

CHAPTER ONE

THE DIAMOND EARRINGS

When my old friend Micki Karlholm sent me an e-mail to announce that he had just returned from India, where he had found the key to permanent enlightenment, I was at a loss. How could I possibly explain to him just how completely not interested I was?

Micki is the original founder of the No-Mind Festival in Sweden, and I have known him for many years. He is one of the kindest and most deeply honest people I know. So I was both surprised and disappointed to see him swallowed up by another Indian cult. I thought we were both over that one.

A few days later, we spoke on the phone. He told me this simple story.

For twelve years, Micki had been married to a woman from Denmark. They had children together. Throughout the marriage, he was always promising to buy her a pair of diamond earrings. “Just wait a little while longer. I will make us so much money that you will get your earrings. You wait and see.” She waited and waited, and finally, they got divorced. No earrings.

Micki told me that while he was visiting this place in India, they did some kind of processes on him that affected his brain. I imagined scalpels and tubes and wires and machines and dubious hygiene. In one of these processes, for example, they helped him to feel all the pain he had unconsciously caused to other people. Micki was able to feel that simple broken heart—all the disappointment—he had left with his ex-wife in Denmark. When he returned from India to his native Sweden, he went straight to a jeweler and bought her the earrings. He drove without stopping to Denmark and knocked on her door. He offered her first an apology, and then the earrings.

“Micki,” I said to him, “now I am interested.” This was not a story of peak enlightenment experiences displaced from ordinary life; this was not another obsession with higher states. This was a story about my friend Micki becoming a more decent human being. It was right in line with everything I was passionate about.

At that time, I was just coming to the end of three years of research for my book *The Translucent Revolution*, a thoroughly overambitious survey of twenty-first-century spirituality. I conducted hundreds of interviews and finally managed to distill millions of words down to a mere 520-page pamphlet. The book came out in the early summer of 2005 to the usual circus of press interviews, talks in bookstores, and TV and radio shows. “It’s six a.m. here, folks, in rural Wisconsin, and our guest today is . . . Arhooh Aghaaaaar. (Did I say that right? Hell, never mind.) So, Mr. Ahaaaar, what is this trans . . . luminous thing? Does it have anything to do with that thing Tom Cruise does in L.A.? I mean, what did you make of his outburst on Oprah? . . . Let’s talk about *that*.”

I needed a break. And just as often happens when something is coming your way whether you like it or not, I kept on bumping into that same brain-changing thing Micki had told me about. At that time it was called *deeksha*. Today it is more commonly called the Oneness Blessing. No surgery or beeping machines were involved. A Oneness Blessing giver would put his or her hands on your head for a few minutes, initiating a powerful rebalancing of energy in the brain. One of the first Westerners to be trained to do this gave someone a ride to our house and then ended up staying over. And so it was that my wife and I got our first-ever Oneness Blessing. If we had experienced flashing lights or firework displays or visions of ascended masters, we might have been less attracted. What we did find was a delicious immersion in the same silence, peace, spaciousness, and causeless love that we both knew to be the essence of spiritual longing and practice. Here was a dropping back into that presence in just a minute, with just a touch on the head. The simple fragrance of home. After that, wherever we went, there seemed to be a blessing giver there, too. Were these guys following us?

The final straw came when I heard directly from the Oneness University in India, where all these people had been trained. It seems the university’s

founder had read *The Translucent Revolution* and liked it. Would I like to come for a visit?

My wife and I both certainly needed a holiday. Was it expensive? Come as our guests. Would we get our own room, no dormitory? No problem. Could we rest as much as we liked? Twenty-four hours a day. Is it a quiet place? Middle of nowhere. Can we do our own thing, be undisturbed? You can be totally silent.

They were good to their word. The campus was situated in a mango grove near low-lying mountains. For most of the time, all we could hear were the chirping of birds and the croaking of frogs. We slept and we slept; we ate some really quite tasty Indian food, took a short walk, and then we slept again. The whole place was run by young Indian men and women called *dasas*. They all wore white and were extraordinarily energetic and in permanently unflappable good moods, despite the fact that they seemed to never sleep. Our *dasa* (literally, “guide”), Pragyanand, would show up soon after eight in the morning to see if we would like a *deeksha*, as it is called in India. Sure, why not? It’s not like we had a packed schedule or anything. Each day the *deeksha* would have a specific intention, such as balancing the body, clearing old relationships, or, as was the case for Micki, helping one to feel pain one had caused to others. One day early on, for example, our young *dasa* announced that we would receive a *deeksha* to clear impressions left over from the relationship with the mother. I was skeptical. Back in the 1970s, I had beaten cushions and screamed primal screams. Later, I did est, hypnotherapy, psychotherapy, even colon therapy. I thought I had cleaned out pretty good, and I really had not thought about childhood for more than a decade.

Pragyanand did his *deeksha*; it took only a minute or two. Then he stood up to leave with the words “Now you rest.” Rest? Are you crazy? We had just been sleeping for fourteen hours straight, plus we took three naps yesterday. “I tell you the . . . very . . . last . . . thing . . . I . . . need . . . is . . . to . . .”

We were gone, as though the bed suddenly had powerful magnets installed in it. And then a powerful stream of images started to emerge, things I had not thought of for decades. The way my mother brushed her hair before we were leaving to go out . . . the smell of the laundry detergent . . . the time she locked

herself in her room, and the neighbor had to come and . . . It went on and on, for several hours. As the images continued, I could actually feel things happening in my brain, as though it were being massaged from inside. And then it stopped, just as it had started, for both my wife and me at the same time. We got up and walked around. Things were quite normal, except that later in the day, someone would casually say the word “mother,” and it provoked a deep resonance of love and gratitude. It was as though there had been furniture there before, and now it was gone, and gratitude had filled its place. “I love my mother”—that was all that remained. The rest was a story that served no purpose.

