

How to fly (for a fee) and the psychopathy of Mahesh

Excerpt from *Handbook of Meditation in Society 6*:

Sutta Discovery 60.1f: A psychopathology of mindfulness © Piya Tan 2023c.

2.5.2 How to fly (for a fee)

2.5.2.1 After leaving TM, Anderson spent 10 years translating the Yoga Sūtras [1.2.3] on his own, to discover exactly what the Yoga Sūtras [2.3.2] had to say about “yogic-flying” or levitation. He was driven to translate the Yoga Sutras, because he “found the Yogic-Flying so useless and awful and wanted to know what the text, not Mahesh, had to say.” He learned, for example, that the Yoga Sūtra’s Eight Limbs of Yoga (*aṣṭāṅga mārga*) was based on the Buddha’s noble eightfold path (*aṭṭh-aṅgika magga*).

According to Anderson, Mahesh basically cannibalized the Buddha’s teaching on breath meditation (*ānāpānā, sati*) and substituted breath-watching with a mantra (making it more secretive, mystical—and saleable). A traditional Hindu would simply mutter a mantra while counting off each bead of a rosary (*jappa, mālā*) (which is no secret at all). Mahesh’s well-organized marketing of TM was similar to McMindfulness: TM seems to be very easy, almost magical, and can be gotten personally for a mere fee (US\$1,000). A key difference is that while McMindfulness is “not Buddhist,”¹ TM is Hinduism in disguise. In religious marketing language, there is no real difference between the two.

2.5.2.2 The mechanics of “Yogic Flying” is basically that of sitting in “full lotus” (*padmāsana*) with palms together in the laps to gain traction; sitting on very bouncy foam helps. Bending forward slightly, then using the belly, leg and butt muscles, one then “flicks” oneself into the air! The whole process is mystified with a prelude of 20 mins of TM sitting followed by mantra recitation, and then the frog-leap—and with a catchy name. Anderson calls the transcendental frog-leaping “butt-bouncing.”²

Mahesh’s grandiose—some would say megalomaniac—claims to save the world through TM and all sorts of costly techniques such as “yogic flying”—a transcendental leap-frogging³—branded as “levitation,” attracted ridicule as well as curiosity.⁴ Mahesh shrewdly knew that any publicity, even negative ones, could be used to broaden his base of recruiting converts. Another faux pas was Mahesh’s misspelling *siddhi* (he knew no Sanskrit, according to Anderson) as *sidhi* (pronounced as “seedy”). He simply took this as a neologism, which served better to benefit from copyright revenues. Old wine in new skins sells better.

2.5.3 The psychopathy of Mahesh

2.5.3.1 One way of studying Mahesh’s life and conduct is to analyze them psychologically, especially in terms of **ego-defence**.⁵ The young Mahesh started his religious life as a brahmachari and was

¹ On “McMindfulness,” see SD 60.1e (1.1.2 f).

² Notice the leap-frogging is *forwards*, not upwards and staying so, in this “yogic flying” video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JyXAB5L3EIQ>. A related illusion is the Balducci levitation first described by Ed Balducci (1906-1988), a NY magician. [Balducci levitation - Wikipedia](#) (23 May 2023).

³ The leader of Aum Shinrikyo, a Japanese cult that released deadly sarin gas in the Tokyo subway 1995, also taught his followers to do exactly the same kind of “levitation.” If such a yogic hopping is taken seriously as a “spiritual” practice, it is likely that the person, on account of habitual karma, would be reborn as a frog!

⁴ A Siegel: <https://medium.com/@transcendentaldeception/yogic-flying-sore-knees-getting-conned-by-transcendental-meditation-433ac4dc59ff> (25 May 2023).

⁵ Ego defence is, in psychoanalytic theory, the use of defense mechanisms to protect the ego against anxiety and frustration arising from threatening impulses and conflicts as well as external threats.

close to Brahmānand, the Shankaracharya of Jyotir Math [2.1.3]. Despite his diligent services to Brahmānand, after Brahmānand died, the new Shankaracharya treated the enthusiastic Mahesh as a mere caste “clerk.” This must have bitterly disappointed Mahesh.

