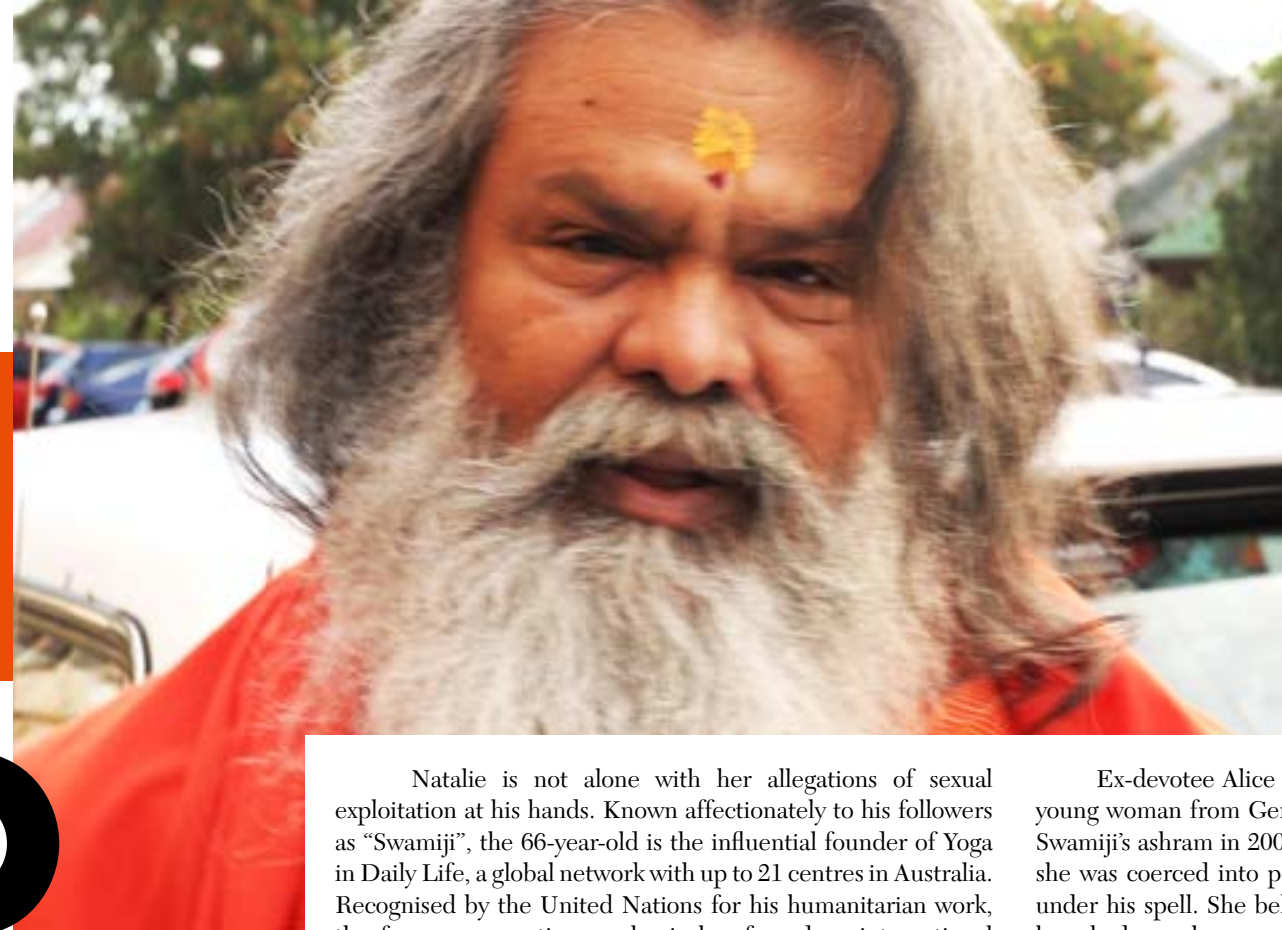


Sex scandal rocking Australian yoga school

Hoodoo guru

To millions of his followers, he's a yoga master who can lead them to spiritual enlightenment. But is he also a manipulative sexual predator? Clair Weaver investigates



