

What does the name mean?

The term sahaja in Sanskrit comes from two words: saha meaning 'with' and ja meaning 'born'. The term yoga means 'union': the ultimate union with the divine or the universe and hence, in Hindu terms, 'liberation'. Put together, the two terms - sahaja yoga - indicate disciples' belief that union with the divine is the birthright of each individual. Sahaja can also be translated as 'spontaneous'.

Who is the leader?

Her Holiness Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi Srivastava (1923-) was born in central India to distinguished and wealthy Christian parents. After studying medicine for a time she married Chandrika Prasad Srivastava, Secretary General of the International Maritime Organisation of the United Nations from 1974 until 1989. She has two daughters and several grandchildren. One of her homes is a palace outside Pune, Maharashtra in northern India and another a castle in Italy, though she spends most of each year travelling throughout the world. In her speeches Sri Mataji has, on occasion, referred to herself as Adi Shakti and she is recognised as such by her followers. These two words can be translated as Primordial Mother or Holy Ghost. In 1970 she proclaimed her ability to offer self-realisation and began her work.

Where are they found?

The movement is estimated to have a committed following of around 10,000 worldwide, predominantly in India and Europe, together with a loose association of some 100,000 individuals. About 500 adults and 300 children are believed to belong to the movement in the UK. In 1999, the movement claimed a presence in more than 75 nations, more than double the figure reported in 1994. The movement is active in Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Colombia, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Holland, Hong Kong, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Lithuania, New Zealand, Poland, Romania, Russia, South Africa, Spain, UK, Ukraine and the United States. In the United States it is active in about 12 cities; in France there are 15 regional centres and five ashrams in Paris; in the UK there are meetings throughout London, and regional groups cover most parts of the country. The movement has two schools, one in Rome and one in Dharamsala, India, with pupils from Canada, the United States, Australia and

Europe. Park House, Shudy Camps, near Cambridge, was purchased after a £300,000 appeal for a home for Shri Mataji in England, but has since been sold.

What are the beliefs?

Sahaja Yogis believe that the potential to realise spontaneous union with the divine is innate and can be awakened with the help of Shri Mataji. Mere proximity to Shri Mataji or her picture can achieve self-realisation and 'awakening'. Central to the idea of self-realisation is that of awakening the kundalini, a primordial energy lying dormant at the base of the spine, waiting to be connected so that it may evolve to a higher stage of consciousness. The channels and organs of the body are seen as being governed by subtle counterparts called chakras, or spiritual centres. The deities are personifications of the qualities of the chakras. When kundalini is 'awakened' or 'raised', it is claimed that it can pierce sahasrara chakra (the uppermost 'centre of the central nervous system'), culminating in an experience of spiritual enlightenment. Kundalini can be awakened by sitting upright with palms face upwards and eyes fixed on an image of Sri Mataji; it is said to rise automatically when touched by the vibrations that radiate from her. The 'awakening' is manifested as a cool breeze felt on the hands and on top of the head, and allows people to feel through the vibrations in their hands the state of other people's chakras and the organs that the chakras correspond to.

Self-realised people are thought to have the power to correct faults and imbalances in these centres in themselves and others. Mental and emotional health is said to improve and people may experience peace, joy and security, together with an ability to deal with the pressures of life. Those who do not feel a breeze may feel hot or remain unaffected, both said to be due to an obstruction in the flow of energy. Shri Mataji claims diseases, including cancer, may be cured in certain circumstances by her techniques. Followers demonstrate great devotion to Shri Mataji. In one ceremony, of ancient Hindu origin, ghee (clarified butter), honey, yoghurt, milk, sugar and water is poured on Shri Mataji's feet. This nectar is kept and drunk later.

How do they live?

