If anyone had asked me to answer that self-identifying "Who am I?" question in the early seventies, my first answer would probably have been "I am a political person." All my other identities mattered a great deal, but the political movements of that day and the previous fifteen years had represented my special project, my sense of where good people should commit their energy and fidelity. With protests, teach-ins, mass marches, and other nonviolent means, we were fighting against racial inequality, the Vietnam war, the occupation and carpet bombing of Cambodia, and other forms of imperialism.

But a new and parallel project had been forming for several years. It was carried out sometimes with one other person and sometimes in small or even large groups. Its purpose was to be “high”, which meant getting high, which usually meant seeking some weed or chemical to ease the transition into that spacious, hilarious, and liberating inner domain. My wife and I had a notebook we called Great Stoned Insights. We rode the music and its lyrics into our version of that other world. The vast majority of our waking hours continued to be dedicated to family and work, but these few hours of courting an
altered state of consciousness were special. And from within the goal of being high what emerged was a larger goal of self-awareness, empathy, and love. The natural high.

In the fall of 1974, I was in Circle Books looking for yet another personal, spiritual saga to read. I couldn't find anything and was preparing to leave when I spotted a purple, dittoed leaflet on the bulletin board. It said, "Siddha Yoga Dham of Ann Arbor proudly announces the arrival of Swami Muktananda Paramahansa." I was about to drift away when I noted that the long quotation in the middle of the leaflet came from Ram Dass. When he was known as Dick Alpert, we were fellow assistant professors at Harvard. I knew that he had since gone to India. I knew that he had found a guru, but what I mainly remembered was that he had come back saying you could get to that same great, high state by discovering some form of the ancient spiritual path. No roller coaster rides with wild trips and the day after. No coming to the false conclusion that it was the substance that caused the shift in your inner state instead of realizing that the inner state was inherently yours to claim as your birthright, a deeper or higher layer of your own true self.

The leaflet said that Swami Muktananda would be giving a talk at the Power Center on campus. As I turned away to leave, a strange thing happened. It seemed to me as though my visual field now contained a large, old-fashioned Teletype machine, and in its clunky, even noisy manner it was slowly spelling out a message. As I watched what it was printing, I read, "Well, I guess I will never get to meet Don Juan." Just that. I knew this was my own thought being typed out, but in this odd form it was impossible to escape its
implications. I thought that this was my chance to do more than read about a powerful teacher. It was perhaps my only chance to do something about an intention that had been growing steadily: "I want to meet one of these guys." I wrote down the telephone number to call and make a reservation to hear the talk. But I couldn't help reflecting, as I recalled the Teletype machine, on what a portentous and extraordinary way to register, almost to receive a thought, from myself.

After I arranged for the tickets, I went on about my normal business until one day I received a call from a man who said his name was Dan Kahalas and that his sister, Ann, had been one of my graduate students back in the sixties. I remembered her well and asked where she had been. He said she had been with her guru, Swami Muktananda, in India for the last three years and that she thought I might enjoy meeting him when he came to Ann Arbor in a couple of weeks. I told him that I had already gotten tickets for his talk at the Power Center, to which he replied that I would certainly be welcome to come by the Ashram for lunch even before Swami Muktananda arrived. This sounded like some kind of proselytizing, and I got off the phone as quickly as I could.

One morning as I rode my bicycle up to campus and reached the intersection of Olivia and Wells, instead of going straight which I usually did or turning left which I sometimes did, my bicycle turned right and I found myself peddling along Wells in completely the wrong direction. I passed the Burns Park School where our three sons had gone, I kept peddling, and I began to wonder somewhat casually what was going on. It may seem odd today, but the zeitgeist of that era was open to the notion that many odd, uncanny things
might happen, and they were worth allowing to happen, at least sometimes. Giving life’s
adventure its best chance of unfolding meant not clamping down on untoward events
such as this. As I came closer to the next intersection, I saw that it was Baldwin Street,
the street that Dan Kahalas had told me now contained the new Ashram. Well, why not?
Some strange current had carried me this far, so why not go have lunch at the Ashram?

