found one person who claimed to have seen Babaji in the flesh. But then I heard that thousands had flocked to India in the late seventies and early eighties to visit a Himalayan teacher known as Haidakhan Baba, believed by some to be the true Babaji. While he bears no physical resemblance to the Babaji of Yogananda fame, he did, in 1970, suddenly appear in a local temple in Haidakhan, India, the same region that had, almost a hundred years before, played host to an appearance of yet another yogi whom many felt was the true Babaji. The mysterious tales of this early-twentieth-century ascetic had developed into a local legend, and he became commonly known in the area as Haidakhan Baba. So when a new yogi appeared in the temple dedicated to this long-remembered sage, many were quick to declare him to be the return of Haidakhan Baba, or Babaji. Possessing a powerful energetic presence and the ability to read minds, this new Haidakhan Baba's fame grew quickly. It was helped along by an influential student he attracted from the West named Leonard Orr.

While he has pursued many paths in his years as a New Age pioneer, Orr is best known by far as the founder and guiding force behind the international rebirthing movement. Orr invented rebirthing over two and a half decades ago, and since then this powerful therapeutic breathing technique has spread quickly, attracting the interest of thousands, if not millions, of people around the world. In 1978 Orr met Haidakhan Baba in India and immediately recognized the yogi to be a modern manifestation of the immortal Babaji. When he announced to the world that the legendary avatar from the pages of *Autobiography of a Yogi* was now living in a body in Northern India, the effect was instantaneous, and a great many soon headed for Asia to receive *darshan* at the Master's feet.

Curious to know more about Haidakhan Baba as seen through the eyes of one of his best-known disciples, I spoke with Leonard Orr last January and asked him, "Who is Babaji?"

"Babaji is the eternal father in human form, who, in the Eastern traditions, is known as Shiva yogi, the eternal youth. You have to realize that Babaji can have as many bodies as he wants. He has several bodies on the planet now.

"Babaji walks through the pages of all the great scriptures. In the Koran he's known as Khidir. In the Bible, he's known as the Angel of the Lord. He's the one who walked in the garden with Adam and

Eve and who appeared to Moses in the burning bush and who trained Enoch and Elijah. One of Babaji's bodies is also Krishna. And as Krishna he said that if he didn't constantly work in creation, humanity would destroy itself.

"So he is not an absentee landlord, he constantly participates in human history. He plays in several different bodies in order to participate in a way that does a minimum amount of violation to the principle of freedom of choice. But he does work behind the scenes of history constantly in order to bring about the spiritual evolution and maturity of his children."

So what made Orr certain that Haidakhan Baba was actually the same Babaji about whom Yogananda had written in *Autobiography of a Yogi*?

"I talked with Babaji personally about Lahiri Mahasaya and Yogananda. The first time I went to see him, he told me that Yogananda had reincarnated, that he was about twelve years old at that time, and that I would meet him in Africa. I didn't go to Africa until twenty years later, and in fact I did meet Yogananda there, but he wasn't a he, he was a she. And she lives in Johannesburg, South Africa. She is a member of the Johannesburg Symphony Orchestra. She was actually born in Australia, and was taken to South Africa as a child."

"Was she aware of her former life?"

"She was—on an unconscious level."

During the course of the conversation, Orr made it clear that while human beings may never attain the same state of consciousness as Babaji, physical immortality is still our true destiny and the goal of human evolution.

"If you read the Shiva Purana, that has always been the ideal—for human beings to become immortal yogis. Until enlightenment includes the physical body, it is very superficial. Yoga was the original religion and it has always been the ultimate path. But we can never become like Babaji. For example, I met a devotee of Babaji who is two thousand years old. When I came away from that meeting and was meditating on it, I realized that the difference between him and Babaji was infinite.

"When Babaji creates a body, he is *descending* into physical existence, and when immortal yogis evolve into Godlike beings, then they are *ascending*. So there is a big difference between a manifestation of Babaji himself and a human being. Even the great seers who are millions of years old are still learning God-realization."

