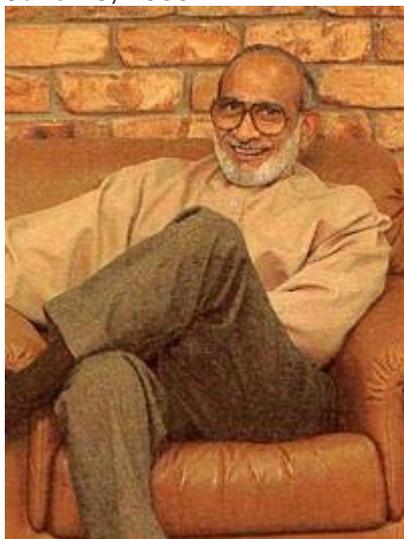


The guru, his wife and the followers

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Vijayadev Yogendra in 1990.

Photo: *Queensland Business Magazines*

He intimated that he could cure cancer, but died of it. He denounced material wealth but was worth millions. He counselled Melbourne's elite and helped the poor. Peter Ellingsen unravels the mystery of Vijayadev Yogendra

The summer sun would have been streaming in the window of her luxurious Port Douglas home when former party girl Kate Ellis systematically tagged her personal possessions, and scribbled her upbeat suicide note.

"Please don't be sad," she wrote to her cousin, Leanne Stratford. "This is something I have willingly and intentionally done. I am not depressed or disturbed in any way." Ellis, 41, bright and bubbly and flush with funds, had planned it meticulously. In mid-January, she made out her will, providing, among other things, \$30,000 a year for her eight-year-old Jack Russell, "Moti" and now, in February, she was explaining her decision to force down 150 pills. "I have a belief that you don't die, that you pass on to another stage of life," she wrote to Stratford shortly before collapsing onto her bed beside a patchwork of opened pharmaceutical boxes.

Fifteen hundred kilometres away, on the Gold Coast, her parents, Judy and Tom Ellis, were settling in for the night, unaware their daughter was about to take her life. They had not seen Kate for seven years, ever since the man who claimed to know all about reincarnation, Indian-born yoga teacher Vijayadev Yogendra, counselled, then courted her. Yogendra, an enigmatic figure who shaped hundreds of lives, winning the endorsement of high-flyers ranging from former Royal Commissioner Tony Fitzgerald to dual gold medallist Kieran Perkins, was, according to Tom Ellis, a Rasputin who brainwashed then wed his no-nonsense daughter.

Ellis - 33 years his junior - was Yogendra's second wife (he had three children with his first), but in an extraordinary odyssey, starting in Melbourne in 1964, the self-proclaimed mystic had wooed and won over countless young admirers. Some, like Roger Gillespie, of Australia's biggest bread chain, Baker's Delight, moved on to make major fortunes; others devoted 30 years of their lives, then found themselves not just bewildered, but broke. Many were back in Melbourne trying to digest a trauma they likened to "soul rape".

Handsome and hypnotic, Yogendra, who claimed to have worked for former Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, attracted the support of a former premier of Victoria, Lindsay Thompson, and

former deputy premier of Queensland, Llew Edwards; federal ministers and MPs; Michael Myer, scion of the Myer family; *I Can Jump Puddles* author Allan Marshall; psychoanalyst Dr Frank Graham and a raft of the rich and famous. His life touched the highs and lows, intersecting with Ian Callinan, High Court judge, and Ian Johns, disgraced head of Tricontinental, the bank whose collapse helped bring down the Victorian Labor government in 1992.



James Vale says of his brush with Vijayadev Yogendra: "No regrets, just sorrow that he turned into a nasty person."

Photo: *Cathryn Tremain*

Yogi and yuppie, "Vijay", as he was known, taught free in prisons and founded innovative schools, as well as global empires from which he secretly garnered millions. But who was he? That is what Kate Ellis' parents wanted to know. Who was this 74-year-old who had taken their anything-but-gullible daughter and made her believe not just in him but, it seems, a final gesture that her Catholic upbringing condemned as a mortal sin?

Kate did not tell her cousin when she rang in early February - the night the pills were being emptied from their boxes - but the controversial guru had died a few days before. The man who implied he could cure cancer had succumbed to the disease around Australia Day, though he told his followers he had been poisoned by a spider.

It was news Kate kept to herself as she penned her suicide note. With a silver Mercedes in the drive, blocks of land at the nearby, exclusive Newell Beach and a reported \$1 million in cash, she had money to burn. But, estranged from her family, her mind was not on a material future. "I've had the most wonderful and happy and precious time with Vijay," she wrote to Stratford. "You could not meet a more compassionate, kind and loving man. I could have had 50 years married to him and it may not have been so good. So please, don't be sad; I feel so blessed."

