

[What Was Two Is Now One; Siddha Yoga Co-Guru Steps Down](#)

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Swami Muktananda took almost inordinate measures to ensure the smooth succession of his spiritual lineage before he attained Maha Samadhi on October 2, 1982. He chose two young disciples he had groomed for the task since childhood. Through extensive legal documents he let there be no doubt that they would as a team carry forward the worldwide Siddha Yoga Dham Foundation he had built from the ground up. Now it seems his strategy was even more ingenious than nearly anyone knew.

The ordination, held at the Ganeshpuri Ashram near Bombay in May of 1982, was picture perfect. Brahmin priests performed elaborate yagna rites and Sanskrit chants filled the air as the 74-year old Muktananda passed his spiritual mantle to Swami Chidvilasananda, 27, and her brother, Swami Nityananda, 21. To all concerned, they were co-gurus until death.

But on November 3rd of this year, that certainty was shattered when Swami Nityananda announced in the Ganeshpuri courtyard that he was stepping down. He would be a guru no more to the thousands who had come to know him as "Baba." Swami Muktananda had, Nityananda explained, secretly told him and his sister during the ordination that Nityananda would serve as guru for three years only. After that, Chidvilasananda (affectionately known as Gurumayi) would assume full control. The time had come. Baba's third Mahasamadhi celebration had just occurred. The news rippled through the crowded ashram.

The news surprised everyone, Hinduism Today was told. Soon after, the swamis phoned the major ashrams throughout the world. Meetings were convened to share the news and the message was gradually sifted down to the home centers and individual devotees.

Nityananda was clearly not upset. There was no sense of wrong-doing. His mood was even described as "ecstatic." "He's always happy," commented David Starring of Los Angeles, happy as guru and now happy as disciple. Following the announcement, Swami Nityananda underwent six days of yagna rites in which he was first de-ordained and then purportedly released from his lifetime vows of sannyas, something akin to a Catholic priest's return to the laity and until recently almost unheard of in India. Commenting on the concept of leaving sannyas, Swami Omkarananda Puri of California said, "In the scriptures it is never accepted. Once you renounce the world, you are never allowed to take it back again. If a guru knows that a man can step back, he should not give him sannyas. Sannyas is the highest stage. One must be fit for that." In abdicating his guruship, Nityananda told Hinduism Today, he was following Baba's orders. But in leaving sannyas he said, "That was my decision."

No longer a monk, divorced from the 30-strong SYDA Saraswati order, Nityananda's new name is "Venkateshwar." The rites complete, he went immediately to the courtyard and prostrated before Gurumayi. Seven days later, on November 10, he sat at her feet during the Patabhishek - installing her as sole guru of the lineage. Ten thousand devotees thronged into and around the ashram.

Not everyone was happy about the change. Especially shaken were "those who had connected with Swami Nityananda as their guru more than they did with Gurumayi." The coguruship led to choosing between the two, or trying to balance them equally. One devotee of Swami Nityananda, on hearing the news said, "I'll never let him go! He's my guru forever." Now he has reportedly changed his mind and is supporting the new arrangement.

Miss Sharvani McBee, public relations person at the Honolulu, Hawaii, ashram, said that many people felt an "enormous grace" flow into their lives upon hearing the news, just as they did at the time of Baba's Mahasamadhi. She said she felt that "Baba's power, the power of that lineage, is now fully concentrated in one body." She said that for her it was helpful, "fantastic," to have this change. Seth-Melchert of San Francisco said he was surprised and shocked, but that his second reaction was that he was thrilled. Everyone Hinduism Today spoke with inside the movement viewed the change as an affirmation of the guru principle - that the guru is not just an individual, but God working through him.

David Starring explained that he had tried to "connect up" with Swami Nityananda,

but "nothing much happened...and now I understand why. It just wasn't going to happen. So I believe that it was all set up in advance." Others outside the movement didn't so readily discount the possibility that changes after Baba's passing may have precipitated the adjustment. Dr. Puroshottama Billimoria of Victoria, Australia, commented "Why would he have ordained two of them at that point in time, when only one of them was going to be the sole guru anyway?"

Wonderment aside, after three years of immersion in the guru bhakti of thousands of devotees, of touring 'round the world, of parades, darshan lines, pada pujas and devotees prostrating at his feet - Swami Nityananda is again a humble devotee. As he walked through the garden at the ashram after Gurumayi's ceremony, someone asked him, "How do you feel." And he answered, "I feel great I feel that I have the greatest guru."

Why? Miss McBee explained: "They didn't tell us in advance because Baba wanted to make the transition smoother and he wanted to give Gurumayi as much help as he could. The work was so big,...that it took two of them to go all over the world and help Baba's disciples make the transition from him to a new guru."

Dressed in white, the young Venkateshwar met with his own former staff and with people who were having trouble making the changeover and said, "I have surrendered to Gurumayi. I am following Baba's command. I recommend that you do the same thing. She is my guru. She is the one who can take you across." He says he is remaining with the SYDA and will work closely with Gurumayi, perhaps even on tour.

Presently Gurumayi is in Japan, meeting with her devotees at the start of her first world tour as sole guru. Charismatic and youthful, 5'5," petite by other than Oriental standards, she and her brother have, devotees say, maintained the movement at the same level as her guru, even surpassed it. Siddha Yoga Dham is doing well. There has been a turn-over of people, Miss McBee admits, but the numbers are even greater than before, and the individuals are very serious about their Sadhana. Many of those just attracted by Baba Muktananda's personality have left.

Gurumayi, now alone at the helm, is known for her stress on devotees' following

the practices rather than focusing on her as a personality. She favors the small, home centers rather than large ashrams. In each locale, she visits the centers to bless them and "give them Shakti."

At public gatherings, especially the big ones in India, she's a master at wooing crowds. Describing his meeting with Gurumayi a reporter once wrote: "When you meet a swami, you expect holiness. What you don't expect is an hour of Laugh In." After her talks, she often leads bhajans, clapping her hands or playing cymbals with "infectious abandon." She was also described as "sometimes so still, it's almost deafening." Her devotees can hardly stop talking about how wonderful she is. "So powerful," Swami Radhananda exclaimed. "She inspires you to want God or want that state...She is becoming more powerful. You should come and meet her. She can awaken you in a moment"

The ashrams and centers, scattered over 52 countries, feature public programs at the introductory level, free evening programs and two-day intensives for \$200. Also offered is a 3-week course on Siddha yoga philosophy and meditation for \$225, as well as an advanced course. When the guru is present, students may receive Shaktipat - described as "the natural awakening of the inner meditative energy."

Through Siddha Yoga Dham, primarily non-Hindus are immersed in a cornucopia of Hindu dharma based in Kashmir Saivism, north Indian culture and Sanskrit, wrapped tightly around the guru principle. There is no formal membership, devotees maintain their identity as Jews, Christians, etc., and Christmas and other Western holidays are celebrated at the centers.

In 1983, details of Baba Muktananda's alleged sex life were published by Coevolution magazine. That scandal has passed. Certain people did drop away, explained David Starring, "We don't know how many. But most of the followers remained absolutely true to Swami Muktananda and dismissed that as not of significance in their lives...Our interest in the guru is beyond these matters."

Indeed it seems to be. What is exciting to observe in the devotees is the sense of sincerity, the focus on personal practice and the gurubhakti. Seth Melchert captured the Siddha Yoga ideal nicely when he said, "The guru is constantly pulling the carpet out from under us, to teach us to go back to the One within your own

heart." For most devotees, it's now business as usual, with an emphasis on sadhana and sharing with others whatever light one has found.