

[Muktananda's Legacy](#)

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students of Siddha Yoga, New York, USA

"Om svaha!" Flames burst high into the air as six brahmin priests chant Vedic mantras and offer ghee, rice, sesame seeds, sandalwood, and more into a traditional ritual fire pit. An unfamiliar sight in the Catskill Mountain region of New York, this is a yajna, or sacred fire sacrifice, performed at the Shree Muktananda Ashram in South Fallsburg. Aside from the brahmins, invited from India to perform the timeless ceremony, the participants and observers are mostly Westerners, part of the thriving path known as Siddha Yoga, whose spiritual head is Swami Chidvilasananda. The sight of these people, their eyes gleaming from heat, concentration, and reverence, brings to mind the words of scriptural scholar M.P. Pandit about Swami Muktananda Paramahansa, the Guru of Swami Chidvilasananda and the one who brought Siddha Yoga to the West. "Swami Muktananda is unique in modern spiritual India. He is the only man of his stature who has cared to impose a discipline-an indispensable discipline-on Western seekers."

Siddha Yoga is not what most people expect. It combines seemingly incompatible elements: ancient and modern, monastic and worldly, emphasis on both personal responsibility and surrender to God. The resulting synthesis has drawn devotees from India, the US and around the world, a considerable number of whom have been practicing this yoga for two decades or more.

The very nature of Siddha Yoga seems paradoxical. Yoga is for the individual, not the masses. Yet Siddha Yoga, having attracted uncounted thousands, is now supported by a global organization, with 10 ashrams and nearly 550 centers around the world. The paradox resolves itself when one distinguishes between the essence of the path, which is the inner relationship of guru and disciple, and the outer

organization that makes the path available, that publishes the books and runs the courses. The guru is the guide in spiritual matters, but administration is the responsibility of disciples, volunteer workers whose challenge, individually and collectively, is to open to the God-consciousness within themselves and then to bring that into action, moment by moment, day by day. This is part of sadhana, the sometimes agonizing, sometimes ecstatic process of personal spiritual development that eventually strips away the trappings of the ego. In Siddha Yoga the guru's grace and the individual's own effort are regarded as two wings of a bird, equally necessary to propel the disciple toward complete identification with the divine.

"You have to understand Siddha Yoga is a spiritual path, not an institution," explains Swami Shantananda, a cheerful Puerto Rican and former art historian who met Baba at his ashram while touring India. After reflecting on what he received in a week of meditation there, he decided to stay-and 23 years later he's still there. "Siddha Yoga is the guru's grace," Shantananda adds, "and what you do with that grace."

The fundamental teachings of Siddha Yoga are very simple. Again and again, Swami Muktananda would tell people, "Meditate on your Self. God dwells within you as you," and, as a natural expression of the experience of inner divinity, "See God in each other."

Although the teachings remain constant, the organization has always been characterized by change. The Siddha Yoga Dham Associates (SYDA) Foundation is the legal entity that serves the needs of this spiritual path. Its trustees, officers, and managers have responded as the Guru addresses the needs of her students and the changing demands of the time. Recently Gurumayi, as Swami Chidvilasananda is known, has been emphasizing the ashram's function as a gurukula, or traditional school of the guru, focusing on disciplined study and spiritual practice. "The ashram has always been that, but something has clearly shifted," says Janet Grady a business woman from Dallas, Texas, who recently paid a brief visit to Gurudev Siddha Peeth, in Ganeshpuri, India. "There are fewer people there now and so everything is simpler; the silence is deeper."

Gurudev Siddha Peeth was founded by Muktananda in 1956, and through the '60s the ashram was an austere sanctuary inhabited by a handful of people. In 1970, Swami Muktananda received a command from his guru, Bhagawan Nityananda. This widely acknowledged holy man, Muktananda said, guided him

"throughout every step" of his life. Thus guided, Baba Muktananda began traveling the world and-in an unprecedented step-giving shaktipat initiation to tremendous numbers of people. Shaktipat is a transmission of divine energy, a spiritual initiation that many people say has given them an immediate and direct experience of God. The spiritual masters of ancient times reserved this initiation for just a few disciples who had been purified, strengthened, and tested through years of service.