All Sahaja Yogis are encouraged to see themselves as part of one big family. Some people, after practising Sahaja Yoga for a time, will move into one of the movement's communal ashrams, although in Britain followers tend to live in their own homes or shared houses. As 'Mother' of the family, Shri Mataji offers a moral code by which followers should lead their lives, including how they should treat parents, advice about bringing up children and guidance with marital matters. They should be able to become detached from all things, both material and spiritual, including their children, and hence some children go to one of the Sahaja Yoga schools in Rome or India. In India, they are said to be free from what are considered to be harmful Western influences, and to benefit from what they consider to be a more favourable environment.

Generally, followers will consult Shri Mataji before marrying. Some couples are 'matched', either by Shri Mataji or by one of the movement's national leaders, and married in a mass ceremony in India with hundreds of other couples. Marriages between people from different countries are encouraged. In terms of daily living, the emphasis is on encouraging spiritual growth through meditation and by surrendering to Shri Mataji. Attendance at pujas (worship), in order to worship the divine, takes place periodically. Sahaja Yogis refrain from alcohol and drugs and dress conventionally. Shri Mataji emphasises that only by following a daily Sahaja Yoga lifestyle can her disciples enter into the depths of meditation. Feeling kundalini rise and clearing out chakras is only a preliminary. Members are encouraged to meditate and recite mantras for an hour between 4am and 6am and then again in the evening. Spreading realisation is said to be vital to growth, whilst attendance at public meetings is essential. Sahaja Yoga should be put before everything else, for an individual's spiritual growth is paramount.

Who joins?

Sahaja Yoga is restricted to no particular age, social or economic group, but most Sahaja Yogis range in age from their 20s to their 50s, and in the UK most come from middle-class backgrounds. There is a fairly high turnover rate in the initial months of attendance at meetings. Each year, about 10,000 people attend Sri

Mataji's annual appearances at London's Royal Albert Hall, but very few become committed followers.

Problems, controversies

The emphasis on complete devotion to Shri Mataji to the exclusion of others has led to problems and controversy. Some of those who deviate and some who are not able to experience the promised sensations may be told they are possessed by evil spirits or may be said to be mentally abnormal. Tasks, meditation requirements, and devotion to Shri Mataji may make a great demand on free time and this can mean that as commitment increases some devotees cut themselves off from relatives and former friends and begin to accept only Shri Mataji's advice about how to bring up children, whom to marry, when to divorce, or the importance of going on an India tour. In the past, members have been encouraged to separate from partners who are not members, although attitudes towards non-member partners are said to be becoming more tolerant. Nevertheless, those who fight the pressure to follow Shri Mataji's suggestions and radically change their lifestyle risk being expelled from Sahaja Yoga. This may bring problems for those who still believe in the power of Shri Mataji and fear 'losing vibrations' and the possibility of a form of demonic possession. Though the initial emphasis is on free involvement, members are expected to accept Shri Mataji's view that the more you give, in time and money, the better you will feel.

Further reading

From within the movement:

de Kalbermatten, Gregoire (1979) *The Advent*, Bombay: Life Eternal Trust Publishers.

Rajasekharan, P.T. and R. Venkatesan (1992) *Sri Mataji, Divine Knowledge Through Vibrations*, Singapore: Printworld Services.

Rai, U. (1993) *Medical Science Enlightened*, Bombay: Life Eternal Trust.

Her Holiness Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi (1996) *Meta Modern Era*, Bombay: Computex Graphics.

More critical treatments can be found in:

Pullar, Philippa (1984; 1st ed. 1981) *The Shortest Journey*, London: Unwin.

Kakar, Sudhir (1984) *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors: A Psychological Inquiry into India and its Healing Traditions*, London: Unwin.

For a sociological approach:
Coney, Judith (1999) *Sahaja Yoga: Socializing Processes in a South Asian New Religious Movement*, Richmond: Curzon Press.

Contact Details

There is no central UK contact address. Enquiries can be directed to any of the individual practitioners listed on the group's UK website:
<http://www.sahajayoga.org.uk>

International Website: www.sahajayoga.org
Critical Website: www.sahaja-yoga.org

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