

Translation (using Word and minor changes by Els Coenen) of the article in the Belgian weekly KNACK (online) – January 10, 2024 – Brecht Castel – Monoloog van ex-sektelid in de yogawereld: 'Ik was een pion in de machtsgeile set-up' - <https://www.knack.be/nieuws/wereld/monoloog-van-ex-sektelid-in-de-yogawereld-ik-was-een-pion-in-de-machtsgeile-set-up/>

Monologue of former sect member in the yoga world: 'I was a pawn in the power-hungry setup.'

By Brecht Castel (translated by Els Coenen as mentioned above)

One yoga session changed Els Coenen's life. For ten years, Kundalini Yoga would dominate her life. Now she realizes, "I was in a cult." Through a multitude of abuse stories, she saw the light again. Her personal quest is a message to be discerning in the spiritual world.

Els Coenen explains in her book *Under the Yoga Mat* how Kundalini yoga swept decades of abuse under the mat. A disconcerting book that goes far beyond MeToo alone. 'Practitioners of Kundalini Yoga worldwide have the right to know that their beloved yoga was designed by a fraudulent cult leader,' says Coenen, who was president of the Belgian Kundalini Yoga federation for 10 years. She told Knack how her own identity disappeared for a sect identity. Eventually she found herself again: Els became Ravinder and back to Els.

Els becomes Ravinder

'Nine months after my stroke, I discovered Kundalini Yoga and was immediately hooked. We squirmed like snakes on our mat, sat for minutes with our arms in the air and chanted movingly beautiful Sikh mantras (prayer formulas). Was this yoga?

"This is *Kundalini Yoga as taught by Yogi Bhajan*," our teacher said. "In 1968, he emigrated from India to the US and helped hippies kick drugs and alcohol. There is much beauty in the 3HO lifestyle,' she said passionately. "3HO?" someone asked. "3HO stands for *the Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization*. Which spreads Yogi Bhajan's teachings worldwide."

A little later I participated in a Kundalini Yoga morning ritual that lasted 2.5 hours. Before dawn, we recited *Japi*, the opening prayer from the holy book of the Sikhs. After an intense yoga set, we chanted mantras for an hour. During one of them, we sat on our left heel for more than twenty minutes with our right knee raised against the chest and our hands in prayer position. Through eye slits I saw that everyone staggered and grimaced painfully except for the angel statue in front. I promised myself that one day I would master this. We drank tea together. "*Yogi Tea* is one of Yogi Bhajan's businesses," the teacher said. "He was not only a yoga master but also a successful businessman."

Soon after my first lesson, I drove to northern Holland for my teacher training. The turban, long white robes and the 3HO jargon of our teacher and his assistants intimidated me. "What is the link between Kundalini Yoga and Sikhism?" someone asked. The answer was muddled. "Why is there so little anatomy in the manual?" asked a woman who had a classical yoga degree. The teacher looked at her sternly. "This is an ancient technology. All the knowledge you need is in this book. Have faith."

During the break, we grumbled amongst ourselves about so much ambiguity. After another *rock-and-roll* yoga set, we were exhausted but happiness hormones were rushing through our bodies. *Feel-good sighs* filled the room during the relaxation. Grandfatherly, our teacher said, "Experience is the most important thing. Yogi Bhajan gave us this technology to guide humanity. In surrender you will understand."

A few days later, I gave my first yoga class to colleagues. The comments were unanimously positive. The warm, powerful Sikh mantras touched many hearts. On the way home, I went to the department store in my white outfit, turban included. It felt good. Now I'm like, *oh my god*.

Applying for a spiritual name was *all the rage*. It was chosen based on your numerology and reflected the mission of your soul. Mine was *Ravinder*, which *means radiant divine wisdom*. Very soon Els no longer existed in the yoga world.

When our teacher set up a picture of Yogi Bhajan to meditate on for half an hour, it felt very weird to me. I wanted to leave. "Try it," an assistant said. I stayed. For some students, the picture began to live and spoke to them. I kept my eyes closed and was confused.