I parked my bike on the sidewalk and started toward the door when a wave of anxiety or
uncertainty stopped me cold. That seemed silly so I poked my head in the door and heard
someone out of sight say, "You must be Dick Mann." Not knowing who was talking to
me and how he knew my name did nothing to calm my jitters, but it turned out that of
course he knew my name. This was Dan Kahalas, and I doubt there were very many
people coming to the door those days. I met two women in red saris, Girija, the co-
director of the Ashram, and Odile, a French psychologist. We had a ghastly and never to
be repeated lunch of seaweed and something. We chatted a bit, and then I met Shankar,
the other director.

When Shankar asked if I would like to see the room they had prepared for Baba, as
everyone called Swami Muktananda, I immediately said no, thank you. He proceeded up
the stairs as if he hadn't heard my reply, and I proceeded to follow him up to the room
that had been prepared. More than the room itself, what captured my attention was the
wholly unfamiliar attitude and gaze I could detect as I watched Shankar look tenderly at
the mat on the floor and the simple furnishings that had been readied for his guru. I could
almost sense how the scene affected him.
As I went back downstairs, I overheard a conversation between two girls. One asked the other, "What are you going to do after Baba leaves town?" The other replied, "I don't know. I'll just do whatever Baba tells me to do." That did it. This clearly must be some kind of cult, I thought, and I head for the front door. However, fear of being abrupt or rude prevented me from doing anything other than to ask if they had any printed material I could read. I had the idea there might be a few pamphlets or tracts. They might ease my way out. Yes, Girija said and led me to a small closet full of books on shelves. I had to have this, she insisted. It was Baba's new autobiography, then called *Guru*. And another with an introduction by Ram Dass, and a couple of smaller books. And that would be seventeen dollars and fifty cents. That seemed like a lot of money to me but I paid it, put the books in my bicycle basket and rode on to my work at the University.

One morning, as I was dawdling about before going up to campus, I spotted the books from the Ashram and recalled what I had paid for them. I thought I might as well look at them, but as I started into the autobiography, I realized that all his references to Gods and Goddesses had aroused a noticeably high level of resistance in me. As I was about to put the book down, I came upon a section entitled My Story. This intrigued me so I launched into Swami Muktananda’s narrative about the nine years between his initiation or shaktipat experience and his final attainment. He had lived alone in a tiny hut all those years. The story was primarily about the unfolding of his meditative experiences. Some were too fanciful or florid for me to appreciate, but the central theme concerned the gradual evolution of his experience of the Blue Pearl, his visualization of a beautiful
bluish dot that moved about in front of him and even entered him. After nine years he had come to know the Blue Pearl to be a manifestation of the Goddess, and he experienced that this goddess, Chiti Kundalini, dwelled within him constantly, and, finally, that he and the Goddess were not different, were not separate. He therefore knew from his own direct experience that he was divine. And then came the sentence that struck me like a thunderbolt. And changed my life. He wrote that now, whenever he meets anyone, his first experience of them involves seeing them as that same divine Blue Pearl, and therefore he now knows that everyone is divine.

Impressive as his attainment was, what had struck me was his promise, or his prediction. Wouldn't it be amazing, I wondered, if when you went up to this man and he looked at you, you could know that he was seeing your divinity? He would see the Blue Pearl first, the Goddess, and then the particulars that made you unique. That was a prospect worth pursuing.

A week or so before Baba was to arrive, I received a telephone call from a woman named Peggy. She wondered if I would be interested in organizing a seminar on the mind, to be given by Baba during his first few days in town. I could hardly think of anyone on the faculty who might be interested, but before long we had arranged that of course students would be welcome. On the morning after he had arrived, thirty or forty of us crammed into a little room in the Ashram for the seminar. As the professor who had organized it, I was shown to a seat on the floor not more than four feet in front of a low, orange bench that was clearly where Baba would sit. In the lull before his entry, back came the
tantalizing question: Wouldn't it be amazing to know that someone was looking at me and seeing my true identity, my divinity?

Baba and his translator arrived in a swirl of orange. Baba sat down, looked directly at me and shook his head from side to side. To me his message was clear: “No Blue Pearl!” I was sure he was saying that I was a complete spiritual zero. No Blue Pearl! I felt the ground caving in beneath me. The sense of shame and embarrassment at being so designated became like an electrified cocoon. The only thing in my consciousness for those first few seconds was the sound of my own angry, petulant voice. Who does this guy think he is? Why does he come halfway around the world to insult people? What kind of person lays bare such a horrible truth?

