

Project

# SATYA

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INVESTIGATION  
**INTERIM REPORT #2**

## MEMORANDUM

**to:** Project SATYA Admins  
(Angela Gollat, Antonia Abu Matar, Jens Augspurger)

**from:** Carol Merchasin; Dr. Josna Pankhania

**subject:** Interim Report on the investigation into the sexual abuse claims against Prahlada, and narratives of survivors on sexual, psychological and other forms of abuse

**date:** August 2020

## **TRIGGER WARNING**

*This report discusses several forms of abuse, including sexual abuse in graphic language, emotional abuse and negligence.*

*\*The appendix at the end of this document includes different resources and inspiration for self-care for survivors and supporters who might find reading this report distressing.*

# Table of Contents

<b>PROJECT SATYA OVERVIEW</b>	<b>5</b>
Background of Project Satya	5
The History of the EBM's Investigation	5
<b>PART 1: SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS OF THE INVESTIGATION INTO SEXUAL MISCONDUCT BY PRAHLADA (THAMATAM REDDY)</b>	<b>7</b>
Overview	8
Update on the Mahadevananda Investigation	8
The Plamondon Investigation into Prahlada	8
Summary of the Investigation into Allegations of Sexual Misconduct by Prahlada	9
The Allegations	10
Definitions	10
Issues of Consent within the Definition of Sexual Assault	11
The Expectation of Celibacy	12
Investigation Standards	12
The Details of the Allegations	12
Overall Conclusions	21
Final Report	22
<b>PART 2: INSTITUTIONAL BETRAYAL AND ITS IMPACT ON SURVIVORS: A SUMMARY OF THE PERSONAL STORIES OF SURVIVORS</b>	<b>23</b>
Introduction	24
Interview Process	24
Overview of the Processes Involved in Abuse	25
Different Types of Abuse	26
Sexual Grooming Process	28
Impact of Sexual Violence	28
Trauma of Sexual Assault	28
Institutional Betrayal	29
Impact of Institutional Betrayal on Sexual Trauma	29
Counter-Reactions of Abusers	29
Charisma, Leadership, and the Social Psychology of Influence and Control	30
Abuse in Yoga	30

<b>The Personal Stories of Survivors</b>	<b>35</b>
Survivor #2	36
Survivor #3	40
Survivor #4	43
Survivor #5	48
Survivor #6	50
Survivor #7	51
Survivor #8	53
Survivor #9	56
<b>Postscript and Reflections</b>	<b>59</b>
Impact of the abuse	59
The grooming process	60
<b>APPENDIX: SELF-CARE RESOURCES</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>1: Self-Care and Self-Nurture guidelines</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>2: Recommended organisations providing information and support for survivors</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>3: Further Reading</b>	<b>68</b>

## **Project SATYA Overview**

### **Background of Project Satya**

On December 10, 2019, Julie Salter, who had been a close disciple of Swami Vishnudevananda, the leader of the International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres (“ISYVC”) until his death in 1993, published a Facebook post with an account of the sexual misconduct of Swami Vishnudevananda. The swamis of the Sivananda tradition are required to be celibate.

Ms. Salter also described her subsequent efforts to bring this information to the Executive Board Membership (“EBM”) in 2007.

A community group called *Project SATYA* was immediately created, led by Angela Gollat, Antonia Abu Matar and Jens Augspurger (“the Project Satya Admins”) to shed light on this and other claims of sexual and psychological harm within the ISYVC. The Project Satya Admins set up a Facebook group (“Project Satya Facebook Community”) and additional women immediately began writing Facebook posts about sexual misconduct involving Swami Vishnudevananda, Pahlada, Swami Mahadevananda and others. Allegations of other forms of abuse (emotional, financial, callous indifference, and indentured servitude) also began to come forward.

Project SATYA has formed as a community grassroots movement to stand with survivors of abuse who came forward with allegations of serious harm within the Sivananda Yoga organization, and are now seeking truth, transparency and reparation for survivors and the community at large. The Project SATYA community is made up of over 2,400 former Sivananda Yoga swamis, staff, karma yogis (unpaid employees), and yoga teachers who launched an independent community-funded investigation into several forms of abuse that allegedly occurred within the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta organization, including sexual, spiritual, emotional, psychological and financial abuse.

### **The History of the EBM’s Investigation**

In December 2019, the EBM issued a statement through its Public Relations firm, *Communications Avenue*, that a confidential email box had been set up by the firm and that women who had allegations could reach out to this email address confidentially.

The EBM attempted to reassure skeptical women to come forward by asserting that no one who told their story would be sued. The Project Satya Facebook Community viewed this statement as an admission of the silencing of women in the past. (Ms. Salter had been threatened with legal action, and other women allege that they had also been intimidated.)

In a further erosion of trust, the EBM first appeared to express surprise at Ms. Salter's claims, but a statement made a week later admitted that they were aware of Ms. Salter's claims beginning in 2007 and that they had failed to investigate.

Given the inadequate and contradictory responses from the organisation, Project SATYA decided that an independent community-led investigation would better serve bringing truth forward and letting survivors voices be heard.

In January 2020, the EBM announced that they had hired Marianne Plamondon, a Quebec lawyer with considerable experience as an independent investigator. Her investigation was initially limited to allegations against Swami Vishnudevananda. Subsequently, the EBM expanded the mandate of Mme. Plamondon's investigation to include allegations of sexual misconduct against Prahlada (aka Thamatom Reddy).

However, at the end of March 2020, only hours before the first survivor of alleged abuse by Swami Vishnudevananda (Kuttan Nair) was scheduled to testify to Mme. Plamondon, the EBM suspended its investigation into all abuses by Vishnudevananda, citing COVID-19 as the cause.

The investigation into allegations of abuse against Prahlada continued but initially not all of the women who came forward to Mme. Plamondon were included in her investigation. Instead, on April 10, 2020 Mme Plamondon stated that the EBM had limited her investigation to only four women. This seems to contradict the EBM commitment in early 2020 that "Ms. Plamondon will have the independence to meet with anyone she believes would help in her findings, and we will not interfere in any way during her investigation." Eventually another two women were permitted to give their allegations to Mme Plamondon.

**Part 1:**  
**Summary of Conclusions of the Investigation into Sexual  
Misconduct by Prahlada (Thamatam Reddy)**

*Carol Merchasin*



## Overview

In this report I will take up the allegations against Prahlada (aka Thamatham Reddy), and, as I did in the last report, I will also explore the allegations that the Executive Board Members (the “EBM”) and/or other leaders of the International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres (the “ISYVC”) knew of these allegations and by inaction, allowed the behavior to continue.

The final report (which will be released in October 2020) will deal with the allegations of sexual misconduct against Swami Vishnudevananda and explore the effect of this reported misconduct on the culture of the organization. It is often the case that misconduct at the top creates a culture of misconduct at all levels of the organization. It can also create a culture of ignoring and silencing reporters of sexual harm. In addition to the complaints of sexual abuse involving Swami Vishnudevananda, the report will include the allegations of sexual abuse against other swamis/senior teachers and reports of the organization’s failure to (properly) respond.

## Update on the Mahadevananda Investigation

Although I tried to reach Swami Mahadevananda through the EBM before I completed my June 2020 investigative report (<https://bit.ly/2BnCSZ3>), neither he nor the EBM responded. Later I obtained a personal email address for Swami Mahadevananda and I wrote to ask him to respond to the seven allegations of sexual misconduct that I investigated. I received a response from him shortly thereafter. Swami Mahadevananda asked me to convey the following:

*Please convey to the Satya people and to all the concerned ladies my deepest felt apologies for my misbehaviour. I shall endeavour my best that it will not happen again.*

Leaving aside the question of the adequacy of the apology, I read this as an admission that Swami Mahadevananda, while not addressing each allegation specifically, admits that he has generally engaged in sexual misconduct.

In addition, since the report was published, another person came forward who corroborated some of the misconduct that was alleged in the June report.

## The Plamondon Investigation into Prahlada

Mme Marianne Plamondon has been conducting an investigation on behalf of ISYVC into allegations of sexual misconduct against Prahlada; her investigation does not, however, include all of the allegations presented here because the Executive Board Members (the “EBM”) limited the scope of her investigation to certain interviewees. The results of her investigation have not been made public by the EBM as of the date of this report. I am not aware whether or when they will be made public.

In addition, Mme Plamondon's mandate did not include the question of whether the EBM was aware of any of the allegations of sexual misconduct and failed to act appropriately. This is a particularly important question as one of the allegations involves the sexual assault of a minor (a potential criminal violation), which the EBM is alleged to have known of but did nothing about. The failure of a mandatory reporter to report the sexual abuse of a minor is often a criminal violation.

### **Summary of the Investigation into Allegations of Sexual Misconduct by Prahlada**

This report is the result of my investigation into six sexual assault allegations against Prahlada and the claim that the Sivananda organization was aware of these allegations beginning in the late 1990s and failed to investigate or act on them.

In the course of this investigation, I reached out to the Executive Board Members (the "EBM") and specifically to Prahlada to hear their versions of events. Despite my efforts, the EBM did not respond to my request to conduct interviews. A criminal lawyer responded to my email to Prahlada informing me that she represented Prahlada and he would decline to speak to me.

Again, I emphasize that these are allegations and without interviewing Prahlada and the EBM it is not possible for me to do any more than discuss the credibility of the women, the available corroboration, and any patterns of misconduct that emerged. If the EBM feels that the allegations of sexual misconduct described here are false, I would encourage them to make the results of Mme Plamondon's investigation public so that the community may understand all versions of these events and come to their own conclusions. As to the serious claim of the EBM's own complicity, a full investigation should be done.

The other issue I will raise here is the tremendous fear that some survivors have of Prahlada. For one thing, they experienced him to be a powerful and vindictive person and for another, (unlike Swami Mahadevananda), he continues to wield power within Sivananda.

At the beginning of Mme Plamondon's investigation, the EBM stated that "Prahlada was relieved of his teaching and administrative duties as EBM ...pending the results of [Mme Plamondon's] independent, third-party investigation." However, I received messages indicating that Prahlada has continued his administrative duties in India and that some leaders within the organization are simply waiting for the Plamondon investigation to be over so that Prahlada can assume even more responsibility.

In this kind of an environment, there may be others who fear reporting similar experiences. I would encourage such others to come forward to

[projectsatya.connect@gmail.com](mailto:projectsatya.connect@gmail.com)

## The Allegations

I investigated the following allegations against Prahlada:

- That he sexually assaulted a minor;
- That he sexually assaulted a woman student who specifically rejected his advances;
- That he used “adjustments” in private rooms and offices to assault women;
- That he abused his power within the organization by coercing female students to have sex with him; and
- That he retaliated against women by humiliating them in public.

In addition, I investigated whether:

- The EBM were aware in 1997 or 1998 that there were credible allegations that Prahlada had sexually assaulted a minor; and that in spite of that, Prahlada remained powerful within the organization, actually joining the EBM in 2014;
- That the EBM knew, or should have known, of Prahlada’s abuses as other leaders and teachers are alleged to have been told of instances of sexual misconduct.

I conclude that:

- The women who came forward with accounts of sexual assault are credible;
- In many cases, they spoke to others who were able to corroborate their stories;
- Swami Mahadevananda likely had some awareness of Prahlada’s treatment of women. Swami Govindananda is alleged to have known of at least one complaint but he refused to speak to me.
- Several credible witnesses have confirmed that the issue of Prahlada’s conduct was brought to the EBM as early as 1998; however, it appears that nothing was done to prevent his sexual misconduct from reoccurring over the years.

## Definitions

It is helpful to understand some of the legal concepts involved in these allegations. The definitions of the words “sexual assault” vary among countries and within states and provinces. I have used the following common definition of the phrase ‘sexual assault:’

*Any type of sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the **explicit consent** of the recipient.*

This definition includes sexual contact from touching, all the way to rape. <sup>1</sup>

Within that broad definition there are a variety of issues that relate to the concept of consent.

### **Issues of Consent within the Definition of Sexual Assault**

Another issue in considering the use of the term “sexual assault” is that of consent. If an adult engages in a sexual relationship willingly and with explicit consent, the term “sexual assault” does not apply. However there are several limitations to consent:

- When one of the parties is a minor child, there can be no consent. The definition of a “minor child” under Canadian law varies; but generally, sexual activity is a criminal matter when one of the parties is a child under a certain age, often between the ages of 16 and 18.
- The age of the minor and the difference in age between the minor and the accused can play a role in whether sexual activity is unlawful; for example, if the minor is 16 and the accused is 18, sexual activity is not necessarily unlawful. However, in the case reported here, the minor alleges that she was 12 when the sexual grooming began and Prahlada was 28.
- Consent must be established and reestablished. It cannot be “implied.” Silence and ambiguous conduct do not establish consent.
- Consent often requires “voluntary agreement” which cannot be obtained if the accused induced the other party “to engage in the activity by abusing a position of trust, power or authority.” <sup>2</sup>
- A growing number of jurisdictions (in the US, there are 14) also recognize that consent cannot be given at all when one of the parties is in a *position of authority, power or trust*, as is a teacher or a spiritual advisor, regardless of the age of the victim.
- These laws recognize a reality – that even without physical force or threats, when one of the parties is in a trusted relationship with the victim (such as teacher or spiritual advisor), there is a power imbalance between the parties, and consent cannot be freely given.

<sup>1</sup> This is a definition widely used, including by the US Department of Justice.

<sup>2</sup> **Canada Criminal Code, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-46, § 266(3)(d)** indicates that no consent is obtained where the complainant submits or does not resist by reason of **(d)** the exercise of authority.

## The Expectation of Celibacy

In addition to legal considerations of consent, I understand that *everyone* is asked to observe celibacy at a Sivananda ashram. Assuming the factual statements of Survivors #1-6 are correct, an esteemed (married) teacher has broken those rules and encouraged others to do so as well.

## Investigation Standards

In conducting an investigation, I consider the following:

1. **Credibility:** When assessing credibility, I am alert to evasiveness, inconsistency, any evident bias, any motive to lie, the inherent plausibility of the allegation and the level of detail.
2. **Corroboration:** It is common in allegations of sexual misconduct that there are no witnesses. However, often the person alleging abuse has made a contemporaneous (or later) account to a family member, friend or colleague. When there was someone or something that could corroborate an allegation, I tried to obtain it to evaluate the claim.
3. **Patterns of behavior:** When the stories told by unrelated accusers establish a pattern of misconduct, it is a strong indication that the allegations are credible. For example, it is quite unlikely that women in different places at different times, who have little or no connection, have 'concocted' the same or similar stories or have conspired together to lie. In many cases of sexual misconduct, the pattern of behavior is the most persuasive evidence that sexual assault has occurred.

