

# **Inner Peace and Global Harmony: Individual Wellbeing and Global Solutions in the Art of Living**

By Stephen Jacobs

## **Abstract**

This paper explores the discourse in the Art of Living (AOL), a Hindu derived transnational meditation movement, which suggests that solutions to global problems are best addressed at the individual level. Ethnographic fieldwork, qualitative interviews and an analysis of published material suggest that the primary concern of the AOL is the reduction of stress and anxiety for the individual practitioner. This reduction of stress not only means that the individual practitioner develops ‘inner peace’, but also contributes to global harmony. AOL is an exemplar of ‘therapeutic solutions’, which are characterized by disillusionment with established institutions and a quest for inner meaning. AOL articulates this therapeutic solution, not only in terms of narcissistic needs, but links this quest for inner meaning to wider social and global concerns.

**Keywords:** Art of Living, spirituality, theodicy, Hinduism, meditation

## Introduction

This paper is an exploration of the therapeutic discourse of the Art of Living (AOL). While AOL (2013a) represents itself as ‘a not-for-profit, educational and humanitarian NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation) engaged in stress-management and service initiatives’ it is problematic to categorise AOL. It can be considered to fall within a number of different categories, all of which indicate some aspect of AOL, but no single descriptor can fully capture this complex global movement. For example AOL can be considered as a self-help movement, a type of meditation, a new manifestation of Hinduism, and a globalised NGO concerned with a variety of social problems. There are three interrelated ways of characterizing AOL: a Hindu-inspired meditation movement (Williamson 2010); alternative spirituality (Heelas 1996 and 2008; Heelas & Woodhead 2005; Partridge 2004 and 2005); and a therapeutic discourse (Rieff 1966; Moskowitz 2001; Illouz 2008).

While participants<sup>1</sup> will assert that AOL is not Hindu, there is no doubt that some of the practices are derived from Hindu traditions. Consequently Williamson’s concept of Hindu-inspired meditation movement is useful in locating AOL. Williamson (2010: 4) indicates that: ‘while the religion of Hindu-inspired meditation movements certainly wear some of the garb of Hinduism, Western traditions of individualism and rationalism also influence the style and ethos of these movements’. AOL can also be understood in terms of Paul Heelas’s concept of ‘self-spirituality’. Heelas (1996: 2) identifies self-spirituality as a large and disparate number of movements which suggest that, ‘the initial task is to make contact with the spirituality that lies within the person’. The term spirituality is often used in AOL discourse. For example the founder and figurehead of AOL Sri Sri Ravi Shankar<sup>2</sup> (1999: 2) suggests, ‘Essentially this quest – Who am I? What is my nature? – is the beginning of the spiritual journey’. However for Sri Sri Ravi Shankar spirituality is not solely about the spirituality within the individual, but is also implicated with social justice. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (2011a) suggests, ‘Spirituality can bring social change. It is spirituality that can bring a sense of responsibility’. By therapeutic discourses, I mean those discourses that are based on what Nicholas Rose calls ‘psy’ which includes psychiatry, psychology and cognate disciplines which explain our existence as ‘individuals inhabited by an inner psychology that animates and explains our conduct’ (Rose 1998: 3). ‘Psy’ has not remained confined to the cantonment of professional practice, but as Eva Illouz (2008) observes has infiltrated many aspects of popular culture. Consequently problems are represented as our own inner failings and the teleology of existence is considered to be personal self-fulfillment. Rieff (1966: 12) argues that therapeutics propose techniques ‘with nothing at stake beyond a manipulatable sense of well-being’. For example, the new International AOL centre in North Carolina

USA<sup>3</sup> is called the Centre for Meditation and Well Being and offers ‘self-development and wellness programs’ (Art of Living 2013b).

AOL was founded by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar in 1981. It is now a global network, claiming to have a presence in over 150 countries. The primary practice of AOL is a rhythmic breathing technique known as *sudarshan kriya*,<sup>4</sup> which according to the AOL official blog, ‘facilitates physical, mental, emotional, and social well-being’ (Art of Living Universe, 2010). Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (2013) explains:

Su means proper, darshan means vision and kriya is a purifying practice. The Sudarshan Kriya literally means a purifying practice, whereby one receives a proper vision of one’s true self. The practice is instrumental in creating a sense of harmony in the body, mind and spirit.