Clearly, he must have felt a sense of **inferiority**.⁶ Going on his own, he was able to **compensate**⁷ this lack by reaching out to the “world.” To build up his charisma, he declared that he was going on a mission to spread his version of “pure Hinduism” worldwide. And to attract the world, he claimed that what he was teaching is not “religion” but a “science of the soul.” This can be seen as a **delusion-rooted intellectualization**.⁸ Presenting TM in this way appealed to the intellectually inclined westerners and the modern educated elite who had the time and means to join and support him.

2.5.3.2 The wealthy and not so wealthy donated huge sums to him, and he feigned pious disinterest to such worldly pittance! His pious pretence, on the one hand, and tacit personal delight, on the other, in such “blessings” seemed to contradict one another. This is a case of **compartmentalization**.⁹ Mahesh held back any expressions of delighting in wealth (which would give others the impression that he was above desiring or needing wealth). The reality was that he saw all his religious efforts and programmes in monetary terms—this is **reaction formation**.¹⁰

Presenting a calm “pious priestly” face exudes a sense of doing a divine favour to the giver. This notion is at the heart of “religious crowd control”: the Guru is above his followers who submit to him. Hence, the rich and not-so-rich gave their wealth in exchange for this favour from a great holy man who did not touch money (only his disciples did that in his name).

We see this pious pretence in some priests of urban Buddhism today too. An urban Sinhala priest once calmly declared, “I only touch money with the hands, not the heart.”¹¹ This heartless honesty puts both the likes of Mahesh and such urban-forest priests in the same realm. Surely, touching money is not the same as when traditional Hindus would respectfully touch a book that has dropped accidentally to the floor, out of respect for knowledge (Skt *vidyā*). Touching money, surely, is to be touched by the power that *money is what money buys*. Anyway, buying and selling are against the Theravāda monastic rules.¹²

⁶ “Inferiority,” based on Adler’s theory of inferiority complex, is “a basic feeling of inadequacy and insecurity, deriving from actual or imagined physical or psychological deficiency, that may result in behavioral expression ranging from the withdrawal of immobilizing timidity to the overcompensation of excessive competition and aggression” (*APA Dictionary* 2015). In Mahesh’s case, his inferiority feelings seemed to develop into sublimation, when his perceived failures were developed into a super-piety in Advaita theology and global evangelizing of Hinduism. See SD 7.9 (3.5.2).

⁷ The psychological defence of **compensation** is where one displaces a perceived lack or failure by its opposite “positive” effort or view. See SD 7.9 (4.5.2).

⁸ The defence of **intellectualization** is where conflicts or emotional problems are dealt with abstractly or concealed by excessive intellectual or religious activity, See SD 7.9 (4.5.2).

⁹ The psychological defence of **compartmentalization** refers to when thoughts or feelings that seem to conflict or to be incompatible are isolated from each other in separate and restricted mental compartments. See SD 7.9 (3.6.1.2).

¹⁰ The psychological defence of **reaction formation** is where unacceptable or threatening unconscious impulses (Mahesh’s love of wealth) are *unconsciously* denied and are replaced in consciousness with their opposite (he feigned not touching money or not having sex). Of course, if Mahesh were doing all this *deliberately*, it would not be a defence but pure *deceit*! See SD 7.9 (3.6.4; 4.3.3.1).

¹¹ SD 60.1d (7.6.2.3 (3)).

¹² Nissaggiya 19 forbids monastics from “buying and selling.” See **Money and Monastics**, SD 4.19-23 (7).

2.5.3.3 Blaming any failure of the TM meditator on “stress” is a classic case of **rationalization**.¹³ Interviewing the “failed” meditator and counselling them seemed too much trouble for Mahesh. TM was seen like some blessing coming down from Mahesh. When we are unable to “appreciate” it, it is our fault: he termed this “stress.” This was, of course, irresponsible and exploitative of a teacher.