I will return to this story in a moment, but I have to yield pride of place to the far more important story that was unfolding even as I was filled with anger and embarrassment. Within seconds of Baba looking at me and just after the beginning of my outraged reaction to what I would now call his ambiguous expression, he began his talk, but I wasn’t sitting in that room at all.

My eyes must have been closed but what I was seeing and feeling was compellingly, vividly real. I was sitting on a thick layer of pine needles. Their softness and their fragrance were so familiar. I just sat there. I existed within a non-moment in time because it had no such boundary. I just sat there, overwhelmed by the silence and the peace. I was
completely content, and there didn't seem to be a single thought cluttering up my expansive sense of just being present and serene.

The midpoint of where I myself was, my felt epicenter, seemed to be located directly in the center of my chest. But two or three times, reminding me of the silvery bubble that forms and climbs when you turn over a bottle of shampoo, I could see the center of my being rising up toward my head. What awaited me there was the sound of my own voice still filled with anger and complaint. Then, slowly, the silvery bubble would reverse direction and drift downward into that same thought-free place of repose.

When I opened my eyes, I could see that Baba wasn’t talking. I guessed that Baba’s talk was over. The room was quiet. I had not heard a word he said, not one. Instead, I had been sitting peacefully on the pine needles. The translator turned to me and inquired whether I wanted to ask Baba the first question. Odd as it may have sounded, my first attempt was not a question at all, but it was all I could think of to say. I addressed Baba through the translator and said, “It’s just as you said! These are the minds we walked in with today, so it’s hard to hear just one voice inside. Precisely what you said is true. There are thousands of voices going on inside.”

After hearing the question translated, Baba looked at me with a warm and gentle smile and said, through the translator, “It’s essential to reduce the number of these voices and to make sure that you are hearing only one voice from within. It is precisely for this the ancient seers of India who lived long ago used to honor mediation so much. Through
meditation they would cleanse their minds and lead normal lives in a state of peace and cheerfulness. Sometimes it happens that through one’s effort, through the strength of one’s endeavor, one becomes free of thoughts for a few moments, and that seems very good. If one could attain the state which is free of thoughts for a few moments through meditation, then one would be able to live one’s life peacefully in spite of one’s mind.”

The translator looked around for more questions. Baba always replied to them with great enthusiasm and directness. Before long, he left the room, and we chanted Govinda Jaya Jaya. Warm tears of relief slowly found their way down my cheeks. The whole issue of whether I did or didn't have a Blue Pearl had completely vanished.

However, as a postscript, I should report that several days later, when I was at the ashram again, I asked the French psychologist what Baba meant when he shook his head back and forth the way he had that first day, and she said, "Oh, Westerners are always getting Baba's nonverbal gestures wrong." She recounted how people would come in the courtyard and not be able to figure out whether Baba was gesturing for them to come closer or go away. And his gesture to me, well, that was just the traditional Indian way of waggling one’s head from side to side as a way of saying "Hello. Welcome." As I took in her clarification of what Baba meant, a new question became inescapable: If Baba did not mean that I was a spiritual zero, who did? Whose unconscious and unacknowledged self-assessment lay behind that misunderstanding? It was, of course, my own. It was my projection. It occurred to me that if I were not excluded from the ranks of those whom Baba saw as divine, it would be worth my while to explore how to alter my own self-
portrait. I now looked forward to hearing Baba say more about all this in a couple of
days. And I looked forward to being around someone who could induce in me a state that
was as peaceful and real as the moments I spent sitting on the pine needles.

Two days later, I went with my friend, Jan, to the Friend’s Meeting House to attend an
extraordinary event. The spiritual head of the more mystical, Kagyu lineage of Tibetan
Buddhism, the Karmapa, had arrived in Ann Arbor to visit Baba for two days. These
great tantric masters had offered to give darshan, side-by-side, to those in attendance at
this event. Before they spoke, briefly, they offered each other gifts, they seemed to be
white scarves, and they chuckled and laughed without restraint as they passed them back
and forth to each other. Then people came forward to pranam, to bow before one or both
of these smiling, available spiritual teachers. Before I got up enough courage and
resolution to join the darshan line, time was up. It was still all too strange for me to feel
comfortable.