*Sudarshan kriya* is promoted as a way of becoming stress free and improving the quality of life. However, this sense of subjective wellbeing and the possibility of improving the quality of life for the individual are articulated with global concerns. One of the major tropes of the AOL is that developing one’s own individual and internal wellbeing will contribute to solving global problems. The practices taught by the Art of Living will have a transformative effect on the individual practitioner, which inevitably has a positive impact on the world at large – inner peace will bring about global harmony. Conversely, AOL has also developed an ethos of concern for others, which manifests in the discourse of service. This discourse of service suggests that helping others has therapeutic benefits. Working towards global harmony contributes to a sense of subjective wellbeing. In other words AOL suggest a fundamental interconnection between the inner life of the individual and the external social environment. Creating a sense of harmony at the level of body mind and spirit concomitantly transforms the social and global context and visa versa in a mutually reinforcing dynamic.<sup>5</sup>

A theme that comes up again and again in AOL literature, in the discourses of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, and in conversation with participants is the suggestion that AOL is concerned with fundamental human values. When asked why she thought that AOL managed to attract people from very different cultures, a senior teacher who now travels around the world suggested:

Because it [the techniques of AOL] works. Fundamentally it is universal knowledge, universal values. The whole thing is based on universal wisdom and essential human values. All cultures, creeds and whatever have a resonance with that.

Lola Williamson in her discussion of Hindu-inspired meditation movements suggests that these movements lie ‘combine aspects of Hinduism with Western values ‘ and consequently lie ‘at the conjunction of two world views’ (2010: ix). This synthesis of Hindu ideas and Western values can be identified in AOL. On the one hand the repetition of Hindu *mantras*, devotional singing (*kirtan*) and the use of various hand gestures (*mudra*) are all significant aspects of AOL practice. Every Monday morning on the ashram in Bangalore a complex Hindu ritual, called *Rudra Puja*, is performed. *Sudarshan kriya*, the core practice of AOL, is a type of

*pranayama* (literally control of the breath), which is a central feature of what might be called traditional yoga. On the other hand Western concepts of individualism and rationality are also significant tropes in AOL discourse. Furthermore, many of the Hindu derived aspects of AOL have largely been disconnected from the quest for liberation from the wheel of transmigration and metaphysical speculation, and re-articulated in terms of reducing stress. For example the AOL website suggests the rationale for performing *Rudra Puja* in the following terms:

The world is a play of energy: negative and positive. When we pray to Shiva – the Lord of transformation – the entire negative energy around us in form of disease, depression, and unhappiness gets transformed into peace, prosperity and joy. Then peace surrounds us in body, mind and soul. (Art of Living, 2013c)

This interpretation of the *Rudra Puja* can be linked to the subjective turn in modern culture. The subjective experience of ‘peace, prosperity and joy’ is what validates the performance of the ritual, and not the sacred hierarchy in which the deity Shiva is regarded as an external and transcendent form of authority.

### **Creating a Sense of Individual Wellbeing**

The proliferation of self-spirituality, in what Heelas and Woodhead (2005) have identified as a ‘spiritual revolution’ is linked to the concepts of the autonomous self, individual choice, and personal fulfillment. These concepts can be subsumed under the generic term individualization, which Zygmunt Bauman (2000: 31) suggests, ‘consists of transforming human identity from a “given” into a “task”’. This task of identity making has produced what Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2001: 7) have termed ‘a tyranny of possibilities’. This tyranny of possibilities seems to have given a particular urgency to the perennial questions of ‘who am I and what do I want’. At the same time there has been a general disillusionment with the traditional institutions and ideologies, which in the past had provided credible responses to these existential questions. This has created a context for what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001: 7) have identified as ‘a market for answer factories’. Many of these answer factories are purveyors of therapeutic solutions to the existential anxiety raised by the fundamental and perennial questions of identity and meaning. The term therapeutic solutions suggests a gamut of techniques proposed by the various answer factories that are solely intended to produce a sense of wellbeing. This sense of wellbeing is often couched in terms of being in harmony with both one’s inner self and the world. These therapeutic answer factories, exemplified by movements such as AOL, can be seen as a response to what Kieran Flanagan (2007: 5) has called ‘the limits of disbelief’. The subjective turn and the disillusionment with grand-narratives have been instrumental in prompting individuals who feel isolated and alienated in this postmodern context to seek alternative providers of meaning, connection and authority.

The therapeutic solutions offered by groups such as AOL, which although derived from the Hindu religious tradition, tend to downplay the quest for liberation. Consequently, as Philip Rieff (1966: 16) points out ‘therapeutics requires no doctrine’ and the credo of therapeutics ‘I feel’ has superseded the ‘I believe’ of religions. Personal experience, rather than faith, validates the therapeutic. Many members of AOL, for example report that they had very powerful experiences on doing *sudarshan kriya* for the first time, and/or suggest that AOL has transformed their lives. One senior teacher who has been an active member of AOL for over seventeen years indicated that her first experience of doing *sudarshan kriya* made her feel ‘more and more myself’ and that she felt ‘very beautiful from inside and so comfortable with myself’. These feelings were not something that she had had at any other point in her life. After this experience she went on to do a five-day meditation course, which involved keeping absolutely silent. She observed that after taking this course:

Something in me was getting more and more pure, more and more open and clearer. I can now understand things better, I am able to handle situations better. I am not getting carried away with my emotions, which I used to. So I was finding a concrete change within myself.