## The Details of the Allegations

Not every person who reached out to the confidential in-box had a complaint of sexual misconduct to be investigated. Those personal stories involving other forms of abuse are addressed in [Part II of this report](#) (Dr. Pankhania's Report on Institutional Betrayal).

In addition, I have not listed the locations of the assaults alleged here in order to protect the identity of the survivors. However, I can say that, just as with the allegations against Mahadevananda, these incidents generally occurred in India and Canada.

The survivors here are numbered in chronological order.

### **Prahlada Survivor #1 - 1993**

Survivor #1 attended the Kid's Camp at Val Morin, Quebec, Canada in the summer of 1993 where she met Prahlada. She was 12 years old. Prahlada was 27-years-old, a prominent teacher and member of the staff. She was assigned to work in Prahlada's office.

She reported that at first, his overtures were very subtle. For example, he would rub his hand on her leg and tap her butt. He would also give her massages, but this did not immediately feel strange to Survivor #1 because there was a boy who often worked there and Prahlada gave massages to him as well. It seemed normal and did not raise any suspicions in the beginning. But she also remembers that she didn't like it.

The next summer when she was 13, she told me that Prahlada began talking about sexual matters, particularly his sexual exploits. She was very uncomfortable, so much so that the next summer when she was 14, she did not go to camp; she did not want to see him. She told no one because he was an important person there and she was confused.

She returned to camp in 1996, when she was 15 to find that he had become bolder, not only talking about sexual things but also touching her inappropriately. He began to talk to her about how "her body was changing." One day he took her to his house for a massage. Survivor #1 said no one was at home; he had her lie down on the floor of the living room so that he could massage her. He sat on top of her, undid her bra and put his hands on the sides of her breasts. He then saw through the window that his wife had come home unexpectedly, and he jumped up and hid in the bathroom.

She then described that in the summer of 1997 when she was 16, Prahlada began groping her breasts and touching her legs when others were not around. This happened mostly in his truck and at the Temple, where she was working.

When Survivor #1 was 17, she visited Toronto for a few weeks in the summer, and she was invited to stay in Prahlada's family's quarters at the Sivananda centre and baby-sit their young daughter. She described his groping at her breasts while she was working at the computer and that he would run away as though it were a game. One day she was not feeling well, so she went to lie down in the Centre. While she was lying on her stomach resting, Prahlada came and laid on top of her. She insisted that he get off. She called a friend who came immediately and picked her up.

When she was 16 or 17, (either 1997 or 1998) she recalls that she told several friends in her age group that Prahlada had been touching her inappropriately. Soon afterward, she said she received a phone call from Srinivasan (aka Mark Ashley), a member of the EBM. He questioned her about what had happened with Prahlada and she told him what she had told her friends. She said that after she revealed the incidents with Prahlada from the age of 12, Srinivasan did not seem to appreciate her being upset

and angry about it, and he told her it was too bad that “she was holding on to a lot of anger.” He asked her if she wanted to talk to the ISYVC’s lawyer. She does not know why he asked that, but she was 16 or 17 years old, she had not told her parents and she did not want to talk to a lawyer.

In 1999, she had an unexpected brief contact with Prahlada in Montreal. She said he berated her for being “stupid” for having spoken to Srinivasan and told her she was “making a big deal about nothing.” Several years later in 2002 or 2003, she told her parents about what had happened, and they went to Val Morin to speak to the EBM but as far as she knows, nothing was ever done.

Survivor #1 said Prahlada wrote a letter to her apologizing –as far as she recalls, he said that he was sorry but that “they were both young” and they did “stupid things.” In fact, Prahlada was 31 years old when she was 16.

### **Corroboration**

It is common that there are no witnesses to the type of sexual misconduct that is alleged here. However, sometimes survivors confide in others. In 1997 or 98, Survivor #1 told several teenage friends that Prahlada was touching her inappropriately. I was able to corroborate that conversation with two people who were in that circle of friends; their recollections were quite detailed and similar. Those recollections included not only the memory of Survivor #1’s allegations of inappropriate touching, but also the awareness that Srinivasan had been told of the assaults by another young woman friend of Survivor #1.

I also spoke with the friend Survivor #1 called to pick her up at the Toronto Centre. This friend corroborated Survivor’s #1’s contemporaneous account of Prahlada’s behaviour in all relevant details.

Survivor #1’s mother reported that she spoke to at least one member of the EBM once she became aware of the allegations. She told me that she specifically spoke to Swami Swaroopananda (aka Rony Magazanic) and he informed her that “it would need to be proven” before anything could be done about it. She understood this to mean that he didn’t believe her. To the best of Survivor #1’s knowledge, no investigation was ever done.

In addition, a witness came forward to say that she was at Val Morin when Survivor #1’s parents came to speak to members of the EBM in 2002 or 2003 and that she was told it was related to Prahlada’s sexual misconduct.

### **Conclusion**

Because both Prahlada and the EBM have declined to speak with me, I am unable to reach a finding on Survivor #1’s allegations. However, I do conclude that Survivor #1 is credible, her telling of her story has corroboration which I have investigated and the

pattern of misconduct that she describes is repeated by several of the other women who have come forward.

Further, Survivor #1's allegations raise important legal issues of the sexual assault of a minor by Prahlada and the EBM's alleged failure to act on this knowledge. If true, there are numerous legal issues. Sexual assault of a minor is a crime with no statute of limitations; in addition, whether the EBM were mandatory reporters with a duty to report such an allegation to authorities should also be investigated.

### **Prahlada Survivor #2 - 2000<sup>3</sup>**

Survivor #2 reported that Prahlada sexually abused her at a TTC where she was assigned to care for his daughter. She babysat the child during the day and into the evening until Prahlada returned from various teaching responsibilities. When he did return, he would not want Survivor #2 to leave. He would engage her in conversation and ask her to stay. He was very insistent.

She said that Prahlada began to pay special attention to her in class, complimenting her and asking her to demonstrate various poses. Then when she was babysitting in the evening, he began seducing her and coercing her to have a sexual relationship, which included kissing and touching. He often asked her to return in the middle of the night and she did as he demanded. She was afraid to tell anyone about the kissing and touching that was happening. Survivor #2 felt that because of Prahlada's position as a senior staff and teacher, she had to obey him. The limits of her duty as a Karma Yogi were not clear.

Survivor #2 was also confused because she knew that students and staff were meant to be celibate at the ashram. Even more confusing, she said, was that Prahlada was in a leadership position and she trusted him. She didn't know that he was married – because he was there alone with his daughter, she thought he was divorced.

One day while practising yoga, Survivor #2 fainted in the asana class. She believes this was due to the stress and confusion of her situation, and the fatigue of meeting Prahlada's demands to return to his apartment in the middle of the night. When she recovered from the fainting episode, she said that Prahlada was angry with her and told her, 'You're just too weak, you're too emotional.' After that, she said, Prahlada ignored her except when he humiliated her.

<sup>3</sup> All of the remaining testimonies in this report are from adults. Survivor #1 is the only person who was a minor.



Eventually, Mahadevananda was informed of the relationship. Survivor #2 feels she then became the “wrongdoer, the bad one,” accused of making Pahlada leave his pure and straight path as a yogi. Thereafter she was “punished” by being sent to another ashram and when she returned, she reported that Pahlada was incredibly cruel to her and routinely humiliated her in public.

### **Corroboration**

Survivor #2 spoke to several friends within the Sivananda organization shortly after these events happened with Pahlada. They have spoken to me and corroborated the relevant details of the story she alleges here. In addition, one person corroborated Pahlada’s treatment of Survivor #2 saying that she herself witnessed his disdainful treatment of her and the public humiliation to which he subjected her.

I reached out to Swami Mahadevananda to ask if he knew of any complaints against Pahlada and he replied as follows:

I never had any direct complains (sic), or accusations etc, just indirect gossips (sic), hearsay or innuendos from people. <sup>4</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Survivor #2 is credible, and I spoke with others who corroborated her account of her encounters with Pahlada, and the subsequent public humiliation that she spoke of. In addition, the pattern of abusing his authority with students and then rejecting and “punishing” them is a pattern of behavior that was reported by other survivors as well, Specifically ## 3 and 4.

### **Pahlada Survivor #3**

Survivor #3 met Pahlada at the Yoga Camp.<sup>5</sup> She felt overworked in her karma yoga and she found herself overwhelmed, tired and distressed. She spoke to Pahlada about how vulnerable she was feeling and he stood up and hugged her. He suggested that what she needed was to go to the movies and that he was going to take her. She did not hesitate because she knew he was married and she thought he was being kind. She looked up to him and trusted him.

<sup>4</sup> Best practice does not require a “direct complaint.” Even suspected sexual misconduct should be investigated. I note that Swami Mahadevananda's response indicates he had some awareness of Pahlada’s misconduct.

<sup>5</sup> Survivor #3 requested that no year be given in order to protect her identity.

At the movies, he kept trying to hold her hand. After the movie, he suggested that they drive elsewhere and take a walk. There he grabbed her and kissed her.

A few days later, he passed her on the grounds of the camp and he asked her where she was staying. She thought nothing of what seemed like a casual question but that night after she was in bed, he came into her room. She said, "What are you doing here?" and he replied that he thought she had invited him; she definitely hadn't. Thereafter, he came to her for sex whenever he wished.

She said he also began "love bombing" her – which she described as "paying her a lot of attention," telling her how "special" she was, asking her to demonstrate in class. She observed this pattern repeatedly; not only as he did it to her, but also as he did it to other women he was having sex with. She said she and Prahlada did not have a relationship because nothing was ever on her terms. If he did not like something she did, he would manipulate and "punish" her. She described the situation as psychologically abusive.

Later, after she hadn't seen him for a year, Prahlada came to her room late at night. She was asleep when he arrived and she was surprised to see him. He told her to "just shut up," he got on top of her, and penetrated her. He was already aroused. She did nothing but lay there. He never even looked at her – he got up, put his pants back on and left without a word.

He would often want her to come to his apartment in the middle of the night or to meet him for sex in the bushes. After a time, she was so ashamed she refused. He began to behave horribly to her, doing and saying things to shame her or giving her "the silent treatment" for punishment.

There was no one in authority at Sivananda that she could tell. She knew from what she had seen, that if she complained, she would be the one to get sent away, that she would be the one to be punished.

### **Corroboration**

I spoke to a woman who corroborated Survivor #3's version of events. She was a friend outside of Sivananda over the years that this was happening. She recounted the manipulation and pain that Survivor #3 endured. This friend told me that Survivor #3 loved the practice of yoga and that she struggled for years with how to get out of the situation. She understood that for Survivor #3, there was no one to speak to about it and no way for her to escape Prahalad's attentions and remain in the community.

In addition, I reviewed emails from another woman that generally corroborated Survivor #3's account.

## **Conclusion**

Survivor #3 is credible. She has told the same story consistently to at least one other person and she has supporting documentation for her story.

There are a number of issues related to the lack of “consent” in Survivor #3’s allegations. Although the sexual activity between Prahlada and Survivor #3 might look consensual (as it also might look with Survivor #2), it is important to recognize that under the law of many jurisdictions there can be no consent when there is a power imbalance between a teacher and a student, as is the case here.

In addition, Survivor #3 recounts that on at least one occasion, Prahlada came in the middle of the night when she was asleep (and when she had not had any contact with him for many months), told her to “just shut up” and then had intercourse without her consent, leaving without speaking. Silence or passivity does not equal consent and sexual intercourse without consent is the definition of rape in many jurisdictions.

Survivor #3’s story also mirrors a pattern that was repeated in Survivor #4’s account, that of grooming a woman by taking her to the movies to make sexual advances and then “love bombing” her.

### **Prahlada Survivor #4 – 2009**

Survivor #4 was assisting on a TTC when Prahlada’s staff were told they were going to the movies. At the movies, he sat next to her and she recalls that he repeatedly put his hand on her thigh. She was uncomfortable and not sure about what, if anything, it meant.

Later, she was working with Prahlada on a part of the TTC. They were outside in a public area and he said, “I think we need to do this in my room.” He explained this by saying that people were always coming up to him and asking him questions. Once in his room, she said he asked her, “Are you in love with [he named a friend of hers who was taking the TTC]?” When she said no, he asked, “Are you in love with me?” She said no and he said, “But you seem so happy.” She said, “Well, I am happy but not because of anyone and I am not interested in you.”

Then she alleges he grabbed her around her neck and tried to kiss her. When she fought him off, he told her to leave; then as she went to leave the room, he forced her up against a wall and tried to kiss her again. She remembers him saying, “You think you’re strong but you’re not. You’re like a wild horse and I will break you.”

She left and reported this to Swami Govindananda. She remembers he said that he was not surprised but there was nothing he could do. He said that Swami Mahadevananda allowed Prahlada to do whatever he liked.

She agreed to continue to work with Prahlada on the TTC, but he made it very unpleasant for her. He began to call her “Horsey” – a reference to his ability to break her like a wild horse. Eventually she changed her schedule so that she did not have to see him and she was given the task of cleaning rooms.

One day while she was cleaning in a vacant room, she alleges he came into the room and said, “I found you.” She left and as she walked away from him he ran up behind her and put his hands around her and on her breasts. She screamed at him and he tried to calm her down, telling her to be quiet. Prahlada then disappeared from the ashram for a couple of days.

### **Corroboration**

Survivor #4 gave me the names of several people, including Swami Govindananda with whom she spoke about what Prahlada did to her. I reached out to Swami Govindananda but he declined to speak to me. However, I did speak with one of the people that Survivor #4 spoke to at the time of these incidents and his recollection of what Survivor #4 told him, matches hers. This friend also described his own failed efforts to bring what happened to Survivor #4 to the attention of the leadership of the Ashram. I reviewed an email that supported this statement.

### **Conclusion**

Survivor #4’s allegations are credible and fit a general pattern of sexual misconduct that emerged during this investigation. In this case, there is not only an allegation of sexual assault but also sexual assault with force.

Survivor #4 participated in the EBM’s own investigation conducted by Mme Plamondon, and I assume that Mme Plamondon interviewed Prahlada since she is conducting the official investigation for the EBM. Once again, I would suggest that the results of that investigation be made public so that the community can know Prahlada’s responses and Mme Plamondon’s findings.

