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# Oneness of Different Kinds:
## A Comparative Study of Amma and Bhagavan's Oneness Movement in India and Sweden

**Enhet av olika slag: En komparativ studie av Amma och Bhagavans Oneness rörelse i Indien och Sverige**

Elin Thorsén

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*Supervisor:* Henrik Bogdan

# Abstract

The process of *globalization* is today an increasingly integrated component within the academic field of religious studies. As more and more religious movements work as transnational agents, and have the ability to spread to new cultures very rapidly, the need to study religion from a global perspective has become more important. The thesis takes its starting point in the context of highlighting religion as a transnational culture/institution. This is done by the conducting of a cross-cultural case study on the *Oneness* movement, located to the two different cultural contexts of India and Sweden. Oneness, founded in the 1980's in South India by a couple known as Amma and Bhagavan, started off as a local school, and in less than twenty-five years transformed into what is today an international movement with followers in all parts of the world. Sweden were among the first countries outside of India where Oneness established. The teachings of Oneness can be described as a hybridization of New Age doctrines and traditional Hindu components, and can in themselves be looked upon as an outcome of a process of cultural exchange, and in the end, globalization. The thesis has as its focal point the question to what extent the Oneness movement has adapted to the local culture in its diffusion from an Indian to a Swedish cultural context. Through analysing empirical material in the form of qualitative interviews with followers and participant observations from both India and Sweden, the process of cultural diffusion is mapped out. The analysis of the collected material shows that Oneness does seem to have undergone a process of adaptation when introduced to a new cultural context (i.e. spreading from India to Sweden). Among the most significant changes that have taken place appears to be a difference in the way of perceiving the founders, as well as a shift from Hindu inspired practises towards a more secular approach.



*Keywords*: New Age; Indian spirituality; Oneness movement; Kalki Bhagavan; Deeksha; Globalization and religion; Cross-cultural studies

# Contents

# 1. Introduction

Oneness is a spiritual movement founded in the late 1980´s in Andhra Pradesh, South India, by a couple known as Sri Amma and Bhagavan. According to the movement itself, the work of Amma and Bhagavan seeks to alleviate human suffering at its roots by "awakening" humanity into "Oneness", described as a state beyond the feeling of individual separation. Inner transformation and awakening, it is believed, is not an outcome of a mere intellectual understanding, but a neurobiological process in the brain. The essential work of Oneness consists in the giving of *deeksha*, a kind of energy transmission usually given through the hands or by intention. To receive deeksha is said to effect the neurobiological functions of the brain, and by that reduce stress levels and intensify the levels of love, joy and awareness, and in the end lead to a state of inner awakening into non-duality. One of the characteristic features of Oneness is a millenarian vision of awakening not only a few individuals, but, eventually the whole of humanity into a higher state of consciousness. For the date 21st December 2012, Bhagavan, the founder of the movement, had set as goal to awaken 70 000 people by the giving of deeksha. This would in turn affect the rest of humanity.

Oneness have many of the features generally associated with the New Age movement, such as focus on individual growth and wellbeing, the use of a scientific vocabulary (Frøystad 2006), along with a universalistic outlook and refusal to be categorised in terms of religion (Beyer 2006). At the same time, the Indian origin of the movement is still, in some ways, palpable. The founding couple Amma and Bhagavan are for instance perceived to be *avatars*, divine incarnations. At an earlier stage of the development of the movement, Bhagavan was called *Kalki* (the tenth incarnation of the Hindu deity Vishnu), and Oneness is sometimes still referred to as the "Kalki movement".

The Oneness movement at an early stage started to attract international followers. On the official website (www.onenessuniversity.org) it is said that the movement, since starting to conduct courses in 1989 has reached over 1,5 million people across 126 countries. One of the first Westerners who came into contact with Amma and Bhagavan was Swedish, and thus Sweden became one of the first countries outside India introduced to Oneness (Ardagh 2007:36-37). Today the main centre, called Oneness University, is located outside the village Varadaiahpalem in the South Indian state Andhra Pradesh. There, courses are held regularly for both Indians and Westerners. Courses and deeksha-giving gatherings are also arranged on a more local scale in the different countries where there are initiated deeksha-givers.

## 1.1. Purpose

Due to the rapid spread of the Oneness movement throughout the world in the last two decades, the thesis aims at highlighting the Oneness movement through the perspective of it being a transnational institution. At an early stage of the preparatory work for this thesis it became clear that it would be difficult to get an accurate view of the Oneness movement by focusing explicitly on its agency in only one cultural context. I first came into contact with Oneness and deeksha in Sweden around 2005. At that time, the giving of deeksha was beginning to become a widely spread practise among New Age sympathizers in Sweden, and I perceived Oneness to be a part of the wider New Age movement. A few years later, I came into contact with followers of Oneness in New Delhi, and was struck by the differences that appeared between these Indian followers and their Swedish counterparts. Oneness in India and Sweden, in their external forms, almost seemed to be two completely different movements. The idea then developed of making a comparative study of Oneness in India and Sweden, as an attempt to map out the diffusion of the movement from its original Indian context into a Swedish cultural environment.

It can be added here that no previous research has been conducted on the Oneness movement explicitly – anthropologist Kathinka Frøystad mentions Oneness in her research (presented in more detail in chapter 1.2), but her reference is brief. Thus, the movement is more or less academically unexplored, which makes it all the more relevant to study. Due to the lack of previous research, the thesis is modelled as a case study based on empirical material collected through fieldwork in the form of participant-observation and qualitative interviews with followers of Oneness in India and Sweden. Thus, the source material mainly consists of interviews, participant-observations, and texts (in the form of websites and books produced by the movement itself). The purpose of making this kind of comparative, cross-cultural study based on empirical material is partly to paint an accurate picture of Oneness as a spiritual movement (by providing a historical background, a presentation of basic doctrines etc.), and partly to put light on the *transnational* aspects of the movement. This last point is carried out by locating the fieldwork to the two different cultural contexts of India and Sweden, and then by analysing the collected material through the lens of globalization theories.

The relevance of this study I would argue is twofold: First, Oneness is a movement that in a period of less than twenty-five years has grown from being a local South Indian phenomenon to becoming a global movement with followers on all continents of the world. Put in relation with its fast diffusion around the globe, surprisingly little attention has been

put on Oneness from scholars, in India as well as in other countries. Presenting the growth and spread, as well as the basic doctrines of Oneness thus serves the purpose of filling that gap. Secondly, this study not only aims at presenting Oneness in itself, but also the more abstract process of diffusion of a movement from one culture to another. By providing empirical material on the views of followers, the celebration of functions, courses etc. from two different cultural contexts, it can also add something to the wider discussion on the process of globalization.

## 1.2. Research questions

From the above given purpose of the thesis, the following research questions have been modelled:

*In the process of diffusion of the Oneness movement from an Indian to a Swedish context, to what extent has the Oneness movement adapted to the local culture? Has any significant changes concerning the motivation, aims and practises of followers taken place?*

- What seem to have been the motivational factor for joining the Oneness movement for followers in India and Sweden respectively?

- What are the aims and objectives for joining - e.g. is it for an increased sense of well-being, self-realization, soteriological aims, or any other reasons for followers in India and Sweden respectively?

- Have the practises and rituals performed remained the same in Sweden as in India, or have they been modified, taking on a more localized (glocalized) character?

The first two questions represent the overarching theme of the study, while the following three sub-questions is an attempt to concretise the more abstract research questions. The intention with adding these last points has been to create tangible issues to use as foundation for designing questions used in the qualitative interviews with informants. To only ask whether or not (and in what way) Oneness has adapted to the local culture would be a much too abstract research question to work with. Therefore, I have added the sub-questions about motivation, aims and practises to get a more substantial angle to the research. I found the three above-mentioned themes to be of relevance for the aim of the thesis, and so decided to use them as focal points. While the questions about motivational factors, aims and practises

focus on the individual level of the movement (i.e. the individual experiences and engagement of followers) the participant-observation fills the function of providing material about the organisational level (i.e. organisation of courses and functions, leadership and power structures). The qualitative interviews and participant observations will thus work as complementary in the attempt of making the answers to the research questions as rich and nuanced as possible.

## 1.3. Disposition

This introductive chapter ends with a presentation of previous research in the field of New Age and New Religious Movements in relation with globalization. In chapter 2 the theoretical foundation of the thesis is outlined by a presentation of different theories on globalization. The chapter begins with a more general introduction to the term globalization, and continues with putting globalization in relation with religion. Thereafter follows a sequence dealing with religion as a transnational culture/institution, and an ending note on the cultural dynamics of the Oneness movement. Chapter 3 deals with the methodology of the thesis, and is a continuation of the theoretical framework outlined in chapter two. It starts with a presentation of the method of making qualitative interviews, based on the work of Steinar Kvale, and continues with a discussion about doing ethnographic work and studying religion from a cross-cultural perspective.

Chapter 4 consists of a more in-depth presentation of the Oneness movement, beginning with a historical background, followed by a presentation of doctrines and practises. Here, essential concepts such as *deeksha* and *awakening* will be explained. The chapter ends with a part where Oneness as a movement is put in relation with the two concepts New Age and New Religious Movements. This last part can be read as a reflection about the structural organization of Oneness, as well as how the movement is perceived on a societal level.

In chapter 5 the source material, consisting of the empirical material collected, is presented. More precisely, the presentation of source material consists of an introduction to the physical field of research in the form of informants and the sites for the participant-observations. The reason for introducing the source material at such a late point in the thesis is that it is directly connected with the following chapter 6, which consists of the analytical part of the thesis. In chapter 6 the interviews along with material from the participant-observations collected during fieldwork are put in relation with the research questions, and analysed through the theoretical framework outlined in chapter 2. The research questions

will first be analysed separately one by one, and later on in the chapter they will be put together and analysed as a cohesive entity. This will be followed by some closing reflections on the process of writing this thesis, and the results of it. Lastly, in chapter 7 a brief summary is given. At the end of the thesis two appendixes are attached. The first of them contains the questions used during the qualitative interviews with informants. The second appendix is a presentation of two different *sadhanas* or spiritual practises collected during the fieldwork. These sadhanas are referred to in chapter 6.2. (p. 67), and are attached to provide the opportunity to read in full length for those who wish to go deeper into the different practises recommended by Oneness.

## 1.4. Previous research

Although the Oneness movement has spread to several countries on different continents during the last two decades, I have not found any academic research published specifically about it. Anthropologist Kathinka Frøystad mentions Oneness (at that time called *Golden Age Foundation*) in two of her published papers (2006; 2011), but she does not write on Oneness *per se*. Frøystad's work focuses on the different ways of invoking modern science as a source of legitimacy in the Indian New Age movement. She describes her encounters with some members of Golden Age Foundation in New Delhi as an illustration of how academic titles are used for the purpose of creating an aura of trustworthiness and legitimation for spiritual teachers and counsellors. Frøystad also writes that, to her knowledge, no academic work had been published on the Golden Age Foundation by the time her chapter went to press[1].

Although no previous research on Oneness is to be found, studies of other Indian-originated movements have been carried out from a transnational/globalization perspective. Previously mentioned Kathinka Frøystad (2009) has made an analysis about how the American spiritual community Ananda Sangha, led by Swami Kriyananda, a few years ago managed to settle on the spiritual market of modern, urban India. Kriyananda, being a disciple of the legendary Indian guru Paramhansa Yogananda, in one sense took his guru's teachings back to their country of origin, albeit to a new audience. The case of the resettling of the tradition of Yogananda (and his predecessors) in India is a case of what Frøystad refers to as "return globalization". Frøystad uses the concepts "flow" and "friction and grip", as interpretative framework, both derived from globalization theory. But she also

[1] The book in which Frøystads chapter is included, *Handbook of Religion and the Authority of Science*, was published in 2011.

writes that a case such as the settling of Ananada Sangha in India, to be fully understood, needs to move beyond globalization theory and pay equal attention to the specific religious and cultural circumstances. In this case, Frøystad concludes, one needs to consider the importance put in the Hindu tradition on guru lineages. Swami Kriyananda's success in resettling the tradition of Kriya Yoga was dependent on him being able to refer back to a lineage of respectable Indian gurus, which gave him a source of legitimacy.