That evening was the night of Baba’s talk at the Power Center. I recall noticing how
sparsely attended the talk was, but my major first impression came from a group of seven
or eight young people sitting three rows in front of us. When Baba walked on stage, and
whenever he would look in our direction, most of group would utter some loud,
incoherent noise and begin going into what looked like some kind of epileptic seizure. I
was slightly prepared for this. I had heard tell of another yoga group in town whose
spiritual practice included being stared at by their teacher until they would go into this
spastic frenzy. Their actions expressed their response to the energy rising up in their
body until they started doing these *kriyas*. But I was completely unprepared for how anxious and alienated they would make me feel. My wife and I quietly debated whether we should leave. I was so unnerved that I cannot now recall much of what Baba said. However, my second major memory of that night was of going up on stage and bowing in front of Baba. I can still recall the sensation of his wand of peacock feathers brushing gently against my back and head.

After the talk, my wife and I decided to spend some time with our colleague and friend, Perry. He had come up on stage with me to meet Baba, but his decision to remain standing, he said, was simple enough: No black person ever bows down to anyone. As we walked toward the car, he exclaimed, "Wow! Did you see his aura? It was enormous. It was purple, and it filled the entire stage and up to the ceiling." Once again, I could see that either I would continue to explore what this man could show me or I would probably settle back into the life grooves I had already created. Clearly, I had never met anyone remotely like this man.

The next morning found me sitting on the floor in the front room of the ashram happy to watch what was going on, but still uneasy. Baba and his translator were moving slowly through the assembled group. At one point I could hear the word professor within the translator’s comments to Baba. Baba was standing with his back toward me with his hands clasped around his red mala beads. I heard him affirm, not in words, that he already knew about the professor, and at that point he released the index finger of one hand and used it to point directly at me. His finger was now inches from my forehead.
My connection to all this seemed to be getting stronger. I learned that morning that Baba would be quite a ways down I-94 in Jackson for the weekend, giving an Intensive. I knew I couldn't do that, but I could attend the somewhat modified Intensive that would be held in the Friend's Meeting House on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. It was on occasions such as this that Baba gave shaktipat initiation, the awakening of the inner Kundalini energy. I signed up for the Intensive.

There might have been thirty of us there that day. I sat down next to a man who looked to be about my age, and it turned out he was a chemistry professor at a nearby college. I found Hans’ presence reassuring. There is only one moment from that morning that I recall with any clarity. We had heard a little talk on shaktipat initiation, and now we were sitting with our eyes closed, taking in the fragrance of Baba’s heena and hearing the quiet rustle of silk as he moved around the room. I knew he was getting closer, but I was unprepared to feel his thumb and forefinger pressing deeply into the bridge of my nose, holding me for what seemed like a long time. A brilliant and seamless field of sky-blue immediately surrounded me. I sat there, taking it in.

I wish now that my discursive brain had held back a bit before trying to analyze something it had no hope of understanding. The only cause my brain could come up with to explain all this was that was that it was some kind of trick. My inner nay-sayer had concluded that we had all been staring at the orange robes so intently that now this sky-blue field was just an afterimage of that orange. This (quite inaccurate) commentary had
its predictable dampening effect, but as I scanned my body and my feelings, I had to say that in these domains as well something powerful had happened. I was quivering. I was barely breathing. I felt wide open. It was one of those nowhere-to-go and nothing-to-do moments. Fortunately, my mind became very quiet.

I was teaching a freshman seminar that term, and I was feeling enthusiastic enough about this yoga to suggest we go down to the Friends Meeting House on Thursday for a dancing saptah, a time men and women took turns dancing in a circle around the musicians and a flame. It sounded like fun, and there was going to be an 8-mm film shown beforehand. One of Baba's longtime devotees, his regular scribe when he gave a talk, had brought this film, and she provided the narration in English. I found two sections of the movie to be extremely disturbing. The first showed Baba garbed in a turban, sitting on a throne-like chair while streams of people flowed by, placing flowers and silks in large, overflowing baskets. The narrator referred to Baba as a great maharaj, suggesting he had been a king in one of his previous lives. The second segment showed Baba handing out pots and blankets to the impoverished village people, the indigenous adivasis, but as he did so, he would slap the men harshly on their back. The narrator said something about the importance of teaching people not to expect gifts without enduring the negative consequences that are part of the whole process. Dependency was not to be encouraged.