“He was on me with his big belly ... He asked me if I was a virgin. I said yes”

When 20-year-old yoga fanatic Natalie was summoned to visit Swamiji Maheshwarananda one evening, while staying at his ashram in India, she was excited at the prospect of benefiting from his spiritual wisdom. In a small room lit by a candle flame, she accepted a hug and obeyed his command to look into his eyes. Minutes passed as the young devotee attempted to melt into his gaze. Her concentration was disrupted when another young woman appeared and sat quietly at their yoga master's feet, but he remained focused on Natalie.

“What do you give me?” he asked Natalie, who thought for a moment before answering: “I give you my mind.”

“Only?” he implored.

Confused and ashamed that her offering had been deemed inadequate, she tried again. “I give you my heart.”

“Only?” he repeated.

“My body and soul,” she answered, before reciting some lines from a prayer in a bid to satisfy him. He hugged her. Suddenly, Natalie's heart went cold: the other young woman was licking his fingers. Alarm bells went off, but she was frozen, unable to move.

“This is what you wanted, no?” her guru asked, as the other woman began pulling down Natalie's trousers.

This was the first sexual experience of Natalie's life. Since joining Swamiji's yoga movement as an idealistic 14 year old, she had become a fervent disciple and dedicated herself to a pure and spiritual existence. This included remaining celibate, rising at 4am for yoga exercises, following a strict vegetarian diet and staying away from alcohol and drugs. She had recently taken another major step in her search for enlightenment and travelled to Swamiji's ashram at Jadan in Rajasthan, India.

“He was on me with his big belly,” recounts Natalie, in an emotionally charged testimony. “He asked me if I was a virgin and I said yes. In my head, I was repeating on and on, ‘You bastard, you old bastard’. He changed his mind [about having intercourse] and pushed my head towards his penis instead and said, ‘Drink it’. I thought I would vomit.”

Natalie is not alone with her allegations of sexual exploitation at his hands. Known affectionately to his followers as “Swamiji”, the 66-year-old is the influential founder of Yoga in Daily Life, a global network with up to 21 centres in Australia. Recognised by the United Nations for his humanitarian work, the former apprentice mechanic has forged an international reputation as a peacemaker and environmentalist. For the past 20 years, he has toured Australia regularly to give seminars and visit his swelling membership, which stretches from WA and SA to NSW, Victoria and Queensland. Described as a “rock star” of the yoga world, Swamiji is an eye-catching presence in his bright orange robes, thick flowing hair and long Santa-like beard.

But earlier this year, goodwill towards the guru began to sour, as the first rumbles of a sex scandal began to shake at the core of the organisation. A handful of women in Europe who decided to speak out about sexual encounters with Swamiji were dismissed as “crazy”. Members were ordered to ignore their claims and pray for the women instead. But the seal had been broken: a whistleblower set up a website on which several women posted shocking testimonies of alleged betrayal by Swamiji. It appeared the monk, whom ex-followers say claims to be celibate, had routinely abused his powerful status to exploit young female devotees for his own sexual pleasure. While none of these claims would amount to sexual assault, people began to leave.

In Australia, a growing chorus of members demanded answers. By the end of June, 18 senior figures who had been part of Yoga in Daily Life for up to 20 years resigned. This included the entire board. Some were forcibly expelled; other attendees simply stopped coming. Some centres closed down.