Amanda J. Huffner (2011) has written about the tension concerning "Hinduness" arising in many Hindu new religious movements when they become established in other countries and gain a new group of followers. Huffner focus on the South Indian guru Amritanandamayi Ma's (also known as Amma) movement in America. According to Huffner, Amma (as well as most Hindu new religious leaders) use a terminology which emphasize the universal applicability of their teachings by talking about "spirituality" rather than "religion", thus de-emphasizing their specifically Hindu features, in order to garner acceptance in new cultural contexts.

Philip Charles Lucas (2011) has similarly studied what he calls the "Ramana effect" - the impact of the teachings of the South Indian Advaita saint Ramana Maharshi on contemporary Advaita teachers in America. Lucas approaches the teachings of Maharshi by looking at them through two perspectives that he calls "portable practise" and "transposable message". The high portability and transposability of Maharshis Advaita has, according to Lucas, made it attractive to many contemporary teachers, who without much problem can adjust and transmit it to an American audience. In this way a traditional Indian philosophical school can be relevant in a completely different setting than its origin, and appeal to a Western audience.

The *Research Network on New Religions* (RENNER), founded by Danish scholars in 1992, has in the last decade produced a couple of monographs on NRM's, New Age and globalization.[2] In these volumes, a number of scholars have contributed to a greater understanding of the topic by highlighting it from different perspectives. While some contributors have focused on theoretical perspectives, others have presented case studies on particular movements. In these volumes there are some articles with direct relevance to the topic of this thesis. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (2001) and Liselotte Frisk (2001), to take two examples using a more theoretical approach, have both critically examined the New Age movement in the light of globalization, and specifically its claims of universal applicability.

[2] These include, among others, *New Religions and New Religiosity* (1998*), New Age Religion and Globalization* (2001), *New Religions in a Postmodern World* (2003), and *New Religions and Globalization* (2008).

J. Gordon Melton (2001) has made a case study on Reiki, a Japanese-originating healing technique and its spread around the world, in many ways possible through the forces of globalization.

Tulasi Srinivas, in the essay "'A Tryst With Destiny': The Indian Case of Cultural Globalization" (2002) presents a case study of the South Indian guru Sathya Sai Baba as part of an attempt to pin-point aspects of cultural globalization in India. Through analysing the emblems and symbols used by Sai Baba, as well as conducting interviews with members of his international following, Srinivas found the universal rhetoric used by Sai Baba to be effective in spreading the movement to an international audience. In 2010 a book by Srinivas was published on the same theme, called *Winged Faith. Rethinking Globalization and Religious Pluralism through the Sathya Sai Movement*.

An often-cited work on New Religious Movements (NRM) and globalization is *New Religions as Global Cultures* by Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe (1997). Drawing on their own empirical work as well as that of others, Hexham and Poewe analyses NRMs in relation with globalization as well as "older" forms of religion, such as Christianity. Hexham and Poewe's conclusion from their empirical material is that NRMs functions as "global cultures" that can travel around the world and take on local color, thus having both a global, or metacultural, and a local, or situationally distinct dimension. As opposed to more established religions, new religions does not have the same need to stay true to any foundational doctrines. Instead, they create new teachings from drawing upon different sources[3].

Peter Clarke in his *New Religions in Global Perspective* (2006) also takes on the task of writing an account of NRMs from a global point of view. Clarke presents the history and development of movements from many parts of the world, thus providing a good overview of the global situation of the development and spread of NRMs. Clarke's work includes a chapter on the development of Neo-Hindu movements such as the Brahmo Samaj, Sri Aurobindo, Sathya Sai Baba and Osho, which provides a good historical background for this thesis.

I believe that Oneness offers a valuable opportunity for learning more about how a movement can grow from being a local school to becoming an international organization in only a few years. The approach of making a cross-cultural study based on fieldwork and interviews can function in a complementary way to the already existing literature on NRMs and New Age in relation with globalization. While many seem to have

[3] A more elaborate discussion on Hexham and Poewe's work is found in chapter 2.3.

presented theories on this subject, I have not found many examples of cross-cultural studies on NRMs and New Age based on empirical material derived from fieldwork. While there exists case-studies of NRMs and New Age, these seem to primarily focus on the historical development or other specific aspects of a movement, or one particular location and the development of a movement/movements in that very place (see for example Liselotte Frisk (2007); Hanna H. Kim (2008); Marion Bowman (2000); and the many examples given in the monograph edited by Phillip Charles Lucas and Thomas Robbins (2004)). The method of studying one and the same movement in two places *simultaneously* does not appear to be common. While this approach might bring some practical challenges, I am convinced that it can bring a fruitful result by providing an empirically based example of how the process of globalization (or glocalization) works.

# 2. Theory

From the very beginning of the process of deciding a suitable theoretical and methodological approach for this thesis, I have been faced with a number of ambiguities that I, already at an initial stage, found necessary to clarify. As a prologue to the coming chapter on theory, I would therefore like to give a brief sketch of what these "question marks" were about.

The first and most obvious (albeit not the most intricate) ambiguity I encountered was how one should study a movement that actively seeks to disconnect itself from the label of "religion", from a religious perspective? This was an issue that arose already in connection with the initial meetings with informants (sympathisers and ex-sympathisers of Oneness). When hearing that I was doing research in the field of religious studies, most informants immediately remarked that Oneness in not a religion.

That a spiritual movement wants to disconnect itself from being labelled as religious is far from unique for the Oneness movement, rather it is something that signifies many of the new forms of spirituality (see for example Heelas, Woodhead and Seel 2005). Since religion anyway is a concept far too complex to have any single, fixed definition attached to it, one way of solving a situation like this is to simply use a definition of religion that is fruitful for the particular purpose (Beyer 2003:427). And indeed, the dissonance that appeared during the conversations with informants could usually be solved when I explained that the term "religion" have many meanings, such as, for instance, an idea about or a path to some ultimate goal of humankind. A definition like this they usually agreed, correlated with their idea about what they were doing, and even if they were still reluctant to call themselves religious, or as belonging to a religious movement, we could at least agree upon that we were, more or less, talking about the same thing. Although the attitude of the informants in this matter did not come as any surprise, it still drew my attention to the difficulties that are embedded in using the term "religion".

Another question that arose mainly in connection with the literature I have been reading was how to categorize a movement such as Oneness. Is it an offspring of the larger New Age movement, characterized as a loose-knit network of ideas and techniques, leaving it (more or less) up to each individual to decide the contents of his or her faith? Or should Oneness rather be seen as a New Religious Movement (NRM), based on the authority and teachings of the founders, Amma and Bhagavan? And secondly, on an individual level, how should one study the engagement of a member or sympathizer in a

movement that allows, and even (as it would turn out) encourages commitment to more than one religious/spiritual tradition?

I was beginning to wonder if there would be any way of conducting a structured research on the Oneness movement, without leaving all these complexities out. In the end, I decided not to get too much entangled in the attempt to categorize Oneness in terms of structure and organizational belonging, and to rather allow for some ambiguities to remain. As a consequence of this, I will later on in the text refer to Oneness both in association with New Age as well as NRMs[4]. I would like to emphasize that this is not the result of ignorance or unawareness, but a conscious decision, since I have found it to be impossible to make any clear cut distinctions between these two categories in this particular case. Avoiding to categorize Oneness as explicitly either a part of the New Age movement or as a NRM, but to rather leave the definition open, gives the freedom to make use of previous research originating from both of these fields, and by this, I believe, enrich the study.

The choice of theory has thus been made with the intention of leaving open space for the many complexities about Oneness that initially struck me. No doubt, a solid theoretical foundation is utterly necessary in a project like this. But instead of finding theoretical support in, say, a theory specifically on NRMs or New Age, or religion of Indian-origin, I have chosen to anchor this study in the field of globalization theories, and thus focus on the transnational aspect of the Oneness movement. This is not to say that the fact that Oneness is (according to themselves not a religious, but) a spiritual organization is not of importance – rather the opposite. The study of religion in the light of globalization is an academic field that is getting more and more prominent, although according to some scholars it still needs to be further developed, both empirically as well as theoretically (see for example Beckford (2004) and Csordas (2009))**.**

## 2.1. Religion and globalization

"Globalization", although today being frequently referred to in academic as well as non-academic discourses, is not an easily defined term. Rather it seems to be attached with multiple meanings, bearing variously positive or negative connotations, depending on context and user. At times one gets the impression that everything related to contemporary society in one way or the other is connected with globalization. As Peter Beyer and Lori

[4] A brief discussion on the Oneness movement put in relation to the categories of New Age and NRM will be presented in chapter 4.3

Beaman puts it; “We have been accustomed to hearing about the ‘age of globalization’ as a way to describe our current era. Globalization, it almost seems, is about everything, and everything has something to do with globalization” (Beyer and Beaman 2007:1).

In spite of being a multi-layered and complex concept, there are however a few points that outlines the basic assumptions of what is meant by “globalization”. James A. Beckford offers the following list of features that social scientists tend to emphasize while defining globalization:

1. the growing frequency, volume and interconnectedness of movements and ideas, material, goods, information, pollution, money, and people across national boundaries and between regions of the world;
2. the growing capacity of information technologies to shorten or even abolish the distance in time and space between events and places in the world;
3. the diffusion of increasingly standardized practices and protocols for processing global flows of information, goods, money, and people;
4. the emergence of organizations, institutions and social movements for promoting, monitoring, or counteracting global forces, with or without the support of individual nation-states;
5. the emergence in particular countries or regions of distinctive or “local” ways of refracting the influence of global forces (Beckford 2004:254).

An often-cited source when it comes to defining globalization is the work of Roland Robertson. Peter Beyer, in his *Religions in Global Society*, states that: “Robertson’s way of expressing this core idea (of globalization) is to say that globalization is at the same time the universalization of the particular and the particularization of the universal” (Beyer 2006:24). Put in other words, the basic idea of globalization consists in the spread of particular social forms across the globe, which constitutes their universalization. These universalized forms do not simply spread as such, but become particularized to various local situations. That particularization of the universal repeats the universal, but also transforms it. Such transformation can, in turn, be the subject of another universalization that becomes particularized in new contexts, and so on. (Beyer 2006:24). A key word in the process of globalization is therefore *relativization*. When particular cultures and societies are put into a wider system, they are put into relation with other, sometimes contesting systems of ideas, and thus become relativized.

The use of the term 'globalization' is of relatively recent origin. It started to appear more frequently in business and sociological discourses in the 1980s, but by the end of the century it had become a much used term in a number of both academic and popular contexts (Beyer 2005:3497). Compared with the usage in areas such as economy, politics and sociology, the concept of globalization has been conspicuously absent when it comes to the field of religion. There are of course important exceptions to this, but in general, the now vast literature on globalization has tended to put emphasis on the economic and political aspects of globalization. The times when religion *does* get invoked in the globalization-debate, it is usually in the form of religious fundamentalism (Beyer and Beaman 2007:1; Beyer 2005:3498).

Beckford (2004), although agreeing with the statement that religion has been neglected or overlooked by many writers on globalization in their preoccupation with the political, cultural or economic dimension of the phenomenon, points out that the origin of the discussion about globalization in fact owes much to the study of religion. He writes: "In short, questions about religion have been integral, if not always central, to the development of a significant amount of social scientific thinking about globalization" (2004:253). He takes Roland Robertson, Peter Beyer and Hexham and Poewe as pioneering examples of scholars who have made significant contributions to the discourse on religion and globalization.