Swami Muktananda, however, would sometimes initiate thousands in a single week. The diverse experiences of those who received shaktipat testify to the undiluted power of this initiation. However it happened-in person or through a photo or mantra, in a formal meeting or at a chance encounter at a gas station-the Guru's grace could be life-changing. Swami Kripananda, a former literature professor, recalls the impact of her first experience of the Guru: "I felt something indescribable in my chest, as if someone had blasted dynamite, and an inner realm emerged. I experienced waves of love so powerful that I cried for two weeks. The experience of those waves of divine love lasted for a year." Stories of amazing visions at the moment of shaktipat are common among devotees; others gauge the experience by the transformation of their mundane lives, sometimes discernable only in retrospect, but dramatic nevertheless.

The informal organization that grew up during Baba's years initially focused on supporting the Guru's teaching tours. Psychologists became carpenters, musicians learned to cook, students mastered sound systems. "People did whatever needed to be done," remembers one person who joined Swami Muktananda in 1974. "We got used to doing the impossible." As the tours moved on-through California, Australia, Germany and elsewhere-a number of ashrams and local meditation centers remained behind.

Along the way, the Guru seized opportunities to help disciples refine their understanding. Swami Shantananda recalls the time early in Baba Muktananda's second world tour when a group of people were meeting to discuss the best way to "package" him in public-relations terms. As Shantananda remembers, Baba strode into the room and told the startled devotees, "I don't need any of that stuff-my Guru does it all. Just let people know that Siddha Yoga is available."

In an era of cynicism about spirituality, when Westerners fear cults and Indians lose interest in yajnas and other traditions that have survived millennia, the support system of a spiritual path-the publications, buildings and corps of volunteers-can

inspire a measure of confusion, resentment and even hostility. One vocal critic of the SYDA Foundation, a neighbor of the South Fallsburg ashram, wrote in a local newspaper: "If their Eastern teachings are so great, then why is India so poor!" Similarly, some neighbors of Gurudev Siddha Peeth in India are disturbed by the influx of affluent Westerners. Several people who have left the path have made negative statements in the press. By and large, however, the students of Siddha Yoga have avoided conflict, directing their energies instead to the pursuit of sadhana.

This is a path based on the teachings of a guru whom disciples regard as a siddha, or perfected being. The authority of its doctrines derive from the Guru's direct experience as well as scriptural sources. Swami Muktananda was already a deeply learned man when he became a disciple of Bhagawan Nityananda, who gave him shaktipat initiation in 1947 and nine years later declared him a siddha.

Siddha Yoga teaches the radical proposition that, with grace and self-effort, all people can achieve this perfection-complete identification with God. Swami Muktananda stressed non-dualism, the idea that the individual and the Absolute are not different. Explaining this to disciples, Muktananda drew on Shankara's Advaita Vedanta, the philosophy of Kashmir Shaivism and the Maharashtra bhakti tradition. But none of these doctrines define Siddha Yoga. Says Sanskrit scholar Douglas Brooks, a professor of religious studies at the University of Rochester in New York, "Baba selectively drew from these sources and others to create a distinctive tradition. All siddha gurus do that. They all synthesize and assimilate." The synthesis of Siddha Yoga is at once profoundly traditional and responsive to contemporary needs. Its orthodox elements include scriptural study, recitation of Vedic texts such as Sri Rudram, the performance of rituals such as arati, and the daily invocation of the lineage.

At the same time as the Guru set forth this discipline, he also evidenced compassion for his students, many of whom initially were unprepared for yogic rigor. "Baba gave us enough elbow room to work our way slowly into the yogic system," recalls Swami Shantananda. "He taught that it is better to have a vegetarian diet, for instance, but he never forced it on anyone. He wanted people to learn from yoga, not run away from it. To remind the disciple of the inner awakening received in shaktipat and to nurture identification with God, Baba urged spiritual practices, such as meditation, chanting, repetition of mantras, contemplation, scriptural study and service."

That sense of dharmic responsibility includes concern for others. In India, Gurudev Siddha Peeth built hundreds of brick dwellings for villagers near Ganeshpuri, organized programs that today provide fortified milk to some 1,500 school children daily and equipped a bus as a mobile hospital that serves 40,000 people annually. Eventually this charitable work was consolidated under a nonprofit foundation called PRASAD Chikitsa, which provides services in India, and a sister organization in the US, The PRASAD Project. PRASAD operates independently from the SYDA Foundation. Having organized three "eye camps" providing free corrective surgery to people suffering from cataracts, PRASAD is planning a \$1 million-plus permanent hospital in India capable of serving 6,000 patients per year.