Furthermore, she indicated that other people observed a change for the better in her. Later on as a teacher in AOL, like many of the other teachers I spoke to, she indicated that she noticed transformations in many of the people that she taught. As with many of the holistic activities discussed by Heelas and Woodhead (2005: 29) the focus of AOL practice is ‘on enhancing the quality of subjective life’.

Look through the literature and listen to what participants say about AOL, and you are very hard pressed to find any clear doctrine. In fact one could argue that the doctrine of AOL is anti-doctrine. A full time committed member from South Africa who was working on the ashram in Bangalore told me:

I have never ever in all the years [that I have been involved in AOL] heard a teacher say ‘you have to believe this or you have to follow this’... The beauty of AOL is that there is no indoctrination, there are no rules.

The emphasis is on technique, rather than doctrine. The Sanskrit term *sadhana*, which in Hinduism traditionally refers to the practices and disciplines required to achieve liberation from the cycle of transmigration, is used by AOL to indicate the techniques to transform life in the here and now. One AOL teacher typically suggested that AOL is not about belief but that, ‘regular and consistent practice does change the way that you think and feel for the better’. Later on she suggested, ‘it is not my goal to get enlightened. I am doing this because right now here in this lifetime those moments of complete bliss are so wonderful’.

The attenuation of doctrine and the emphasis on practice are associated with the idea that AOL is not a religion, but spirituality. Religion is associated with institutional forms, and is often regarded as anachronistic, irrelevant and hypocritical, whereas spirituality is articulated in terms of personal authentic experience.

This suggestion that religion is about external practices and therefore rather superficial, while spirituality signifies the core values that underlie all religions is a common theme in those therapeutic solutions that can be said to have a religious dimension. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar in a frequently cited aphorism suggests that, 'Religion is like the banana skin and spirituality is the banana. People have thrown away the banana and are holding onto the skin' (Sri Sri Ravi Shankar 1999: 3). Consequently AOL can claim to transcend all religious differences and be relevant to people of all faiths and none. However as Jeremy Carrette and Richard King (2005: 31) point out, the term 'spirituality' is 'a vague signifier that is able to carry multiple meanings without any precision'. Certainly, from talking to participants in AOL and reading their literature, the idea of spirituality tends to be rather vague. Expressions like 'spirituality is being comfortable with your self' as one informant suggested, or as another participant indicated, 'spirituality is the sense of who you are and your connection with the bigger picture', are commonly used.

There is a clear correlation between discourses about spirituality and what Christopher Lasch (1991: xvi) has termed 'psychological man', who is 'haunted not by guilt but by anxiety. He seeks not to inflict his own certainties on others, but to find meaning in life'. A central question is to what extent is 'psychological man', haunted by anxiety and on a therapeutic quest, purely a narcissistic individual only concerned with his or her own wellbeing? Many commentators suggest that the answer factories that fall under the generic, albeit vague, rubric of spirituality are simply manifestations of consumer culture selling therapeutic solutions to alleviate anxiety, and that this is ultimately the antithesis of a Durkheimian understanding of religion as binding people into a coherent moral community.

Jeremy Carrette and Richard King (2005) argue that New Age Spiritualities are no more than another type of transnational capitalist corporation simply selling a product. The good life is achieved through consumer products, which not only includes the latest technological gadgets, the most effective beauty products, exotic holiday destinations, and the most in vogue style, but also the latest fad in therapeutic solutions. These therapeutic solutions are simply selling products in response to the consumer mantra 'Because You're Worth It' as the *L'Oréal* advertisements constantly remind us. Steve Bruce (2006: 43) argues that these New Age Spiritualities not only fail to challenge the inequalities of society, but fundamentally do not transform the individual – the banker who practices yoga and meditation still is a banker (with his/her excessive pay). Carrette and King argue that spirituality can be characterized as '*cultural prozac*' that only provides 'transitory feelings of ecstatic happiness' but fails to address 'the underlying problem of social isolation and injustice' (2005: 77).