### **Prahlada Survivor #5 – 2018**

Survivor #5 said that after many years “working like a slave” for Sivananda, she was allowed to be a guest at one of the ashrams. She asked to participate in the ATTC morning classes where Prahlada was the main teacher. During the month he “casually flirted” with her and made her feel like she was his favorite student. She thought this was the way Indian men behaved. One day she asked him for spiritual guidance, and he invited her to meet him privately in an unoccupied office.

She began to discuss her spiritual suffering and how she was not finding any answers, when he asked her to stand. He said, “My master, Swami Vishnudevananda,

transferred me his power and right now I have the power to remove all your suffering.” Then he pressed into her as if to hug her but instead he used his hands on her back to move her breasts against his chest. He continued to manipulate her body against his and made strange sounds in her ear. He told her that everything was going to be ok. She froze, thinking “This is not ok.” He pulled her head back and looked at her face. He dropped his hands to her arms and said, “Get out, we’re finished here,” in a sharp, forceful voice.

The next day she left the ashram several days before the end of the program.

### **Corroboration**

Survivor #5 told no one about what happened to her. This is not unusual as she was in a foreign country where she knew no one and she had been in Sivananda long enough to know that nothing would be done. She had complained some years earlier to Swami Sitaramananda about Bramacharyas having sex with karma yogis but Swami Sitaramananda was not interested and nothing was done.

### **Conclusion**

Although Survivor #5 did not tell anyone about this experience, her account was consistent with a pattern of behavior related by other survivors; that of Prahlada using his position of power and authority to violate the boundaries of vulnerable women who looked up to him and sought his advice and counsel.

### **Prahlada Survivor #6 – 2019**

Prahlada represented himself as a person who did “adjustments” and offered to help Survivor #6 at one point, so she followed up with his offer in 2019.

She reported that he took her to a private room and directed her to remove her pants and cover up with a towel and then lie on the floor. When he began the adjustment, he moved the towel that was covering her away and began applying pressure to her pelvic area. He then acted as though her underwear were also in the way and moved them too, leaving her exposed. When she looked up at his face, he was looking at her genital area and his face appeared strained, which she felt was with arousal. She was shocked.

### **Corroboration**

Survivor #6 was credible. She was confused and concerned about what happened and she sought advice from a fellow member of Sivananda shortly after the incident occurred. This person confirmed speaking to Survivor #6 about this matter and the details of what she told him were consistent with what she told me.

In addition, this person mentioned that what Survivor #6 said directly contradicts what Prahlada taught during TTC's – that is, how to correctly put your hands on someone so there is no possibility of misinterpretation. I was also told that Prahlada taught that when doing this type of work, it should *not* be done in a private room and yet, we have a number of accounts where he allegedly did just that.

In addition to the above, a written statement came into the confidential mailbox recounting the same type of incident from another woman. This pattern of behavior from unrelated women, that of using massage or adjustments in a private room as a way to physically assault women students (Survivors ##1, 5 and 6) is a strong corroboration of their allegations.

## **Conclusion**

Survivor #6 experienced distress over this incident and communicated that distress to another person when it happened. That person corroborated learning of the incident. In addition, Survivor #6's allegations repeat a pattern of behavior that has been described by a number of others. Reports of the same behavior by unrelated women are strong indicators of credibility.

The incident that Survivor #6 reported took place in 2019, less than a year ago. Since Survivor #6 also participated in Mme Plamondon's investigation, I urge that the EBM make her conclusions and recommendations public so that the community can be assured that the necessary protections for women's safety have been taken.

## **Overall Conclusions**

The women who came forward with allegations of sexual misconduct by Prahlada are credible; and in five of six cases, they spoke contemporaneously to other people who then spoke with me and were able to corroborate their accounts.<sup>6</sup>

Several credible witnesses have confirmed that the allegation of Prahlada's sexual assault of a minor was brought to the EBM as early as 1998 and again in 2002 or 2003 (specifically to Srinivasan and Swami Swaroopananda); if true, it is possible that the EBM had a duty under Canadian law to report the sexual assault of a minor to the Canadian authorities.

There are credible allegations that Swami Govindananda and Swami Mahadevananda were aware of Prahlada's treatment of women. Swami Mahadevananda denies that

<sup>6</sup> In the one case where the woman did not tell anyone, she was in a foreign country and knew no one to tell.

anyone ever “directly complained” but he did say that he heard “indirect gossips (sic), hearsay or innuendos from people.”

### **Final Report**

The final report which will be released in September 2020 will deal with the allegations of sexual misconduct against Swami Vishnudevananda as well as an exploration of the effect of this reported conduct on the culture of the organization. It is often the case that misconduct at the top of an organization creates “permission” for misconduct down into all levels of that organization, as well as condoning a culture of ignoring sexual harm and silencing women.

In addition to the complaints of sexual abuse involving Swami Vishnudevananda, I will investigate the allegations of sexual abuse by other swamis/senior teachers and equally as important, reports of improper responses to sexual assault allegations by the organization’s leadership.

**Part 2: Institutional Betrayal and its Impact on Survivors:  
A Summary of the Personal Stories of Survivors**

*Dr. Josna Pankhania*



## Introduction

In February 2020, Carol Merchasin was appointed by Project SATYA to conduct an investigation into reports of sexual misconduct, and I was appointed at the same time to provide a psychosocial perspective on these reports as well as on reports of emotional, psychological, financial, and other abuses within the International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Community (ISYVC). For this important project I have drawn on my experience as a narrative therapist<sup>7</sup> and an ethnographic researcher<sup>8</sup>.

This report presents the personal stories of the survivors of Prahlada's alleged abuse. They describe sexual, psychological, social, spiritual and financial abuse. They clearly express the trauma survivors have suffered, and continue to experience, to varying degrees. Some of these survivors have allegations of abuse against other Swamis, too. These will be included in the final report.

This report is structured as follows:

- [Brief definitions of different types of abuse](#)
- [Framework on Institutional betrayal](#)
- [Overview of Abuse in Yoga](#)
- [Personal stories of survivors](#)
- [Postscript and reflections](#)

## Interview Process

The interview process used a trauma informed framework, drawing on best practice from counselling and therapy spheres, with a firm understanding of the impact of trauma and its recovery. This approach recognizes the complexity of trauma and comprehends the dynamics of power within a hierarchical organisation, and the potential for abuse in guru/disciple, teacher/student relationships.

Trauma informed approach recognises:

- The prevalence of complex trauma and its impact on the emotional, psychological and social wellbeing of people in yoga communities.
- The dynamics of power and the impact of abuse within a hierarchical yoga organisation with charismatic leaders.

<sup>7</sup> Narrative therapy is a form of psychotherapy that seeks to help people identify their values and the skills and knowledge they have to live these values, so that they can effectively confront problems they face. It offers a social-justice approach to therapeutic conversations, seeking to challenge dominant discourses that can shape people's lives in destructive ways.

<sup>8</sup> Ethnography, a branch of anthropology, involves a form of social research that seeks to understand people in a particular social context. It is based on the subject's own interpretation of events and behaviour.

- The power of guru/disciple, yoga teacher/student relationships and the potential for abuse within these relationships.
- The systemic and cultural dynamics of power and abuse as it relates to the yoga communities.
- The gendered dimensions of abuse.

Interviews involving cases of sexual abuse were carried out jointly by Ms Carol Merchasin and me. Carol Merchasin, as an experienced investigative lawyer, focussed on sexual abuse and misconduct claims, following up on legal issues. I followed up on psychological issues. Survivors who had complaints of other abuses, such as psychological, social, financial, spiritual, or institutional were interviewed by me.

Drawing on my counselling expertise to establish rapport, I set out to listen actively and empathetically, and to offer unconditional positive regard. It was my aim to ensure that every interaction through the interview process was consistent with recovery, and reduced the possibility of re-traumatization, given the prevalence of violence and abuse and its impact on the lives of people. I worked with the core principles of safety, trustworthiness and choice. All those who approached the Project Satya Investigation with a complaint were empowered to choose the extent of collaboration, whether or not they participated in the investigation, or what they wished to be included in the report. When invited to include their personal stories in this section of the report, some chose not to (for instance, if someone felt they might be easily identifiable) and this was respected. I aimed to be non-directive (i.e., let the interviewee decide what they would like to talk about) and to ensure emotional and psychological safety, understanding the emotional, social, psychological and physiological impact of trauma, and at the same time, being responsive to the social and cultural contexts which shape survivors' needs and healing pathways. Where appropriate I made referrals.

The interviews varied from person to person but often involved as many as three to five further sessions, as well as a series of email exchanges. The next step was to assist them to put together their statements. This was done via Zoom, and followed up by phone calls and emails, where I sought clarification. The aim of each session was to offer the interviewee a safe, non-judgemental space to make sense of their experiences and to make decisions as to how they wished to proceed.

### **Overview of the Processes Involved in Abuse**

This overview sets out to provide a brief description of the terms of abuse that figure in this report, and covers:

- Types of abuse common in society
- Sexual grooming process
- Impact of sexual violence
- Trauma of sexual assault

- Institutional betrayal
- Impact of institutional trauma,
- Charisma, Leadership, and the Social Psychology of Influence and Control
- Counter- Reactions of Abusers
- Abuse in Yoga

### **Different Types of Abuse**

What follows is an overview of the types of abuse common in society. These illustrate the types of abuse reported by the survivors, who would have experienced one or more of these, but not necessarily all.

Behaviour that causes harm to an individual is considered abuse, and can be categorised into a number of different types:

- Sexual Abuse
- Psychological Abuse
- Financial or material abuse
- Discriminatory abuse
- Organisational abuse
- Neglect
- Physical abuse

Sexual Abuse includes:

- Rape
- Indecent exposure
- Sexual harassment
- Inappropriate looking or touching
- Sexual teasing or innuendo
- Sexual photography
- Subjection to pornography or witnessing sexual acts
- Sexual acts to which the individual has not given consent or was pressured into
- Sexual acts where there can be no consent because of an imbalance of power

Psychological Abuse includes:

- Emotional abuse
- Threats of harm or abandonment
- Deprivation of contact
- Humiliation
- Blaming, controlling and intimidating behaviour
- Intimidation and coercion
- Restricting personal choice and refusing to respect privacy

## INTERIM REPORT #2 | PART II

- Harassment
- Verbal abuse
- Cyber bullying
- Isolation
- Unreasonable and unjustified withdrawal of services or supportive networks

Financial or material abuse includes:

- Theft
- Fraud
- Coercion in relation to an adult's financial affairs or arrangements
- Forced labour and domestic servitude

Discriminatory abuse includes forms of harassment because of:

- Race
- Gender
- Gender identity
- Age
- Disability
- Sexual orientation
- Religion

Organisational abuse includes:

- Inappropriate use of power or control
- No flexibility in daily routine
- Lack of personal clothes and belongings
- Stark living environments
- Deprived environmental conditions
- Illegal confinement or restriction
- Being spoken to with disrespect
- Inflexible services based on convenience of the organisation's leaders, rather than the needs of the individual
- Inappropriate physical intervention
- Removal from the establishment with no discussion with appropriate people or agencies, because of staff inability to manage behaviour (such as mental illness)

Neglect includes:

- Ignoring medical, emotional or physical needs
- Failure to provide access to appropriate health care and support, or educational services

- Withholding the necessities of life, such as medication, adequate nutrition and heating

Physical abuse includes:

- Assault
- Hitting
- Slapping
- Pushing
- Restraint or inappropriate physical sanctions

### **Sexual Grooming Process**

Grooming is a deliberate process of cultivating a relationship with an individual, generally a vulnerable one, with the purpose of preparing that person for exploitation or abuse. It is done so gradually, making the person feel special, marking them out for attention, establishing trust, that when the inappropriate behaviour begins, the victim has been desensitised to the warning signals, and may even see it as positive.<sup>9</sup>

### **Impact of Sexual Violence**

The consequences of sexual violence are physical, like bruising and genital injuries, and psychological, such as depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts.

The consequences may also be chronic. Victims may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, experience re-occurring gynaecological, gastrointestinal, cardiovascular and sexual health problems.<sup>10</sup>

### **Trauma of Sexual Assault**

During a traumatic event like sexual assault, the brain only concerns itself with staying alive. The prefrontal cortex, which controls logical decision-making, shuts down and an autonomic “fight, flight or freeze” response occurs. This “freeze” is known as tonic immobility, a situation in which the body is unable to move, the mouth is unable to talk, but the mind is aware of the situation.

<sup>9</sup> Sinnamon, G. (2017). The Psychology of Adult Sexual Grooming: Sinnamon’s Seven-Stage Model of Adult Sexual Grooming. In: *The Psychology of Criminal and Antisocial Behavior: Victim and offender perspectives*, pp 459-487. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-809287-3.00016-X>

<sup>10</sup> Centres for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.samuelmerritt.edu/discover/student-experience/safety-and-security/sexual-assault-and-violence-prevention-resources>

Dr. Rebecca Campbell, professor of psychology, explains that this is why victims of sexual assault don't always act the way that society thinks that they "should have" acted. <sup>11</sup>

### **Institutional Betrayal**

According to Smith and Freyd (2014), Institutional Betrayal occurs when an imbalance of power exists in an organisation, and where this power is used to perpetrate abuse on an individual. It includes the failure to respond when a victim seeks help in the situation, the institution seeing reputation and status as more important than the well-being of the person seeking help. Often a victim is punished in some way for reporting their abuse, and the result is additional trauma, causing further emotional and physical health problems. Such betrayal experiences have been linked to post-traumatic stress disorder, personality disorders, as well as substance abuse (Freyd, no date). <sup>12</sup>

### **Impact of Institutional Betrayal on Sexual Trauma**

Research indicates that when traumatic experiences are interpersonal, the resulting damage is greater, and when betrayal is perpetrated by a trusted person on whom the victim is dependent, then the results are particularly profound. Whilst the victim may suppress any memory of abuse, the physical and psychological symptoms indicate their negative impact. If this abuse occurs within the context of an institution, which then fails to support the victim, then the resulting post-traumatic stress is significantly increased (Smith & Freyd, 2013).