Rumors circulated about Yogi Bhajan's sexual abuse. I found some insane-sounding stories on the internet. "It is all slander," said those who had known him well. I let it go.

I became a vegetarian, stopped drinking alcohol and completed all the training modules in no time. A year later, I was assisting in teacher training. My urge to share this wonderfully fascinating and rich practice was strong. I organized training courses at home and abroad.

In 2010 I became president of the Belgian Kundalini Yoga Federation. During international meetings, I felt at home and enjoyed the we-share-something-beautiful feeling. The 3HO jargon was now mine as well.

My social life was dying out. Then, when I went to a barbecue, it was alienating, people eating meat and drinking wine! Their conversations had no depth in my eyes. After a few months, I only had yoga friends.

At four o'clock I got up, took a cold shower, recited *Japji: Ek ong kar sat naam kartaa purakh nirbha-o nirvair...*, did my yoga and went to work. In the car, I chanted mantras. I no longer listened to news reports. I taught several classes a week and workshops on weekends.

I didn't notice that I was chronically sleep-deprived. When I felt weak, I did a few minutes breath of fire and I was back on my feet. When we ate only mung beans and rice for forty days during a training, I said, "All the nutrients I need are in there." I mimicked that because I had no clue. Why

would I question an ancient wisdom? The scientist in me was asleep. For every discomfort, I could recommend one of Bhajan's hundreds of meditations. The yoga students were happy. My helper syndrome was delighted.

The life of yore seemed dull and meaningless. I was reborn.

I was a big fan of *Japa* events where the same mantra is repeated 11,000 times. Afterwards I was *high as a kite* and lived on air and water for days. That's crazy, but I thought I was just very alert and could handle anything.

From the trainings I organized, the trainers earned thousands of euros. Happy faces were my reward and happiness. I didn't understand why the teachers passed up the benefits of *selfless service* – which they praised so much.

In 2012, as an organizer, I first encountered sexual abuse. During a training in *Sat Nam Rasayan*, a meditative *healing* technique linked to Kundalini Yoga, a teacher took advantage of a student who was in a nasty divorce. During their months-long sexual relationship, he called her *Princesa* and suggested that he was getting a divorce. When she discovered he was sleeping with several female students, she broke off the relationship.

Another student spoke to him about her relationship issues. During an individual healing session, she was shocked when his hand strayed from her arm and the healing turned into sex. She didn't feel that was abusive but was bothered by the silence he imposed on her. Months later, the young women told me their story. I was furious at the teacher for abusing his position of power, but also at myself for tolerating his flirtatious behavior.

When I informed GuruDev, the master of *Sat Nam Rasayan*, he asked to keep it quiet. He would send another teacher. "Then, will that teacher continue to teach elsewhere? Do you recognize the abuse?" I asked. His reply was, "Know your place." It wasn't up to me to ask questions. When I insisted, I was excommunicated, and Belgium became no-go zone for *Sat Nam Rasayan*. The ethics committee of 3HO in the US could not do anything because the *healing* branch did not fall under their jurisdiction. The teacher now lives with his family in Moscow where he teaches. (Many years later, I learned that GuruDev himself repeatedly sexually abused a seventeen-year-old.)

In 2017, I read a study by a historian about Bhajan's past that exposed many lies. Among them that this yoga was not ancient but Bhajan's creation. I was sick of it. How had I swallowed and even taught this nonsense? I asked 3HO for an explanation and got silence as an answer.

In the same year came this news: *Akal Security* – a company from Bhajan's empire that was billing billions in security for US government buildings – was involved in the implementing Trump's directives at the Mexican border. Children of refugees were separated from their parents. I gagged. Were our yoga activities sponsored by dirty money? A petition to cease all contracts with the immigration service at once was signed by only 768 out of a few ten thousand yoga teachers worldwide. It took months for the leaders to respond. This was the last straw.

At my next yoga classes, I let the students know I was quitting. They tried to talk me out of it: "We don't care that yoga is not ancient. Those problems in the US are so far away. Are you abandoning

us?" Yes, I did. I didn't want to belong to that club anymore. At the beginning of 2018, I quit. Forever, I thought.

