

In France, a kundalini yoga master in a bad way

Le Monde Magazine - 19.10. 2023

Investigation - Jean-Louis Astoul, one of the stars of this discipline which claims to liberate the psychic strength of its followers, is today the target of serious accusations by former students, who denounce a form of domination and dangerous practices. A judicial investigation for sexual assault and sectarian aberration is underway. On Thursday October 19, the yoga teacher was taken into custody.

From the village of Saint-Michel-les-Portes in Isère, it's impossible to see what's going on in the yoga school. The ashram, set in 20 hectares in the Vercors mountains south of Grenoble, is difficult to access. To get to the Domainedu Martinet, on this September morning when mist follows rain, you have to walk down a tortuous path, full of cracks and rocks, for long minutes, before reaching two imposing lion statues that mark the entrance.

A large barnum and a hall are dedicated to "kundalini yoga". This variation of yoga has become very popular, and is practiced by tens of thousands of adepts in France in well-established centers. It claims to liberate psychic strength through long, rapid breathing exercises, postures and the recitation of mantras. Sometimes, in summer, singing and shouting can be heard from the valley floor, according to several local residents.

The place, shrouded in mystery, is intriguing: what is the training provided by the establishment's founder, Jean-Louis Astoul? Few people know. Better known by his spiritual names of Karta Singh or Satyavrati Yogi, the teacher asks each participant not to mention his teachings to **a n y o n e** outside. Smiling, 73-year-old Jean-Louis Astoul welcomes guests on the first floor of a gîte. With his white hair pulled back into a bun, the long-bearded teacher enters after his morning kundalini practice, wearing a long tunic and socks, all in white.

At his side, Prem Jot, his partner, a former German fashion designer who describes herself as a pioneer of "*overcycling*" and now "*project manager*" of the yoga school, sits cross-legged on an armchair, eyes half-closed. She won't move for more than half of the two-and-a-half-hour interview. As soon as she sits down, the host suddenly becomes suspicious and holds out his finger:

"Who sent you? You've been investigating me for several months, I know it." He has every reason to be on the defensive. According to the Grenoble public prosecutor's office, he is under investigation for a *"potential sectarian aberration"* and at least three sexual assaults allegedly committed on employees and students of his ashram. On Thursday October 19, the kundalini yoga teacher was placed in police custody, confirms public prosecutor Eric Vaillant.

Tough methods

Jean-Louis Astoul is one of the most famous practitioners of kundalini ("energy", in Sanskrit) in France and abroad. The master yogi boasts of having taught all over the world, from the Chinese to the Russians, and even to *"pygmy tribes"* in Central Africa. Established in 2000, his school was the first to specialize in training future instructors. Three levels of apprenticeship are required, at a cost of around 10,000 euros, before a course can be run. At a rate of around a hundred people a year, the septuagenarian has trained several thousand teachers, far more than any other kundalini school. The rest of the time, the "master" also offers a series of retreats lasting a few days entitled *Eveil de Soi* (795 euros for seven days, accommodation not included) or *Les 12 nuits sacrées* (1,295 euros for twelve days, accommodation not included).

Jean-Louis Astoul claims an *"esoteric and mystical"* approach. Several former participants, however, consider it *"dangerous"*. They describe strenuous methods involving up to five hours of yoga in a row, very little food and trance-like states that can lead to malaise. Every day, during courses and retreats, just after 4 a.m., students would be woken by music and invited to take a "yoga class".

A "cold shower" in the river, lit by headlamp.

As part of these courses, *"vision quests"* requiring at least twenty-four hours of fasting, alone in the forest and without supervision, would be organized. Before departure, participants' bags would be systematically searched to prevent them from taking their phones or food with them. *"The good thing about this discipline is that you can't hurt people,"* says Jean-Louis Astoul. The Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les dérives sectaires (Miviludes) (Interministerial Mission for Vigilance and Combat against Sectarian Aberrations) disagrees, stating that it has received several reports, all of which have been referred to the courts as part of the ongoing investigation.

An alternative lifestyle

The son of a stay-at-home mother and an employee of the Imprimerie Nationale in Paris, the future yoga star started out by working for over fifteen years as a territorial forestry technician with the ONF, from 1972 to 1988, notably in Sisteron, in the Alpes-de-Haute-Provence region. But he remained dissatisfied: *"Ever since I was a teenager, I felt I wasn't being given a vision of the world that suited me,"* he confides. At the same time, the young man took refuge in the spirituality of the New Age movement, which combines esotericism and borrowings from Eastern beliefs. And, when his job leaves him enough time, Jean-Louis Astoul explores an alternative lifestyle in the famous Scottish eco-village of Findhorn.