Carly Smith and Jennifer Freyd (2013) have developed the Institutional Betrayal Questionnaire (IBQ) to measure institutional betrayal regarding sexual assault. The IBQ is designed to measure institutional betrayal that occurs leading up to, or following a sexual assault (e.g., [The institution] "... created an environment where sexual assault seemed like no big deal"; "... responded inadequately to reports of sexual assault").<sup>13</sup>

### **Counter-Reactions of Abusers**

The acronym, **DARVO**, conceptualised by Freyd (1997), describes the reaction of abusers when confronted by the victim. It stands for *Deny, Attack and Reverse Victim*

<sup>11</sup> Campbell, R. (2018): Available from: [https://statenews.com/article/2018/10/understanding-the-trauma-of-sexual-assault-discussion-at-wonders?fbclid=IwAR0hjdX-9E3vGsmJtdX76fs7TICpAjEk44xRDJsJRQqi1\\_NrU2uJbe8GB3A](https://statenews.com/article/2018/10/understanding-the-trauma-of-sexual-assault-discussion-at-wonders?fbclid=IwAR0hjdX-9E3vGsmJtdX76fs7TICpAjEk44xRDJsJRQqi1_NrU2uJbe8GB3A)

<sup>12</sup> Smith, C.P. & Freyd, J. (2014). Institutional Betrayal. *American Psychologist*. 69(6), pp. 575-587. <https://theconversation.com/when-sexual-assault-victims-speak-out-their-institutions-often-betray-them-87050>

<sup>13</sup> Smith, C.P. & Freyd, J.J. (2013). Dangerous Safe Havens: Institutional Betrayal Exacerbates Sexual Trauma. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*. 26, pp. 119-124.

*and Offender*. According to Freyd, the abuser will deny the abuse ever took place, become threatening, following which they will then propose themselves as the victim, and the victim as the offender.<sup>14</sup>

Enablers are people who may apply DARVO or justify, legitimise or downplay the misconduct of an offender. For example, in Ashtanga Yoga, these were mainly people who said that the actions of Pattabhi Jois, founder of Ashtanga Yoga, were not sexual, that it was not possible to judge him, as his intentions were not known. Karen Rain is a writer, an activist and sexual abuse survivor of Pattabhi Jois. She responds to these 'enablers' by pointing out that ultimately, perpetrators and their enablers are responsible for their actions, and the blame cannot be shifted to the victims.<sup>15</sup>

### **Charisma, Leadership, and the Social Psychology of Influence and Control**

Charismatic people have a certain quality that sets them apart from other people who do not share the same charisma. These people are perceived to have exceptional insight or outstanding accomplishments, and this prompts others to treat them as having supernatural or superhuman traits. Because these qualities are so out of the range of ordinary people, followers see them as divine and place them in positions of leadership. Their power, therefore, is accorded purely by the loyalty and obedience of his followers, based on these perceived qualities.<sup>16</sup> *The Cult Research & Information Center* lists numerous examples of charismatic leaders who have abused their power.

17

### **Abuse in Yoga**

The guru-disciple pedagogy, which is inherent in many schools of yoga in India, has proven to be a vulnerable juncture in the transmission of transnational yoga. Although there are many individual gurus that have made formative contributions to the practice of contemporary yoga worldwide, few organisations that support such

<sup>14</sup> Freyd, J.J. (1997). Violations of Power, Adaptive Blindness and Betrayal Trauma Theory. *Feminism and Psychology*. Vol 7, pp. 22-32.

<sup>15</sup> Rain, K. (2020). Understanding Sexual Violence in Context. The Medium, 29 April 2020, <https://medium.com/an-injustice/understanding-sexual-violence-in-context-2b8dc5453ded>

<sup>16</sup> Kendall, Diana, Jane Lothian Murray, and Rick Linden. *Sociology in our time* (2nd ed.), 200. Scarborough, On: Nelson, pp. 438–439.

<sup>17</sup> Lalich, J. (2016). Cult Research: Recommended Reading, Sept 2016, <http://cultresearch.org/recommended-reading/>

a teaching model have managed to navigate the power dynamics without scandal and abuse. <sup>18</sup>

The following is a list of some of those yoga teachers and ‘gurus’ publicly accused of abuse by students. More information can be found at The Yoga Lunchbox’s *List of Yoga Scandals Involving Gurus, Teachers, Students, Sex and Other Inappropriate Behaviour*. <sup>19</sup> Other sources, where available, are additionally linked in the footnotes.

- Pattabhi Jois - Astanga Yoga <sup>20</sup>
- Yogi Bhajan - Kundalini Yoga <sup>21</sup>
- BKS Iyengar - Founder, Iyengar Yoga <sup>22</sup>
- Manouso Manos and others within IYNAUS <sup>23</sup>
- Mark Whitwell - Heart of Yoga <sup>24</sup>
- John Friend - Anusara Yoga
- Bikram Choudhury - Founder, Bikram Yoga
- Osho/Rajneesh
- Kausthub Desikachar, grandson of Krishnamacharya
- Amrit Desai - Creator, Kripalu Yoga
- Muktananda - Founder, Siddha Yoga
- Swami Rama - Founder, Himalayan Institute of Yoga Science and Philosophy

<sup>18</sup> Pankhania, J. and J. Hargreaves 2017. “A culture of silence: Satyananda Yoga”. Friday 22 December. <http://theluminescent.blogspot.com/2017/12/a-culture-of-silence-satyananda-yoga.html>

<sup>19</sup> Grant, Kara-Leah & Standiland, Lucinda “A List of Yoga Scandals Involving Gurus, Teachers, Students, Sex and Other Inappropriate Behaviour.” Yoga LunchBox, Feb. 17, 2015, updated May 30, 2019, <https://theyogalunchbox.co.nz/a-comprehensive-list-of-yoga-scandals-involving-gurus-sex-and-other-inappropriate-behaviour/>

<sup>20</sup> Remski, Matthew “Yoga’s Culture of Sexual Abuse: Nine Women Tell Their Stories.” The Walrus, Feb. 5, 2020, <https://thewalrus.ca/yogas-culture-of-sexual-abuse-nine-women-tell-their-stories/>

<sup>21</sup> An Olive Branch Associates, LLC “Report on an Investigation into Allegations of Sexual and Related Misconduct by Yogi Bhajan.” August 10, 2020, [http://asiasamachar.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Olive-Branch-Yogi-Bhajan-Investigation\\_10Aug2020.pdf](http://asiasamachar.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Olive-Branch-Yogi-Bhajan-Investigation_10Aug2020.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Griswold, Eliza “Yoga Reconsiders The Role of The Guru In The Age Of #Metoo.” The New Yorker, July 23, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/yoga-reconsiders-the-role-of-the-guru-in-the-age-of-metoo>

<sup>23</sup> Sargeant, Bernadette C. “Report of Investigation of Allegations of Inappropriate Sexual Touching During Yoga Instruction Made Against Manouso Manos.” IYNAUS, March 26, 2019, [https://iynaus.org/sites/default/files/redacted\\_report\\_of\\_investigation\\_for\\_iynaus\\_-\\_march\\_26\\_2019\\_redacted\\_4\\_4\\_19.pdf](https://iynaus.org/sites/default/files/redacted_report_of_investigation_for_iynaus_-_march_26_2019_redacted_4_4_19.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> Roe, Christie “Breath to Speak” Medium, Jan. 5, 2020, <https://medium.com/@dighyself/breath-to-speak-c5606af5db69>



- Swami Satyananda & Swami Akhandananda - Satyananda Yoga <sup>25</sup> <sup>26</sup>
- Swami Satchidananda - Integral Yoga
- Swami Shankarananda - Shiva Yoga
- Swami Vivekananda - Agama Yoga <sup>27</sup>
- Paramahansa Yogananda
- Swami Kriyananda - Ananda Sangha Worldwide
- Swami Maheshwarananda
- Maharishi Mahesh Yogi - Leader, Transcendental Meditation Movement
- Ruth Lauer - Manenti - Jivamukti Teacher
- Swami Sathya Sai Baba

Both Uma Dinsmore-Tuli and Matthew Remski, in their books represent two of several efforts to facilitate the process of re-writing the history of sexual abuse in Yoga communities through the lens of survivors.

Uma Dinsmore-Tuli is a writer and radical yogini. In her book, *Yoni Shakti (2014)*, she presents testimonies from survivors of sexual and psychological abuse in yoga communities, maintaining that it is still occurring around the world. She discusses the harm, the damage done in these communities by yoga teachers and trainers they trusted. <sup>28</sup>

Matthew Remski is a researcher of cultic dynamics and abuse in yoga. In his book *Practice And All Is Coming (2019)*, he presents survivors' reports of sexual abuse in Yoga communities, as well as examining the wider contexts that allow such abuse to occur. He explains how isolation, powerlessness, victim-blaming and silencing create

<sup>25</sup> Coate, Justice Jennifer & Milroy, Professor Helen "Report of Case Study No. 21: The response of the Satyananda Yoga Ashram at Mangrove Mountain to allegations of child sexual abuse by the ashram's former spiritual leader in the 1970s and 1980s." Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, April 2016, <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/file-list/Case%20Study%2021%20-%20Findings%20Report%20-%20Satyananda%20Yoga%20Ashram.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Pankhania, J. 2017. "The ethical and leadership challenges posed by the Royal Commission's revelations of sexual abuse at a Satyananda Yoga ashram in Australia". In Sunil Savur and Sukhbir Sandhu (eds.) *Responsible Leadership and Ethical Decision-Making (Research in Ethical Issues in Organizations, vol. 17)* (pp. 105–123). Emerald Publishing Limited. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0BwrH-vQ6M6nsVk5lcDI5cHZ0MDg/view?usp=sharing>

<sup>27</sup> Tempesta, Erica "Tantra students reveal how they were sexually assaulted and pressured into group sex by a guru at a Thai yoga retreat who claimed that abuse was a 'ritual' for achieving enlightenment." Daily Mail, Aug.12, 2020, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-8620357/Tantra-students-reveal-raped-abused-guru-yoga-retreat.html>

<sup>28</sup> Dinsmore-Tuli, U. (2020). *Yoni Shakti: A Woman's Guide to Power and Freedom Through Yoga and Tantra*. Pinter & Marlin

the conditions for such abuse in the yoga community, effectively turning them into cults. <sup>29</sup>

In *Yoga's Culture of Sexual Abuse: Nine Women Tell Their Stories: Disturbing accounts of misconduct against the founder of one of North America's most popular forms of yoga*, Remski honours the testimonies of survivors of abuse in yoga. <sup>30</sup>

Jubilee Cooke and Karen Rain are two examples of survivors who have begun a process of recounting personal stories and sharing them with the wider community, and in doing so have started to bring about radical and revolutionary change in yoga.

Jubilee Cooke, in *Why didn't somebody warn me? A Pattabhi Jois #Me Too Story*, documents her story of abuse by a teacher who was a world-renowned yoga leader. It took years of carrying the ordeal, but she finally shares her personal story with the wider community.<sup>31</sup>

Karen Rain was also abused by Pattabhi Jois, and also kept quiet for years. In trying to make sense of what people said about him, that his actions were not sexual, she says the following:

At times I even tried to glorify the sexual assaults. I wanted to believe what some people claimed, and still do, that Pattabhi Jois was transferring a healing energy to me by touching me that way. Rather than feeling pitiable, that thinking would allow me to feel lucky, like I was being blessed. This may sound like consent on my part, but the power differential, and my fear of the repercussions if I protested — losing my friends, my career, and my sense of belonging — made consent impossible. I was powerless. Here was a yoga master, a heavy man, lying on top of me, humping me, while I was in compromising postures. I acquiesced. I endured. I tried to tune it out.

I did not consent.

<sup>29</sup> Remski, M. (2019). *Practice and All is Coming: Abuse, cult dynamics, and healing in Yoga and beyond*. Embodied Wisdom Publishing Limited: New Zealand

<sup>30</sup> Remski, Matthew "Yoga's Culture of Sexual Abuse: Nine Women Tell Their Stories." The Walrus, Feb. 5, 2020, <https://thewalrus.ca/yogas-culture-of-sexual-abuse-nine-women-tell-their-stories/>

<sup>31</sup> Cooke, J. (2018). *Why Didn't Somebody Warn Me? A Pattabhi Jois #MeToo Story*. *Decolonizing Yoga*, 11 July 2018, <https://decolonizingyoga.com/why-didnt-somebody-warn-me-a-pattabhi-jois-metoo-story-jubilee-cooke/>

Rain now believes that sexual violence is defined by the behaviour of the perpetrator, not by the response of the victim, and further, that it is often more about power than about sex.<sup>32</sup>

When the subject of abuse in yoga communities arises, the response is often an attempt to preserve the practice, rather than focus on the harm done by the institution. Consequently, the issue is rarely dealt with. These two women have outlined clearly how to respond to sexual abuse in yoga communities, stressing that the perpetrator must be made accountable and the institution must acknowledge and apologise when such abuse occurs and is covered up. They argue that a culture of belief, rather than disbelief, must be established, but one which goes further by offering encouragement and dignity to the victims. Education and prevention should also be an integral part of this culture.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Rain, K. (2018). Yoga Guru Pattabhi Jois Sexually Assaulted Me for Years. Available from: <https://medium.com/s/powertrip/yoga-guru-pattabhi-jois-sexually-assaulted-me-for-years-48b3d04c9456> and <https://medium.com/an-injustice/understanding-sexual-violence-in-context-2b8dc5453ded>

<sup>33</sup> Rain, K. & Cooke, J. (No date). How to respond to sexual abuse within a yoga or spiritual community. Available from: <https://yogainternational.com/article/view/how-to-respond-to-sexual-abuse-within-a-yoga-or-spiritual-community/>

## **The Personal Stories of Survivors**

The people who came forward to Project SATYA with allegations of abuse by Prahlada had the choice of writing their personal narratives on institutional betrayal and its impact in this report. Most chose to do so.

The following section includes the personal stories of five survivors who reported sexual misconduct (these are Survivors #2 to # 6 which correspond with those in [Part I of this report](#) by Carol Merchasin). Each survivor's personal story begins on a new page. Survivors #7 to #9 reported psychological and institutional abuse, hence were not mentioned in the first part of this report which only deals with allegations of sexual abuse.

## Survivor #2

I was on staff with the Sivananda organisation from 1999 to 2005. I had been a victim of sexual abuse by Prahlada in 2000. This took place in an abusive organisation where I also experienced social, emotional, psychological, spiritual and financial abuse. During my time in this organisation, I was in constant burn-out, I suffered poor physical and psychological health.

I went to India in 1998 when I was a 25-year-old. I left my own country and my career to discover a new land and new experiences. I wanted to be free. I wanted to learn and discover new spiritual experiences. I was drawn by a spiritual quest, and by Indian philosophy, attracted by yoga asanas. There are many things that I liked about the yoga ashram in India, in many ways, ashram life was good for me.