There are many answer factories that sell therapeutic solutions as another product that will solely make the consumer feel better about themselves, in the same way as purchasing a shampoo or new car are marketed as making us feel

good. There are Ayurvedic spas offering to pamper you. You can purchase meditation machines that promise an easily achievable state of deep meditation by listening to recorded sounds through headphones and simultaneously looking at pulsating lights while wearing glasses equipped with LEDs. There is definitely a market for quick fixes for the perceived stresses of modernity. AOL promotes itself as a technique for eliminating stress. One gets involved in AOL by going on one of their many courses, which are sold as ‘practical wisdom for improving the quality of life’ (Art of Living, 2013d).

AOL runs numerous courses,<sup>6</sup> none of which are particularly cheap. One first has to take the introductory course, which is called ‘The Art of Breathing’, but recently rebranded as ‘The Happiness Course’. In this course, which is generally lasts two and a half days, participants are taught the technique of *sudarshan kriya*. Having undertaken the introductory course it is then possible to take a number of what AOL calls ‘Graduate Courses’. The Art of Silence Course is a four or five day residential course held in one of the AOL centres. Most of this course is held in silence, which ‘provides optimal conditions for going deep within, quieting our mental chatter and experiencing deep rest and inner peace’ (Art of Living 2013e). ‘The Art of Meditation Course’, which is also known as Sahaj Samadhi Meditation, which ‘almost instantly alleviates the practitioner from stress-related problems’ (Art of Living 2013f). At the end of these courses it is emphasized that the course is not simply a one-off, but that one should repeat the courses on a regular basis<sup>7</sup>.

AOL also has a vast commercial enterprise. Through its various websites and outlets AOL sells a wide range of products. There is an ever-expanding literature produced by AOL. This literature includes: discourses by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar; his commentaries on various Hindu texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita*; and confessional biographies by devotees which recount how the author’s life has been transformed through participating in AOL.<sup>8</sup> AOL produces and markets CDs of Hindu devotional music, many of which have been rearranged in more contemporary musical forms. For example AOL have produced a CD entitled *Cosmic Trance: Bhajans for Youth*, which sets Hindu devotional songs and chants to an electro dance beat. CDs of guided meditations and yoga DVDs are also available. The DVD of *Sri Sri Yoga* indicates on its back cover: ‘Energize your body, relax your mind with this short and powerful 20 minute sequence of Yogasanas’. AOL also produces a range of ayurvedic products and cosmetics. *Ojasvita*,<sup>9</sup> for example, which is a chocolate-flavoured herbal energizer drink, is promoted as giving ‘power and vitality’.<sup>10</sup>

While there clearly is an aspect of the ‘Because You’re Worth It’ syndrome in AOL discourse, I will argue in the rest of the paper that AOL is not merely a therapeutic consumer product, or cultural prozac to use Carrette and King’s term, sold to make individuals feel good about themselves, but can inspire some members to actively engage with the world. This concern for others may be identified as en-

gaged spirituality. This term derives from the concept of engaged Buddhism, which suggests that ‘the transformation of the self and the transformation of the world [are] indivisible’ (Network of Engaged Buddhists 2013). Engaged spirituality leads to a collective sense of identity that cultivates a community of believers and can contribute to creating a sense of obligation to those outside of the community.

In order to argue that AOL constitutes a mode of engaged spirituality, and to dispute the simple cultural prozac hypothesis of Carrette and King, which would suggest that participation in AOL is no more than the purchase of transitory well-being, I will refer to Colin Campbell’s concept of theodicy. Campbell (2007: 166) defines theodicies as ‘cultural systems that specifically serve to meet the universal human need for meaning at the highest level’. Campbell argues that theodicies have both ‘a cognitive component’, which is a systematic explanation of reality, and also ‘an emotional component’. Theodicies are not only about sense-making, but also about feeling. Campbell (2007: 167) suggests that:

Theodicies typically offer a framework of meaning that enables individuals both to experience catharsis and, more specifically, to translate such negative feelings as fear, anxiety, and despair into positive ones of calm, confidence, optimism, and contentment.

These two components of theodicies can clearly be identified in AOL discourse. AOL teaching clearly has a cognitive component linked to the emotional component. For example, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (2006: 14) suggests that, ‘Many people have a problem of letting go of control, causing anxiety, restlessness and soured relationships’. So here Sri Sri provides an explanation for anxiety and a formula for emotional catharsis. Through the practices (*sadhana*) of AOL the participant will feel less need to control the external context, and therefore transform the negative emotions of anxiety and restlessness into a sense of wellbeing, and consequently will be able to establish better relationships with others.

