

PREFACE

by Dr Jacques Vigne

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Thirty-five years ago, I spent four years working on my first book, "*The Master and the Therapist*", which presented the guru-disciple relationship in India in conjunction with that between therapist and patient in the West¹. For this work, I studied the commonalities and the differences between the two systems and I was supported by a research grant given jointly by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the University Grant Commission in New Delhi. Since then, I have continued to study and write about religious psychology from my perspectives as a psychiatrist and specialist of India.

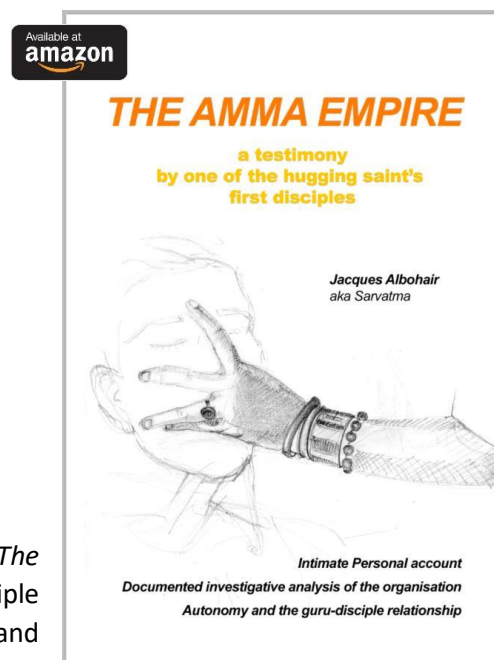
I also spent twenty-five years in India with Swami Vijayananda, a great French disciple of Ma Anandamayi (Bengal saint, 1896-1982), having lived 60 years in her ashrams. I met Jacques, the author, in Paris when I was collecting information prior to my first visit to India. He squatted a sort of unheated hallway right next to railway lines. He had been sent by his guru to develop her movement in Europe, without any financial means. I was impressed with his knowledge of India and his commitment, but I was a little puzzled when he discreetly encouraged me to meet Mata Amritanandamayi, known as Amma. I met her nevertheless for the first time in 1987 in the capital. Four years later I stayed at her ashram in Kerala for a few weeks. I had mixed feelings, but I did not yet have the elements to explain my discomfort. At the time, the public still did not know what was going on behind the scenes.

Twenty-two years later, when I discovered Gail Tredwell's testimony of her two decades as Amma's personal assistant, *Holy Hell* (Amazon, 2013), I felt the need to revisit the subject of the psychology of the guru-disciple relationship. In Gail's account I discovered serious problems with the way her ex-master pursued the guru-disciple relationship – which is a traditional relationship highly valued in the Indian subcontinent, not only in Hinduism but also in Jainism and Tibetan Buddhism. I then wrote a summary of Gail's book in French and two articles including a study on Amma's personality.²

As the author quotes in his dedication, the concept of the guru-disciple relationship is associated with precise and rigorous ethical criteria that have been clearly documented centuries ago. Swami Vijayananda mentioned above, had spent over thirty-one years with Ma, a true master, until her death in 1982 and he regularly insisted on her perfect sense of truthfulness. Several times, for example, he returned to the only episode during this whole period when it could have seemed that Ma had lied. By looking into all the details, we realised that this was not the case. Apart from this instance, the question of lying never arose. Of course, she could answer the same question differently to different people, depending on their level of understanding. This was not a contradiction, but simply respecting the capacities of her interlocutors. As for the swami, I do not remember, in a quarter of a century, having heard him tell a lie or ask for money directly or indirectly. When asked what the criteria of a

¹ Vigne Jacques *Le maître et le thérapeute, éditions du Relié, réédition 2011*

² <http://jacquesvigne.org/>



true guru were, he would briefly give two central qualities: detachment from the two powers of sex and money. In this, he took up the advice of Saint Ramakrishna (Bengal, 1836-1886) to his disciples on the two major obstacles on the spiritual path. In Bengali, Hindi and Sanskrit, the terms are the same: *kāma-kanchana*, *kāma*, intense desire or lust, especially sexual, and *kanchana*, gold, in modern terms, the attraction to money. The present work by the author will provide a series of examples, either experienced directly or very clearly documented, showing that the behaviour of this lady and her organisation do not adhere by far to this ideal.