When I joined the staff, right after my TTC, I was told that my karma yoga was to look after Prahalad's child. She was 5 or 6. He came to India from Canada where he lived for two months to teach the advanced TTC. I was told that I had to be the child's mother, do everything that a mother does for her. I had to be loving, caring, patient, look after her, entertain her all day. I had worked with kids before, so it was not difficult to look after one little girl.

After about one week of looking after the little girl, Prahalada invited me to attend his Advanced Teacher Training classes. I was happy to be invited as I had only done the TTC.

In the classes, he praised me all the time, in front of everyone. He commented about my body, my flexibility. At other times, he talked about my youth and my looks. He used to praise me in private and in public, in front of big groups of people.

There was so much about India and Indian people that I loved. I absorbed everything, the yoga classes, the food, the clothes - I used to wear saris. Prahlada told me that he liked me because of my dark skin and black hair, he said that I looked Indian. I was flattered. I felt special, part of a new family. I wanted to be as Indian as possible! When you are young and in a new country, away from your parents and your family, it is reassuring to have someone offering you care and affection. It was a good feeling to get so much praise and attention and opportunities to learn advanced yoga.

In the evening, I put his daughter to bed and waited for him to come back. He talked to me and soon he asked me to come back later in the night, and he kept me in until very late.

What happened in his room was very confusing. There were pictures of Swami Sivananda there, looking at us. And I remember thinking that this can't be right. He was a senior Indian teacher and I was a young student from another country. I was very naive about the ashram life. I thought that it was a pure place, where everybody did his best to follow the rules and to be nice and sincere to others. I did not really

understand everything about the ashram way of life and about the culture of this new country. I trusted him. And I believed that as a senior Indian teacher, he cannot do wrong.

I knew that in the ashram, the culture was one of celibacy, and so I found the behaviour of this senior teacher, whom I trusted, very confusing, but because he was one of the people in charge and Indian, I did not question him. I had to believe he was acting properly. As a new staff member, I also had to respect and obey senior staff.

One day, in a hall full of people, Prahalad looked straight into my eyes, across all the people and mouthed slowly and clearly, "I LOVE YOU". It was really strange and very confusing.

So, in his room, with the picture of Swami Sivananda, Prahalad's guru, Prahalad was trying to have sex with me. I was afraid of Prahalad, always afraid that he would force me. He was strong, a big, strong man. He used to shout at people. He was terrifying when he shouted. I was so confused with my emotions, I wondered, Is this allowed? I had nobody to ask.

I was a strong young woman, but working all day, looking after the little girl, and then spending the evening with Prahalad until late at night, was exhausting. I was frightened, confused and exhausted. Each night, I had only a few hours' sleep in the dormitory I shared with other women. The fear, the mental anguish and emotional confusion and the physical exhaustion was too much, and one day, I just fainted in the asanas class.

After the class where I fainted, Prahalad became very angry, he said very despisingly, "you are too weak, too emotionally weak", and then he stopped talking to me, just like that.

After this, for the remaining days of his stay at the Indian ashram, he did not talk to me.

The following year, when he returned, Prahalada was angry and distant. He was mad at me. He used to shout at me all the time, angry shouting, rejecting me.

I hated the way he shouted at me so much, even in public. I was young and fragile and there was nobody there to protect me from his anger and his abuse. People at the ashram saw this kind of shouting regularly. They were used to it. That is why nobody stood up for me, nobody protected me from his angry outbursts about nothing. This was a very difficult time for me.

One day, I was translating for him to a big group, and he came over to me and threw my yoga mat and my flip flops across the hall and told me to go. I felt really bad, destroyed. It was humiliating in front of a hall full of overseas guests for whom I was

translating. They were probably shocked, but people just accepted this kind of behaviour, they probably did not know what to say anyway.

It was a horrible time. It lasted for more than a month. I cried and suffered a lot. I was scared to walk into the daily morning staff meeting where all the staff, as well as Prahalad were seated.

That second year, I became aware of his game. I noticed that his game was always on. I saw him playing the game with other young women, the game that he played with me. I started to see how he was playing with other young women, praising their bodies, their looks, their flexibility, their strength. I saw the way he would touch them. And I was disgusted by what I was seeing. I felt sorry for the girls. I understood that it was wrong, that what he was doing, the way that he was behaving, was all wrong, but it was still confusing, because a part of me could not understand how a senior teacher could be wrong, how a senior Indian teacher, a special disciple of Swami Vishnudevananda, could be wrong.

I started to notice that when he was adjusting the young women in different asanas, it was more than yoga moves. He was touching their bodies, not only to adjust them, he was simply touching beautiful, flexible female students for the sake of touching them, not for yoga. He always chose young and slim women. And some were pleased to get such close attention, just as I was when he praised me.

But the question remained for me, how can a senior teacher be wrong or do wrong? A teacher who everyone saw as great.

Now it is clear. I was not the only one that was abused. I suspected there were others, but I never knew. Now I know that there were many others. And I believe that even Swami Vishnu and others, abused women. Prahlada is following all the teachings of his guru, carrying on all the sexual and psychological abuse.

All this has been very disturbing for me. It made my childhood trauma come alive again. I went to this organisation in search of spirituality and there I was harmed. I had to have therapy over four years to regain my confidence and my sense of self. I left confused about so many things, my spiritual quest, my trust in humankind, about relationships, about men, about work, about my *self*.

I gave some of the best years of my life to this organisation but in the end, they threw me out because I denounced the monetary greed, the luxurious way of living of the senior swamis, the lack of generosity and simplicity.

I was too sincere, happy, willing to sit on the floor having the same lunch as the students. I wanted to give for free a blanket, a book, a bowl of soup, when the rule was to charge for every little service. I couldn't stand being part of a "yoga business". Where were the words of Swami Sivananda "Serve, love, give, purify, meditate and Realise" and "Give until it hurts"?

EBM called me a rotten apple, I had to be thrown away!

I disappeared from SYVC in 2 hours! They would not allow me to say my farewell or a word to my friends, the staff and the students.

When they threw me out, I was not even allowed to collect the few belongings I had. I went to this organisation as a strong young woman and I left broken, with not even the few clothes I had. And the journey to rebuild my life has not been easy.

For 5 years I worked long hours with no minimum wage or paid holiday, 2000 to 2005. My pension has a hole from 1999 to 2006. I will suffer financial consequences from this hole when I am old. After leaving this organisation, I had to undertake weekly psychotherapy sessions over a period of four years to recover my self-confidence.

I question sometimes, How did I become so psychologically weak, so exhausted, that it took me such a long time to be able to leave? I believed in what I did at my simple level. I understand that SYVC worked as a cult on me. I was weak, I was trapped in it, I got used to all the abuses...This is scary and so dangerous. So many fragile people join staff.

The pain of betrayal is still there. I still hurt but I am not suffering so much, as I am out of that danger. I am not in an organisation where people are broken and abused. Questions of humanity remain, how can money, power and sex be part of the foundation of a spiritual organisation? Of course, I am disappointed, but the important thing is that I am not there. I am free.



### **Survivor #3**

During my time at the ashram, I was feeling exhausted and overwhelmed and needed guidance. My karma yoga at that time meant that I worked closely with Pahlada and so, naturally, I asked for a private meeting with him so I could ask him for guidance and express how I was feeling. I looked up to Pahlada as a person who held responsibility, who was a senior teacher within the organisation. During our discussion, I started crying, as I felt very emotional and exhausted at that time. He then told me that I needed a break and said he would take me out, I guessed to cheer me up. He then came and said I needed a hug and he hugged me close and said, "I like you; I really like you". As my boss and a married man, I took this to mean nothing more than he liked me as a person. I thought nothing more, other than he was being kind at a time when I was upset and vulnerable.

I felt uncomfortable when he took me out and held my hand, but I didn't push it away as I just didn't know what to do at the time. This was my teacher and it was unexpected. I enjoyed his company, but I did not feel attracted to him in that way. That same occasion he grabbed me and kissed me, but I did not really reciprocate as I was just shocked and taken by surprise.

One evening Pahlada arrived uninvited to my sleeping space at night. Again, I was shocked, I just didn't quite know what to do. I made excuses as to why I couldn't have sex with him, but he persisted and managed to have it his way. He repeatedly told me how he loved me and the easiest way to describe that time is that I was being 'love bombed'. At the time, I didn't even know what that term meant, I was quite naive then.

It was not long before things became a nightmare, and I felt violated. I felt ashamed, dirty, used and hurt.

It was not a two-way relationship in a normal and healthy way. Everything was on his terms and when he decided. After some time, I saw how he was doing the same thing to other women (love bombing), and then things turned. I feel that when he had enough of me, he went on to others.

There were times when he would publicly humiliate me in front of many guests. My self-esteem was quite low, but somehow, I just laughed off the humiliation as a joke. I think that was my way of dealing with it at the time.

There were times when I felt violated. I felt guilt. I felt shame and pain in my heart, and I had no one to talk to or turn to. If you did not go along with Pahlada you would eventually be punished in one way or another. This could be many things. For example, he would make sure you were either put in a karma yoga duty he knew you would not like, or even send you away to another centre. He has a lot of power and he abused that.

At times he would tell me my ego is too big, or I'm too emotional, or there was something wrong with my mind. There were times when he was passing by, and if no one was around he would quickly grab me, grope and fumble around and tell me, "I love you", and then quickly walk off. I felt horrible when this happened, and it did, more than a few times. If he thought I wanted or enjoyed that kind of connection, he was wrong. I did not. It was upsetting and I felt violated.

I felt that once Prahlada saw my vulnerability, he moved in on me. I was naive and thought that things were my own fault or my karma, as it was taught that we bring everything on ourselves. I was not in a relationship with him. I have come to understand that this was abuse. That as a leader of yoga, there is power imbalance between a teacher and a student. It is not equal.

It took me time to break away. I lacked confidence; I still lack confidence on some levels. I have not had any therapy. However, this process has been helpful.

I now know that what happened was not ok. I am reliving it all, reprocessing it. This process has brought up so many things that I had locked away, things that left me feeling hurt, broken and used. I didn't know all this was inside me.

Now the tears have been flowing, because I am not suppressing it. I am healing now, mentally, instead of carrying on with business as usual. I am not burying it; I am bringing it out. It is not a big secret anymore, a secret that I did not share even with my best friend. At last I am beginning to heal from this trauma.

Reading Julie's testimony brought up a lot inside me, and I felt from my own experience that she was telling the truth. Reading others' testimonies and accounts also made me see that I was not alone. It made me realise the things I endured were actually not ok, were not kind, but actually quite damaging to me as a person.

It has been a very difficult process since Julie's testimony, as it shattered a belief system that had been deeply ingrained in me. I believed in Swami Vishnu.

I began to relive my whole time and see things in a true light. The process brought up so many things that I had locked away, things that left me feeling hurt, broken and used.

I now understand that I am one of many, and that Prahlada is not the only man who has abused women in this organisation. There was never a two-way connection. Somehow, I lost my voice to stand up to him.

I have carried this dark secret, and sadness has been buried deep in me. This process of talking is so helpful. I felt guilty, but now I am trying to accept that it was not my fault.

## INTERIM REPORT #2 | SURVIVORS PERSONAL STORIES

I had no one to talk to and also felt ashamed about it all. If I had told someone then, it would have been me that was sent away and not him, because that's what happened to others. For a long time, I did not know that it was abuse. I just felt terrible and alone. I have cried many tears, blocked so much. But in the end, I am very glad that I left.

## Survivor #4

In 2006, while I was travelling in South America with my sister, I was told about the Sivananda organization and I decided to go to India at the end of our trip. As my sister was not interested to go with me, I decided to go alone to the ashram in Kerala in Spring 2007. I remember feeling comfortable there. I loved to go to the morning satsang with everyone chanting. It felt like home. I spent a month in the ashram and decided to take the next teacher training course. After this I stayed on as staff, as I loved it, and just felt I wanted and needed to know more.

I met Prahlada, his wife and his children at the centre in Toronto just after I had left staff. I remember having a conversation with Prahlada where he asked me what my plans were now. I told him that although I did not want to be staff, I wanted to learn more, and I was going to go back to India.

He then told me he was teaching the Advanced Teacher Training Course in Madurai in January 2009 and asked me to come and assist him. As it appeared a great opportunity, I accepted. The idea was that I would take his asana classes, attend his lectures and stay behind after classes to hear him take questions from students. Then when the ATTC students were in other lectures, I would study anatomy with Prahalada so that the following month I could teach on the upcoming TTC at the ashram.

On the first day off of the ATTC, I wanted to spend time in the ashram: it was the first day off and it was a very lovely place. However, I was told that we had to go to the movies with Prahlada to watch a movie in Indian. I did not want to go, but I was told we had to, and we took a minibus with him to go into town.

During the movie, he put his hand on my leg, inside of my thigh. It felt very uncomfortable. Although I moved my leg a couple of times, he put his hand back every time and I felt strange and very confused by it. At first, I thought that maybe he was just someone tactile. So, although it felt weird, I decided not to make a big deal about it.

Not long after, we were studying in Prahlada's room (there weren't many places in the ashram at this time that were quiet - the ashram was still being built and so he had suggested we study in his room so as not to be disturbed all the time). He asked me if I was in love with a friend of mine, who was taking the ATTC, I replied that I wasn't, and he then asked, "Are you in love with me?"

I was stunned I said, What? No. I told him he was my teacher and I wasn't interested in him in any other way, and I reminded him that I had met his wife and children in Toronto. He said, ok, let's get back to this (the studying). And then two minutes later he head-locked me and tried to kiss me.

I said, "What are you doing!?"

Then he said, "I think you should leave".

And as I was packing my things away, he came at me from across the room and shoved me up against the wall and tried to kiss me again. He held me up against the wall and I had my arms stretched out around his neck keeping him away from me, he laughed and said, "you think you are strong but I am stronger, I will break you!"

Then he said, "I am giving you a new name and I am going to call you Horsey, because you are a wild horse and I will break you in".

I said, "I won't answer you if you call me that!"

He actually called me Horsey, after that in private and in public.

But I would not answer until he called me by my name.

In lectures, he called me Horsey and I would not reply until he called me by my proper name.

It made me angry that he was so obnoxious.

It left me confused and shocked.

I could not believe that he thought it was ok to behave like this.

All I wanted to do was to teach yoga and to learn how to teach it better. When I agreed to be his teaching assistant, I thought that it was going to be a great opportunity to learn from him. That is why I said yes.