In connection with the study of New Religious Movements (NRM) and New Age we find a number of references to globalization (see for ex. Arweck 2007; Beckford 2004; Clarke 2006; Frisk 2001; Hanegraaff 2001; Hexham and Poewe 1997). According to Peter Clarke, "A global perspective can shed much light on aspects of NRMs that might otherwise remain obscure, including their significance and impact. Such a vantage point also reveals the myriad forms, of what Robertson (1992) called 'glocalization', that NRMs have taken as they have attempted to embed themselves in different cultures" (Clarke 2006:3).

Elisabeth Arweck (2007) points out the following recurrent themes in the globalization debate with particular reference to NRMs: the question of boundaries between religions and between religion and non-religion; the impact of communication on NRMs, and conversely, the global impact of NRMs which arises from their use of communication; and, lastly, the dynamic between NRMs and the social and political systems within which they operate (2007:255). Clarke, following Robertson (1992), argues that the global character of many NRMs can be explained by considering them as part of a quest for a sense of self-identity and self-understanding, and as part of the project of constructing a global self

for a global world. This argument rests on the suggestion made by Robertson that there is a religious dimension to globalization, in the sense that the issues it raises are fundamentally important questions about self-identity and the meaning of being human (Clarke 2006:6-7). James V. Spickard makes a similar connection between globalization and religion in the way that he sees the prominence of the belief in universal, human rights as a sort of religious expression. According to Spickard, the universalizing and global spread of certain ethical rights for individuals and ethnic groups has given these rights an almost religious status (Spickard 2007).

## 2.2 Theoretical approaches

Globalization perspectives that have included religion into its scope have, according to Beyer, taken several directions. Three of the most significant of these are the following: First, to view and analyse religion as a global or transnational institution that operates more or less independently from economic and political structures and that binds different parts of the world together in ways comparable to global trade, international relations or mass media. Secondly, and related to the previous view, to focus on the function of religious systems as powerful cultural resources for asserting identity and seeking inclusion in global society, especially among less powerful and marginalized populations. Thirdly, to investigate how the formation, reformation and spread of religions have been an integral dimension of globalization as such (Beyer 2005:3499). This perspective assumes that what is conceived as "religions" today in academic and popular discourses is in fact not uncontested categories. Rather, the concept of religion is an outcome of ideas that originated in a specific culture and time (e.g. Christianity in Europe during the long reformation period (McGuire 2008)). The very construction of such concepts as "World Religions" is from this perspective an outcome of a globalizing force of ideas.

In my research on the Oneness movement, I have found it useful to focus mainly on the first of the above outlined approaches, that is, to view religion as a transnational institution. Since my research question concerns changes within the movement when being introduced into a new cultural context, I believe that looking at Oneness as a transnational institution can be fruitful. I have, however, also included aspects of the other two approaches. To take on a critical perspective of the concept of "religion" can, for instance, be helpful in facing the situation of trying to analyse a movement that does not consider itself to be "religious" at all. The Oneness movement has explicitly defined itself as *not* being a religion, and if using such concepts as membership in a congregation, clergy and

laypeople or a clearly defined and unified faith, that is usually connected with the idea of religion, then the members and sympathizers of the Oneness movement does indeed fall outside the category of religion. But if one instead uses a more open and dynamic approach, sensitive to the historical construction and origin of the concept of religion, it becomes possible to use the term in a more inclusive way. Meredith McGuire (2008) shows an example of this, introducing the concept of "Lived Religion". McGuire, in her ethnographic work, focuses on religion-as-practised by individuals rather than on more traditional notions such as membership in congregations.

## 2.3 Religion as transnational culture/institution

The concept of religions as transnational cultures has been interpreted in slightly differing ways by scholars of religion, who have emphasized different aspects of the matter. Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe, in their work *New Religions as Global Cultures* (1997), put forward the following definition: "One could say that a global culture is a tradition that travels the world and takes on local color. It has both a global, or metacultural, and a local, or situationally distinct, cultural dimension" (1997:41). Further, according to Hexham and Poewe, new religions seen as global cultures complicate this picture in the sense that, while a world religion such as Christianity, despite its numerous local adaptations, must remain true to one world tradition, new religions work in a different way; "By contrast, new religions, despite their globality, must fragment existing traditions, recombine with others in new ways, and yet remain true to a very old and a very local folk religion" (1997:42). The core of Hexham and Poewes argument seems to be that all forms of religion, whether being "world religions" or "new religions" can function as a global culture that is being spread and diffused in different parts of the world by adapting to local variations. The difference that lies in new religions is that they lack the need to remain true to an overarching metaculture - the strict accomodation between a local religious culture and the metaculture of a world tradition is absent. Instead, parts of different traditions are mixed and this "results in the sense of having created a new world culture that is more than a recombination of fragments and experiences from numerous great and small traditions" (1997:46).

James A. Beckford (2004) in discussing the relation between globalization and NRMs emphasizes the distinction between the *global aspirations* of some NRMs and their *transnational modes of operation* (2004:257). That is to say that, while many NRMs put effort into creating a sort of global consciousness and interconnectedness that aims at transcending national and ethnic boundaries, their modes of operation, although being

transnational, nevertheless continue to have a local character, coloured by their place of origin. Beckford state that "the study of NRMs and older religious movements leads me to be cautious about some of the wilder claims that are made about the standardizing and individualizing effects of globalization. I have tried to show that, while some of these movements purvey ambitious ideas about globality, there is also a strong tendency for them to represent the universal in particularist terms" (2004:258). In other words, while many NRMs aspire to create truly global ideas, their modes of operation remain "merely transnational". And, further, the ideas and images of globality presented by NRMs are marked by their origins in particular cultures (2004:261).

Thomas J. Csordas (2009) makes a useful remark about the academic approaches to religion and globalization, pointing out that "Particularly in a situation in which the globalization of religion has only recently begun to be examined in the human sciences, the empirical determination of its conditions is a necessary first step. An initial question in this respect is to identify what travels well across geographic and cultural space" (2009:4). Csordas proposes making use of the two aspects of *portable practice* and *transposable message* in order to determine what kind of religious modalities that travels well. By portable practice are meant rites and procedures that can easily be performed without necessarily being linked to a specific cultural context. A transposable message can be defined as a religious tenet, premise or promise that can be appealing across a diverse linguistic and cultural setting. Further, whether a message is transposable or not depends either on its plasticity (transformability) or its generalizability (universality) (2009:4-5).

What all these theories on religions as transnational cultures have in common, is that they in one way or another reflect and affirm Robertson's previously mentioned definition of globalization as a universalization of the particular and particularization of the universal, leading to a general relativization of cultures. I have therefore found it useful, in my own theoretical approach, to view the Oneness movement as a transnational movement that in its diffusion into a new (Swedish) context, has undergone a process of universalization and particularization, or in other words, adapted to local circumstances. It is, firstly, to determine whether this is the case or not, and secondly, if so, *to what extent* and *in what ways* this process of universalization and particularization has taken place, that is the aim of conducting empirical work on the Oneness movement. To use Csordas vocabulary, the thesis will be an attempt to examine the transposability of the message of Oneness, as well as the portability of their practises.

## 2.4. Cultural dynamics of the Oneness movement

Studying the Oneness movement from the theoretical perspective of being a transnational culture or institution further raises some important questions to take into consideration. There are two aspects of the Oneness movement in this context that are important to look closer at. First, it is a movement that in its structure and teachings can be described as belonging to the wider New Age movement. Second, it originated in Andhra Pradesh, South India, where it still has its main centre, the Oneness University.

Scholars of religion such as Wouter Hanegraaff and Liselotte Frisk, while discussing the relation between New Age and globalization, has tended to see the spread of New Age as that of mainly Western values to non-Western cultures (Frisk 2001; Hanegraaff 2001). Frisk, although agreeing with Beyer's argument that "although key globalizing structures originated in the West, globalization is not just another word for Western expansion" (Frisk 2001:38), still questions the equality of cultures in the process of globalization. In the case of New Age she argues that: "New Age-practitioners may go on sacred journeys to India, or may adopt new-schamanistic techniques. But it does not change the main direction of cultural flow, not much more than the exhibition on Papua New Guinea changes the culture in London. Perhaps selected traits from non-Western cultures could rather be said to have a *supporting* effect on Western cultural values in New Age" (Frisk 2001:40).

Other scholars, such as Tulasi Srinivas, have argued that a country like India is in fact what Samuel Huntington refers to as a "strong culture", and "as such may provide us with a template of a working alternate modernity" (Srinivas 2002:90). According to Srinivas: "While cultural globalization forces do enter India, cultural models are also increasingly emitted *from* India. What are commonly called New Age practices, which include meditation, yoga, spiritual healing, massage, and Tantrism, are popular in the West today. Lifestyle gurus Deepak Chopra and Shri Satya Sai Baba have large followings in New York, Santiago and Munich" (Srinivas 2002:90).

Putting the arguments of Frisk and Srinivas together raises interesting questions about the cultural dynamics of an Indian New Age movement such as Oneness. Is it possible to maintain New Age-inspired ideas and teachings and still be firmly rooted in the Indian culture of origin? And further, as Andrea Grace Diem and James R. Lewis (1992) have pointed out, the origin of the New Age movement in itself owes a great deal to ideas

derived from conceptions of the "Mystical East"[5]. Conducting a case-study on the Oneness movement can hopefully not only lead to deeper knowledge about the particular globalization process of the movement itself, but also give indications about how the intricate relation between New Age culture and Indian culture works. Following the line of thoughts of scholars such as Frisk and Hanegraaff, a New Age movement with a particular Indian identity would be hard (although not impossible) to imagine, since New Age is seen as representing mainly the spread of Western values to non-Western cultures. If one on the other hand, as Srinivas, sees India as a strong culture with the potential of providing an alternative modernity, then the existence of New Age movements with an Indian identity seems perfectly reasonable.

I would argue that these two views are in fact more easily reconcilable than they might appear at a first glance. If one looks at the history of nations from a wider perspective, it becomes clear that neither the Western nor the Indian culture have developed in a vacuum. Rather, they have been in a constant dialogue with one another. Therefore to say that New Age represents the spread of Western ideas to non-Western cultures does not necessarily contradict the existence of a particular Indian New Age, since India has been influenced by Western ideas (and the other way around) long before the dawning of the New Age movement. In other words, Western ideas are already found inherent in the Indian culture, and because of that the ideals and thoughts of New Age does not really come as something new, and can even be interpreted as affirming the Indian cultural tradition. Nevertheless they can also be interpreted as originating from a Western mind-set. This becomes even clearer when one considers that the New Age movement, as pointed out by Diem and Lewis among others, has drawn upon ideas about a "Mystical East".

An illustrating example that affirms the reconcilability of New Age and Indian spirituality is to be found in the area of Tamil Nadu in South India (where Oneness also partly has its origin). The *Theosophical Society* at an early stage established a centre outside of Chennai. Further, outside of Pondicherry lies *Auroville*, an international utopian community founded in the 1960's upon the ideas of the Indian philosopher Sri Aurbindo and his co-worker The Mother, who was of French origin. The Theosophical Society and Auroville can be seen as predecessors to the New Age movement, and thus exemplifies that there are strong links between New Age and Indian spiritual traditions.

[5] See also Nugteren (2003) and Kranenborg (2003) for more examples of how concepts such as *tantra* and *yugas* (cyclic periods of time), originating from the Hindu tradition, have been incorporated and reinterpreted in modern Western religiosity.

To summarize, I would argue that seeing New Age as a primarily Western phenomenon spreading to non-Western cultures, and at the same time admitting the existence of a particular Indian New Age is not reconcilable, sine the Western and Indian culture have been in a dialogue with one another for a long period of time. It appears that the relation between New Age and the Indian cultural/spiritual tradition works more in the form of a symbiosis than as contradictory forces.