Looking at the viewing statistics and likes on Youtube of the interview that Sébastien Villalba, psychologist specialising in mass hypnosis phenomena in politics, sport and religion, made of me in 2019³, it seems obvious that the general public no longer wants to be fooled. Indeed, people seem able to appreciate in-depth reflections differentiating themselves from the press releases from Amma's organisation that rushed journalists copy-paste without taking the time to verify their validity. In addition, the latter sometimes claim to have direct experience of this lady and talk about her almost like specialists, after spending just five seconds in her arms, preceded by one or two hours of being fed official public relations material, observing the scene and waiting in line, accompanied by a chaperone. Often, these journalists do not challenge their perceptions or what they are told, which would be essential to properly inform the general public of the risks inherent to this type of spiritual organisations. At the same time, those who risk it are immediately threatened by US law firms mandated by the organisation, as the author reports.

By contrast, the author provides key insider testimony. He visited India for the first time in 1970 at the age of sixteen and stayed six months a year in Tiruvannāmalai, one of Hinduism's major places, with its sacred mountain, its great temple from the 15th-16th centuries dedicated to Shiva and above all, the ashram of the sage Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950) before returning to settle there in 1978. From an early age he was deeply impressed by the high ideal of the guru as given by sage Shankarāchārya in the 8th century and quoted in the dedication of this book. He finally joined Amma in 1979 before being sent back to Europe five years later in 1984 as her representative and to spread the word about her. He served her for fourteen years, closely during the first five years at the Vallickavu ashram, then as a regular interpreter during her European tours, or otherwise remotely in Europe giving talks and founding and developing her movement.

Jacques worked on the languages of India. He studied Sanskrit to understand the etymology of the terms in the founding texts of Hinduism and also acquired a good working knowledge of Tamil. He learned Malayalam, a difficult language that very few Western devotees, even those who have been with her for a long time, can understand and speak fluently. Since he could also speak several European languages, this earned him the role of Amma's interpreter in Europe. With his privileged position among the first circle of disciples, he was obviously not only aware of the official discourse, but of what was being said behind the scenes and able to understand the internal affairs of his ex-master and her organisation. It is about this divorce between the two discourses that he reports on in this testimony in a captivating and especially useful way, which is nothing short of an eye-opener.

After having resumed his autonomy in 1993, Amma repeatedly asked him to return to the movement as a lay person. She probably wanted him back to prevent him from speaking out. But he refused the compromises that this return entailed. Jacques' text is a mature work, written several decades after having left the movement: *"If I waited so long [twenty-seven years] before speaking out, it was not just*

³ <https://youtu.be/O82llySmuo>

because I was engaged in more constructive and positive pursuits, but to keep my word as balanced, neutral and fair as possible".

His book is teeming with quality testimonies, incriminations and evidence of serious ethical excesses related to the behaviour of his ex-master and to the management of her organisation. Reading it, we realise the huge discrepancy between the façade and reality, we discover how, in this organisation, lie and deception is part of a parallel reality. It is even quantifiable when the author analyses and dissects with rigour the foreign contributions accounts published on the website of the Indian Home Ministry. Fortunately for us, he deals with the subject he knows perfectly, as an investigative journalist would. Listening attentively to his testimony unveiling fundamental thematic related to the organisation could save many people a lot of time and energy.

One of his motivations is to "straighten things out" after having initially preached the glories of this person. To err is human, the essential is to admit that one has made a mistake and to let people know one has misled them. This book will therefore be of immense service by supporting the empowerment of devotees and sympathisers who will be ready to receive his message. I think even former disciples will be shocked by the revelations it contains, which they may not have been aware of, or at least not in such detail.