To me this all seemed archaic. Feudal. My identity as a political person recrystallized and made the film and its implications unacceptable. Before the dancing saptah had even begun, I put on my coat and stormed out. My students stayed and had a wonderful time.
dancing, but I was convinced I needed to cancel my reservation for the weekend Intensive coming up in two days. My wife and I and Perry had decided to go to the Intensive, but my motivation to do so had dropped to near zero.

That night I had a dream. I was standing in a large, elegant living room that overlooked the Huron River and a row of beautiful weeping willow trees. I and a few others were getting things ready for a seminar. The chairs and couches were being put into a circle when I noticed that my eleven-year-old son, Davey, was just about to slide a couch right into the space on the floor where Swami Muktananda was sitting with his legs crossed. As I saw what was about to happen, I called out, "That's right, Davey. Run him over!"

With that, the setting for the seminar vanished, and I was left looking at two books that were floating mid-air in front of me. One book was Gandhi's autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, and the other was Stuart Schram’s biography of Mao Tse-tung. Even within the political dimension of my life, this polarity was a vital but unresolved source of tension. Gandhi and Mao. Then the two books began to move slowly, coming closer and closer to each other. As they touched, there was an explosion of brilliant white light. The two books merged into each other. As I was abruptly awoken from the dream, I heard the voice of the narrator of the film asking, "What did you think he was? A communist?"

Within seconds, the emotional intensity of Gandhi-Mao polarity drained away. In a voice that sounded amused and steady, I heard myself commenting that after all, the film was simply the narrator's version of Baba. She had her version, and she loved everything
about it, and I could have and would have my own version. No need to get tangled up in anyone else's version if it brings me down. There was no reason, I concluded, to turn away from what I had been drawn to explore. Gandhi and Mao were not what this coming weekend was about. This was a hiatus in my life as a political person, and I had no way of knowing how long it would last. But maybe that explosive fusion of the two books signaled that I might not return to the struggle unchanged. I renewed my excitement for the upcoming Intensive.

There was much that was unfamiliar, difficult to master, and physically painful about those two days in Ortonville, but there also were moments of engagement and awe. I recall standing in the darshan line, grumpy from sitting for so long on wooden floors. As I got closer and closer to Baba, my mood would change, and when he would smilingly ask, "How are you?" I would mean it when I said I was completely fine. When I was looking at him from that close a distance, it always seemed that with his right eye he was looking at me with great kindness and clarity, knowing me through and through, while his left eye was deeply absorbed in viewing eternity, infinity. I had no words for it.

During the final meditation on Sunday afternoon I knew I was supposed to keep my eyes closed, but I needed to do something to distract myself from attending only to my sore knees and back. In the dim light I could see Baba sitting on his chair, meditating. He looked so peaceful. Within a minute of my starting to look at him, he opened his eyes, turned his head slowly toward the side of the room where I was sitting, looked right at me, and the space between us suddenly contained a beautiful, golden ribbon of light. This
soft, palpable light seemed to come out of his left eye and enter my right eye and then 
emerge to complete the loop from my left eye to his right. I could feel this light 
continuously entering and leaving me. It felt almost grainy.

I stopped breathing, stunned by this amazing process. As all this was happening, I began 
to feel tiny, rapid puffs of air on my left cheek, and when I looked down to see what was 
happening, I saw a small hummingbird with an iridescent greenish throat. It was hovering 
close to my face, and it was drinking or sipping the tears that were welling up in my eye. 
I silently proclaimed to myself, "I am a feeding station for a saint!" I have no idea how 
these visions subsided, but before long I was sitting in my place on the floor struggling to 
preserve the details and the meaning of what I had experienced.

Sentences began to come and go. I thought, "Baba and I are linked together." I 
remembered the biblical passage in which Paul sensed he had been apprehended, seized, 
laid hold of. I remembered how Don Juan insisted that Carlos Castaneda had not chosen 
him; he, Don Juan, had grabbed Carlos in the bus station. More than simply connected, I 
too felt drawn toward Baba, but these profound constructions of my new reality were just 
beginning to take root.

Baba’s two-week stay was coming to a close. Jean, Perry and I crept stealthily around his 
house in the woods, hoping to catch a last glimpse of him, and then we drove home 
through the brilliant orange, red, and yellow leaves of early fall. Baba colors, we called 
them.