Early in his religious career, Mahesh was known as the “giggling guru”:¹⁴ he often gave a child-like giggle or laugh when questioned during interviews or addressed during encounters with the public. This **giggling**, a nervous reflex, might be seen in either of two ways or both. Mahesh was getting all this public adoration and publicity: he felt that he should at least exude a congenial aura. This is a defence of **compensation**, even over-compensation (if we see this as being overly done to give a good impression upon his audience).

On the other hand, there might be a somewhat sinister depth to this nervous giggling. Mahesh had a low opinion of the non-Hindu world, especially Westerners. Setting aside this disdain, he put up this disarming giggling in his weak childlike voice, his gesture could be seen as another case of **compartmentalization** [above]. He set aside his personal feelings and gave the benefit of the doubt to his unworthy soulless audience so that they would benefit from the “science of the soul.”

2.5.3.4 Like insects in the dark night, we are drawn to bright dancing open flames that is Guru Mahesh and his likes. We think we can learn something, but the reality is that we are drawn by a sense of **power** (this is called his charisma). Insects that dance around the naked flame soon get burnt; others are scarred.

Mahesh was in the habit of proclaiming that “the actor can play God better than God.”¹⁵ With our insect minds, we love those who play God since it seems more real than the idea itself. When we know that we are not insects, we will notice (if we choose to) that something is profoundly wrong with a man playing God or who feigns to be other than what he really is.

Mahesh is a good example of one who was stuck in the mud of craving, and many were cluelessly drawn into the Mahesh mire. With wisdom, we drag ourselves out of the mud to safety. We may even survive and blossom as lotuses to share our wisdom with others who are willing to listen and wise enough to learn. Yet, many more will continue to pay for their ignorance and craving. We simply need to wake up to true reality: perhaps, for this reason, the Buddha arose in India! In this darkness, even a single light shines brightly.

2.5.3.5 Meditation (including mindfulness) promises personal healing and true happiness, even spiritual salvation. However, at this relatively early stage of the popularization of meditation, we have little real informed guidance other than best-sellers and social media posts, but these are simply passing fads that have no accountability for the patient’s safety and health. Other than going to a professional for meditation therapy, during the late 21st century we see people flocking to Guru-centred meditation practices, such as TM, which reportedly seemed to be wildly successful.

However, in some significant ways we have learned our lesson not to blindly place our minds (and wallets) in the hands of cultish Gurus and best-selling life-coaches. Those peddling meditation in the mass media and as a business merely claim that many people “like” it. Meditation, however, is a personal practice that must be specially tailored to our personality and personal needs. The best

¹³ The psychological defence of rationalization is where apparently logical reasons are given to justify unacceptable behaviour that is motivated by unconscious instinctual impulses. See SD 7.9 (4.3.4).

¹⁴ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-512747/Lennon-right-The-Giggling-Guru-shameless-old-fraud.html>. 29 May 2023.

¹⁵ Anderson, in a personal communication.

way to know which meditation works best for us is, ideally, to be familiar with at least a brief history of meditation.

Historically, the most organized and reputable tradition of meditation is that of early Buddhism, in which practically all modern forms of meditation (especially Hindu and Buddhist)¹⁶ are rooted. Hence, this is a good place to familiarize ourselves with meditation. Grounded on this historical reality, we can then, if we choose to, safely shop around for some modern versions of meditation.¹⁷

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¹⁶ On the Indian roots of modern Yoga and meditation, see (1.1). For the roots of Christian contemplative tradition, see SD 60.1e (1.1.1).

¹⁷ For studies on adverse effects of Transcendental Meditation (TM), see R B **Kennedy**, "Self-induced depersonalization syndrome," *American J of Psychiatry* 133 1976:1326–1328; L **Otis**, "Adverse effects of Transcendental Meditation," in (edd) Shapiro & Walsh, *Meditation: classic and contemporary perspectives*, NY: Aldine, 1984: 201–209; R J **Castillo**, "Depersonalization and meditation," *Psychiatry* 53,2 1990:158–168.