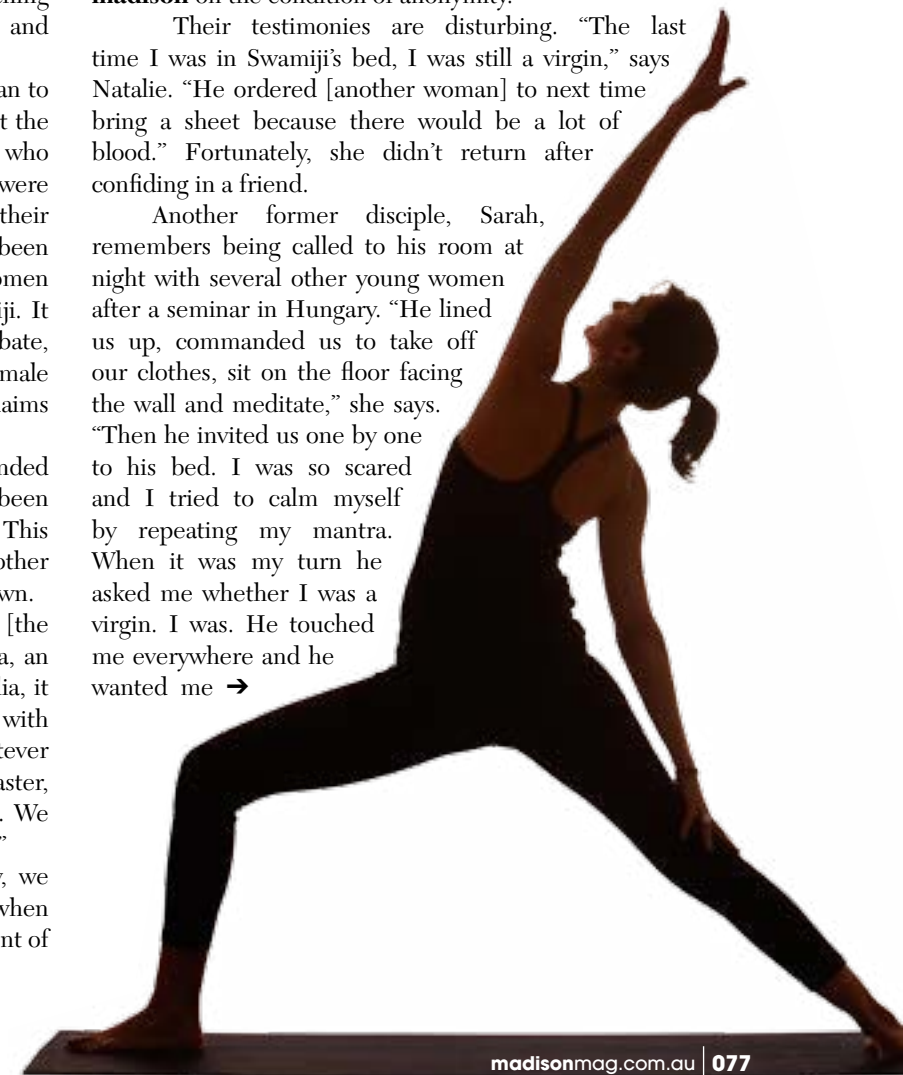
“We all put our hearts and souls into making [the organisation] what it was, so it was devastating,” says Lisa, an ex-disciple of 12 years based in Brisbane. “Within Australia, it wasn't run like a cult, but the relationships individuals had with Swamiji were cult-like – we were supposed to follow whatever he said, without question. We took him as our yoga master, someone who would show us the path to enlightenment. We thought he was a saint – he cultivated that [image] as well.”

And to leave wasn't easy. “For the whole of May, we received anonymous abusive emails,” she says. “That was when we realised we had to go. I'd say between 70 and 80 per cent of the core followers have left now.”

Ex-devotee Alice (pictured on following page), a striking young woman from Germany who made an unplanned stop at Swamiji's ashram in 2004 while touring India on a bicycle, says she was coerced into performing oral sex on him after falling under his spell. She believes the number of women known to have had sexual encounters with Swamiji could be approaching 100. “And that is the ones we know about – the unknown number could be many hundreds,” she adds. “We've got [women] from Australia and all over the world.” The vast majority are too afraid or ashamed to speak out, but three agreed to be interviewed by madison on the condition of anonymity.