A few days after that first assault, Prahlada said that he was not going to stay after his class to answer the students' questions and I said to him, "You will stay behind and answer peoples' questions! You are the teacher and you have to answer students' questions, that is what we are here for!" He was furious, he said, "Nobody speaks to me like this how dare you! Even Swami Mahadevandna doesn't talk to me like this" And I said, "Maybe it is about time somebody did!"

I felt so sorry for Prahlada's family, that he was behaving like this whilst touting himself as one of Swami Vishnu Devananda's special disciple. He always talked about himself and Swami Vishnu in his lectures and of his special bond with his guru.

After the first time he tried to kiss me by putting me in a head-lock and after he shoved me against the wall, shouting at me, "you think you are strong, but I am stronger, I will break you!" I went to speak to Swamiji, Swami Govindananda directly.

He said, "I am sorry I can't do anything about it, Swami Mahadev lets him (Prahlada) do what he likes.

For me it was frustrating he had no power to do anything. He was a lovely swami but completely powerless to do anything in this situation. Swami Mahadev was the Acharya for India and Swami Govindananda was under him, even though he was the Ashram director.

And so, Swami Govindananda said to me, "Do you think you can try a bit longer?" I said, "Yes ok." I wanted to learn, and I wanted to be able to teach on the TTC. I also thought that since I had said no to Prahalada in no uncertain terms, that he would not do it anymore.

But it happened again.

When I try to remember that incident, all I can remember is how I felt, I cannot remember exactly what happened, except that I left crying and really angry.

I went to Swami Govindananda, and I was really upset and angry and crying, and I told him I couldn't study with Prahalada anymore. I didn't want to have anything else to do with him. I wanted to be on a different karma yoga schedule so that I would not have to be around him. So Swamiji (Swami Govindananda) changed my schedule. One of the jobs was to clean the guest rooms.

It was during the last week of the course and I was cleaning and chanting ... I loved to chant as I worked... and I heard a voice in the doorway. It was Prahalada, and he said, "Here you are".

I said, "I thought you were teaching!"

And he said, "I came out to find you," and he came into the room.

I said, "I am leaving".

He then ran up behind me as I was walking out of the room and put his hand on my breasts.

I had a sweeping brush and a bucket in my hands. I shouted at him and he tried to shush me and quiet me down, and I said, "If you do anything, I will scream the place down!"

He ran away down the stairs.

I was upset, I was angry. Swamiji had changed my schedule so that I did not have to be around Prahalad, and here he was, coming out of his class, putting his hand on my breasts!

I spoke to Swamiji again, and he said again, "I am so sorry but there is nothing I can do".

I felt completely powerless. I was in India, I had no smart phone then, there was no internet and the person in charge could not do anything to keep me safe.

I trusted Prahlada. That is why I agreed to join him in India, to learn from him. I thought that it was a great opportunity for me to develop as a yoga teacher. Anyway, when I told someone about being assaulted by Prahalad, the way he forced his kiss on me and held me against the wall, they said that it was good that it happened to me, because I was able to stand up to Prahalad. Others, as well as Swamiji, told me that it was good that I had said no, as “they don’t normally say no”.

Anyway, it was not good that it happened to me, it shouldn’t happen to anyone. I had said no, but it didn’t stop him from continuing to try it on.

I found out that people knew about Prahlada’s behaviour with women. Swami Govindananda told me he was sorry it was happening, but he was also a bit amused. He said this has bruised Prahlada’s ego, and he said, ‘they don’t often say no’, implying this had happened before.

I realised why I had, in the past, felt kind of ‘icky’ when he used to do adjustments on me. The adjustments themselves were often very good, but they left me feeling ‘icky’. It was challenging, there was an internal struggle, and I did not know what that struggle was. All I know is that it left me feeling icky. I enjoyed the class, but did not like him, and did not feel comfortable with him. That was the internal struggle I now realise.

Prahalada is a charismatic leader. People like him. His lectures are interesting. He has a great deal of knowledge. I had tried to continue learning with him but didn’t want to do it in his room anymore, but that didn’t work.

One day, when Prahalad was doing some body work adjustments, I told this young woman, “Don’t be on your own with this guy”, and she said, “Yes, I know!”

So, here is this man who everyone thinks he is the best teacher, and he finds ways to touch women through one-on-one body adjustments. And his assistants are all supposed to feel that they are special because they work for him.

During the graduation feast Prahlad called me over to him and said to me, “Are we cool?”

I said, “We are not cool, and we will never be cool!”

I have made sure that I never saw him again.

All this put me off the organisation.

Someone told me when I told them about Prahalad, “You have to take the teaching and not the teacher”.

Through this experience, I have learned that I can hold my ground.

I stayed on for lots of reasons, and, because I was sleeping in a dormitory with 15 women, I knew that he would not be able to come to me in the night and try anything.

But that did not stop him during the day. I stayed on because I thought that if he did anything, I would scream, and others would come to my assistance.

That did not stop him either that day when I was cleaning.

I am disappointed that Swamiji did not do anything, but I understand that he was powerless, and am so glad that he has set up his own ashram.

I am angry that these things happen, and that so many people seem to know but do nothing.

I didn't let this put me off doing what I love. I have explored other kinds of yoga. I found other good, respectful hatha yoga teachers.

I felt sorry for Prahalad's family. I thought, This is their dad this her husband, and this is what he gets up to!

I think the organisation could do so much good. There must be more transparency and honesty, and if they can't do this, the current EBM should go, they are a bunch of hypocrites. They teach non-attachment, but they do not know how to detach themselves from their self-serving positions.

They live like leaders of a kingdom, a kingdom they rule over. That is not yoga. That is hypocrisy.

I have some friends in the Sivananda Yoga community, but I don't really teach Sivananda Yoga anymore.



## Survivor #5

I was a believer; an active advocate and participant of Sivananda Vedanta Ashrams and Centres around the world, a Staff/Karma Yogi for long periods of times, on and off, for the last 10 years. Through the organization, I pursued a journey of knowledge and certifications; TTC, ATTC, Yoga, Vedanta, Ayurveda. I tried to re-form, reconstruct my life and beliefs accordingly. This pursuit started as the result of my heart being set on healing deep traumas, and, as I found a community of Love and Unity, my whole being wanted to belong to every part of it. Yet as I grew within the organization, I witnessed and experienced deep physical, mental and emotional wounds at the hands of senior teachers.

“Surrender! and just DO your Karma Yoga!” Swami Sita said. I listened attentively and acted accordingly. When I first met her, I was inspired by her sweet character and strenuous way of teaching. I had no home, no family, so I stayed and tried to be a perfect student and follow the principles of Karma Yoga as a path to self-realization. I poured every inch of myself into the Organization's mission and needs, under her teachings. This led to years of verbal abuse every time any one of us “misbehaved”. Negative behaviours of prejudice towards staff, based on their labour skills, racial background, and personal traumas. In times of desperation, they pursued you to donate all your belongings, and devote yourself to the organization. I experienced labour abuse by encouraging us to “burn” karma and selflessly serve the Swamis and guests, 15 hours per day / 7 days a week without any consistency of nutritious meals or resting time. Authoritative dismissals and humiliation occurred whenever one's personal views differed from Swami Sitaramanada.

Prahlada would casually compliment my practice and made me feel like I was an excellent student with greater potential. The month was about to end and after intense training, I approached him for spiritual counselling. We met at the director's office, I asked one question and his response was an instruction. He instructed me to stand up and come closer to him, showing me the way to meet halfway. He looked at me and said, “My master, Swami Vishnudevananda, transferred me his power and right now I have the power to remove all your suffering.” He then hugged me and pulled me towards him with strength and held me there, locking my arms down and proceeded to say in my ear, “Everything will be ok”. He pressed my breast hard to his chest and began to move my body in such a way that my boobs were massaging his body. He pulled away, looked at my face, and asked me to leave. I was in shock. I left the next day.

Today, this has left a tremendous impact in my life as I struggle physically, mentally and emotionally in many aspects of my life. Swami Sita knew that I was broken, Prahalad knew that I was broken. They all knew I was broken. They are not trying to help. They teach you, to break you. And then use you for their own tank of fuel. They profit out of us.

**Note from Josna Pankhania** (*Given with permission of the survivor*): This survivor reported that she has a history of childhood abuse. She ran away from home at a young age, ending up on the streets, barely able to feed herself. She states that she experiences severe physical, emotional, and psychological pain and that at times she has lost the will to live.

## **Survivor #6**

When I met Prahlada, I was at a low point, and he said he could help me. I believe that he took advantage of me, because he thought he could.

He had spoken to me about leaving my job to join the organization full time, and I sometimes wonder what would have happened if it weren't for Julie sharing her testimony. Shortly after assaulting me, he started saying that I was going to be his assistant, but I never wanted to be anyone's assistant. Before I knew there were others that Prahalada was taking advantage of, I doubted myself and my truth.

After the allegations against Kuttan Nair became public, there was little accountability or support from the organization. They continued to prostrate to Vishnudevananda after every class. If I didn't follow, I was alone. Prahlada led a healing gathering for the community, even though there were also public allegations against him at the time. There was no one protecting survivors.

I couldn't ignore the truth of what Prahlada did to me. I became an outsider and no longer belonged. What I once thought I had, by being part of the organization, was never really there in the first place.

## **Survivor #7**

I was a member of staff in the ISYVC in both Canada and in India.

My work involved teaching and Karma Yoga.

Sometimes we were sent to a private house near Montreal to do some gardening and tree cutting, and all of us felt that we were being used as cheap labour in this way.

At the New Delhi Centre, as a staff there you don't even get a room, we had to sleep on the floor of the yoga hall and after waking up, we could store our belongings in a wardrobe without lock. At Val Morin ashram during summer, staff had to sleep in tents because the limited numbers of rooms were reserved for paying guests.

As staff, we all served voluntarily with no income (I was lucky since I was a businessman before I joined the ISYVC and had some savings) but all the staff had to pay for T-Shirts & Yoga pants which were requested for teaching the classes at the ashram in Val Morin...the so called yoga teacher's uniform. If we wanted maybe sometimes a little chocolate, soda or any other small thing from the ashram boutique, we had to BEG to get it for free. Same for using the washing machines!!! If we wanted half a day off, we had to BEG them for it while the people in charge would drive off in range rovers to go and play golf.

As a true seeker I was questioning a lot about the teachings, but the only answer was always that it was ego, that I have to break it, and I should not question.

During my second summer at Val Morin, another volunteer and I came to know about the misusing of the donation money from the Temple where we were doing our Karma Yoga.

The priests who knew that the money was being misused by the people in charge, did not want to report it because they feared a sanction from Prahlada, who would have kicked them out and send them back to India. They all told me that this is what Prahlada had said to them, that if they question anything, they would be sent back to India.

When I reported the matter to Swami Mahadevananda, the Ashram Director, he just told me to keep quiet.

The next day Prahlada who was the Ashram Manager and oversaw the activities of the Temple, saw me at the ashram premise, and was shouting all over the place that I am stupid. He then told me that my new Karma Yoga was now housekeeping (normally done by females). I did not mind being placed in the housekeeping department, but I objected to the way in which Prahlada was shouting at me and I said that he can talk to his children in this way, but he cannot shout at me. He said that, "then it is better if you leave".

I did not mind doing the housekeeping as my karma yoga, but I was not comfortable anymore at the ashram and asked Swami Mahadeva if I could return to India earlier. He denied, so I said to him that I would leave the organisation. He started to yell at me and said that I had to return the flight ticket that the organisation had bought for me when they sent me from India to Canada. I gave him back that return ticket. Thank God, I had some money left to buy myself a ticket back to India to go and collect my things from Neyyar Dam, and then to return back home to Europe. If I was not able to finance my own flight back home, I would have been stuck in this organisation and would have been at the mercy of such leadership.

My former girlfriend was also with me in Canada. She was the personal secretary of Swami Mahadev and she always told me he exposed himself naked in front of her; I did not believe it, until I saw it by myself one day at the Neyyar Dam ashram, when I brought something to my girlfriend at the accommodation of Swami Mahadev, where she had to clean, and he was walking around naked. When I questioned him, why he was exposing himself, he just answered, "Do you have a problem? This is nature."

Shortly before I left, she had a big confrontation with Swami Mahadev, and he kicked her out from the ashram. I paid for her ticket as she also was refused a flight back.

After ISYVC I have studied the Vedas/Upanishads in India and I opened a Yoga Ashram myself in 2005. What I am hearing about this organisation now confirms my doubts about Swami Vishnu and the rotten EBM.

## Survivor #8

I did my Teacher Training Course (TTC) with Prahlada as a main teacher. Then I was quite enchanted with his teaching style, his wisdom, the magic aura around him. In TTC, I, or others, would ask a question, and before even finishing, Prahlad would have the answer. My gaze would stick on his lips and gestures, my ears thirsting to hear more of what he had to say.

I always wanted to come back, recreate the amazing experience I had. The summer in Val Morin, when I did TTC, it was one of the best, maybe the best summer I ever had. Many others felt the same.

In the years to come I kept myself connected to the practice, and to Prahlada. I can totally get why people would consider him a guru, or to use a less loaded and frightening language, as a huge inspiration. His life story, coming from a simple background and being totally dedicated to his guru's mission... his knowledge, his commitment, his funny and jolly nature, his seriousness, and the way you could just walk up to him and ask something. When I was at home, I listened to voice recordings of an asana class given by Prahlad. Especially for pranayama, it helped me, and it made me feel connected. My friends from TTC and I would often indulge in memories and share "our favourite Prahlada story" in the following years.

Prahlada remembered all those students, even when they did their TTC years ago. His goofiness was the thing that made me like him. I thought of him as a role model... at least in some instances.

Obviously, the path that Sivananda Yoga and this organisation demand is extremely challenging. I also never felt like I was succeeding or doing right. In retrospect, I think that a lot of the unhappiness and feeling of failure I sought to cure with Yoga, came from the incredibly high demands this Yoga itself had... getting up at crazy hours, doing intense practices and spending a lot of time with them, outdated understanding of sexuality and the weirdness around it... (it was either not spoken about, or it was considered as an obstacle... so you could choose... I think many people have just kept living sexually in some way... I am speaking of students and karma yogis... but internalised negative feelings about it).

All of this, I did not realise for a long time. The community, the friendships, the romantic ideas of Yoga I have had... my memories of Val Morin. It all blended so well into a flowery world, in which I did not really see a lot of things, that I now blame myself for...