# 3. Method

My academic encounter with the Oneness movement started already back in 2009, in connection with a reading-course on New Age. I had come to know about the movement a few years earlier, around 2005, when I met some representatives of Oneness at a New Age festival[6] in Sweden and participated in their programs. In 2009, my time was very limited and thus the scope of the research became quite shallow. My intention at that time was to get a basic idea about the goals and teachings of the movement, as well as to see how it had come to be established in Sweden. Besides from reading some books and webpages produced by the movement, I had some contact with deeksha-givers[7] in Gothenburg. Later on, in spring 2012, when again taking up the thread and starting to prepare for writing this thesis, I made contact with some members in New Delhi to get an idea how the Oneness movement was working in India. At that time, two things became clear: First, that it would be interesting to focus on the transnational aspect of the movement, as is reflected in the theoretical foundation of the thesis presented earlier. Second, given the lack of previous research,[8] that I would have to start off with a very general inquiry – and use more than one method for collecting material in order to find out more about the movement. The natural way to do this would be to spend time with members, making interviews with them and participating in their programs whenever possible.

Thus, the methods of collecting source-material for this thesis have been through the conducting of interviews and participant-observation, as well as reading of material such as books and websites published by the movement itself. For this, it seemed most appropriate to make use of a qualitative approach, that is, to focus on the depth and nuances of the empirical material rather than on quantity. Taking my starting point in the narratives of individuals from the two different cultural contexts of India and Sweden (and to some extent, the official narratives as given by the movement), I thereby tap into the field of

[6] The *No Mind Festival* is an annual festival held every summer at Ängsbacka kursgård outside the city of Karlstad. During one week, spiritual teachers from around the world are invited to give workshops on topics such as meditation, healing etc. Anette Carlström and Freddy Nielsen, two of the initial front-figures who introduced Oneness to Sweden, were giving deeksha on the festival.

[7] Deeksha-giver is an epithet used within the Oneness movement for those who are initiated to give deeksha, a type of energy transmission. An explanation to what deeksha is and how it is used will be presented in chapter 4.2.1.

[8] As was mentioned earlier on the chapter on previous research, Kathinka Frøystad (2006; 2011) provides a brief discussion on Oneness (at that time called Golden Foundation) in her work, but her focus is not on the movement *per se*. Frøystad writes on the way science is invoked as legitimation in the setting of the Indian New Age environment, and Golden Foundation is taken as an example of one of the New Age movements she encounters in Delhi.

ethnography of religion, as well as comparative, cross-cultural studies – both highly debated subjects in the general discourse on religious studies (see Spickard and Landres (2002), and Beyer (2003) discussed further down)**.**

## 3.1. Making qualitative research-interviews

According to Steinar Kvale, the qualitative research-interview seeks to understand the world from the viewpoint of the interviewed, and looks closer into the meaning of people's experiences (1997:9). It is thus a way of gaining knowledge through the attempt of understanding the subjective experiences of an informant. Kvale, in discussing the qualitative method, uses the metaphor of the researcher as either a "gold digger" or a "traveller"[9]. While the first sees knowledge as something similar to a buried precious metal that can be discovered and brought to the surface by the researcher without going through any intervening transformation, for the latter the research-process is a path travelled and discovered together with the informants. These metaphors represent two different ways of looking at knowledge. While the gold digger sees knowledge as something given, pre-existing, the traveller tends to look upon knowledge in the light of the postmodern discourse, as something of a more fluid nature. Qualitative research methods can be said to represent the latter category (1997:11-12). The kind of knowledge produced by the use of a qualitative method is thus connected with the postmodern notion of the social-construction of reality. In the qualitative research interview, knowledge is being built, and can be seen as related with five aspects of postmodern production of knowledge, these being the conversative, the narrative, the language related, the contextual and the relational. All these aspects together make up the starting-point for understanding the kind of knowledge produced during a research interview (1997:44-46).

The interviews have more precisely been conducted as half-structured life-world interviews, which Kvale defines as "an interview which purpose is to receive descriptions of the interviewee's life-world with the intention to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena" (1997:13, my translation). Translated to a more practical level, "half-structured" means that the interviews will start off from a set of structured questions[10] derived from the initial research questions, but at the same time leave space for the informant to take up related issues that they might find relevant, as well as occasional, additional questions that follows up the responses of the informant. According to Kvale,

[9] Originally in the Swedish translation "malmletare eller resenär"
[10] The questions used for the interviews are attached as an appendix

there are few standardised procedures for the qualitative interview, which means that many of the analyses of methodological decisions needs to be made during the interview (1997:20-21). Being based on human relations, one cannot in advance predict the turnings of the conversation. Thus it demands of the interviewer sensitivity to the unfolding of the situation.

To understand the meaning of receiving "descriptions of the interviewee's life-world", one needs to go back to the work of Edmund Husserl, the founder of modern phenomenology. *Life-world* is originally a philosophical concept with epistemological and ontological meaning (Bengtsson 2005:9). Husserl, according to Jan Bengtsson, used the concept of life-world in an epistemological context, where the life-world functioned as the starting-point for a project with the intention of finding an absolutely certain ground for all scientific knowledge (2005:16). Husserl's point was that the objectivism found in much modern science has created a distance between science and the world as lived and experienced by humans. This distance stems from that objectivism

> understands the world as objective-absolute, as a world in itself, while the world that people live their lives in, the life-world, is subjective-relative, a world that is always experienced in relation to a subject, that is, from a concrete perspective with a certain meaning" (Bengtsson 2005:17, my translation).

Put it in another way, one might say that the use of the concept of life-world as a starting-point for the collecting of data, is to downplay the meta-narratives of modern science in the form of claims of access to absolute, *objective* knowledge, and instead take the *subjective-relative* knowledge of the individual as focal point.

Finally, to "interpret the meaning of the described phenomena" will be to put the informant's response in relation to the research question and the replies of other informants, and thus analyse it from the theoretical perspective provided above.[11] At a first glance, it might appear to be an impossible task to draw any certain conclusions on the basis of qualitative interviews, given the subjective, and sometimes even contradictory nature of the material. But, according to Kvale, this is not a weakness but actually where the strength of the method lies. The records from interviews can capture the opinions of a number of people on any topic, and thus give a picture of a many-sided and controversial human world (1997:14). Additionally, as Judith Coney (2003) has pointed out, memory and forgetfulness play a crucial role in the narratives of members of a (religious) community. What one remembers – and forgets – is highly selective. Memory is something social, being established and re-established through social negation. As long as one is aware of the

[11] This is my interpretation of Kvales description of the half-structured life-world interview.

construction and re-construction of memories about past events, what one (consciously or unconsciously) chooses to remember and share in a conversation can provide valuable information in itself.

## 3.2. Doing fieldwork: discussions on ethnography

In addition to the conducting of interviews, I have also used the method of participant-observation. This has basically meant participating in different courses, meditations and functions arranged by the Oneness movement, both in Sweden and in India. To participate in these activities not only provides concrete information about what is being done and how (at least, at an external level), but also helps in getting an insight into the more emotional aspects by subjectively experiencing the effects of the meditations and other techniques being used. Also, the more informal talks arising in the settings of the courses and functions are an important source of information (Kvale 1997:94). Doing this type of fieldwork in the form of participant-observation, and thereby tapping into the field of ethnography, is not such a self-evident matter as it might appear at a first glance. To fully grasp the complexity that this kind of method can present, we will proceed with a brief introduction to some recent discussions on ethnography.

According to James V. Spickard and J. Shawn Landres, there has long been a methodological divide in the social-scientific study of religion. On the one hand there are what Spickard and Landres calls "the generalizers", those who use polling data and membership lists to present the overall trends of religious life. On the other side are those called "the particularizers", those who are interested in details of specific religions and the concrete effect these religions have on a small number of people. While the first category comes from a "desire to find lawlike regularities in human life; the second stems from a wish to understand how particular people see the world" (2002:1-2). Ethnographers are a good example of the latter category, as they seek out a specific research locale where they spend considerable time with the intention of trying to make sense of their informants' lives.

Particularizers have traditionally held less status than generalizers in the social-scientific study of religion, Spickard and Landres continues, though this has now started to change. The rapid change in the religious landscape that has taken place in the last decades has made ethnographic research more necessary, since standard survey questions seem to miss too much of the complexities embedded in these new forms of religion (2002:3-4). But, in spite of the betraying simplicity in "standard" procedures of ethnography, such as, "being there" and "knowing the natives", it is not such an uncomplicated matter. In fact, the very

ability of understanding another people and see the world through their eyes has been questioned, and thus the validity of previous "standard" procedures highly criticized. Spickard and Landres highlight issues such as the problem of subjectivity; the insider/outsider problem; the question of researcher identity; and issues of power as of being important topics to discuss (2003:3-5). They summon their view on the state of contemporary ethnography as follows:

> We believe that the ethnography of religion must recognize the personal aspects of its knowledge: the fact that ethnographic knowledge is generated in interpersonal encounters between people with specific social locations. At the same time, ethnographic knowledge is not *only* personal; it aspires to something more. Finding that balance – encompassing personal knowledge but simultaneously going beyond it – seems to us to be the chief task facing ethnographers of religion today (2003:12-13).

One way of coming to terms with the problems of doing ethnographic work, suggests Billy Ehn and Barbro Klein, is to develop an ethnology based on reflexivity, here with the meaning of "thinking about ones own thinking"(1999:11). In their vision of how such an ethnology would look, Ehn and Klein suggests that:

> (T)he meeting with the Others would be looked upon as an existential experience and not merely as "collecting of data". The fieldwork as culture-meetings, dialogues, confrontations, conflicts and common reality-constructions rather than notations, records and one-sided observations (1999:79, my translation).

The ethnographer is partaking in creating the reality that is described in the resulting work. "Facts" are created by researchers and informants in a complicated interplay. This, the ethnographer should be aware of throughout his or her working process, even though it is not necessary to account for every detail of that process in the final result of the analysis. Reflexivity does not require any self-biographical account. On a practical level, writes Ehn and Klein, this means that the ethnographer observes her own observation and questions why her "facts" and interpretations come as they do (1999:79-80).

Spickard and Landres, as well as Ehn and Klein, propose the raising of awareness of the subjective side in the shaping of ethnographic work. In the meeting with "the Others", as Ehn and Klein puts it, knowledge is produced through an intricate process of exchange. To believe that the role of the researcher is to simply come and watch and by that draw objective conclusions is naive, and draws the attention away from the very important point that the researcher is creating something together with his or her informants.

The researcher needs to be aware of this, and engage in a process of reflexivity in order not to become too biased.

Meredith B. McGuire highlights another important point about studying people's *religious* lives in particular. McGuire argues that in the study of religion, official kinds of religion have generally been seen as more "proper" than popular religion. Popular religious beliefs and practices has tended to be judged as mere superstition, and has therefore not been given the proper recognition as important religious components. By only focusing on official religion, our understanding of people's religious lives cannot be complete. McGuire writes:

> By overemphasizing official religious belief, teachings and organizational membership, sociologists and other researchers have simply failed to notice that many people engage, outside or alongside those religious organizations, in valued spiritual practices that adress their material concerns and deeply felt emotional needs (2008:66).

Thus, not only by assuming an ability of pure objectivity, but also by having a too narrow or prejudiced view on what counts as "religion" or "religious" and what does not, can we miss out on important aspects while doing research. I believe that McGuire's reasoning is particularly relevant in relation with a movement such as Oneness, that actively dissociates itself with religion, but still (I would tentatively assume) fills an important function in providing emotional and existential support for its sympathizers.