In 1978, he discovered a master during three days of meditation called "Harbhajan Singh Khalsa, a white tantra teacher, at the European Kundalini Yoga Festival in Loches, Indre-et-Loire. Harbhajan Singh Khalsa, a teacher in his late fifties who wears a long tunic, a turban on his head and large rings on his fingers, calls himself Yogi Bhajan. For Jean-Louis Astoul, no other encounter - even that with the Dalai Lama in Saint-Germain-en-Laye in the early 1980s - would surpass this moment.

"I then decided to serve this man," he recounts today.



Blending certain symbols of the Sikh religion with the physical postures of several types of yoga, Yogi Bhajan, a former Indian customs officer, began developing kundalini on the West Coast of the United States in 1968. Initially marketed as a way to combat addictions, this variation of yoga appealed to hippie youth. A course was even organized as an introduction to the famous Woodstock festival, in August 1969.

After a few years, Yogi Bhan transformed his activity into a religious organization, Sikh Dharma, known by its acronym 3HO (Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization), to which he attached a company.

"It quickly became an empire," says Philip Deslippe, historian of religion at the University of California, Santa Barbara. In addition to yoga sessions, the spiritual leader founded the Yogi Tea brand and set up Akal Security, which, until 2021, was one of the largest private security firms in the United States, responsible for maintaining order inside federal courts. According to the academic, the entire economic structure, with its millions of dollars in dividends, belongs to Akal Tea.

"personally" to Yogi Bhan.

As a strategist, the guru secured American political support through generous donations to both the Republican and Democratic parties. In the early 1990s, he met Bill Clinton in the midst of the election campaign and appeared alongside the candidate at several rallies. His high-profile connections also include Bill Richardson (1947-2023), the former governor of New Mexico, who will be named in 2019 in the case of prostitution and sexual abuse of minors by financier Jeffrey Epstein.

A missionary

His friends often gather at his ranch in Española, north of Santa Fe. Yogi Bhan likes to bring together some of his closest students, including Jean-Louis Astoul. Astoul follows him around the world, from India to the United States, via Hamburg, Germany. He

He "downloads" his teachings, as the saying goes, and takes charge of a few classes. Like other devotees of the creator of kundalini, the young yogi is charged with spreading the discipline around the world. From Sisteron, where he set up an alternative micro-farm in the 1980s, the missionary criss-crossed France to run kundalini sessions in community halls rented out by town halls. Then, in 1988, Jean-Louis Astoul founded the French Federation of Kundalini Yoga (FFKY), of which he became the first president.

But in the early 1990s, he suddenly reconsiders his ambitions. The teacher becomes romantically involved with one of his students and leaves his wife. Some of the participants, attached to the ethical rules defined by 3HO on the *"professional, respectful and gracious"* relationship between teacher and apprentice, no longer understood their master. Today, Jean-Louis Astoul admits that his divorce triggered a *"seismic tremor" in the yoga world.*

His classes were running dry, and he was reluctant to change direction. "*Yogi Bhajan called him to bring him back into the loop,*" explains Olivier Bagnerès, who now calls himself Atma Singh and welcomes visitors to his salon in Grenoble, wearing Bermuda shorts and a turban. This kundalini teacher and founder of an infusion company introduces himself as a colleague of Jean-Louis Astoul, whom he has known since Yogi Bhajan's courses in France and across the Atlantic. He recounts how the American master had invited Jean-Louis Astoul to the United States, and asked him to lead a few sessions.

Thousands of practitioners

In the mid-1990s, with the support of American superstars such as Madonna, Pamela Anderson and model Cindy Crawford, kundalini became very popular, quickly attracting hundreds of thousands of practitioners worldwide. Yogi Bhajan chose Jean-Louis Astoul and two other devotees to formalize the discipline in the book *The Aquarian Teacher* (sold to all future teachers from 2003). Little by little, the Frenchman returned to the limelight: in 2000, he bought a vast plot of land in the Isère region to found the Amrit Nam Sarovar school - literally the "nectar of the water basin". The fifty-year-old has established himself as one of the most popular kundalini yoga teachers.