Campbell goes on to suggest that ‘people desire meaningful experiences in addition to a meaning for their experiences’ (2007: 168). Clearly *sadhana*, as a set of therapeutic practices in AOL provides meaningful experiences for the individual participant. Many participants in AOL suggest that life before AOL did not have much meaning, and that their involvement with AOL provided something that was missing in their lives. A member of AOL who now works full-time on the ashram in Bangalore, indicated that a few years previously he reflected on his life as a successful creative writer for a major advertising company. This reflection led to him thinking that there must be more to life than work, marriage and children. This informant had taken the Part One Course, and was doing some volunteer work for AOL in his spare time. He suggested that his participation in AOL ‘was giving him more happiness than the small cubicle that I was sitting in [at work]’. He reflected that at the time he felt that he needed ‘to do something more con-

structive, more fulfilling, more satisfying, and this [full time participation in AOL] gave me that’.

Campbell also suggests that theodicies have a moral component and some indication of how to act in the world. This suggests that meaningful experiences are not only about individual personal transformation, but also can include an urge to ‘put the world to rights’. Campbell argues ‘that this need is, in turn, closely correlated to have proof of one’s own significance’ (2007: 168). Effective theodicies ‘Supply a credible interpretation of life’s vicissitudes while also providing a purpose, that is to say, it will be experienced as both convincing and *inspiring* (Campbell 2007: 170).<sup>11</sup> This purposive and moral dimension of theodicies finds expression in AOL discourse in what members and the literature refer to as *satsang*, which roughly translates as ‘good company’ and ‘*seva*’, which can be translated as ‘service’.

### **A Global *Satsang*: The Communal Aspect of AOL**

*Satsang*, although a traditional Hindu practice, has become increasingly significant in many contemporary Hindu and Hindu-inspired meditation movements. *Satsang* has three interconnected connotations: being in the company of the *guru*, the association with fellow devotees, and a group of people gathered together for devotional purposes. The third connotation indicates a congregational aspect to Hinduism, and is a prevalent practice in many contemporary Hindu ashrams (see Jacobs 2010: 44-45). Every evening on the AOL ashram at Bangalore there is a *satsang*, which consists of devotional singing and a discourse, normally based around Hindu texts. Many AOL events are promoted as *satsangs*. In May 2011 an event was held in a Hindu temple and community centre in Birmingham, UK with one of the senior AOL teachers, which was advertised as ‘Satsang with Rishi Nityapragya’. The flyer indicated that the event would be, ‘Life transforming practical wisdom, deep blissful meditation as soul stirring melodies’. Rishi Nityapragya is regarded as one of the best singers in AOL, and the evening consisted of a short talk about the nature of happiness, singing of Hindu devotional songs (*bhajans*) and a question and answer session. The event finished with a short guided meditation.

The communal aspect of *satsang* brings into play Durkheim’s functional understanding of religion as binding individuals into a single moral community. A great deal of emphasis is placed on the concept that AOL is ‘a one world family’, and that it has centres in more than 150 countries. Many committed members of AOL indicate that they feel a connection with other members of AOL, no matter where they are from. This sense of a collective identity was exemplified in the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of AOL, held in Berlin in July 2011. Superficially the Berlin event was like any world music festival such as WOMAD, with performances by musicians and dancers from various parts of the world, and food tents serving

various national cuisines. A number of artists sang traditional Hindu devotional songs, but often in a Western style. One of the most popular was an Argentinean duo called the *So What*, who organise what they call Yoga Raves.<sup>12</sup> *So What* performs Hindu devotional songs utilising various western popular musical conventions, such as dance beats and hip-hop.<sup>13</sup> *So What's* vision is that their performances, in Berlin and other venues:

Will bring the spiritual element back to celebration and the way we have fun, offering a drug free alternative for our youth to gather and release their energy and tension. In the words of Art of Living Founder Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, 'from the intoxication that depletes the energy to intoxication that brings enlightenment'. (Yoga Rave, n.d.)

The World Culture Festival was designed as a grand spectacle. It was a rather ambitious, but deeply symbolic strategy to use the Berlin Olympic Stadium, which has the capacity to accommodate over 110,000 people. AOL in the promotional material on the web indicated that they anticipated 70,000 people to attend. It was an unusually cold, wet and windy July, and often the stadium looked less than a quarter full. However, AOL claim that 50,000 people attended the event (Nambiar 2011: 3). The other spectacular aspects of the event were various performances such as a grand guitar ensemble with 200 guitars, and a hoped-for 1,000 people participating in a Bulgarian folk dance.