Blessed is not the word Tom Ellis would use. "He was a bastard," the ruddy-faced, 68-year-old retiree says. "I don't think I've met a worse person. He was totally ruthless, no scruples, egocentric, didn't care who he used." Judy, 63, nods. She did not like it when Kate sold the furnished terrace house and MG sports car she and Tom provided, fearing the money would go to Yogendra. But the bigger shock was in 2003 when she learnt of her daughter's secret wedding. It was so devastating she sent Kate her own wedding veil, along with the veil they shared at Kate's first communion in the hope the talismans might persuade her daughter to make contact.

But whatever the allure of the items, it could not match Yogendra's grip. The guru, as he had proved in 40 years in Australia, could make as well as break families. Judy Ellis poured out her heart, telling Kate she was her "much-loved only daughter", and what she was doing was breaking her "Irish mother's heart", but it could not climb over Yogendra's charisma. In common with others who acquire disciples rather than friends, he had the sort of self-regard that could, as Scott Fitzgerald said of his creation Jay Gatsby, convey eternal reassurance. Like Gatsby, the guru had a smile that "concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favour, understanding you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believ(ing) in you as you would like to believe in yourself".

I studied yoga with him when he was in Melbourne and found him compelling. Focused and at ease, he seemed to walk the Eastern wisdom he talked. He was astute and plausible, portraying himself as a humble man who just happened to have a direct line to the divine. Even with - or perhaps because of - unlikely claims, such as his "ability" to predict Melbourne Cup winners, it was a heady mix for altruistic baby boomers.

Michael Myer, grandson of store founder Sidney Myer, has not been involved with him for 20 years, but in the 1970s he was, and explained the appeal. "I had the name - I could have gone on just about any path in society," he said at the time. "But I didn't. I looked around to find there was no vision anywhere." He said Yogendra offered a vision "interested in creating people who could be examples of a better way of life".

Many others, including Roger and Lesley Gillespie, joint heads of Baker's Delight, a \$450 million chain of 700 bread shops, felt the same. The business that has netted them a personal fortune of more than \$100 million, according to the *BRW* list of Australia's 200 wealthiest people, began with a Yogendra-inspired bakery in Ashburton in 1974. At the time, they saw the guru as Christ-like, and wanted to back him. Like scores of others, they worked for little or no pay, embracing his mantra of sacrifice for spiritual growth. While the guru would later accept brown paper bags of cash from another "student", indulging himself with \$100,000 cars, \$10,000 clocks and membership of elite golf clubs, most followers went without. The Gillespies broke with Yogendra in the early '80s, believing he was "immoral and dishonest", but only after spending "a couple of hundred thousand" to bail out his version of utopia.

The Yogendra story beggars belief, and yet, belief is what defines it; that, and paradox. To unravel it, we need to go to Santa Cruz, the former bushland, now suburb, of Mumbai, India's commercial heart. It is here that the name Yogendra has a respected ring. Locals still talk of Shri Yogendra, Vijay's father, founder of the Yoga Institute. Yogendra senior, one of the handful of early 20th century yogis who simplified the practise and brought it to the West, operated without fanfare for little money, a tradition still carried on by his eldest son, Jayadev.

It was not, however, the path chosen by second son, Vijay, who had extravagant tastes and big ideas. After marrying Ivanhoe Grammar girl Jill Campbell in India in the early '60s, he set up yoga centres in Melbourne.

While the early yoga classes were authentic - many still testify to their beneficial effect - they were not enough. Yogendra could use yoga breathing to rid millionaire James Vale of asthma, but, instead of leaving it at that, he encouraged the property developer to donate money. Vale kicked in \$800,000 - worth some \$4 million now - to establish the Helen Vale Foundation, named after his late daughter. It was to be an educational vehicle to change the world, and while it changed lives, it was not - for many, including Vale - a change for the better.

Now 84 and "broke", Vale puzzles at what he sees as the guru-gone-wrong. "No regrets," he says, "just sorrow that he turned into a nasty person, a bastard". Vale donated the money in \$200,000 lots between 1971 and '74. The foundation had its headquarters in Chapel St, St Kilda, in an ornate Victorian building opposite St Michael's Grammar. Through yoga classes at Melbourne universities, Yogendra gathered scores of idealistic young students, eager to absorb his special "knowledge". With an aristocratic Eastern pedigree, it was easy for him to claim the guru role and those attracted to his persuasive story-telling accepted the need to "sublimate their egos". Vale was happy to see his money going to a non-denominational, non-profit school that would provide an emotional and spiritual, as well as orthodox education.