I wondered how Orr viewed Babaji as he is represented by other traditions and lineages—in particular, the immortal yogi that Marshall Govindan and Yogi Ramaiah write about.

"Babaji in that tradition is actually Sunanda, who is the son of Shiva and was created out of light. And that particular body is alive in the upper regions of the Himalayas near Badrinath. But I wouldn't call him Babaji's body any more than we would say that your body or my body is Babaji's body. Because he's a son of Babaji. He was created by Babaji at a particular point in history and he is a great immortal being who has only been on the planet, I guess, for nine hundred to a thousand years."

Whatever the true story of Haidakhan Baba and his fourteen years of teaching, his impact on people all over the world was quite profound, as I found out in my brief foray into the story of his life. But it also seems that he failed to convince anyone but his own students of his connection to

Yogananda's Babaji. Most of the individuals to whom I spoke in the yoga world, regardless of what they thought of his teachings, dismissed his claim to the throne.

Haidakhan Baba passed away in 1984, although his physical death did little to affect the faith of devotees, who simply saw it as a final teaching by a great immortal yogi on what it means to be a mortal human being.

## **The New Babaji**

The latest information I had heard regarding Babaji was that a young man from Canada was declaring himself to be the reincarnation of the deathless avatar. "I'm now writing a book about the story," one of Leonard Orr's former associates told me, halfway into our conversation about the "new Babaji," as he is sometimes called. It all started when Orr moved to Walton, New York, in 1997 to spread the rebirthing creed to the residents of his former hometown. In this small upstate New York community, Orr's unconventional ideas didn't exactly find a receptive audience, and his announcement that Babaji, the ageless immortal, was now manifesting in the body of a twenty-year-old from Canada, who was giving teachings and *darshan* in the area, didn't improve Orr's standing among the locals. This new Babaji was working with a woman named Durga, who was reportedly the first to appreciate the great Master's new incarnation. In fact, over the couple of years that Orr lived in Walton, there were several "Babajis" who came through town, at least two of whom were encouraged to teach as incarnations of the immortal yogi by Durga, herself an alleged incarnation of the Indian goddess of the same name. Curious to track down one of these individuals, it only took me a few phone calls to be close to making contact.

"I probably know more about Babaji than anyone," the forty-something-year-old Durga told me as we spoke together one evening last January. "After all, he's my husband." She was not speaking in strictly legal terms, I soon realized, but referring to Hindu mythology in which Babaji is the Shiva avatar and Durga is Shiva's wife. And in fact Babaji, or the latest young man whom she recognizes to be an incarnation of the deathless sage, was sitting next to her on the other end of the line. Hesitant to speak to me directly, he asked Durga to function as our intermediary. "At what point did you recognize your true identity?" I asked the young Babaji.

"In a certain way this body was prepared when I was born. When you plant a seed, it doesn't yet have petals like a flower. It takes time to grow. You only see it when it opens. But when I met Durga, the flower opened."

"What is Babaji's role in spiritual evolution?"

Durga answered this one: "Babaji has been left in control of the Earth. He's the one who's supposed to be monitoring the evolution of this planet."

Over the next thirty minutes, Durga and I continued our conversation with the distant voice of Babaji chiming in from the background. We spoke about the events at Walton, about how Babaji can manifest in up to seven bodies at one time, about the demonic forces that we must now battle during this dangerous moment in the history of the planet, about spiritual evolution, about Yogananda's legacy, and even about Sri Yukteswar's current reincarnation.

The next day I sat at my computer drafting this article. Deadline approaching, I wondered how best to bring my search to an end. Suddenly a chime sounded indicating that I had just received a new email. Absentmindedly, I clicked on the screen. From across the etheric fibers of cyberspace, another incarnation of the *Mahavatar* Babaji had agreed to an interview.

"Well, you have reached me," the email began. "I suppose in cases like this I must 'grant' an interview. How lordly that makes me sound. If my words can help people see their own divine nature, I would be happy to speak to you." And it was signed simply, "Yours, Babaji Mahadeva."