Ravinder became Els again

I missed the yoga little or not at all. That surprised me. The regained time was quickly filled.

In early 2020, the book *Premka: My Life with Yogi Bhajan* came out. The author was the former number two of 3HO. For eighteen years she was part of his harem. Her book describes how genius Bhajan controlled everything and everyone, lied, cheated, abused, threatened, and defrauded. For the first time, I saw clearly how he used the yoga, religion and 3HO lifestyle as a cover for shady practices and to keep his followers under wraps.

The #MeToo zeitgeist and this book triggered hundreds of (ex-)3HO members to share their own, sometimes fifty-years-hidden abuse stories. Second-generation adults spoke for the first time about their traumatic childhood: the separation from their parents, the neglect, and the abuse. For months, new testimonies came to light almost daily. I read and listened for hundreds of hours, sometimes literally day and night because the stories came mostly from the US. During Zoom calls, I wrote in my namebox first Ravinder, then Ravinder-Els, then Els-Ravinder and finally Els.

"Why are you doing this to yourself?" asked my now-friends-from-here. "I feel responsible," I said. I would do what I could to amplify the voices of brave survivors and name the pain and damage. That I had helped spread the nonsense and lies of that predator in sheepskin weighed heavily. Most of my 'yoga friends' called me a nest polluter. They were concentrating on the future! This yoga was far too good to say anything bad about it. Cult expert Dr. Alexandra Stein, who investigated the 3HO child abuse, encouraged me. According to her, 3HO was and is a cult.

On abuse-in-kundalini-yoga.com, I brought a manageable summary of the horror. To give a face to the true Bhajan, I added his staggering statements, such as this one: "Rape is always invited." He said this at a women's camp in 1978. His listeners were silent. In the audience were women he had abused.

After *Premka*, 3HO commissioned an independent report that interviewed 300 witnesses. Their conclusion was that "more likely than not" the allegations of sexual abuse were true.

3HO tried to limit the damage to its image. I was on an advisory team of the 'Compassionate Reconciliation Commission'. "Why is this not a 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission' like in South Africa at the time?" I asked. "Because in 3HO there are different truths," was the reply. At the end of 2022, I stepped out disappointed.

For more than two years I wrote on *Under the Yoga Mat*. In July 2023, it was published. The dark side of the history of Bhajan's Kundalini Yoga is now on paper. Those who are ready can read it. I did what I could. That especially in Europe Bhajan's abuse is hushed up, I still find painful. Newcomers have the right to know the true origin of this yoga.

Six hundred survivors signed up for a recovery program that was completed in late 2023. Many experienced it as inadequate, humiliating and retraumatizing.

It's hard to admit that you were in a cult. Ravinder was a pawn, a cog in the power-hungry setup of a not-so-holy institution. I am a doctor in science, many yoga friends had university degrees. Cult experts say it can happen to anyone if you're in the right context. It's a meager consolation.

Bhajan's Kundalini Yoga can relieve depression and yet I want to warn. In the hands of a manipulator, his methods are dangerous. My message: do yoga but remain vigilant.

POSTSCRIPT

Yogi Bhajan died in 2004. There were already two lawsuits against him and his organization in the 1980s, but they were settled out of court with a financial arrangement. In France, Jean-Louis Astoul, a well-known French Kundalini yoga teacher, is under judicial investigation following complaints of sexual abuse and cult formation.

The Belgian federation of Kundalini Yoga does not currently have a president. One of the three board members, Sige Mariën, responds on his own behalf:

'I have not read the book *Under the Yoga Mat* by Els Coenen and have no intention of doing so. The Belgian federation has taken initiatives in the past to combat abuse. We give that subject enough attention with, for example, a workshop during our annual festival. I believe there should be a pure relationship between a yoga teacher and student.

We continue to use the teachings of Yogi Bhajan. His words have helped me a great deal. Let me be clear: I have never met this man and in Belgium we have received no complaints about his abuse. Kundalini Yoga is certainly not a cult.'