Following McGuire's argument, an individual can have a rich spiritual life and be highly devoted without necessarily being member of a congregation or any other official religious institution. People's inner spiritual lives cannot be measured in terms of membership or church attendance. McGuire continues:

> Individual religious commitment is evidenced less by avowed commitment to and participation in the activities of religious organizations than by the way each person expresses and experiences his or her faith and practice in ordinary places and in everyday moments. To understand modern religious lives, we need to try to grasp the complexity, diversity, and fluidity of real individuals' religion-as-practiced, in the context of their everyday lives (2008:213).

Drawing upon these reflections on ethnography, in my own ethnographic work with the Oneness movement I have keep three points in mind: First, to be aware of my own role as an ethnographer and the impact my presence might have on a situation. To believe that it is possible to have the role of an invisible watcher is somewhat naïve. Better then is to see the

ethnographic work as a dynamic process involving an interplay between researcher and informants. Second, to reflect over my interpretations of events and situations, and to question whether my own way of interpreting is the only way possible, or if there are alternatives. Third, following McGuire, I have tried to avoid making clear-cut distinctions about what belongs to a person's religious and secular sphere of life respectively. Instead of having a preconditioned view on what is religious or not, I have kept the question open and looked more to the individual life-world of the informants.

Here it is also necessary to mention a few things about the ethical issues that need to be taken into consideration while conducting a study such as this. Throughout the work, I have followed general ethical recommendations for research in the human sciences[12], which in practice means that all informants who were interviewed were informed about the purpose of the study and asked if they would like to partake in it. Further, they have all been anonymous. Thus, the names of informants used in the quotations further on in the text are fictive. A few times non-fictive names will occur, but when that is the case, it is people who in other contexts have made public statements about Oneness, for instance in books or magazines, that are referred to.

When it comes to participant-observation, I have contacted the responsible organizer in advance and got his or her permission to join the course, function or meditation. At a public event with many participants it was more difficult to inform each and everyone about the purpose of research, and I left it up to the organizer to decide whether or not it was necessary to inform the other participants about my research. As with the interviews, all participants in the events are anonymous.

## 3.3. Studying religion in a cross-cultural perspective

As mentioned earlier in the discussion on theory, this thesis aims at focusing primarily on the transnational aspects of the Oneness movement, which means that the study will be made in a cross-cultural way. This brings in another dimension to the already complicated matter of doing fieldwork, although one could argue that it not only complicates but also enriches. The possibility of doing cross-cultural studies in a unbiased way has, like the examples from ethnography and sociology discussed earlier, been questioned.

As Peter Beyer writes, one of the factors that previously made the comparison of different cultures relatively unproblematic, was that the "cultures" studied existed in

[12] E.g. "Forskningsetiska principer inom humanistisk-samhällsvetenskaplig forskning" (http://www.codex.vr.se/texts/HSFR.pdf)

comparative isolation from one another, as well as from the cultural region of the researcher. There was also the distinction between "traditional" and "modern" societies, as well as the boundaries of territorial states that further enhanced the separation between cultures. Today, however, this situation is rapidly changing. Western society can no longer be treated as the self-evident standard of modernity, and there are hardly any cultures left that still exist in anything like isolation. This makes the distinctiveness of cultures more difficult to discern, and the differentiation between "us" and "them" has become blurred. The difference between "here" and "elsewhere" is no longer clear (2003:420-421). And, according to Beyer, this has had the effect that:

> (M)any social scientists have come to the realization that a world society has been emerging for quite some time, and that in this context cross-cultural work takes on a new and somewhat different importance: it is an unavoidable task if we are to understand how the obvious social and cultural differences that exist around the world can still be a part of a single social unit: and vice versa, how we are to understand and, indeed, maintain differences if there is now but one worldwide society (2003:421).

If geographical boundaries or the dichotomy of modern/traditional can no longer serve as defining cultures from one another, then on what can we base cross-cultural studies? Given the lack of natural boundaries, Beyer suggests that we either "accept those boundaries that social groups in their own self-descriptions consider to be definitive, or we use whatever boundaries are convenient for the analysis we have in mind" (2003:427). In either case, however, we must admit the relative fluidity of the distinctions, and not consider them as anything more than what they are – matters of convenience for doing research or accommodation to the conscious self-identification of our subjects. Similarly, when studying religion from a cross-cultural perspective, we must also admit the fluidity embedded in the term "religion". Beyer here refers to Meredith McGuire who, among others has suggested that defining religion should be a matter of research strategy and nothing more fundamental (2003:427).

Beyer points out another interesting implication of the blurring of cultural boundaries in contemporary world society taken in relation with the study of religion: previously, a common way of understanding religion in a cross-cultural perspective was to see the religious function as what we all have in common, and religious form as the way of understanding how we are different. But with "increased "intercultural" contact, the role of form and function may in fact be reversed: a form may be globally spread but serve different

functions in different areas (or, in different "cultures")" (2003:428). This last point actually summons well the intention of this thesis, to investigate whether Oneness (the religious "form") serves the same purpose or function in Sweden as in India (although it should be mentioned that there might also be important differences in the form itself).

In recent decades, "classical" ways of doing comparative studies of religion have been criticized, mostly on the grounds of supressing differences between cultures and religions in the quest of finding universal truths. Eurocentric concepts of religion have often been applied to non-European cultures, thus reducing these to instances of Euro-Christian classifications. On the other hand, writes William E. Paden, in the "post-Eliadean" phase of comparativism, new articulations and emphases has made comparative studies more sensitive for these kinds of problems. Contemporary comparativism tends to emphasize that comparative studies is not just about describing commonalities, but might as well mean the opposite – to find differences as well as similarities. "Cross-cultural" is not the same as "universal", and, further, comparison should be based on clearly defined aspects of that which is compared (Paden 2005:217-219).

One should of course be aware of the risk of falling into stereotypes when comparing religious phenomena in different cultural settings. But on the other hand, I believe that if one keeps in mind the above mentioned points, that comparison is not necessarily *universal* in nature, but can mean comparison between two or more particularities (in this case, a movement in two different cultural settings), the risk is much less of ending up starting to universalize.

Further, due to the fact that it is the same movement that is the focus of study in both India and Sweden, I do not see that the issue of defining "religion" and "culture", as discussed by Beyer (2003) earlier, in this case necessarily needs to be too problematic either. The group studied is the Oneness movement, and whether they should or should not be categorized as religion is in this case a formality, not particularly relevant for the thesis. They are either way a defined group, which give something substantial to use as focal point to study. When it comes to culture, I would argue that the differences between India and Sweden are obvious enough for it to be legitimate to use the two nation-states as representing two different cultures[13]. Then there are of course other, more subtle sides to the definition of culture. If we, for instance, talk about a middle-class culture with Western-oriented values, then this can today also be found in India, not only in countries such as

[13] See for instance Sudhir Kakar (2010) for a discussion on the differences between the "cultural psychology" of the Indian and the "Western" mind, including the way of percieving the self and its relation to the environment.

Sweden. Thus, there might be that there is a culture that looks similar in India and Sweden, giving the research question an extra twist. Given that Oneness is a part of the Indian New Age spirituality, dominated by the Indian middle-class, as Frøystad suggested, then it could be that the differences between Oneness in India and Sweden are not that big after all.

# 4. Oneness: History and Doctrines

## 4.1. History

To try to write a cohesive history of the Oneness movement is not an easy task. As with other relatively "new" movements, many things have rapidly changed throughout the years since the founding days. For instance, the founder Bhagavan (born as Vijay Kumar) has been known by the name *Mukteshwar* and as *Kalki*, the tenth incarnation of Vishnu[14]. The movement itself has also been renamed several times. It has been called *Golden Age Foundation*; *Foundation for Global Awakening*; *Oneness Movement* and as *Oneness University* (Ardagh 2007:207). Not only the names but also the teachings and practises seems to have undergone considerable changes. Deeksha, which today is one of the most important components, was not a part of the parcel when Oneness was first introduced to Sweden, to give one example.

Since the only previous academic research that mentions Oneness (that of Kathinka Frøystad, presented in chapter 1.4) does not go into any detail about the movement or its founders, my main sources of information regarding the previous history of Oneness has been literature produced from followers and sympathisers[15], and the stories of informants. The informants have been both those who were still active within Oneness, as well as former members. They have also been active during different periods ranging from the beginning of the 1990's up to present day. For these reasons, their stories have showed a great variety within them. As Judith Coney writes, new religious movements usually carry within themselves a number of different narratives on different levels such as the individual

[14] During the fieldstudies for this essay in South India, I came across several people who still referred to Bhagavan as "Kalki", and Oneness as the "Kalki movement". The official line, on the other hand, seems to be to not use the name Kalki any longer, since it had created too much controversy (Windrider 2006:13).

[15] I have mainly used two books written by sympathisers of Amma and Bhagavan, both containing a similar hagiography about the founders. The first one is Arjuna Ardgah's *Vägen till insikt. Diksha och medvetandets utveckling* from 2007 (this book was originally published in English with the title *Awakening into Oneness. The Power of Blessing in the Evolution of Consciousness* (2006)). Ardagh is the founder of *Living Essence Foundation*, and a spiritual teacher himself. The book offers an overview over the history and beliefs of the Oneness movement from an "insider perspective". It is based on interviews with deeksha givers both in India and abroad, as well as an extensive interview with Bhagavan himself. While Ardagh does bring up some criticism that has been directed towards the movement (such as claims of being able to intuitively read peoples states of consciousness, high fees for courses etc.), it is basically a positive, affirmative account of Oneness and its work. The other book is Kiara Windrider's *Deeksha: The Fire from Heaven* (2006). Windrider is, like Ardagh, a spiritual teacher, and the book is basically an account of his personal encounter with Bhagavan and Oneness. It also contains the transcription of an extensive conversation between Bhagavan and Windrider.

and the public. These stories can both confirm and refer to one another for seeking legitimacy, as well as being rivalry. This kind of outlook stems from a view on history not as a static, permanent version of events, but rather as something that goes through a continuous revision (Coney 2003:214-215). If we accept this reasoning it results in the possibility of multiple interpretations of one and the same event, one not necessarily more "true" than the other.

Quite naturally, there was at times a discrepancy between the narratives of former members and present members of Oneness, as well as "outsiders" and "insiders" in general. These included the way of perceiving the stated divinity of the founding couple, the quitting of former members who were previously in key positions, accusations of illegalities taking place at Oneness University etc. Depending on which perspective one chooses to look from, the story of Oneness unfolds in radically different ways – many possible stories can be written here[16]. In this brief sketch of the history of Oneness I have chosen to focus mainly on the founding years and on recent developments, and to do so by mainly using narratives found within the movement itself. At an early stage of the research I came across a hagiographical depiction of the early life of the founders Amma and Bhagavan[17], beginning from their birth and continuing up to the starting point of what came to be known as the Oneness movement. This story was retold in more or less the same way by informants as well as the authors Ardagh and Windrider, and thus seems to be generally accepted among sympathisers. The following account is a summary of this hagiography[18]. In the part dealing

[16] To take but one example of how one and the same event can be interpreted in radically different ways, the following happened during the fieldwork in India: through looking at some websites I had found out that some allegations had been held against Bhagavan around 2010, including seriously manipulating tax declarations, drug scandals etc. (see for example "India TV reveals truth behind self proclaimed Kalki Bhagavan" (http://www.indiatvnews.com/news/india-tv-reveals-truth-behind-self-proclaimed-kalki-bhagavan--16892.html); "Kalki Bhagavan In Drugs Scandal" (http://www.news.fullhyderabad.com/16049-a.html)). It should be mentioned that it never became clear whether the allegations had been true or not. When I asked a devotee about this issue, his reply was that this was something that had come up to test the faith of the devotees of Bhagavan, thus indirectly something almost wanted by the founder-guru himself. Conversely, when I discussed the same topic with a local journalist, he said in a sarcastic tone that he, as a journalist, would probably never be allowed to set his foot at Oneness University because of his profession, since they were now afraid that more unpleasant information would leak out.