On another level the World Cultural Festival was a New Age gathering focused on self-spirituality. A compère in one of the world pavilions where music and dance performances were taking places introduced the acts with a plethora of therapeutic aphorisms such as: 'Feel connected to your inner silence. This inner silence is the core of our being. It connects us all. Do you feel connected to each other?'. There was a yoga pavilion, where attendees could take lessons in yoga and meditation. Numerous flyers were handed out advertising all sorts of holistic therapeutics, such as the Love Peace Harmony Institute, which offered to 'awaken the healing power of the soul'; New Age Travel companies offered Ayurvedic vacations etc. There was also a large marquee selling DVDs, CDs and books about AOL.

On a third level, the World Culture Festival resembled a quasi-political rally. In between the cultural performances in the main arena there were numerous speeches by various dignitaries. These speeches all stressed the way in which AOL brings harmony at an individual and a global level. For example, Professor Ruud Lubbers, a former Prime Minister of the Netherlands suggested that:

All people of this world are connected to each other and to nature in its magnificent diversity. We all have a common destination and that is to live in harmony with ourselves, with our neighbourhood, with all peoples and with nature. (Lubbers 02/07/2011)

What these three aspects of the World Culture Festival – the cultural, the spiritual and the quasi-political – all had in common was an emphasis that global security

was contingent upon inner harmony. *Sadhana* – the therapeutic practices of AOL is not only presented as the ultimate panacea for individual existential anxiety, creating a subjective sense of wellbeing, but also is regarded as the foundation for curing global ills. *Sadhana* is therefore perceived to operate on three interconnected levels of being – the individual, the community of believers and the global. *Satsang* could therefore be said not only to encompass the moral community in the Durkheimian sense, but also implicitly suggests a much more universally inclusive sense. The implication is that if you connect with your own inner self, you will realize the innate connection that you have with all of creation. Therefore AOL *sadhana* not only creates an individual sense of wellbeing, but also is instrumental in evoking the concept of a global *satsang*, expressed in terms of ‘a one world family’.

### **Seva: Concern for Other’s Wellbeing**

This link between the subjective existential sense of wellbeing with the global environment is captured by a comment made in an interview with a senior member of AOL in the UK: ‘When you feel happy within yourself and more at ease with life, and you are less stressed, you are more inclined to naturally want to help other people’. This observation alludes to the third important aspect of AOL praxis, which is called *seva*, which Gwilym Beckerlegge (2006: 1) defines as ‘religiously motivated service to humanity’. Although the term *seva* originally referred to service in and for a temple, and Beckerlegge (2008: 783) suggests was virtually a synonym for ritualistic offerings to a temple image known as *puja*, it has now acquired a connotation of charitable work.

The concept of religiously motivated service can be traced to two ancient Hindu antecedents. First are the criticisms of Hindu society by the religious poets and mystics such as Kabir (1398-1448) who were founders of a diverse set of groups, which are collectively referred to as the *bhakti* movement. Despite the great diversity of these groups, all suggest that liberation is available to all regardless of caste or gender. Some commentators have argued that the *bhakti* movement acted as an important stimulus for a demand for social justice (see Beckerlegge 2006: 8). The second antecedent for the perception of *seva* as service to humanity is the concept of *karma yoga*. The idea of *karma yoga*, which is most clearly articulated in the important Hindu text *The Bhagavad Gita*, suggests that actions should be performed for their own sake and not for the hope of any reward. However Swami Vivekananda (1863 -1902), who founded the Ramakrishna Mission, was the first important Hindu advocate of organized service to humanity as central to the religious life (see Beckerlegge 2006). Since the active and organized involvement of the Ramakrishna Mission in humanitarian projects at the end of the nineteenth century, *seva* as signifying philanthropic and charitable activity, and as an inher-

ent aspect of spiritual practice (*sadhana*) is now central to most Hindu and Hindu-inspired meditation movements.

In AOL *seva* is regarded as an important dimension of *sadhana* and has two aspects. The first aspect pertains to service to the organisation itself. This includes doing some sort of chore. For example when you do the Advanced Course at the International HQ in Bangalore, all participants are expected to do some work – normally either in the kitchen or helping clean the accommodation. *Seva* also includes teaching courses and any of the tasks required to maintain and expand a complex multi-national organization. However, *seva* also involves various charitable ventures. In 1997 Sri Sri Ravi Shankar founded a sister organisation to AOL called the International Association for Human Values (IAHV), which styles itself as an international humanitarian and educational NGO. The mission statement of IAHV describes itself as ‘a global platform for humanitarian initiatives that solve problems by uplifting human values’ (IAHV 2012). It does this through a number of projects, most of which are primarily promoted in terms of reducing stress for various groups, such as soldiers returning from war, prisoners, victims of natural disasters and school children.