One of the valuable elements of the work to be noted is the reinterpretation of the official biography. The author's hindsight and his insider knowledge make it possible to demystify the official discourse and to lay bare the reality of the person, her evolution and her realisations. After Gail Tredwell, Jacques in turn reveals in his own way the functioning, the tendencies, and the intimate thought of their former master.

Jacques had already told me a long time ago about a number of problems and excesses of the movement and its leader. However, he had not told me everything: in particular, he had neither spoken of the intimate relationships she entertained with certain disciples nor of his own personal experience in this regard. He probably did not want to shock me then. His honest and candid testimony will not fail to disturb. But it is important to inform the general public about this public personality representing a movement and a religion and put an end to fairy tales.

As he himself puts it: *"Please know that I am only mentioning part of what I know here, as my goal is not to spread gossip or to humiliate anyone publicly. But when one pretends that Gail Tredwell's sincere testimony in "Holy Hell" is riddled with lies and when she is vilified in public, I would like people to know that she is not alone and that we still have a lot of information up our sleeves to strengthen our discourse."*⁴

Some fundamentalist Hindus who do not know him may criticise him for being a Christian agent in a plot to demean their religion, as Gail was accused of. Except that this argument falls short since he was born to atheistic parents, of Catholic and Jewish origins. In reality, this book is an ode to Hinduism, to what it fundamentally is, to what it could be despite some obvious excesses. It is indeed important not to confuse the criticism of a spiritual personality with its faults, intensified by a material and socio-religious success which obviously went to her head, and the global vision of several thousand-year-old traditions having distinguished themselves by a long series of great and true sages. The author's struggle as an individual against this sprawling and extremely wealthy organisation which does not hesitate to bring in international lawyers to silence its critics and opponents, seems to be David's against Goliath. I wish him success in his mission of information and truth.

⁴ Ch. 7, "The organisation's nr. 2", footnote.

The author guides the reader in the gradual discovery of the various dysfunctions and excesses of his ex-master and her organisation. His direct experience and investigation cover a whole range of themes: spiritual lineage, learning and achievement, megalomania and manipulation, psychotic outbursts and decompensations, sexuality and greed, personality cult, miracles and prophecies, infantilisation and violence, media fabrication and contradictory information, finances and charity, entrepreneurial empire in education and health and development aid with various key testimonies and reports, construction of the myth and reality, plagiarism and innovative authenticity, empowerment of women and support of patriarchy, politics and power, celebrities and traditions. We will find in it the main distinctive features of sectarian movements. Despite all the literature already available it is sad to note that so many people still fall into the same trap.

What also gives weight to this work is the number of directly accessible internet links which support the author's analysis: almost on every page, readers will be able to start their own research on the subjects that interest them or on which they may have doubts – especially useful in the electronic version of the book. Readers will therefore be able to form their own opinions on the basis of his testimony and investigative work.

After his personal testimony, in the second part of the work, the author gives us the means to understand the criteria of the authentic spiritual master, the true meaning of the guru-disciple relationship, and in case of need, the elements to regain our autonomy with the minimum of losses. He insists on putting into perspective the guru-disciple relationship and the meaning of Dharma within the framework of classical tradition, with Sanskrit sources. This makes it possible for people to remain rooted in a solid foundation in their further development and broadens the debate by going beyond the criticism of one-off/factual excesses of given persons or groups.

In particular, I recommend the reading of the last pages of this second part carefully. There he develops what we could call the psychology of *deconversion*, that is to say how to extract and empower oneself in relation to a belief, a religion, a group, or a master that one has followed for some time.

His book is not only a precious and authentic testimony, but also a guide for finding oneself and navigating one's way around a situation of spiritual, social and personal involvement that is often complex to grasp and to disentangle from. Those who fear the repercussions of a coming-out will be able to comfort themselves with these words of Mahatma Gandhi: "*Tell the truth: at the beginning you will be alone, then most will follow you!*" As the saying goes: "*You can fool all the people some of the time and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time!*"

<https://www.jacquesvigne.org>
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