Their testimonies are disturbing. “The last time I was in Swamiji's bed, I was still a virgin,” says Natalie. “He ordered [another woman] to next time bring a sheet because there would be a lot of blood.” Fortunately, she didn't return after confiding in a friend.

Another former disciple, Sarah, remembers being called to his room at night with several other young women after a seminar in Hungary. “He lined us up, commanded us to take off our clothes, sit on the floor facing the wall and meditate,” she says. “Then he invited us one by one to his bed. I was so scared and I tried to calm myself by repeating my mantra. When it was my turn he asked me whether I was a virgin. I was. He touched me everywhere and he wanted me →



to touch him. He took my hand and touched himself, and in the end he pushed my head down towards his penis and held me like that until I opened my mouth. Then he invited us all together to stimulate him and he requested that we touch each other. At the end, he ejaculated into the mouth of one of the girls. He called it *prashad* [holy food].”

Ulrike Schiesser, psychologist with the Federal Office of Sect Issues in Austria, has counselled alleged victims and understands why most are unwilling to go public with their stories – they’re caught in a paralysing web of shame, guilt, anger and helplessness. “Many of them blame themselves for not having left the group earlier, not having made themselves heard and not having warned others,” Schiesser tells **madison**. “Some of them are afraid of the reaction of Swamiji Maheshwarananda’s followers. Some fear the revenge of the guru, to whom some of them still ascribe superhuman powers. Some spoke openly and now report subsequent defamations, public accusations and threats. They soon find themselves in a position where they have to justify themselves. Some are called liars or are accused of being mentally ill.”

Many of Swamiji’s followers believe he has mystical abilities. “He definitely had some power to open the heart and make you feel your own love,” says Alice. But Richard, a former US-based swami (yoga master) who set up an online forum to discuss the scandal, is more sceptical. “He is a very good drugstore psychologist,” he says. “He can see how a certain person is and what her weaknesses are, and he plays on that.”

Ruby, who sought refuge from domestic violence at home by becoming a disciple at 17, is a classic example. She stayed at Yoga in Daily Life for 15 years after allegedly being intimately touched by Swamiji when she was 22. “From the moment he put his hand between my thighs, I was sure it was completely wrong,” she says. “I only understood this year why I wasn’t able to get out



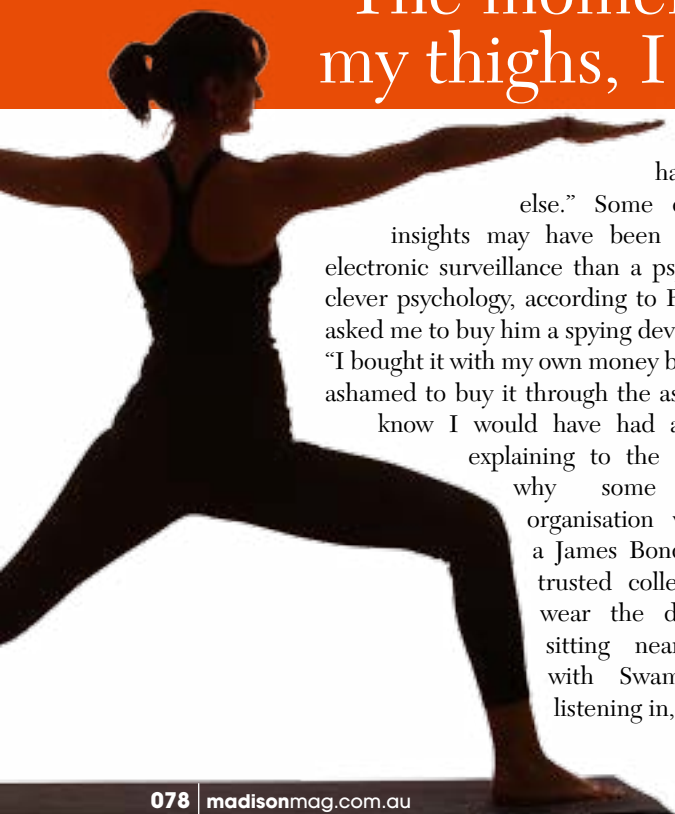
THE DARKNESS BENEATH

When Swamiji slipped quietly back into Australia in October, he maintained an uncharacteristically low profile. Usually his visits are well-publicised, with workshops and seminars advertised to the public. This visit, in contrast, was subdued. At the organisation’s national headquarters in Annandale, in Sydney’s inner west, loyal devotees told Swamiji how grateful they were that he had come to “show us the light” in such “difficult” times.