For example, the *YES for Schools* project is characterised as ‘breathing life into education’. It offers young people ‘practical tools and life skills to manage stress and emotions’. *YES*, which is an acronym for Youth Empowerment Seminar, involves going into schools and running a thirty-hour course. The course has three aspects focusing on a healthy body, a healthy mind and a healthy lifestyle. Under the heading of a ‘healthy mind’ the *Yes for Schools*’ web site (2011) indicates that it teaches ‘Targeted breathing techniques that reduce stress, anger, anxiety and depression; improve focus and concentration; and enhance learning ability’. *Yes for Schools* proposes ‘Changing our schools one student at a time’. In other words social change and wider changes are contingent upon individual transformation, which is achieved through the techniques of AOL.

AOL, and in particular the sister organization IAHV are involved in bringing practical benefits to people in disaster areas around the world. IAHV projects include providing material aid and care for victims of disaster such as the Haiti earthquake in 2010 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Many of the crisis interventions also involve development projects, such as rebuilding schools, and creating community gardens for growing food. However, the main focus is on alleviating trauma and reducing stress through teaching AOL techniques. According to Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (2012b), ‘Unless the trauma is released, food and medicines will not work. People cannot eat or sleep because their mind is full of the terrible tragedy that has befallen them’. In a similar vein the European director of *Prison SMART* (Stress Management and Rehabilitation Training), the IAHV programme that works with offenders pointed out that in a recent survey of prisoners in a pilot project in a UK prison over 90% of the prisoners who took the programme reported that they felt hopeful about their future and over 70% indicated that they were

now better at controlling their tempers.<sup>14</sup> At the annual meeting of IAHV UK volunteers held in London in January 2014, the director indicated that making a significant change in the inner lives of individual prisoners had the potential to make a significant transformation in the prison environment and make a major contribution in reducing the likelihood of reoffending. Consequently there is a clear connection between the amelioration of stress at the individual level and the transformation of society.

*Seva* is not only about service to others, but also has therapeutic benefits. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar suggests that the more you serve other people the happier you yourself will feel, conversely ‘if your goal is just to please yourself, depression is sure to follow’ (Sri Sri Ravi Shankar 2006: 62). In response to a question about how to improve one’s experience of meditation Sri Sri Ravi Shankar responded:

If you are not having good experiences in meditation, then do more *seva* you will gain merit and your meditation will be deeper. When you bring some relief or freedom to someone through *seva*, good vibrations and blessings come to you. *Seva* brings merit; merit allows you to go deep in meditation; meditation brings back your smile. (Art of Living 2013g)

One of the exercises that participants are asked to do on the introductory course is to perform ‘a random act of kindness’. This involves performing some small altruistic act in a spontaneous way, preferably for a stranger. When the course reconvenes, participants are asked about how they felt about this task, and it is suggested that although an altruistic task should be carried out without any expectation it can create a sense of wellbeing.

Conversely one must feel good about oneself in order to be able to serve others. For example the mission statement of the IAHV (2006) suggests ‘that unless the individual’s spirit is lifted, one cannot be an instrument for positive change in society’. This suggests a dialectic relationship between individual wellbeing and social service: feel good about yourself and you will be naturally be inclined to help others, serve others and you will feel better about your self.

## Conclusion

AOL has grown into a highly successful transnational movement. One of the reasons for its success is that its anti-doctrine doctrine is clearly commensurate with the postmodern disillusionment with grand narratives. However, as Campbell (2007: 168) argues, there seem to be innate human compulsions to imbue life experiences with meaning and at the same time to seek meaningful experiences. For many people neither traditional forms of religiousness nor science seem to supply adequate narratives to explain the vicissitudes of life or provide meaningful experiences. Disillusionment with both traditional sources of meaning and the institutions of modernity has led to what Roof (1999: 9) describes as an ‘effusive quest culture’ in which increasing numbers of people seek meaning and meaningful

experiences in alternative arenas. In response to this 'effusive quest culture' there has been a proliferation of answer factories that aim to provide both credible responses to existential concerns and significant experiences for the individual. Many of these answer factories, such as AOL, may be considered as theodicies, supplying both meaning and meaningful experiences in the face of a perceived tyranny of possibilities where the 'melting power' of modernity (Bauman 2000: 6-7) has dissolved all certainty.