In the ashram, Jean-Louis Astoul founds his own community. In May 2005, he welcomed Ezel and Stephan (first names changed at their request), with their two children aged 2 and 5, in exchange for the promise of *seva*, "selfless service", a practice of the Sikh religion common in yoga. Originally from Hamburg, the couple were keen to discover a new way of life, away from the city, and to support this kundalini school, which they had come to know through a German teacher.

On site, nothing was ready," says Stephan today from Germany. *We even had to build ourselves a kind of hut so we wouldn't have to sleep outside.* The forty-year-old works around fourteen hours a day, including weekends, without pay, to set up a farm on the estate. Exhausted, he suffers from violent physical pains and long migraines.

"Karta Singh didn't want to hire anyone else," recalls the volunteer.

Lots of cash

And yet, the ashram makes money. A lot of money, according to Stephan, who is also in charge of the ashram's accounts. According to Stephan, Jean-Louis Astoul reported annual sales of around 300,000 euros in the late 2000s, a figure confirmed by Astoul himself. But that's without counting the unofficial sums.

Every summer, when several hundred students camp out on the property to take part in *teacher's* training, everyone is asked to pay in cash.

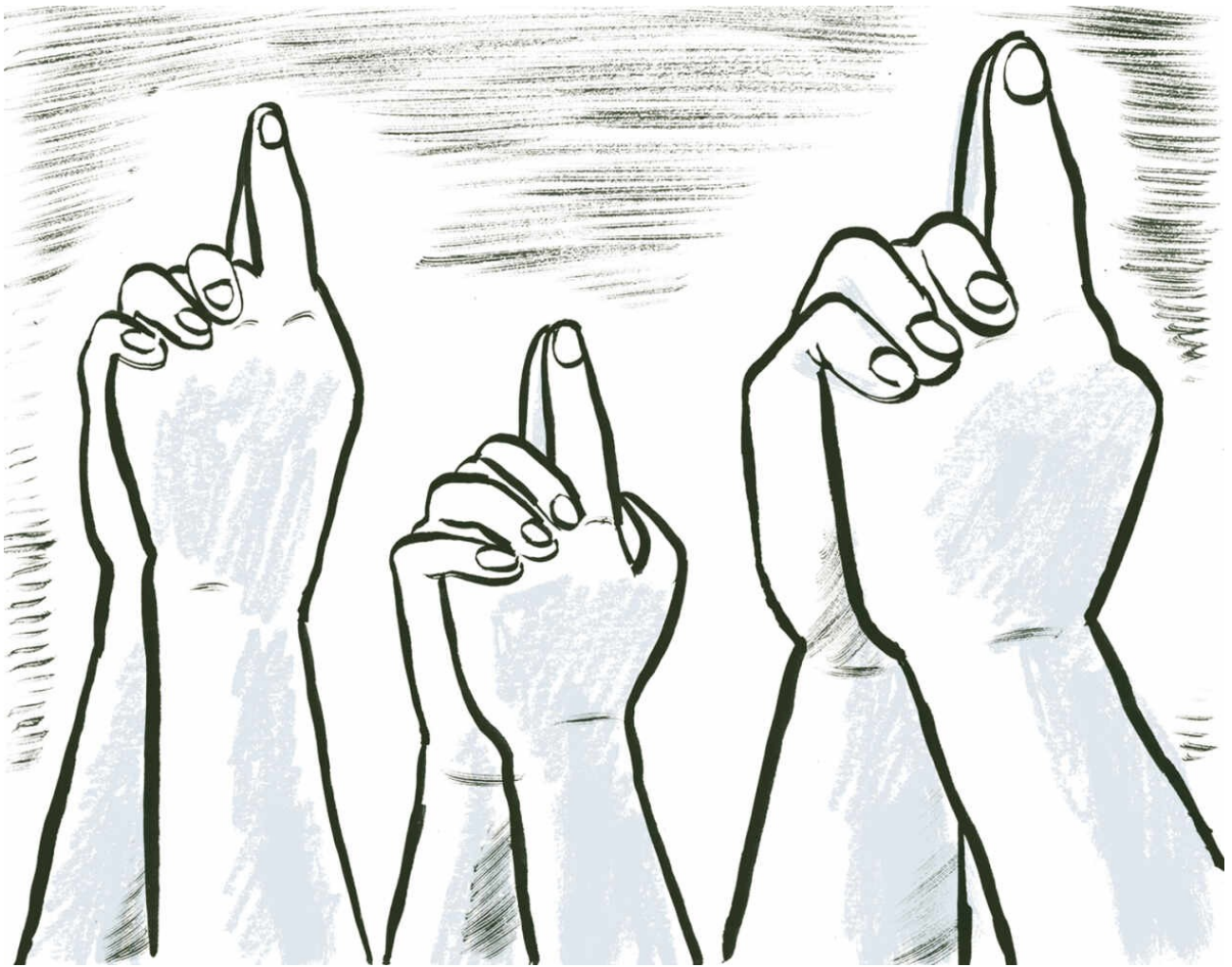
Regularly invited to give classes in Moscow, where his practice is very popular, the kundalini yoga star is said to have taken to hiding bundles of cash in his turban to avoid declaring them at customs. "*He was once stopped at the airport with the equivalent of \$10,000 on his head,*" says Stephan, who vividly remembers his former teacher's passion for the Indian guru Osho, known for amassing fortunes and owning seventeen Rolls-Royces as the head of a sect in Oregon (immortalized in the Netflix documentary series *Wild Wild Country*).