I went undercover for **madison** to attend the Saturday evening *satsang* (spiritual gathering). Swamiji sat comfortably on a cushioned white couch, surrounded by flowers and positioned next to over-sized framed pictures of himself and other gurus. The rest of us sat facing him on thin cushions on the floor, like children at a school assembly. I was told by an adoring, glassy-eyed devotee how lucky I was to see Swamiji in person. His audience comprised around 30 to 40 people; before then, these events routinely attracted up to 300 attendees.

In the almost two hours of preaching that followed, Swamiji acknowledged that people have left Yoga in Daily Life, but insisted they are simply “going the long way around”. Lights were switched on behind him, illuminating his Buddha-like silhouette, in preparation for a video recording to be broadcast on Swamiji TV. What followed was an assortment of metaphorical stories. We were told we should follow Mahatma Gandhi’s example of non-violence. He referred to many forms of violence, but not the sexual kind. Nor was an incident in which he smacked a woman over the head (recorded on video and seen by **madison**) mentioned. In a separate incident about six years ago, an ex-Sydney member is also understood to have been slapped across the cheek by him – for leaving a door open.

“The moment he put his hand between my thighs, I was sure it was wrong”



– I didn’t have anything else.” Some of Swamiji’s insights may have been more about electronic surveillance than a psychic gift or clever psychology, according to Richard. “He asked me to buy him a spying device,” he says. “I bought it with my own money because I was ashamed to buy it through the ashram, and I know I would have had a hard time explaining to the [Tax Office] why some non-profit organisation would need a James Bond device.” A trusted colleague would wear the device while sitting near followers, with Swamiji secretly listening in, he says.

The following day, I confronted Swamiji on the footpath outside the Annandale ashram and asked what he had to say about the sexual allegations. He didn’t answer. His two companions, a male and a female, immediately jumped to his protection. They attempted to block my colleague from taking photographs of Swamiji, who tried to cover his face with his robes as they hurriedly ushered him inside.

Silence appears to be the organisation’s main strategy in dealing with the allegations, although a couple of vague statements on its website allude to the circulation of “incorrect” claims, attributed to “a smear campaign” against Swamiji.

In a statement to **madison**, the Australian branch claimed it had commissioned an investigation into the allegations and said it found no evidence of any misconduct by Swamiji. It did not, however, provide a copy of the report as requested before we went to press. Earlier this year in an interview with a Vancouver radio station, Swamiji dismissed the allegations as “completely false information” motivated by jealousy of his work. →

“PORNO MOVIES WITH VICTIMS AND VOLUNTEERS”

“Manipulation is a huge part of Yoga in Daily Life,” says Emily, a former Sydney member who joined in the ’90s. “It’s still evident. Even the expulsions were very aggressive – especially when you know these people have devoted their lives to the organisation.”

Indeed, the network relies heavily on the unpaid teaching, voluntary work and significant financial donations of altruistic followers. **madison** understands some ex-Australian members led frugal lifestyles, in the belief that this represented a purer existence, and donated large portions of their incomes to Yoga in Daily Life, as well as its legitimate charitable projects, such as a school for poor children. In contrast, Swamiji is reported to travel first-class, stay in upmarket hotel chains and enjoy every material comfort available. Since 1990, he has been overseeing the construction of a monumental 250-acre ashram in India, and his personal wealth is said to be vast.