Those theodicies that have a quasi-religious dimension can be classified in terms of what Heelas (1996) has identified as self-spirituality. Self-spirituality can be understood as a form of therapeutics which promotes various techniques that promise the individual a sense of personal fulfillment and wellbeing. Many people, particularly after the romanticisation of Eastern culture by the counter-culture, turned East (see Cox 1979) to find various therapeutics techniques in yoga and meditation, and this led to the proliferation and popularity of Hindu-inspired meditation movements. However it is simplistic to view these movements, as Carrette and King (2005: 87) have suggested as only 'colonising and commodifying Asian wisdom traditions', in order to enable the individual to feel better about themselves physically and/or psychologically. While the quest for liberation and complex metaphysical speculation are often very attenuated in these therapeutically orientated Hindu-inspired meditation movements, individual wellbeing is not the exclusive or necessarily the predominant preoccupation of participants. Movements such as AOL might be classified as engaged spirituality, which perceive that individual wellbeing and global harmony are inherently linked. In AOL, the concepts of *satsang* (community) and *seva* (service to others) evoke a sense of connection and ethical concern for others, not only in the Durkheimian sense of a moral community, but in the global sense encapsulated in the AOL maxim of 'a one world family'.

Two factors contribute to the success of AOL as a theodicy for many seekers of meaning and meaningful experiences. Firstly, AOL operates at both an individual and global level, suggesting solutions to both individual existential needs and global concerns. Secondly, AOL provides these personal and universal solutions without fixing these solutions within a rigid grand narrative. AOL functions as a symbolic resource that enables people to select whatever aspects suit their personal disposition. AOL discourse enables the devotee to be both the pampered individual and altruistic global citizen. You can do this by being a Hindu, a Muslim, a New Ager or even an atheist without compromise as AOL claims to transcend and include all particularities of culture and faith. Consequently, AOL can be perceived as a therapeutic solution that provides a range of practices that can provide a renewed sense of belonging and purpose in the uncertainty of the postmodern context. It creates a sense of belonging through a reinterpretation of the Hindu concept of *satsang*. The notion of *satsang* is not so much a community of believers, but a transnational network of practitioners, who share a vision of a 'stress

free violence free society'. Purpose is provided through a reinterpretation of the concept of *seva*, in which helping others help themselves, ultimately contributes not only to creating a better world, but also to the individual's wellbeing.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> There is a problem of determining the best term for people who engage with AOL practices, and indeed there is no consensus in AOL – some people feel that they are devotees, followers, or believers while others suggest that they are members. Rather than trying to coin some obscure neologism, I will simply use the neutral and deliberately vague term 'participant', with the implication that different individuals participate in AOL in quite different ways.
- <sup>2</sup> Not to be confused with the famous sitar player Ravi Shankar. There are some anecdotal accounts that suggest that Sri Sri Ravi Shankar uses two honorifics to distinguish himself from the musician.
- <sup>3</sup> The property and over 300 acres of land in the Blue Ridge mountains were purchased by AOL in 2011 and was formally inaugurated by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar in 2012.
- <sup>4</sup> I have not used the academic convention of using diacriticals for transliterations of Sanskrit terms, but have used the transliteration and spelling adopted by AOL.
- <sup>5</sup> My thanks to one of the anonymous reviewers for this suggestion.
- <sup>6</sup> For more details about these courses see my forthcoming book *The Art of Living Foundation: Spirituality and Wellbeing in the Global Context*. Ashgate (2014).
- <sup>7</sup> At the end of the Art of Silence Course that I attended in August 2011 in Bangalore, the teacher asked participants how many Art of Silence Courses participants had attended – a great cheer went up for an individual person who had participated in more than twenty Art of Silence courses. The teacher then indicated that we should attend an Art of Silence Course every six months.
- <sup>8</sup> See for example Fischman, M. (2010) *Stumbling into Infinity*. Gautier, F. (2007) *The Guru of Joy*.
- <sup>9</sup> Ojas is a Sanskrit term that roughly translates as spiritual energy – it is particularly used in yoga to refer to the energy created through sexual abstinence.
- <sup>10</sup> For a full list of AOL products see the online store at <http://www.artoflivingshop.eu/>
- <sup>11</sup> My emphasis.
- <sup>12</sup> See <http://www.myspace.com/sowhatproject> and <http://www.yogarave.org/us/>
- <sup>13</sup> There is a long tradition of synthesising Eastern devotional music and western popular music. For example *Mustt Mustt*, a CD released in 1990, is a collaboration between the Sufi singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and the Canadian composer and guitarist Michael Brook. World music festivals often have artists who play devotional music as performance. Purna Das Baul, a musician in the Bengali devotional tradition known as the Bauls, is very popular on the world

music circuit at festivals like WOMAD. However musicians like Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and Purna Das Baul, although they come from devotional traditions, record and play to entertain Western audiences. In other words, the music becomes an aesthetic rather than a religious performance.

- <sup>14</sup> The statistical data from this survey can be found in The Prison SMART UK 2013 report available at [www.iahv.org.uk](http://www.iahv.org.uk)

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