It went on and on like that. A short deeksha, a powerful inward release something like a shamanic journey, and then more and more space, simplicity, love—the return to the natural state where things are just as they are, and there is no commentary saying it should be any different than it is.

Toward the end of our stay at the Oneness University, I sat down with our guide. “This is really quite powerful stuff, you know?” I told him. He smiled that unflappable smile again. “I know,” he grinned. Just twenty-five years old, he had the innocence of a child and the deep wisdom of a sage. During this three-week vacation, I had watched him be fully present with world-famous musicians, politicians, writers, and seminar leaders from all over the world. I had watched him greet their moments of ecstasy and agony with equal calm. He was around from six in the morning till way after midnight. I was seriously impressed. “I don’t think people in the rest of the world fully appreciate the power of what is happening here. You guys really need someone to write a good book,” I told him. “Maybe,” he said, and smiled.

A couple of days later, he got back to me. “Thank you for your idea. We would love for *you* to write the book.”



There were several things that really impressed me on that first visit to the Oneness University. The first were those 170 dasas. I have spent a good deal of my life around organized spirituality. The situation has always been more or

less the same. A great teacher, great teachings, wonderful practices, meditations or prayers, and then among the followers, there was always a certain degree of politics. Who could get higher in the organization? Who had the power? During my three-week stay at the university, I looked under every rock and behind every bush. Where was the politics? I could not find it, even after an exhaustive search. What I found instead was an extraordinary quality of oneness: people living together, working together, being together as many bodies but one heart, one consciousness. I saw it not only among the dasas, but also with the security personnel, the women caring for the garden, the drivers.

The second thing that impressed me about the Oneness University were the Oneness Blessings themselves. I have practiced many kinds of meditation over the years, as well as prayers, physical exercises, and other practices. It was always somewhat hit-and-miss. You could do the same practice day after day, and sometimes you would hit the jackpot and be drenched in peace, while many times you were left wading through the mud of the mind. The Oneness Blessing was different. It was fast, clean, and accurate. It seemed to hit the mark every time and deliver the goods. Moreover, it seemed to have an intelligence of its own; it knew where to go and what was needed, whether it was healing, releasing memories, or just deepening silence.

The third thing that moved me was the vision out of which all of this was arising. They had a plan. Not only a plan for a few meditation veterans like me and my friends, but also a plan for transforming global consciousness. It was a plan that may sound ridiculously optimistic at first hearing, but it had caught the attention and support of visitors from the Vatican as well as of Muslim leaders, presidents of countries, musicians, writers, and Hollywood celebrities. It is a plan you will hear more about in these pages, a plan that might slowly grow on you.

I left my first visit to the Oneness University armed with both enthusiasm and skepticism. Was this just another workshop high? What happens to the Oneness people once they get back to their jobs and houses and kids and busy lives? This book is the answer to those questions. I have interviewed more than three hundred Blessing givers and receivers from all over the world. Some of the people you will meet in these pages are celebrities or household names. Many

are ordinary people leading ordinary lives. I have talked with doctors who give the Oneness Blessing to their patients, with CEOs who have brought the Blessing to their companies, and with teachers who have brought it to their classes. I have talked with people who see the Oneness Blessing as the saving grace that has transformed their lives, as well as to others who are highly skeptical and critical. I returned to the Oneness University in the summer of 2006 to research this book and to make a movie, and I received an extraordinary level of cooperation and openness. I was able to conduct more than six hours of interviews with the university's founder, Sri Bhagavan, as well as with his wife, Sri Amma, who had never previously given an interview. I was given free access to all the operations of the university and was allowed to wander freely through all its varied activities.

Writing this book has been like trying to paint a picture of a ballet. Every time you look up from the canvas, things have moved. This phenomenon is known simply as "deeksha" in India, the land rich in mystical heritage where it started. During the time that I was conducting the interviews for this book, it was known by the same word throughout the world also. As it has spread rapidly throughout other countries, it became clear that it needed a new name, no longer tied to any particular tradition. It has now come to be known as "Oneness Blessing," or "Oneness Deeksha." Throughout the text I will use these words interchangeably, although they all refer to the same simple magical touch of the divine, the same the world over. In quoting from the hundreds of interviews I conducted in India, with Amma, Bhagavan, and the staff of the Oneness University, I have retained the word "deeksha." In quoting people from Western countries, where the new term is now used, and for the narrative of the book, written in my own voice, I have used the new term "Oneness Blessing."

This book is neither an evangelical text of conversion nor an exposé. It is an attempt to summarize the effects of a movement that has spread extraordinarily quickly all over the world and affected millions of people. You will hear from many people in this book who feel their lives have been completely transformed. You will also hear of the five major criticisms aimed at the Oneness movement, which are lobbed daily across the Internet like custard pies. You will have to come to your own conclusions based upon what you read here. You might run

to your nearest Oneness Blessing giver or even wind up jumping on a plane for the next Oneness training in India, or you might dismiss what you read here as just another cult. Whatever your conclusions, this has proven to be the fastest-growing spiritual phenomenon in living memory. Although many continue to be attracted to the Oneness Blessing while many others back away in disbelief, this is something that few will be able to ignore in the years ahead.