[17] In the literature I have read, as well as in conversations with devotees, Amma's and Bhagavan's names are sometimes put together to one single name (AmmaBhagavan). This, according to one informant, is because the two individuals are in fact parts of one and the same consciousness. I have chosen to refer to the couple as "Amma and Bhagavan", but if a quoted source talks of AmmaBhagavan, I have used that name.

[18] When specific dates or other information that has only appeared in one of the sources is referred to, I have included the source of reference in the text. In other cases, the story follows the "main line" and thus seems to be commonly accepted by all authors and informants.

with recent developments I have taken use of Oneness official website and of interviews first and foremost with Oneness Trainers in Sweden.

### *4.1.1. The founding years*

The man today known by the name Bhagavan was born as Vijay Kumar in 1949, in a small village called Natham in Tamil Nadu. Already at an early age, Bhagavan is said to have understood that he saw the world differently than most other men. In an interview with Windrider, he explains:

> Ever since I was a child, my only concern was how to liberate man from suffering. These were not things that I arrived at through my own life experience, because I myself was a child, but rather I was forced to become concerned about man's suffering and to work for that. That is why I am an avatar, because I never arrived at these conclusions: I was just led into these things by a higher energy, a higher force, what you call the Divine Energy, or God (Windrider 2006:196).

When Bhagavan grew older, and his father would ask him what he wanted to do with his life, his reply would be that he was God and that he would change the world. When he was in his twenties, his parents decided that he should marry, with the hope that a family might take his mind away from all the spiritual ideas he had. He married a girl named Padmavati, today known as Amma. She is also said to have had an unusual childhood. Since she from an early age had the intense desire to marry God, she was worshipped by local saints and elders as an incarnation of the divine mother.

In 1984 the two of them started a school together in Andhra Pradesh called *Jeevashram*, with the intention of providing an alternative, holistic form of education. The school is described as having been a magical place where miracles took place almost daily. Soon after the opening, it is said, many of the children started to have mystical experiences, and reached high states of consciousness. Krishna, Amma and Bhagavan's son, discovered he had the ability to transfer a golden light to the other children by placing his hands on their heads. This was the starting point of the phenomenon that came to be known as deeksha. The children is also said to have had inner visions of the school director, and started to call him Sri Bhagavan[19].

The reaction from the parents of the spiritually transformed children is said to have been varied – while some were positive, others were complaining, saying that they sent

[19] *Bhagavan* is a Hindu expression for God, non-sectarian in the way that it is not used to depict some specific deity. *Amma* in turn means mother.

their children to school to become doctors or lawyers, not mystics. As a result of this, it was decided that the school would close, and that a spiritual centre would be opened instead. Around 1991 the ordinary classes in the school were phased out, and in 1994, when the last class of students graduated, the school was officially closed. The place was renamed to *Satyaloka*. Many of the young men and women who had been students at the school stayed on and became teachers at the new centre.

Satyaloka went from being a school to functioning as a spiritual centre. Eventually, a kind of order of monks and nuns was created mainly by the young men and women who had stayed on since the school time. These were called *dasas*[20], and functioned as spiritual guides and deeksha givers. Three of the former students also became *acharyas*, or main teachers. According to Windrider, this order of disciples has grown throughout the years, and by the time Windrider wrote his book in 2006, they numbered about 180 (Windrider 2006:143).

Initially, courses lasting for three, six or ten days were held. The participants at these courses were mostly Indians. These first years seems to have been a somewhat turbulent time. Amma and Bhagavan decided to withdraw from the public light and leave the dasas to run all the courses. Apparently, rumours started to appear that Amma and Bhagavan did not exist, and that the young dasas were actually leading an anarchistic party, even kidnapping minors. The police came, but none of these accusations could ever be confirmed. All these rumours led to worries among the public, and Amma and Bhagavan decided to once again step forward and make public appearances. When an official *darshan*[21] was held, over 150 000 people from all over India is said to have attended. After this, the reputation and activity grew even more (Ardagh 2007:39).

Around that time, a small number of Westerners started to hear about the movement, which up to then had been more or less exclusively Indian. In 1998, the first course specifically made for Westerners were held, with 40 participants from Russia, USA and Scandinavia (Ardagh 2007:39). In 2000, Bhagavan and the dasas moved into a new area that was named *Golden City*, today known as *Oneness University*. A big temple called the *Oneness Temple* was eventually built there. At Oneness University, the so-called *mukti courses* began to be held, with the intention of quickly bringing people into an awakened state of consciousness. In January 2004, the first three weeks-courses for Westerners were

[20] *Dasa* literally mean "servant" in Sanskrit. Sometimes "ji" is added in the end (dasaji) as a sign of respect.
[21] *Darshan* is a Sanskrit term with the meaning of "seeing the divine". The word is used both for viewing deities in temples as well as for living godly men and women.

held. During these courses, the participants were initiated to give deeksha themselves. According to one Swedish informant who joined Oneness in 1999, the possibility of getting initiation to give deeksha had not been available before 2004. Ardagh, who published the first edition of his book on Oneness in 2006, writes that:

> During the last years, over twelve thousand people from more than fifty different countries around the world have been initiated to give onenessdeeksha or onenessblessing. They have a background as psychotherapists, doctors, writers, actors, Christian bishops, Muslim imams, Jewish rabbis, Hindu sadhus, shamans, and everything in between that (Ardagh 2007:41, my translation).

### *4.1.2. Oneness today*

At present, separate courses are held at the Oneness University for Indians and non-Indians respectively. These courses, which are put together by the dasas, are not fixed, but changes every now and then when new ideas are born. But from what I have understood, they normally contain different meditations, deeksha and darshan with Amma and Bhagavan[22]. Additionally, courses are held outside the University at different locations around the world. A few years ago a new initiative was taken to educate *Oneness Trainers*, who would function as organisers of events and as deeksha-initiators. These trainers are now responsible for the administration and organisation of Oneness at different places around the world. Whether the installation of Oneness Trainers has led to a greater autonomy or not for deeksha givers outside of India is unclear, since, from what I understood from Swedish Trainers, they usually receive clear guidelines from the University itself regarding the content and design of programs arranged. But possibly, this could be a step towards a localization of the organization. A look at the official Oneness pages on the Internet reveals that there are also a lot of events happening through webcast. Darshans with Bhagavan are regularly broadcasted and can be viewed by people around the world simultaneously. It is believed that Bhagavan (who sits with his eyes closed during the darshan which lasts around fifteen minutes) can send out deeksha in this way.

One of the latest changes in the structure of the Oneness movement seems to have been the launching of a new meditation, the Oneness Meditation (sometimes referred to as OM meditation) in the beginning of 2012. This meditation, which is said to assist the planetary shift in consciousness[23] is held by special OM meditators, who have been chosen

[22] A more elaborate description of the doctrines of Oneness, as well as the function of deeksha, will be presented below in chapter 4.2.
[23] www.onenessuniversity.org/index.php/oneness-meditation

by the University. The OM meditators enter a kind of trance-like state, in which the Divine takes hold of their body. They then mediate this Divine to the other participants by looking into their eyes. According to a Swedish informant, there are at present around fifty-one OM meditators around the world, out of which three are Swedish. The OM meditations are also broadcasted on webcast in the same way as the darshan with Bhagavan.

One aspect that is worth to look closer into is the fact that Indians and people from other parts of the world are divided and offered different courses at the Oneness University - allthough it should be mentioned that this is not unusual in Indian spiritual contexts[24]. Given the universal, including character of the message of Oneness, it is interesting to look closer at the way this kind of division is legitimated[25]. In Ardaghs book a brief explanation is given to this, meaning that, since there are remarkable differences in the psyche of Indians and Westerners, they are in the need of different types of guidance to reach a state of awakening (Ardagh 2007:177-178). Interesting to note in connection with this is how the different courses are presented for Indians and non-Indians respectively at the official Oneness website. While the Mahadeeksha course, that caters for Indians, brings up the struggles of modern life and offers improvements in both spiritual and worldly matters (represented in a traditional way by the four *purusarthas* or aims of human life)[26], the Oneness Awakening course held for non-Indians is said to culminate in the giving of Mukthi deeksha, which is a ”direct transfer from the Divine to the recipient, with the sole purpose of taking the recipient into the state of Oneness and Awakening – that same state enjoyed by saints, sages, and mystics world over.”[27] Terms such as the awakening of kundalini and chakras are also used to explain the process for Westerners. Not only do these differences reflect the inherent view that Indians and Westerners have a different psyche. It might also be suggested that they indicate tendencies of adjustment to different needs and *expectations*

[24] According to my own experiences from different ashrams in India, it is far from unusual that non-Indians are treated differently than Indians, for example by being offered a more comfortable place to stay, special seats during functions etc. (normally to a considerably higher fee).

[25] I experienced the consequences of this division myself as I was visiting the Oneness University during my fieldwork. I had been invited by one of the Indian informants with whom I had been in contact with, to join her and her friends to participate in a darshan with Bhagavan, which would be held during a half-day function. As we entered the University it became clear that there were no other Western groups around that day with whom I could join. When I then asked some of the dasas if I could not participate in the Indian program, which would be held in Tamil, they sternly refused me to do so. The only explanation given was that that were the rules. It took a long time of convincing to finally be able to enter the darshan hall.

[26] http://www.onenessuniversity.org/index.php/mahadeeksha

[27] http://www.onenessuniversity.org/index.php/courses/oneness-awakening-course

of followers from different cultures. We will return to this point in the later analysis part of the thesis.

*4.1.3. Establishing in Sweden*

Sweden seems to have been among the first countries outside of India to be introduced to the teachings of Amma and Bhagavan. One of the reasons for that was probably that one of the foreign disciples that joined the movement at an early stage was Swedish, a man called Freddy Nielsen. According to two of the Swedish informants I interviewed, Freddy played a key role in introducing the teachings of Amma and Bhagavan to a Swedish audience.[28] So successful was he in his mission of spreading Oneness that Bhagavan even declared Sweden to be the second country in the world to become fully awakened next after India, which would be the first (interview with Anna). In an interview in October 2012, the informant Margareta said that there where now around hundred Oneness Trainers in Sweden, and many more deeksha givers, possibly as many as 2000-2500 (of course, not all of them might still be active today). These numbers according to Margareta meant that Sweden has the highest percentage of deeksha givers in relation to the amount of citizens[29].

I have not been able to find any exact date for the time when the teachings of Amma and Bhagavan started to be introduced in Sweden, but one informant, Margareta, says she went on her first course with Freddy Nielsen already in 1999. Tilda, another Swedish informant said she came into contact with Oneness around 2003. She did not quite remember what the movement was officially called at that time, but said that there was a lot of talk about Golden City (today known as Oneness University), and that Bhagavan was known as "Kalki". The courses offered were called Mukti courses and had three different levels. According to Tilda, deeksha was not part of the program at that time, instead the focus was on teachings and meditation. It was also strongly recommended to become a fruitarian, that is, to only eat fruit in order to quicken ones spiritual development. At the last level of the Mukti course one would go for a visit to Golden City and meet with Amma and Bhagavan.

[28] I have tried to contact Freddy Nielsen to hear his view about these first years when Oneness was established in Sweden, but he did not reply. Apparently, according to the informants I spoke with, he left the movement already in 2005 after directing severe criticism against it. Since Freddy Nielsen was a public persona during his time in Oneness, and often referred to by other informants, I have chosen to include his name here.

[29] I have not been able to get these numbers confirmed by any other source, but since Margareta herself is a Oneness Trainer with close connections with the Oneness University, I assume that her information comes from there.

By 2005, Oneness seems to have become more widely spread, and deeksha had been introduced and turned into the main focus of the movement. By that time, deeksha even for a short period became the subject for a public debate in Swedish media. Svenska Dagbladet, one of Sweden's daily newspapers, published a whole series of articles about them during 2005 (Haag 2005; Lagercrantz 2005). Although the articles overall painted a negative rather than positive image about Oneness and deeksha, it nevertheless shows their visibility in Swedish society at that time.