Swami Chidvilasananda has continued her Guru's work, attributing her achievements to her master just as Swami Muktananda did to his. She spent her youth as Muktananda's disciple, and served as his translator during two of his three world tours. She is, at 39, a striking presence. Devotees regard Swami Chidvilasananda, like the forbears in her lineage, as a siddha. According to Professor Brooks, ordinary individuals can perceive this state in others. "In the presence of a siddha, you see yourself and all your strengths and weaknesses-and you feel happy and capable of change," he says. "That's what grace is: the capacity to awaken the divine potential in others."

Five months before his death in 1982, Swami Muktananda named Swami Chidvilasananda and her brother, Swami Nityananda, as his co-successors. In 1985, acknowledging that he had broken the vow of celibacy required of gurus of this tradition, the brother renounced his position; he now presides over an unrelated group called Shanti Mandir.

Many of those who continued to practice Siddha Yoga through the succession from Swami Muktananda to Swami Chidvilasananda say they experienced the truth of the proposition that the guru is not a personality or physical form, but an utterly impersonal divine principle embodied in a human being. Rather than an individual, the guru is seen as a demonstration of the perfectability that is every human being's birthright. Helping people achieve this goal is the guru's work.

Swami Chidvilasananda is adapting Siddha Yoga to circumstances very different than those that faced Swami Muktananda, but her message to devotees is the same as his: Divinity lies within you. After decades of growth, more devotees are attracted to Gurudev Siddha Peeth in India than the ashram can hold. "Over the

years, Gurudev Siddha Peeth became extremely overpopulated, and the physical facilities were overtaxed," says Catherine Parrish, executive vice president of SYDA Foundation. "People were coming to the ashram for the wrong reasons." Tourists were showing up to eat at the ashram's non-existent "five-star restaurant." Visitors were conversing loudly in places where others were trying to meditate. When Swami Chidvilasananda was in residence, and on holidays, the crowding greatly increased. The care of so many people required enormous efforts on the part of ashram residents, who would sacrifice their own meditation and contemplation to serve visitors.

To address this situation, Siddha Yoga ashrams have dramatically reduced the number of people in residence at any given time. Those who wish to stay at Gurudev Siddha Peeth must formally apply for a stay of at least one month. At Shree Muktananda Ashram in New York state, only people with advance reservations may remain overnight. The purpose of these policies is to protect the serenity and silence needed to sustain people in meditation and contemplation.

Newcomers still appear at Siddha Yoga centers throughout the world, and are welcomed. Gurumayi still grants shaktipat initiation and gives darshan publicly. But the new limits on ashram residency demonstrate that the purpose of Siddha Yoga isn't proselytizing or moneymaking. Indeed, the new policies have significantly cut revenues at Gurudev Siddha Peeth.

In the gurukula there is an emphasis on study. To fulfill Swami Muktananda's vision of Ganeshpuri as a center of learning, the SYDA Foundation is devoting resources to the Indological Research Center, an independent outpost of scholarly research into India's religious and cultural heritage, accredited by the University of Poona. "We have a brilliant faculty of scholars researching and translating texts that would be otherwise unavailable to people who do not read Sanskrit," says Swami Gitananda, who helps administer the Institute. "These scholars visit the ashram and regularly participate in our courses."

In the 25 years since Siddha Yoga was introduced to the West, thousands of people have committed their lives to translating the Guru's teachings into action. For each of them, the changes take place in the most private of inner spaces-and yet their progress is discernable to others. As Baba Muktananda once wrote, "As time goes by the ashram atmosphere becomes more and more powerful and the seekers also become purer and purer."

The fulfillment of the vision of Siddha Yoga is in the lives of disciples. In August 1993, when a number of people who had been visiting the South Fallsburg ashram over the summer season were about to return to their homes, Swami Chidvilasananda gave them these words of direction, "Whatever is happening, keep love in sight. It is the supreme goal. Whether you are suffering, going through a difficult financial period, breaking up a relationship, struggling in your profession-however rough things may get, keep love in sight. Love in the beginning and love in the end. Allow your love for God to shimmer everywhere you look, in everything you touch. Never lose sight of love."

Gurudev Siddha Peeth, PO Ganeshpuri, Thana District, Maharashtra 401 206, India.

SYDA, PO Box 600, South Fallsburg, New York, 12779, USA.

Sidebar: Experiences at the Gurukula

In the last year, people visiting Gurudev Siddha Peeth, the principal ashram of Siddha Yoga in Ganeshpuri, India, have experienced the gurukula, the school of the Guru. In the tradition of ancient India, this is a quiet center for scriptural study and spiritual practice.