And, it must be said, the school was impressive. With hot meals, few fees and one dedicated teacher for each five students, it set the standard, gathering the attention of Lindsay Thompson and other VIPs who marvelled at the way Yogendra - who also set up classes in Pentridge Prison - realised his vision.

It all seemed to be on track, and then, after a false start establishing a community in Gippsland, Yogendra moved to Warwick, near Toowoomba. Former follower Michael Sherlock, CEO of Brumby's bread chain, another multi-million dollar business the teacher inspired, recalls Yogendra saying he had a vision of Melbourne in flames while on a ride at the royal show. He headed for south-east Queensland, Sherlock says, because Colonel David Hackworth, the most decorated US soldier in Vietnam, thought it was most likely to survive a nuclear war. Hackworth, a model for renegade Colonel Kurtz, played by Marlon Brando in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, fled the US for Queensland about 1980.

Yogendra and 100 followers arrived around the same time, building a school and a collective of 30 homes on the perimeter of Warwick. Vale, after being feted, found himself on the outer. A major problem, he says, was that no one told him the body he funded had changed its name, dumping his daughter's memory for a catchy acronym, THE - Total Health and Education Foundation. "I wasn't welcome after I fell out with Vijay," Vale says. "No one wanted anything to do with me." He retired onto the pension and was rebuffed when he asked for financial help. "Vijay said: 'Go and make another million.' That was the end of my patience," Vale says.

Not everyone felt the same. Tony Fitzgerald, QC, the man who exposed corruption in Queensland, and has been investigating Victoria Police, met Yogendra around this time and found him "calm and charming with a sense of wisdom and desire to help people". Prominent Brisbane architect Graham Bligh agrees and says the attacks by "a handful of people with axes to grind" are obscene. "I was privileged to be an independent student of Vijay for over 20 years," he says. "He was one of a handful of people for whom I would stand on his entering a room, such was my respect." Melbourne businessman John Salomon, 71, started with Yogendra in 1965 and sees him as benevolent. "As a teacher he tried to direct you for your own spiritual development," he says.

That direction, however, was often arbitrary. There was no room to disagree. Anyone who did was told their ego was obliterating the guru's higher purpose. Such alibis mask a lack of transparency and accountability and the abuse that follows. Wendy Linton, a former teacher at the school, says Yogendra kept control by reinforcing low self-esteem. Rosemary Carroll, a member of one of Queensland's oldest legal families, agrees. "He had all these enthusiastic and positive people and while he did have a vision for a wonderful school, he squandered so much by constantly putting people down," she says. Such, of course, is the way of cults, and as Yogendra evolved a baronial lifestyle, some children at the school were heard to refer to themselves as "cult kids".

It started off subtly. The \$512,000 spent on his home at the 800-hectare farm the group purchased in 1980 was to accommodate an office, he told followers. The land, which cost \$250,000 25 years ago and is probably worth several times that now, contained smaller shared houses for the faithful, but they were moved about at the guru's whim. Yogendra, who arranged marriages and other intimate details for his followers, held couples' meetings where he preached fidelity. Covertly he was conducting affairs, several women claim. One, in his inner circle, says he initiated midnight trysts, saying it would free her from her "sexual demons".

While followers were encouraged to live simply, he drove the latest Range Rover, began wearing expensive cologne by Paco Rabanne, and flew first class, always in seat 1A. The farm had a 40 km/h speed limit for everyone except the guru. It was the same with colour TV, and other rules Yogendra imposed via the rotating lieutenants he used to divide and rule. Such indulgence was at odds with his teaching, and the plight of the school teachers, who were paid a pittance. Ray Whitely, a science graduate from Melbourne University, says he was properly reimbursed for just 12 of the 19 years he taught. He kept the accounts for the school and reckons he was under-paid more than \$320,000. In 2003, after giving the school, he says, \$19,000 he received following a car accident, he found himself facing a poverty-stricken retirement, and requested modest help, citing Yogendra's pledge to take care of his flock. School chairman Paul Currie reminded him that teachers had agreed to work for low wages. There were no funds, Currie wrote, adding: "The situation is of our collective making and we are all in the same boat."

Several years before, however, Yogendra had, through one of the companies he inspired, sold some \$4 million worth of shares in natural medicine supplier Mediherb. Even after paying capital gains tax, he was left with a sizeable windfall. Unbeknown to his followers - who were told he was going to a remote location to meditate - he used the money to secretly set up in Port Douglas, where he became a regular at the Sheraton Mirage. The obsession with money, not present in the early days, arose, some say, only after the companies he set up to fund his vision came close to collapse in the 1980s, when the empire was in hock to Tricontinental merchant bank.