Another important character for the spreading of deeksha in Sweden at this time was Anette Carlström, a woman who, after attending the Mukti courses was declared awakened. In one of the articles from Svenska Dagbladet referred to above, Carlström is described as a central figure in the mission of Bhagavan (Haag:2005). In 2006 she published a book about her journey towards enlightenment (Carlström 2006).

During fieldwork in autumn 2012, I got the feeling from people I spoke with that the "deeksha wave" is in a state of withdrawal these days. Both members and former members of the Swedish deeksha community confirmed that the interest seems to be less now than a few years ago, that many have moved on to other teachings and techniques. But, on the other hand, there are still those who continue, and new people are still getting initiated to become deeksha givers.

## 4.2. Doctrines and practices

### *4.2.1. Deeksha and awakening into Oneness*

The overarching philosophy of Oneness, although presented in a modern language, seems to rest on the ancient Indian religious-philosophical principle that man has the possibility to attain a state beyond all separation and individuality[30]. This is within the Oneness movement usually referred to as "awakening", or "awakening into Oneness"[31]. It is explained that:

[30] In the Hindu tradition, this is usually referred to as *moksa*, in Buddhism as *nirvana*, and in Jainism as *kevala-jnana*. Although there are important differences between these concepts regarding the nature of the liberated state, I would still argue that they resemble each other, sharing the overall view that man is in a state of bondage that somehow needs to be cut through in order for true liberation, which is regarded as the ultimate goal of existence, to be attained. Interestingly enough, while the above mentioned religious traditions describe worldly life as *samsara*, a cycle of life and death, and liberation as freedom from this cycle, I have not found the term samsara to be used in the doctrines of Oneness found for instance on their websites. This might be a coincidence, but it could also be part of a conscious strategy to "de-culturalize" the concept of liberation, in the same way as the neutral word "awakening" or "oneness" is used to describe a state of liberation.

[31] It is reported that earlier in the history of the movement, some people were disappointed with the Oneness courses, since they felt they were promised to become enlightened, which they were not. This, according to Bhagavan and the dasas, had to do with misunderstandings concerning language

> The vision of Oneness University is that man can be released. For Bhagavan, there is only one reason for all human problems: the strong feeling of a separate I, the feeling of separation, the feeling of an I and a not-I. There is no other type of relation that we know of. We can only relate to things as the I and the not-I. That's what causes problems in homes and in relations between people. And it is this that creates problems between two countries or gives rise to religious conflicts or any other problem. It is the feeling of separation, or the feeling of I and not-I. Whatever ideology we have, and whatever virtues we maintain, conflicts are unavoidable as long as we relate to our surrounding in this way, as I and not-I (Ardagh 2007:192-193, my translation).

According to Amanda J. Huffner, a majority of transnational gurus with a Western audience have "chosen to implement generalized universalistic principles usually derived from Advaita Vedanta and couched in the language of spirituality, but dissociated from the greater context of Hinduism in order to garner popular acceptance of their "foreign" religiosity" (Huffner 2011:376). This statement, I would argue, fits well together with the soteriology found in the Oneness movement, although Bhagavan and the dasas have made some significant modifications, and use a different terminology than the one derived from the Vedantic tradition.

The key principles of Advaita Vedanta, as presented by contemporary gurus, are usually the following three: First, there is an essential unity between all living creatures and God, which one must realize by pulling aside the veil of *maya*, or illusion. Second, the realization of this ultimate reality is *moksa* or liberation, attained through personal development by spiritual practise. Third, there are many ways of accessing this ultimate Truth (Huffner 2011:378). According to Philip Charles Lucas (2011), who has studied the effect of the teachings of the late Indian Advaitic saint Sri Ramana Mahrshi on contemporary American teachers of Vedanta, it is the high portability and transposability of Maharshi's Advaita that has made it attractive to many contemporary teachers, who without much problem can adjust and transmit it to a non-Indian audience. In this way, ancient teachings can gain relevance in new cultural settings.

Similarly, in the Oneness movement the terms maya and moksa have been replaced by a more scientific-sounding vocabulary, but the essence of the teachings of Bhagavan seems to share the overarching Advaita Vedantic principles of the possibility of reaching a state of oneness and unity beyond a separate identity. What within Oneness is called awakening seems to bear similarities with the concept of moksa. That truth or unity

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and culture. In order to avoid such misunderstandings, the term "enlightenment" is rarely used these days. Instead, Bhagavan and the dasas speak of "awakening" and "oneness" (Ardagh 2007:181).

can be reached trough many different paths is also accepted. No one is encouraged to leave his or her respective religion when being initiated to become a deeksha giver. Rather a religious belonging is seen as complementary to the work of Oneness.

The main point where Oneness seems to differ from the Advaita Vedantic view is on explaining the way *how* to free oneself from the false feeling of having a separate I. Liberation, what is referred to as awakening, is seen as being a neurobiological shift in the brain. When the different parts of the brain are in harmony, it is thought that the brain goes back to functioning naturally, and one wakes up from the false, trance-like state of separation. The dasas are said to have developed an intuitive method of measuring the activity in the different parts of the brain. By using this method, they are said to be able to see if a person has reached a state of awakening or not. Thus, awakening is not merely a subjective experience of unity or oneness, it is also a specific neurobiological state that can be measured intuitively by the dasas (Ardagh 2007:173).

In the Oneness movement, the way of bringing forward this neurobiological shift in the brain is through the giving of deeksha[32], sometimes also referred to as oneness blessing. Deeksha is a kind of energy transmission usually given by the laying on of hands on the head of a person (*sparsha deeksha*). It can also sometimes be given through the eyes (*nayana deeksha*), or trough intention (*smarana deeksha*) (Ardagh 2007:44).

The principle of the effectiveness of deeksha rests on the idea that awakening is a neurobiological process rather than the outcome of a proper ontological understanding. A proper understanding of reality, or to see things as they really are, is rather thought to be the outcome of a shift in the brain. Due to this idea, less importance is given to spiritual teachings. This, in turn, can be said to legitimate claims of universal applicability. Since there are no teachings or dogmas to follow, anyone can receive and experience the benefits of deeksha. This becomes clear in the following presentation found on the Oneness website:

> The Deeksha neither requires practicing a particular way of living nor is an initiation into following a new path. It does not bind one to any philosophy or ideology. It transcends religious and cultural barriers from the fact that it only chooses to awaken each to his/her own spiritual tradition by facilitating a neurobiological shift, thus making religion a matter of personal choice and convenience. Hence people belonging to any faith or age group can receive the Deeksha (http://www.onenessuniversity.org/index.php/what-we-offer).

[32] Deeksha is a Sanskrit term usually having the meaning "initiation" (for instance, by a guru). Within the Oneness movement it is used with different connotations.

The universal applicability of deeksha is further illustrated by the idea that there are different types of awakenings related to the religious preference of the individual. It is said that different types of awakenings are related with different *chakras*[33], which in turn represents different religions. For instance, an activated heartchakra is experienced as unconditional love. This is called a Christian awakening. An activated throatchakra is called a Muslim awakening; activation of the third eye is a Buddhist awakening; and, when the chakra on top of the head is activated, it is called a Hindu awakening (Ardagh 2007:179).

The relation between doing spiritual practise, for instance by following a religious path, and the possibility to awaken seems to be a bit ambiguous. It is on the one hand stated that there is no need to follow any specific philosophy or ideology, and it is even said that the changes in the brain that occurs during the giving of deeksha happens easier without the conscious participation of the receiver (Ardagh 2007:579). On the other hand, one can read that:

> Effort does have a role in the Deeksha. While effort in the form of introspection, contemplation, asking the right question, having an intent, external doing etc. is also essential. The role of effort in this context is analogous to a plane speeding on a runway to take off, but the actual take-off also demands an appropriate wind current. The Deeksha is like the current that finally lifts the plane off the ground (http:/onenessuniversity.org/index.php/what-we-offer).

But, in the end, the power and ability to awaken is said to depend on divine grace. "Man cannot make it on his own. It has to be given to him", is a slogan I have heard repeated many times. This, one can argue, gives a certain power to the founding couple Amma and Bhagavan. Since they are thought of as avatars, that is, incarnations of the divine, they are assumed to have the ability to bestow this grace.

### *4.2.2. The 2012 awakening*

According to the teachings of Bhagavan, to move away from the feeling of separation is not only a way to individual awakening, but also the locus for transforming the world into a better place. These two aspects of individual and collective awakening are united in a vision held that the world is destined to move into a new state of consciousness. During the time when I started doing fieldwork (autumn 2012), it was believed that in the coming last months of 2012, the whole earth would go through major transformations, which would

[33] *Chakras*, according to Hindu-Tantric physiology, are centres of spiritual energy situated at different places in the body along the spine.

culminate around the 21st December[34]. For this to happen with a positive outcome, a critical mass shift in consciousness would need to take place. According to the vision of Amma and Bhagavan, that means the awakening of 70 000 people by the end of 2012. The task of the Oneness movement is, according to the presentation on their website, to assist in this process.[35]

During my fieldwork in Sweden in autumn 2012, I got the impression that there was quite a lot of focus put on this upcoming collective shift in consciousness. At two deeksha events in October, Swedish deeksha givers who had been declared as being awakened by the dasas from the Oneness University, shared their stories, and the other people present were encouraged to write to the dasas in India if they had noticed any change in their consciousness. Apparently the procedure was that one wrote to the University about one's state of mind, and then the dasas there would decide whether you had reached a state of awakening or not. At the Oneness websites, there are many stories found from people who have become awakened. During autumn 2012, figures on the number of awakened were updated on the 21st of every month at the World Oneness Community website. By the end of October, the numbers presented were as follows:

- People Awakened are over 114,000
- People living in the Presence are over 262,000
- People in Awakened states are over 63 million
- People experiencing the Presence are over 108 million

(http://www.worldonenesscommunity.com, accessed 2012 10 31)

As shown above, a distinction is made between being in awakened states and being awakened, living in the presence and experiencing the presence. An awakened state, which is temporary, is said to have the possibility to lead to permanent awakening, but does not necessarily always do so. An awakened state is an experience made by the individual consciousness, the "I", while in full awakening, there is nothing left of the individual consciousness (Ardagh 2007:178).

[34] That the world will enter a new era is a foundational belief in many New Age teachings. According to Olav Hammer, the very term "New Age" itself refers to the close coming of the goal of history, the dawning of a New Age (Hammer 1997:36). Arjuna Ardagh in his book on deeksha connects the importance of the year 2012 with the ancient Mayan calendar, and refers to the Swedish authority on the Mayan calendar, Carl Johan Calleman (Ardagh 2007:195).

[35] http://www.worldonenesscommunity.com/

In an interview published in Ardaghs book 2007, Bhagavan talks about the future of Oneness and the courses held at the University. He is quoted saying:

> We aim towards a complete abolishment of the course itself. We want humanity to be liberated, not to hold courses for all future. This is only a preparation to make the people that come here ready to give deeksha. Then all of humanity will enter into a new phase. That is why this order of dasas might not exist after the year of 2012. Otherwise it would turn into a cult or a religion. We imagine that 2012 at the latest, when our mission is completed, there will be a deconstruction of the whole show, and then the dasas will return to their anonymous lives. This is very clear to us (Ardagh 2007:214, my translation).

This statement shows that the belief that a transformation will take place after 2012 is an important component in the soteriology of Oneness. And, according to the number of people reported to be awakened or in awakened states as presented above, it seems as if the 2012 prophecy of Amma and Bhagavan is being fully realized among their followers.