But only a few days after Julie Salter's post, Prahlada was publicly called out for being an abuser. This was something I was not prepared for. And I could not deal with it. If that was true, it was not about stories and things I had heard about someone I had never met (Swami Vishnu) – instead, it would mean that I myself had been living and creating an illusion.

I stopped blaming myself for it. How could I have known? Isn't the very nature of deception that one is deceived?

Nevertheless, that did not stop the pain. And memories came back... of moments in which I saw Prahlada or other senior staff being verbally or emotionally abusive. Yelling. Being very unfriendly. Calling out people in front of everyone. Telling people to "have more faith", instead of hearing their difficulties... bringing people in dangerous positions, both mentally and physically. But I also saw many rising above their own boundaries, including myself. Not sure if that was a good thing, ever... but it was certainly decisive for many of us in creating our bond with the organisation.

The other thing that was terrible realising: the accusations against Prahlada meant it wasn't 40 years ago... it meant that people had suffered maybe while I enjoyed my time in my training courses. It was much closer. It also meant that my by-standing or fence-sitting had enabled a situation, in which abuse was overlooked.

I remember once or twice expressing discomfort about how Prahlada had called out a student in class. We discussed this with other students late at night. The general response I got: "It was to this student's own benefit"- Prahlada would have helped them overcome karma. I was not happy with this. A teacher should not speak like that. But the prime example, the primus maximus of competent teaching we looked at was Swami Vishnu. And everyone knew the stories of how he would yell at people, publicly shame them, "break their egos" and basically make people feel like shit. This was taught to us, in many anecdotes, like it was the best way to do it. So people quickly said "this is also how Swami Vishnu did it".

I don't remember if I was the only one feeling discomfort about it, because there was little time to talk about these things during the crazy scheduled days. Eventually I dropped it. And probably continued to use the same patterns of excusing and overlooking myself. And also say these things to others. Especially then, when my own discomfort had to be taken care of...

Around that time in early 2020, a friend also told me of an experience with Prahlada. This person's testimony is shared in this report. I also learned of others who said they were abused by him. Some of these people were people I knew or shared mutual friends. It all was overwhelming.

My own brothers and sisters were abused, while I was happily laughing at Prahlada's jokes?

I grew up in a complicated family situation, with an abusive parent. I knew how this felt. And now it seems some of the stuff is repeating. It is dreadful. I have completely lost faith in the yoga path for now... I lost many friends over this, who did not want to or manage to overcome the cognitive dissonance. Some of the people I felt closest to during the past years are still happily chanting and praying to Swami Vishnu, and have

stopped interacting with me. Or I stopped interacting with them. Because they tried to justify and tell me I was in the wrong: having negative thoughts, allowing this to enter and pollute my mind. How I was not looking at the good done. In other words, they were spiritually abusive towards me. I understand why people are in denial. I was, too. Sometimes still am... it is all a process. Actually, more like a nightmare. Sometimes I wake up and indulge in happy memories of TTC. The next moment I feel terrible for having entertained this memory. It feels like it is poisoned. So, emotionally, it is very hard. But rationally, there is much less left to question. The EBM's reactions are telling.

It helped to read Matthew Remski's book and understand better the mechanisms of abuse, deception and so on. I used it to explain things I had experienced and felt.

In the book, a survivor says about Pattabhi Jois (I think), that the difference between his abusive guru (Jois) and his abusive father was that the abusive guru would also give love. I resonate with this sensation, but I believe it is deceptive.

I thought for the longest time, I was part of the Sivananda Family. Almost 8 months down the line after Julie Salter's post, I realise this family was never a thing. I was a paying customer and a free work source of a corrupted system... many were... including people in higher positions. This all has become a self-perpetuating thing, and few people can look through it. But a few have started to benefit and stuff their fat bellies (both literally and metaphorically), based on what others were generating.

Believing in Pahlada (and others in the organisation), thinking they were role models... it is something I have to work through. I feel betrayed and hurt. Abused and lied to. I lost my community. And I lost a lot of faith that I had. Sometimes I am now over-sensitive and over-critical... extra cautious. I don't want to be betrayed again... and I do not believe in 'goodness' the way I did before ... because what I believed in was in large parts a constructed lie. But mainly, I am disgusted and pained by what others had to go through, who were groomed, used and abused in the most damaging ways.

Much of the enchantment I had felt vanished, and there is now confusion and disillusionment. Disillusionment is good, I guess, because who wants to live in illusion. The yogis call it Maya, and it is something we should all overcome. This was also taught in TTC and ATTC. I believe every single person in Project SATYA has done a better job in doing this than the senior staff and directors of the Sivananda organisation. I believe it can only be through immense self-deception and re-interpretation of the obvious that they each manage to look themselves in the eyes.

**Note from Josna Pankhania** (*Given with the permission of the survivor*): This survivor has explained that when he returned home after attending Pahlada's teacher training course, he created a place of honour in his home where he placed a photograph of Pahlada, and in this sacred space, he says, he carried out his daily practice.



## Survivor #9

When I went to a Sivananda Yoga Centre, Prahlada noticed me. I felt a connection to him. I always looked up to teachers. Even as a child, I liked being the teacher's pet. Recognition from teachers made me feel good. My mum was abusive.

My admiration for Prahlada grew, he was wise, knowledgeable and seemed to be humble, ...charismatic. He would say, "You are the best karma yogi".

When I did my teacher training course, I loved it. It was amazing. I loved the whole practice and process. I was so happy that Prahlada was my teacher.

I wanted a spiritual name. I wanted Prahlada to give it to me. He gave me my name.

Then he started to "test me". Sometimes he would shout at me and then say, "I am just testing you to see if you would be affected". And then he would say, "When I take you to India, I will show you this place and that". Now I think that I was being groomed.

In one retreat class, we had to put our legs out. He pushed my leg until it hurt. He said, "I am training you to become my assistant". I thought, "Oh wow that's cool, special!"

I then joined the staff. I was struggling with a relationship, and Prahlada said, "Why do you even need a relationship?" There was pressure on me to cut myself off from all outside worldly relationships and connections. He kept saying, "If you join the ashram, we will take care of you. You don't need the outside world". Then he would explain to me some protocol, and say to me, "You need to know about this for when you become a director".

One summer, I was being sexually harassed by a Karma Yogi. Prahlada dealt with it by meeting with me, then with the KY, then with us both. He said that the protocol in these cases was to have the person apologise, and then they would make sure that we didn't work together. If the person did not apologise, then they would be asked to leave.

The KY did not apologise and was kicked out. The KY did not leave that night. I was afraid that the KY could come into my room and rape me. The KY had a volatile temperament. So, I locked the door with extra care before going to sleep. The KY left the centre the next day.

When that KY returned to the centre about a month or two later, I said to Prahlada, "He is here!" Prahlada said, "It's ok you are stronger now... He apologised to me, so it is OK". I didn't know how to respond. I never received an apology from that KY. I couldn't understand why he was allowed back when he hadn't apologised to me.

Looking back though, that whole scenario was really confusing. I didn't understand how I did anything wrong. I had previously explained to Prahlada that I had been

sexually abused by another spiritual teacher and that I wanted to make sure this was not happening at the ashram. Prahlada said that I was just creating drama, and that I had opened up a can of worms when I told people that I had been sexually abused by a spiritual teacher. He said you don't have to be afraid of rape because rape involves two people. I didn't know how to respond to that. I was shocked.

Then, Prahlada questioned me sternly and asked, "When did your aversion to men start?"

Once again, I was shocked by his question. I didn't know how to respond. He then said, "I don't know what to do with this aversion of yours, I don't know if I can send you to India".

I have forgiven Prahlada. He was like a father to me. He wasn't a monster in my eyes. Perhaps I was blinded by his charismatic personality, because I only saw the good in him. I wish him well, regardless of his past. I don't wish anyone harm. I believe that only "hurt people, hurt people."

The tone of the ashram was that they spoke negatively about the "Mundane World", trying to convince people to join the ashram, because Ashram life was supposedly better.

So, becoming his personal assistant was slowly introduced. I was honoured and flattered that he would consider me to have such a great responsibility. Later, I found out that he was using the same lines on me that he was using on other young pretty girls, "When I first saw you, I knew that you would become full-time staff", and, "I want you to become my assistant".

When I asked him about the allegations against Swami Vishnu, Prahlada said to me, I never knew any of it, Swami Vishnu will always be my guru. Knowing that everyone has a dark side I can still be your teacher.

### **Impact of the abuse and neglect**

I honestly don't know how to explain how living within the Sivananda Community has impacted me. I am still processing. I felt angry that people are still promoting this organisation, when the leadership that buried all of the crimes against humanity are still in charge. I felt sick when I saw people carrying-on online like nothing ever happened. I felt disgusted to hear that Bramacharias and Swamis were having sex with others, and that it was ok with the directors as long as it was consensual. I think it's ridiculous that people are still loyal to their "gurus" when many of them in this organization have been accused of things that are criminal.

We were not fed properly at some of the centres. Many of us lost a lot of weight. Staff at various centres and ashrams would deny us food when we were hungry.

Staff meetings: Directors and Swamis would reprimand, scold and embarrass staff in front of everyone, when the staff did something “wrong”.

One Swami told a senior staff lady to shut up in front of the whole staff. She was so embarrassed.

I am happy to be out of the organisation.

I couldn't support a community that stayed silent during all those years of ongoing abuse. I can't support an organisation that is misogynistic and greedy.

Where is all the money going if this is a non-profit organisation?

Why do Swamis have all these expensive toys and gadgets?

Why were they not writing receipts for donations?

So much corruption! I would expect this from any regular corporation, but not a "spiritual community" that preaches the Yamas and Niyamas.

I'm happy not to be so exhausted from such a rigorous schedule anymore. I'm happy not to be bullied and mistreated by senior staff. I am happy to be free.

## **Postscript and Reflections**

The survivors listed in this report travelled great distances, often across continents, in their search for yoga. Through Sivananda Yoga, within an international spiritual community, they sought health, wellbeing, peace, and a sense of belonging. They wanted to do some good in the world by serving their community.

These dreams, these aspirations, they say, have been shattered and have left them devastated.

### *Impact of the abuse*

Many survivors have reported that the impact of the sexual abuse has been life changing, with severe implications for their mental, physical and social health. One survivor remains impacted, notwithstanding the weekly psychotherapy sessions she has undertaken over a period of 4 years since leaving this organisation.

The seeker who raised concerns about the management of donations offered at a Temple reported being asked by Prahlada to leave the organisation. He survived verbal abuse, psychological abuse and institutional betrayal, and left the ISYVC disillusioned

The manner in which Prahlada handled a survivor's complaints of being sexually harassed in the ashram by a karma yogi, left her feeling unsafe. His comments about rape left her feeling shocked.

Another survivor of psychological abuse and institutional betrayal has reported that he is grieving the loss of his yoga community and his friendships.

All have reported that their faith has been severely compromised. They feel betrayed by an organisation they believe should have nurtured them, taken good care of their physical, spiritual and emotional well-being. The manner in which the history of abuse is being addressed by the current EBM has reinforced their sense of betrayal.

All those survivors who worked in an ashram, or any of the International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres (ISYVC) have reported being overworked to the point of exhaustion. The regimented day began at 6 am and finished with a compulsory lecture (satsang) around 9.30 pm, and this was for 7 days a week. Karma Yoga, as a form of dedicated service to the organisation, comprised long hours of arduous work each day. The survivors were socially isolated, received limited family visits, and no visits were allowed with friends. There was no remuneration, no pension and little support when medical attention was required, despite the fact that, to their knowledge, large amounts of money were being received by the organisation. If survivors tried to object or question, they were often treated in a way that felt humiliating and cruel. Sometimes they were physically removed.

### *The grooming process*

Sexual grooming is the process of deliberately establishing a connection with an individual in order to prepare that person for sexual exploitation and/or abuse. Sexual predators are often very considered in their approach to their selection of, and the tactics they employ to engage with, both the abuse environment and their intended victim. This deliberate consideration, and associated behavior, is the grooming process. Offenders have consistently stated that they identify and target vulnerable individuals and systematically set out to ingratiate themselves into the person's life. Establishing trust with the target and their family and social network, normalizing intimate interactions, blurring the lines of what is and is not appropriate behavior, desensitizing their victim to the warning signs of abuse or exploitation, and creating a psychologically, socially, emotionally, and often physically reinforcing experience as an integral component to these processes are all a part of the systematic preparation of a victim. As abusive interactions are slowly introduced into the relationship, the victim, while feeling some surprise or discomfort, is generally desensitized and habituated to the intimacy, such that the intensification of sexual contact does not elevate the victim's threat response sufficiently to instigate defensive behaviors. Further habituation can then result in increased acceptance of the abuse. Grooming is an effective tool for a sexual predator as it creates a space in which the grooming process and often the abuse itself, at least initially, may be identified by the victim as a positive experience. Later, confusion, guilt, fear, or some other overt or implied threat by the abuser are consistently reported by victims as factors that acted to prevent them from reporting the abuse.<sup>34</sup>

Most of the survivors in this report reflected on what they experienced as a grooming process. Those who experienced sexual abuse have identified a process, by which, according to them, Prahlada engaged in methodically and systematically drawing them into his sphere of influence. This they said he did when they were vulnerable by praising them publicly and privately, spending time with them, taking them out to the movies, and appointing them as personal assistants, allocating karma yoga which would involve them being in close proximity to him, and promising them future care.

Physical touching often began with playful, friendly touching and then progressed to hugs when the survivors were at their lowest point. Gradually this escalated to sexual harassment and abuse.

<sup>34</sup> Sinnamon, G. (20170). The Psychology of Adult Sexual Grooming: Sinnamon's Seven-Stage Model of Adult Sexual Grooming. In: *The Psychology of Criminal and Antisocial Behavior: Victim and offender perspectives*, pp. 459-487 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-809287-3.00016-X>

Cultural factors played a part as these can create vulnerabilities that can be manipulated and exploited. Seekers from another country with different cultural norms and mores were vulnerable as they had no established social supports and were often reliant on others to assist them to navigate their new environment.

Sarah Buxton<sup>35</sup>, describes grooming as an act of preparation, preparing another for a specific purpose. Sinnamon's model of adult sexual grooming clearly categorises the seven stages applied by predators.