Stanley Nelson: Born in 1916 in New York's Harlem ghetto, Stanley Nelson put himself through dental college and fought his way to a practice on prestigious Park Avenue. He spent six months at Gurudev Siddha Peeth last year.

"I became enamored of the mantra, Om Namah Shivaya. Instead of saying, 'Hello' I would say, Om Namah Shivaya! I was trying to say it all the time, from the moment I put my right foot on the floor in the morning until I took it off the floor at night. Om Namah Shivaya. I got into that habit, and people caught on to it. The little kids, three and under, would say it whenever they saw me: 'Om Namah Shivaya.' So I had all these little children reminding me about the mantra. And when I went up for darshan, they would see me and say, 'Om Namah Shivaya.'

"Being in the ashram has completely transformed my life. My heart is wide open and opening more all the time. I am getting what I have always asked for. I had been a seeker, but everything I had been into was intellectual, like a projection on the wall. It wasn't inside me. Now that love is in my cells, it's real.

Alberta Ferrario: In February 1994, just six days after receiving her degree from the University of Political Science in Milan, Italy, Alberta left for two months' stay at Gurudev Siddha Peeth.

"At first I wasn't sure I could handle ashram life-living in a dorm with twenty people, getting up so early in the morning. Then I started loving it. I spent some time by myself, and began to be very quiet. There was a lot of opportunity to be silent there. You don't talk, in the dining hall or at seva or when you chant. I would see people I knew and we would smile at each other, without words, and love would be flowing between us."

The Polatin Family: Betsy Polatin visited Gurudev Siddha Peeth last year with her daughters, Daria, 16, and Ruby, 12-and they returned in the summer.

Daria: "When I got back to school I noticed how the kids would ask questions just to get the teacher to talk, so they wouldn't have to work. I started realizing that I'm in school to learn, so why keep putting it off? The scriptural courses in Gurudev Siddha Peeth were much, much more focused. When I studied the Upanishads, both the students and the teacher had the same goal-to know God."

Ruby: "A big thing for me is helping out at home. One day Daria was really busy in school and I saw her laundry downstairs, so I just carried it up. And then I swept the stairs for her, too. It was her turn to sweep, but the stairs were dirty. Now when things are messy I don't feel right-everything in the ashram was always so clean. I got used to seeing people scrubbing the walkways, or cleaning the roofs. So much care goes into the ashram, and you can see the result, how pure it is. It's just easier when things are clean-your mind is cleaner. It's easier to think, it's easier to be there."

Betsy: "Our household has a different undercurrent now. Everything seems lighter-it was kind of a battle before. For myself, having a spiritual practice with my children is probably the biggest gift in my life."

Sidebar: The Founding Guru: Baba Muktananda

"As one pursues this self-born yoga, the light of the Self reveals itself. It is the light of God, the form of God within us. One day, this tiny light expands to fill the universe, and then the yogi experiences his all-pervasiveness. He attains the state of the supreme Truth, beyond all pain and pleasure. He experiences the true bliss of Consciousness. He knows without any doubt, 'I am God, and God is me.' Such a yogi lives in constant awareness of the Self, in the state of perfect fearlessness and freedom. This is liberation. This is the secret of a Siddha's sadhana. Always remember this. It is the final instruction of the Guru, the command of Shiva."

"Become absorbed in the repetition of God's name. Practice with deep feeling and love. Immerse your mind in the remembrance of Him. Become saturated with God's love. Give up attachment to all. Find joy in Parashiva alone." Reflections of the Self, 1980

"The mantra is always obtained from the mantra seer, whom we call the guru. A mantra, to be invested with consciousness, must be alive. It must be living. It should be taken from one who has himself fully realized its power. If you get a mantra from one who hasn't realized its power himself, how can it help you?" Mantra Yoga, 1974

"It is Shiva who causes the wind to blow. Through Him, the buried seed sprouts into a plant. Through Him, the hair grows on your head. He wipes away tears and brings laughter. He is not far but very near. He witnesses all that you do, knows all that you think." Reflections of the Self, 1980

"O man, don't you remember that you are a part of God? He is your father and mother. You have been with Him for age after age. You are Consciousness, a pure, unchanging mountain of joy. You neither take birth nor die. You are indestructible

and ever-new." I Am That, 1978

This article was prepared specially for Hinduism Today by the students of Siddha Yoga.