Friends in India were now calling him "the businessman" rather than "the yogi", and former followers claim he covertly got hundreds of thousands of dollars from medical fees charged by his medical acolytes at an after-hours Toowoomba surgery. "We were told the money was all going to the school," one of the disillusioned doctors explains. The GP, who asked not to be named, said Yogendra "trained" him to call hospitals and demand celebrity-style treatment when the guru needed medical attention. "He'd get me to say he was a professor of medicine, high-profile doctor," the GP says. Now back in Melbourne, he argues that the 30 or so diehard believers he left behind in Warwick are in denial. "They won't believe what he did."

Belief, more precisely self-belief, is what Kieran Perkins needed going into the 1996 Olympics, and he found it in Yogendra. In 60 visits over the 18 months leading up to Atlanta, the swimmer was given, he says, the tools necessary to win back-to-back 1500-metre finals. "He helped me win a second gold," Perkins says. "The biggest battle going into '96 was the mental one, self-belief, attitude. Before the final I went through highs and lows in how I felt about myself. I've no doubt his techniques and teaching gave me much-needed perspective."

Yogendra did not label the teaching, but the breathing and calming routines were unlike anything Perkins had experienced. "A lot of it was based on tradition," he says. "I hadn't encountered it before. It had a great effect on me. It helped me in the pool and in life. He was a very spiritual man and much of what he taught was an attitude. I don't practise the exercises now but what you might call his teaching - giving others a second chance, his work with wayward kids - goes on." Perkins says Yogendra asked him not to talk about the sessions. "He didn't want anything," he says. "He was doing it to help me. He opened my mind to find the goodness, redeem the spirit." The man Perkins knew - "he never asked me for a cent" - is at odds with the materialist encountered by David Winter, 50, a Monash economics graduate who says Yogendra badgered him for money. Winter, who ran some of the guru's businesses in the '80s, says the teacher always wanted more cash. "I gave millions to the foundation," he says. "The experience hurt me severely. It hurt my marriage, took away everything I worked for. I'm still deeply bitter and hurt. I lost 25 years of my life. I'm delighted that the school survived, but I'm appalled by what I've finally found out. It's been like a jigsaw puzzle that's taken years to fall into place."

Mark Everson, who now works in international trade, was one who refused to be underpaid. He did not mind working for minimum wages in the '80s helping to set up Mediherb, a business now worth an estimated \$20 million, because, he says, Yogendra promised him 10 per cent equity. But when this was not forthcoming, he took the guru to court, and won a settlement. "You can boil it down to bad faith," Everson, 49, says. His barrister, Mark Martin, chuckles when he recalls the case, which had Ian Callinan, now a High Court judge, acting for Everson. "Yogendra went on with all this spiritual crap," Martin says. "They were outraged that we'd sued God."

Former Melbourne student Alex Gudkovs, chairman of the foundation, is Yogendra's key advocate. Kate Ellis left him the guru's emerald ring and Rolex watch, and he says the school and the guru's work will go on. "Those who could follow what he (Yogendra) said usually found results," he says. "The success he had was to impact positively on just about everyone who knew him." Gudkovs says he was "never troubled" by Yogendra using the titles of doctor and professor. Neither was school principal, Richard Waters, who says he never took seriously the claim about predicting Melbourne Cup winners. "He was the kindest person I ever met," he says. On the claims of Whitely and other disillusioned followers, Gudkovs says: "Nobody was exploited." There was, he says, "no misappropriation of funds by Vijay". The teacher "used money in a constructive, benevolent way".

Sitting in their Main Beach unit, Judy and Tom Ellis shake their heads, still distressed at being barred from Kate's funeral. Gudkovs says they were not included because Judy disowned her daughter, and Kate wanted nothing to do with her family. It is a claim Judy Ellis denies. She says she never stopped loving her daughter and wanting her to return, and still can't understand the sway Yogendra had over her. She is not alone. Many consulted for this story, most of whom did not want to be quoted, remain either pained or perplexed. Some are angry, at him, and at themselves. More than a few were loath to believe he had feet of clay.

It is a common response when dealing with self-proclaimed oracles. South African mystic Sir Laurens van der Post, Prince Charles' guru, left a similar legacy. Many who embraced his philosophy of simplicity still refuse to accept he made up stories and had affairs, partly because he was such a spell-binding orator, and partly because he created beauty, as well as dross. Melbourne psychiatrist Dr Alec Dempster, who knew Yogendra well, thinks the guru did the same and was torn between good and bad. "He taught 'know thyself', which means becoming psychologically autonomous, but he undermined many of his followers' ability to be autonomous," he says. "Because of his narcissism, he had very little guilt or concern at his actions and limited empathy for his loyal students." Referring to Yogendra's estrangement from so many who had believed in him, notably his three children, Dempster says: "By the end he was apparently deceiving himself as much as everyone else."

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