1. Selecting the victim
2. Gathering information
3. Gaining personal connection
4. Meeting needs and establishing credentials
5. Priming the target
6. Creating the victim by instigating sexual contact
7. Controlling the victim. <sup>36</sup>

What the survivors have outlined as their experiences of being groomed seem to fit these parameters. To Survivor #9: "When I first saw you, I knew that you would become full-time staff", and, "I want you to become my assistant." This is the selection process. With Survivor #4 Prahlada reportedly seeks information about whom she loves, asking, "Are you in love with your friend? Are you in love with me?" Personal selection came in the form of asking them to become babysitters or personal assistants. Because of his position Prahlada was well aware of survivors' needs, which ranged from guidance and support, the desire to learn yoga, to advance as a teacher, and to further their spiritual search, and so he was able to prime his victims and discover their vulnerability. It was possible for him to achieve control using private and public praise, interspersed with public humiliation.

As a direct disciple of the founding guru, Swami Vishnudevananda, Prahlada was a charismatic yoga teacher with a position of authority and respect. He is world renowned and had significant power. In contrast, vulnerable seekers, some with childhood physical, sexual or psychological trauma, and some with a history of homelessness and family estrangement, were defenceless, often in a country far away from their own, in a new and challenging cultural context. For the vulnerable, it was an

<sup>35</sup> Buxton, S. (2020). A politics of naming and sharing: One therapist's personal journey of traumatic grief, grooming and sexual abuse in the workplace. *Psychotherapy Politics International*. 18:e1535 [doi.org/10.1002/pp1535](https://doi.org/10.1002/pp1535)

<sup>36</sup> Sinnamon, G. (2017). The Psychology of Adult Sexual Grooming: Sinnamon's Seven-Stage Model of Adult Sexual Grooming. In: *The Psychology of Criminal and Antisocial Behavior: Victim and offender perspectives*. Pp 459-487 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-809287-3.00016-X>

intimidating prospect to question Prahlada's inappropriate behaviour, because of the power differential and the fear of potential retribution.

When one survivor did stand up to Prahlada, his response was to ridicule her publicly and in private, reportedly referring to her as a horse which needed to be broken in, rather than take her "no" for an answer.

The survivor of psychological abuse and institutional betrayal, who saw Prahlada as a source of inspiration, feels betrayed after hearing of allegations against Prahlada. He, too, feels as though he was groomed to revere and uphold an ethically and morally corrupt organisation.

All the survivors have left the International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres (ISYVC) with the aim of rebuilding their lives.

These survivors have shown great courage and resilience when recounting their experiences, even when it was most difficult. They persevered because they no longer want to remain silent.

By bringing light into the darkest corners of an organisation they once treasured, they hope to free themselves from the union they had sought.

## **Appendix: Self-Care Resources**

This list of resources was taken from a collection of self-care resources compiled by Yoni Shakti the Movement to Eradicate Abuse of Women in Yoga and to reclaim Yoga as a Tool for Healing and Justice and with contributions from Dr Josna Pankhania. Relevant parts are published here with kind permission of Yoni Shakti the Movement.

### **Resources for Survivors of Abuse in Yoga, and for campaigners to share with survivors. Version 1 / July 2020**

#### **Welcome!**

This document is compiled from the contributions of our group members and advisors, to provide a reliable resource for everyone who needs it. This is the first version of this document and it will be updated as further resources are recommended by our members.

You may be a survivor of abuse in yoga who is looking for support or a safe space to disclose.

You may be a campaigner who has met survivors of abuse in yoga, perhaps because you are sharing campaign information, or are meeting survivors because of the work you are doing to reveal injustice and abuse in yoga, and you are looking for a helpful resource e to give those seeking to disclose or looking for support?

You may be a teacher/trainer/ or studio owner who wishes to support survivors of abuse in yoga, or to provide resources for your students/teachers/ trainees?

Whoever you are, if you are looking for resources to support yourself or anybody else who is a survivor of abuse in yoga, then this is for you.

#### **1: Self-Care and Self-Nurture guidelines**

*Three simple suggestions to help yourself (and others) whilst you find help:*

These are general guidelines to support survivors and campaigners to care for ourselves with kindness whilst we do this work. One of the key experiences reported by many survivors and campaigners in our group is that of overwhelm. Many times the work of revealing abuse in order to work towards its eradication produces a real sense of overload, exhaustion, distress and desperation that can be very hard to withstand. These experiences can manifest as fatigue, grief, anger, fear and many other emotions all at once.

It is beyond the scope of this resources document to provide a complete guide to managing these powerful experiences, which is why it provides lots of recommendations for referrals of places to get more help. The intention here in this



section is simply to provide three basic suggestions of how to take care of yourself whilst you look for outside help.

Our first suggestion is simply to be kind to yourself, and take nourishment and rest, the second suggestion is to practice Grounding, Centring and Orienting, and the third suggestion is to step into connection online or in person with trusted individuals and groups.

Here below are more details about what these suggestions might involve. These suggestions are listed beneath one after the other, in no particular order. All are important, and sometimes it takes a connection with another person to encourage us to be kind to ourselves, or maybe we need to practice grounding, centring and orienting before we are able to reach out for help or to recognise the need to be kind to ourselves. So please don't see these as one step that leads to another, but rather a trio of suggestions that might happen in any order, or even all co-exist.

### **Simply to be kind to yourself, and take nourishment and rest**

This can be as simple as STOPPING right now– to exhale. Press your feet into the floor.

Feel your hands and face.

Drink water, have a warm tea or soup.

Step outside if you can – if it's possible, walk or stand barefoot on the earth.

Eat some food you love.

Take time to be in outside, wherever you are - even looking up at the sky, that is nature! Be close to trees and plants and animals if you can.

Take a warm shower or have a bath. Maybe put salt in the bath, or use Epsom salts or whatever oils you find calming.

Massage and oil your feet.

Get enough sleep, and rest when you feel tired.

If you enjoy yoga nidra, lay down and practice this too – make rest a priority and do some resting every day. Don't wait to get tired before you rest – make it part of every day.

If you can please do these things every day.

Take care of yourself. You are precious and deserve time to rest and be.

### **Practice Grounding, Centring and Orienting**

If you are standing- feel the earth beneath your feet (be barefoot if you can, or feel the soles of your feet through your shoes/socks the soles of your feet). If you can reach out with your hands – press them against a wall, or a tree and feel you centre.

If you are seated, then use your hands to press into the ground beneath, and feel your centre. Feel your legs and the base of our spine on the surface beneath and press down into the earth beneath that surface even if it is a long way beneath, it is there.

Look around you – open your eyes and see if you can notice the corners of the room or the places outside that draw your attention – like trees. Notice what you see – look straight ahead, look to the sides, and know where you are. You are here and now.

Rub the palms of your hands together and pull your fingers. Pinch your ears and tug them all the way around their edges. Rub your cheeks and pinch them. Screw up your face and then stick out your tongue feel you face with your hands. Feel your scalp with your hands, wriggle your toes and fingers. Feel where your edges are – feel where your centre is.

Notice your breath coming and going. Hear the sounds close to you. Yawn and sigh and feel your centre, and notice what is happening around you, in the room, or in your immediate space.

### **Choose to step into connection online or in person with trusted individuals and groups**

Please know that you are not alone. There are many survivors and supporters seeking to eradicate abuse, and many campaigners, supporters and survivors who are reclaiming yoga as tool for healing and justice.

Together we are working for truth and change, and knowing this can be helpful and supportive. You are not alone. Simply connecting with others who share your own experiences or intentions can be helpful.

Seeing evidence of others' efforts to eradicate abuse and reclaim yoga for healing and justice can be reassuring and positive.

This is part of the function of the Yoni Shakti the Movement Facebook group which includes examples of many different organisations and individuals who are working in their own way to address these issues. It is from amongst the members of this group and the friends and colleagues connected to these members that we have been able to compile this resource. Simply reading this resource, which has been compiled with love and care for you by trusted people is a form of connection. You are not alone... Read on to learn about the many sources of support which is available.

## **2: Recommended organisations providing information and support for survivors**

### **Rape Crisis Network (Europe)**

[www.rcne.com](http://www.rcne.com)

RCNE is the network of European rape crisis centres. Aiming to make sure that anyone who experiences sexual violence can get the help they need. Also active in influencing policy, standards and legislation through European governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). All member centres share a 'survivor-centred' and antidiscriminatory approach.

### **Solace Women's Aid (UK)**

<https://www.solacewomensaid.org/>

'Violence against women and girls stops here': London-based organisation offering national support through a freephone number, with support and advice, rape crisis refuges, therapeutic support and training.

### **The Survivors Trust (UK)**

Helpline: 0808 801 0818

[thesurvivorstrust.org](http://thesurvivorstrust.org)

The Survivors' Trust is an umbrella organisation for specialist rape and sexual abuse services and sign post survivors to our member agencies throughout the UK. The following resource on our website can be used to find local specialist support in your local

Area: <https://www.thesurvivorstrust.org/find-support>. The Survivors' trust and its members are committed to the fair treatment of people regardless of race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, age or physical/learning disability. [Find support](#)

### **RAINN (USA)**

<https://www.rainn.org/>

RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network) is the largest anti-sexual violence organisation in the US. RAINN offers a National Sexual Assault Hotline for survivors and their loved ones, in association with local sexual assault service providers and also carries out programs to prevent sexual violence, help survivors, and ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice.

### **Canadian Women's Health Network CWHN**

[www.cwhn.ca](http://www.cwhn.ca)

Provides services to women who have been victimized through sexual violence, including a 24-hr crisis line, one to one counselling (guaranteed confidentiality), information and referrals, advocacy, accompaniment for medical, police and court

procedures, Sexual Assault Survivors Support (SASS) group several times per year, volunteer training, public education to increase awareness, assistance...

### **Imkaan (UK)**

<https://www.imkaan.org.uk/get-help>

Imkaan is a survivor support organisation rooted in Black feminist thinking advocating the power of collective action. It provides support for survivors of sexual and domestic violence and referral to BAME specific support.

### **Cult Information Centre (UK and international)**

<https://cultinformation.org.uk/index.html>

CIC is a charity providing advice and information for victims of cults, their families and friends, researchers and the media. Established in the United Kingdom to focus critical concern on the harmful methods of cults worldwide.

### **Women Against Rape (UK)**

[womenagainstrape.net](http://womenagainstrape.net)

This is the joint website of [Women Against Rape](#) and [Black Women's Rape Action Project](#). Both organisations are based on self-help and provide support, legal information and advocacy. Campaigning for justice and protection for all women and girls, including asylum seekers, who have suffered sexual, domestic and/or racist violence.

### **Rape Crisis (England and Wales)**

Helpline: 0808 802 9999

[rapecrisis.org.uk](http://rapecrisis.org.uk)

National organisation offering support and counselling for those affected by rape and sexual abuse.

### **Victim Support**

Supportline: [0333 300 6389](tel:03333006389)

[Rape and sexual assault](#)

Confidential, free services available to anyone who's been raped or sexually assaulted, now or in the past. Offering help, regardless of whether you have told the police or anyone else about the attack. Volunteers can visit you at home (if you want us to, and if doing so will not put you at further risk) or somewhere else if you prefer. If you don't want to see anyone face-to-face, you can also on the phone, either at local offices or at the national Victim Supportline.

### **Women's Aid Federation (UK)**

National Domestic Violence Helpline (24hrs): 0808 2000 247  
[womensaid.org.uk](http://womensaid.org.uk)

Women's Aid is the national domestic violence charity that helps up to 250,000 women and children every year. We work to end violence against women and children, and support over 500 domestic and sexual violence services across the country. Offering phone support, email support, survivors' forum, training and information.

### **National Health Service (UK)**

<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sexual-health/help-after-rape-and-sexual-assault/>

Find an NHS Sexual Abuse Referral Centre (SARC) near you (UK)

<https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/other-services/Rape%20and%20sexual%20assault%20referral%20centres/LocationSearch/364>

SARCs are specialist medical and forensic services for anyone who has been raped or sexually assaulted. They aim to be one-stop service, providing the following under one roof: medical care and forensic examination following assault/rape and, in some locations, sexual health services.

### **3: Further Reading**

All articles written and/or shared by members of the YSTM Facebook group

<https://yogainternational.com/article/view/how-to-respond-to-sexual-abuse-within-a-yoga-or-spiritual-community>

Karen Rain here sets out the key guidelines to follow for helpful responses.

<https://humanparts.medium.com/i-dont-need-i-believe-you-i-need-i-ll-stand-up-for-youc6f9a2cc8d35>

Karen Rain outlines the heart of what's needed from a survivor's perspective.

[https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10926771.2020.1774695?fbclid=IwAR22Kx\\_VtxjW05jOuarwz2fVgdxdl3l0M-9Csgz1W1HeCU\\_SfLGnfhfbAml&](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10926771.2020.1774695?fbclid=IwAR22Kx_VtxjW05jOuarwz2fVgdxdl3l0M-9Csgz1W1HeCU_SfLGnfhfbAml&)

Crucial exposition of DARVO (Deny, Attack, reverse Victim and Offender) response that is a common response of perpetrators (and enablers) in order to discredit a survivor who speaks up. Awareness of DARVO reduces its effectiveness.

Freyd, J.J. (1997). Violations of Power, Adaptive Blindness and Betrayal Trauma Theory. *Feminism and Psychology*. Vol 7. 22-32.

## Other resources

An extensive reading list on cults and their influence.

<http://cultresearch.org/recommended-reading/>

Matthew Remski's work is recommended

- His book: *Practice and all is Coming: Abuse, Cult Dynamics and Healing in Yoga and Beyond* and online articles:
- <https://embodiedwisdom.pub/paac-resources/>
- Matthew Remski's invaluable round up of abuses revealed in yoga in 2019  
<http://matthewremski.com/wordpress/category/cult-dynamics/>

## ALSO

Site recommended by Christie Roe, full of thoughtful reflection and practical guidelines, for example:

<https://transformharm.org>

<https://transformharm.org/9-ways-to-be-accountable-when-youve-been-abusive/>

# Project SATYA

Sivananda  
Accountability  
Truth Seeking  
Yogic Action

**Carol Merchasin** is a former partner at Morgan, Lewis & Bockius, the eighth largest law firm in the US with years of experience in conducting investigations into workplace misconduct. Carol has conducted a number of complex investigations into allegations of sexual abuse in religious organizations, including Shambhala International in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

**Dr. Josna Pankhania** is a counsellor and psychotherapist accredited with the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. Josna currently works as a senior caseworker for an Australian state-wide counselling service that supports women and children experiencing violence and abuse. As a member of the Satyananda Yoga community, Josna has been working towards healing, truth and justice in this community since, in 2014, the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse exposed cases of child sexual abuse within this yoga movement.