When asked about the incident in Moscow, Jean-Louis Astoul speaks of *He calls it "hogwash"*. Stephan admits that part of the income is reinvested in the domain, but assures us that the ashram leader doesn't hesitate to treat himself to a car, luxurious vacations abroad, fine dining in the region or sumptuous jewelry costing several thousand euros. "*When we made money, I reinvested it all,*" he contests.

"A problem with women, money and power".

Ezel and Stephan recount how the school's founder would make them accomplices in his financial maneuvers, and believe they were victims of a form of control. "*I was a puppet, souffle the woman. Back then, I would have thrown myself off a mountain if he had asked me to.*" The forty-something describes a veritable "*brainwashing*". Hired as a secretary to accompany Jean-Louis Astoul wherever he went, she moved into a room inside the master yogi's house, where her husband was not allowed to join her. Ezel distances herself from her family, and even hesitates to divorce.

Today, the former student recounts how she was sexually abused for several years. *He presented himself to the world as a sacred figure, above human needs like sex,*" she describes. *Except that he used me, and other women, including students, to have sex.*" Confronted with these accusations, Jean-Louis Astoul evokes a consensual relationship: "*I had an affair with her, but I didn't abuse her.*" In 2012, after more than seven years on site and increasingly violent arguments with the owner, Stephan insisted that Ezel leave the school. The family then cut all ties with the yoga teacher.



Once they returned to Hamburg, it took Ezel two years to finally tell her husband the details of this *"hell"*. She chose not to press charges, fearing that the police would accuse her of complicity in the running of the school. In a long letter sent to the German branch of 3HO, Stephan decided to denounce the actions of the school's founder Amrit Nam Sarovar: *"I am writing this letter to alert you and to share a direct testimony of what is happening now and has been going on for years. Karta Singh abuses women."* The text goes viral.

At the end of 2015, an ethics committee summoned the teacher, who refused to attend and severed his ties with the organization, even before risking expulsion. *"In the yoga world, there have been no consequences for Karta Singh and no one has supported me,"* enthuses Ezel. Asked about 3HO's reaction at the time, Siri Sant Kaur, CEO of the European branch, suggests by e-mail that we should focus on the *"positive aspects"* of the discipline instead of *"feeding gossip, voyeurism and negativity"*. For his part, Atma Singh, the Grenoble-based teacher who led a kundalini session at the school this summer, continues to defend the quality of his colleague's teaching. But as the conversation progresses, he says: *"Jean-Louis has a problem with women, money and power."*

In the United States, arranged marriages, rape, child abuse...

In January 2020, the practices of the American master Yogi Bhanjan, who died in 2004, were denounced. Pamela Sahara Dyson, his former secretary, publishes *Premka: White Bird In a Golden Cage: My Life with Yogi Bhanjan*. My Life with Yogi Bhanjan", Eyes Wide Publishing), in which she details the years she spent under his spell. She accuses him of sectarian aberrations and psychological and sexual abuse.

In the wake of this, dozens of testimonies emerged: former followers described arranged marriages, rape, the mistreatment of children forcibly sent from the USA to boarding schools in India, and even Yogi Bhanjan's complicity in the illegal import of 20 tonnes of marijuana and weapons from Thailand in the early 1980s. 3HO commissioned an NGO to carry out an extensive internal investigation which, in a seventy-six-page report, confirmed the accusations. Many teachers distanced themselves from the creator of kundalini yoga. Not Jean-Louis Astoul. As far as the Frenchman is concerned, it's just a case of "*allegations*". He insists that Yogi Bhanjan "*did not intentionally commit any abuse*".