Although Yoga in Daily Life is practised in 30 countries, Australia has played a critical role in its worldwide success. Ex-swami Richard explains, “Until Yoga in Daily Life came to Australia, it was on the fringes. The Australian people used their professionalism, their abilities and their knowledge to make it into a real organisation.” Indeed, Yoga in Daily Life was well respected within Australia and none of the alleged conduct by Swamiji occurred in Australia.

However, the presence of Australians at Swamiji’s ashram in India may have helped trigger this year’s exodus. “What has been very convincing is the stories of a number of Australians who lived in Jadan for some years and were involved in assisting women who were [taken advantage of] by Swamiji,” wrote a former yoga teacher on Richard’s online forum.

The scandal has sent shockwaves across the globe. A former European swami, who had been a major player for 30 years and has been accused by some within Yoga In Daily Life of being behind a “smear campaign” against Swamiji, penned an open letter about his disgust that “behind the scenes, Yoga in Daily Life seminars were porno movies with victims and volunteers.” The ex-swami recalled first hearing about allegations of sexual exploitation in 1982, but confessed he and most other followers “chose to believe our guru and not the tears, fears and humiliation of the victims.”

LEAVING THE CULT

At first, most Australian followers did not want to believe the allegations but felt compelled to take them seriously. “I spoke to the women [who claim to have been exploited],” says ex-member Lisa. “I also considered what I’d seen through the years and hadn’t questioned before, piecing the clues together... Swamiji always had young women around him doing his cooking and cleaning, which for a monk and a guru was not really appropriate.”

Natalie, who recently moved from her town in Slovenia because of the daily abuse she endured after revealing her story, admits the blind and unquestioning devotion shown to Swamiji may be hard for outsiders to comprehend. As a disciple, her brainwashing included constantly repeating the mantra: “I bow down to you my guru, light of the universe”, drinking water from his foot bath and eating leftover food scraps from his plate. “When I think back, now that I’m out, it seems so crazy. I can’t believe I was doing it,” she says.

It appears social isolation was also key: ex-disciples described how Yoga in Daily Life quickly swallowed their lives as Swamiji advised them not to mix with outsiders who didn’t do yoga, ate meat or could be bad influences. This made departing difficult. Natalie was devastated when her best friends of 20 years turned on her and accused her of lying when she left. So why did she leave? Giving birth to a daughter was a defining moment. “When I thought about it happening to my girl... I [realised] I would do anything [to prevent it].”

Not all women who have had sexual relationships with Swamiji, however, classify it as exploitative. **madison** understands some regard it as an intimate blessing or spiritual lesson. According to Natalie, other lovers – including those who are married and still in the organisation – are “proud” to be part of his harem. “They explained to me that what he was doing was Tantra [powerful ritual acts of the body] – raising your kundalini [corporeal energy] to the higher state of consciousness,” she

“Her brainwashing included drinking water from his footbath”

explains. “I never felt anything like that. I felt only confused, humiliated and stupid.”

Ex-Hamburg member Mira, who says she became one of Swamiji’s lovers as a 22 year old in the ’90s, explains disciples regarded Swamiji as a direct line to God. “Imagine how it may feel if a girl is allowed to make such special [sexual] experiences with God? It was an indescribable feeling, it was euphoric and it just elevated me, it lifted me up. I never saw it as an abuse... Is it not fascinating how deeply brainwashed I was – we were?” She says Swamiji ordered her, like the other women, to keep their sexual relationship a secret.

Such harrowing testimonies of betrayal at the hands of a man Schiesser says was seen as a “loving father-figure” beg the question: what happens to Swamiji now? The answer is likely to be nothing. Yoga in Daily Life does not have a typical organisational structure. Swamiji is regarded as a direct descendent of a holy dynasty and is therefore unaccountable. What about his alleged victims? Most are simply trying to get on with their lives. Alice left Yoga in Daily Life in 2006, but says she was confused until she received counselling last year. “The sex abuse was not that devastating that I can’t get over it,” says Alice. “What I had bigger problems with was realising I had been in a cult for years.”

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