By the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Isère school was growing in popularity. Astoul succeeded in attracting a number of yoga personalities to her establishment, including Lili Barbery. The star teacher, followed by over a hundred thousand people on Instagram, studied and then taught on site from 2018 to 2021, before severing all ties with the school. "*The disappointment and shock of the recent discoveries have been extremely difficult to get through,*" she clarifies via email. Partly motivated by the influencer's posts on social networks, word-of-mouth and the spike in kundalini popularity at the time of the confinements, a hundred or so "*Parisian girls in APC bags*" will be arriving at the ashram, starting in summer 2021, says Apolline (her first name has been changed at her request), a lawyer in her thirties.

No Covid-19 test is required to enter the estate. "*Karta Singh used to say that chanting mantras would protect us from illness*", describes Martine (first name changed at her request), a kundalini yoga teacher who passed through the ashram. That summer, dozens of trainees and teachers, including Jean-Louis Astoul, contracted the disease. Plunged into a coma, the yogi spent five days in an intensive care unit in Grenoble, claiming to have had a "*near-death experience*", which he recounted in detail on his return to anyone who would listen.

A survivalist twist

According to several people who knew him at the time, his discourse took a survivalist turn. Jean-Louis Astoul refers to the post-apocalyptic world of American author Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*, where a father and son wander through a nuclear winter. The septuagenarian, who prides himself on belonging to a Masonic lodge, is said to have talked about installing multiple cameras on the estate, building a bunker to stock up on food, training in martial arts or acquiring a hunting license or bows. Today, Jean-Louis Astoul vehemently denies this, insisting that he "*hates*" guns.

During this period, accidents at the school multiplied. In early 2022, a British doctor who had come for a few days' retreat had to be airlifted by the emergency services after falling into the torrent, where, in the throes of hypothermia, she nearly drowned. Jean-Louis Astoul maintains that she simply wanted *to "confront death"*, and laughingly brushes aside the question. According to several participants, during the week-long yoga practice entitled *Eveil de Soi*, between 2020 and 2022, the master yogi repeatedly gave trainees pastries with high doses of nutmeg, without warning.

Consumed in large quantities, this spice can trigger hallucinations or psychotic states that sometimes last several days, according to studies by the Illinois Poison Center and the University of Utah.

"We wondered if he'd drugged us," says one former participant. Others also report *"repeated illness"* following improvised saunas in *"sweat lodges"*, where a blanket covers a wooden structure to increase the temperature.



Some of the ashram's employees feel isolated. Pauline and Alice (their first names have been changed at their request), both hired to look after the garden and kitchen, say they were sexually assaulted by Jean-Louis Astoul. These two cases are being investigated by the Grenoble public prosecutor's office.

Some of the events are said to have taken place in the summer of 2020 as part of the

"Pauline had asked him for an appointment to go over a bad experience she'd had during a breathing exercise. Pauline had asked him for an appointment to go over a bad experience she'd had during a breathing exercise: *"He asked me to do the rapid breathing exercise again, even though it made me feel bad,"* she recounts. *Then he suggested I lie down on a sheepskin in his office, where he joined me before caressing my chest and putting his hand between my legs, before I ran away."*

"We're not a cult at all!"

Alice, for her part, speaks of three assaults and describes *"touching and several kisses without consent"*. During our interview, the teacher denies all allegations and denounces a *"cabal"*.

About Alice, he claims that it was the young woman who kissed him without warning, and says she has *"a problem with the father figure"*. The students eventually managed to have these accusations of aggression and the school's many dysfunctions discussed publicly during a Zoom call in the summer of 2022, several excerpts of which were consulted by M.

Supported by Prem Jot, his partner, who appears behind him on the screen, the master insists on his innocence. *"Then he finally lost his nerve and cut the camera off,"* says Apolline, a former student present that day. After this exchange, the vast majority of the 100-strong class decided to drop out.

Today, only twenty-five people remain in the Amrit Nam Sarovar school. Jean-Louis Astoul defends this new, smaller-scale model, far removed from a *"Hollywood-style"* kundalini, he argues. At the end of our interview, he starts speaking in English so that his companion can understand: *"We're not really a cult."* Prem Jot instantly corrects him: *"We're not a cult at all!"*

In the ashram, next to the yoga practice room, a beautiful wooden space will house a future clothing boutique for the students. For the moment, three sweaters and T-shirts are on display. Each bears a different inscription: "Create magic", "Keep up". And the last: "Be silent".

[Lucas Minisini](#)