## 4.3. Oneness – a New Age inspired NRM?

According to Kathinka Frøystad (2011; 2006), it might appear that the term New Age may seem to be a misnomer as a label for spiritual movements in India, as it primarily signifies a Western phenomenon that has been influenced by selective Hindu, Buddhist and Native-American practices. But New Age has also developed in India, among Indians - especially in the urban middle-class segment. Frøystad writes:

> In Western contexts, the term of New Age is usually applied to activities that span from meditation and astrology to Reiki healing and tarot-card reading but are united by beliefs in reincarnation, the meaningfulness of all events, the enhancement of bodily flows of energy by various techniques and, not least, the coming of a global spiritual enlightenment that will usher in a new era. These characteristics also apply to Indian contexts, though one should note a few differences: the Indian New Age includes more guru movements, less Native-American influence and a more frequent use of 'New Age' as a self-referent (Frøystad 2011:46).

Further, compared with Western New Age, Indian New Age shows a stronger continuity with religious traditions of local origin – although these traditions have many times been given a modern, "Californianized" interpretation (Frøystad 2006:107). Indian New Age, like its Western counterpart, prefers to consider itself as "spiritual"' rather than "religious". But this, according to Frøystad, is more a reflection of the Indian non-dualist conceptions of God

than a rejection of the established order, which is how Heelas and Woodhead understand this distinction (Frøystad 2011:46).

With its focus on the coming Golden Age after 2012, the non-denominational rhetoric, and the many miracle-stories surrounding the two founders Amma and Bhagavan, the Oneness movement seems to fit perfectly into the description of the Indian New Age movement as given by Frøystad. The doctrines and practices presented by the movement appear as a blend of traditional, Hindu beliefs and Western-inspired New Age.

On the other hand, even though Oneness clearly wants to distance themselves from all kinds of religious dogma, thus following the New Age ideal of freedom of choice for the individual and loose organizational structures,[36] there are also components that could make it appropriate to describe Oneness as a NRM. First of all, there is an organization around Amma and Bhagavan that seem to attend to both spiritual as well as administrational tasks. From the foundational years of the movement, the monks and nuns known as *dasas*, and the *acharyas* have played an important role as teachers and organizers of courses. In places outside of India, there are today *Oneness Trainers*, who are responsible for arranging programs, and who can give initiations to others to become a deeksha giver. Even though there is no formal membership (as far as I know), the epithet of being a deeksha giver could be seen as a form of membership. For those who wish to, my impression is that Oneness certainly provides the opportunity for a deeper engagement.

It seems as the Oneness movement embodies both an organized NRM as well as a more loosely organized type of New Age spirituality. Depending on the needs of the individual, Oneness seems to be able to offer a whole system of doctrine, practices and communion, as well as being able to simply function as a complement to other faiths. An illustration: the Srimurti, a picture of Amma and Bhagavan, is usually present at deeksha events. It is said that one can receive deeksha straight from this image only by looking at it. There are also many miracle-stories related to the Srimurti retold at the Oneness webpages. But, for those who belong to another faith, the image of Amma and Bhagavan can be replaced by any other image of the divine (or, be replaced by nothingness, for those who prefers that). It is up to the individual to decide whether they want to use the image of Amma and Bhagavan as representation of the divine or not[37].

[36] Liselotte Frisk (2003) in her study on Swedish New Age participants writes that new Age is a private form of religion, expressing itself through the reading of books, discussions with friends and sporadic participation in common activities. Thus, not much focus is put on communal activities.
[37] During fieldwork both in Sweden and India, I was often encouraged to visualize my own image of the divine while prostrating in front of the Srimurti.

An interesting example of the ambiguous status of Oneness, as both a non-confessional, universalistic movement, and as a distinct NRM of Indian origin, was described in an interview with a Swedish deeksha giver who is also a Oneness Trainer. She told that she had been co-operating with priests belonging to the Swedish Church for a couple of years, in congregations in Stockholm. Some of these priests had gone to India and undergone the process of becoming deeksha givers a few years before. After that they had been giving deeksha in church. This had been of no problem for the bishop, who had approved of it. Some members of the congregation had on the other hand been very upset, and one of the priests had even been exposed to threats.

After this interview, I had a look on the Internet to see if there was anything written about these deeksha-giving priests. In *Kyrkans tidning* I found an article published on the 12th November 2009[38] reporting about a sermon that included Oneness blessing[39] conducted in the church of Engelbrekt, Stockholm. The sermon was said to be the first of its kind in Europe, and had attracted around four hundred people. The priest who had taken the initiative to the sermon, Louise Linder, was interviewed in the article. She, together with some colleagues had previously gone as the first priests from the Swedish church to Oneness University. Linder said in the interview that they had thought the experiences from the university suited with the stillness, reflection and unity that the church represents, and therefore decided to try Oneness in their sermons[40].

The reverend in the congregation of Engelbrekt, Per Wahlström, was also interviewed in the article. He said that he did not think that Oneness was an odd or even unusual feature in the church, and that the decision to hold the Oneness evening was a thoroughly sought over decision. Had the priests perceived Oneness to be an exclusive religious group, then one can assume that they would have hesitated to bring it into church. Rather, they seem to have embraced their message of offering a way to enhance universal peace and harmony through the giving of deeksha or Oneness blessing.

[38] http://www.kyrkanstidning.se/nyhet/handpalaggning-lockar-manga-nyfikna

[39] The author of the article uses the more neutrally sounding term Oneness blessing rather than deeksha throughout the whole article. Only in the end, in a small note, it is written that Oneness blessing is sometimes also referred to as deeksha. It is also stated that the method is independent of any religious belonging.

[40] After reading this article, I contacted Louise Linder via email to hear if she and her colleagues were still giving deeksha/Oness blessing in church. She confirmed this, writing: "We still have personal blessing/Oneness blessing on our peace of mind sermons (sinnesro mässor). It is both priests and other blessing givers who give during the Holy Communion" (email from Louise Linder 16-05-2013, my translation).

On the Swedish webpage bibelfokus.se[41], I found another article on the issue, written by an obvious critic. From the presentation given on the website, bibelfokus appears to have a somewhat fundamentalist view on Christian faith.[42] In the article on the deeksha-giving priests it is stated, among other things that ”Oneness blessing is occultism derived from Hinduism and New Age. There is a philosophy and religion behind this that is not at all compatible with Judeo-Christian faith that is based on The Holy Scripture, the Bible” (http://bibelfokus.se/tecken6, my translation).

Even though this article might not be a clear example of a dichotomy between non-denominational New Age and a more exclusive, religious movement (since the author refers to Oneness as derived both from Hinduism and New Age), it gives an interesting perspective on how the kind of inclusive universalism that Oneness advocates can be interpreted. The author of bibelfokus obviously does not agree with the claims of Oneness to be universally applicable, but rather tends to see them as going against “true Christian faith”. Hence, one could say that for the priests who went to India to become deeksha givers, Oneness seems to represent a striving to arrive at an underlying unity of mankind, spiritual and ethical – and visions such as those put forward by the Oneness movement makes sense, and actually becomes embodied in practices such as deeksha. For others who have a different outlook – in the case of the critical author of bibelfokus, the exclusive authority of the bible, Oneness becomes a false doctrine, even heresy when practised in church.

Recent scholarship has taken the discussion on Hindu-inspired NRMs one step further. Amanada J. Huffner, for instance, in her work on Amritanandamayi Ma’s movement in America (2011), refers to Lola Williamson who champions an entirely new category of (Hindu) religiosity, using the term Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements (HIMM) to “denote the dual influences of ethnic-Hindus and theologically kaleidoscopic non-Indian Hindu spiritual seekers who comprise devotee populations” (Huffner 2011:377). According to Huffner, Williamson argues that HIMMs are a new religion consisting of a hybridization between Hindu religiosity and Western traditions of individualism and rationalism (Huffner 2011:377).

Whether or not the category of HIMM is applicable to Oneness University I will for now leave open. In one sense, it seems to fit well due to the fact that the followers

[41] http://bibelfokus.se/tecken6, accessed 2012-09-29. Exactly when the article is written is not clear, but it is said that the two priests and one doctor that is discussed in the article visited Oneness University in September 2009. It is also stated that the page is updated 2010-10-29 with further testimony. The article in question is signed by Lennart Jareteg, who is also said to be responsible for the publication of bibelfokus.se.

[42] http.//bibelfokus.se/vad_vi_tror

and sympathizers of Oneness include both ethnic Hindus as well as Westerners, who, apparently, all contributed by adding their own character to the movement. But on the other hand, meditation does not seem to be of such importance as to call it a meditation movement.

# 5. Source material

## 5.1. Collecting material

The main source material to be analysed here are the interviews and field notes collected during the fieldwork in Sweden and India conducted during September 2012 – January 2013. More precisely, in Sweden six interviews with seven informants were conducted, and in India five interviews with six informants (two of the interviews were conducted with couples that were interviewed together.) In addition to that, many more conversations took place during the fieldwork, both with devotees of Amma and Bhagavan, as well as with "outsiders", often with a more critical view.

The interviews in Sweden took place in Swedish - although for the sake of the flow of the text, I have chosen to translate them into English whenever quotations are used in the analytical part of the thesis. In India, the interviews were conducted in English. Most of the Swedish informants (all except one) suggested that we meet in their home, and subsequently the interviews were conducted there. This was something that I found to be of great value, since it gave an opportunity to get to know a little more about the general life situation of the informants. As opposed to how things unfolded in Sweden, none of the Indian informants wanted to meet in their home, but preferred a more public space[43]. Thus, the interviews in India were conducted in restaurants, offices and hotel rooms. Although no one explicitly asked to be anonymous, the informants were all told before starting the interview that their names would not be used in the thesis. When quotations from the interviews are given in the text, the names of the informants have been changed.

## 5.2. Informants

The informants were found and contacted in a number of different ways: in Sweden, I found a list of *Oneness Trainers* responsible for Oneness programs in different areas of Sweden. They were contacted via email. Out of six, three of them responded and were interviewed. Additionally, I contacted two people whom I had met a few years ago when I first started to look into the Oneness movement, and they both agreed on meeting again. Lastly, I took the help of friends and asked them if they knew of anyone involved in Oneness. Through this,

[43] This probably has its explanation in cultural differences. My experience of India is that inviting a (fairly unknown) guest to your home means a whole lot more in terms of work and formality, since hospitality is something almost sacred. In Sweden, on the other hand, the relation with the informants were usually much more informal, and they didn't seem to be bothered by inviting me over without formalities.

the last two informants were found. I met with the informants at the place where they lived, and this meant that five interviews were conducted in Gothenburg, one in Stockholm, and one in Helsingborg.

By these multiple ways of approach, the Swedish informants became a varied group concerning age, gender and engagement: two were male and five were female; the age varied from around thirty up to sixty years; three were very much involved in Oneness, one had a lower, kind of "on and off" engagement, and three had more or less left the movement. This last point needs a small commentary. At first, I was hesitating about whether or not it would be appropriate to use so many ex-members as informants, as the essay focus mainly on how the movement functions today. But then, the more I started to speak with people, I got the impression that a quite large number of people previously engaged had left the movement in the last few years. Since no official membership is held, it is difficult to get any exact numbers of how many that has left and how many new people that has joined Oneness since its establishing days in Sweden. But two of the Oneness Trainers did confirm that many former deeksha givers seem to have left their engagement behind. Keeping this last point in mind, it seemed accurate to use former deeksha givers as informants, as they obviously represent a rather large group in this context.

In India, informants were found in a similar way: I first started with writing to the Oneness University. When no reply came, I contacted one of the Swedish Oneness Trainers, who put me into contact with some dasas at the University. They in turn directed me to a deeksha giver in Chennai who organized two interviews. I also contacted a deeksha giver whom I had previously met during a Oneness program in Delhi in spring 2012. The last two informants I stumbled over more or less by chance - they were both working in the tourist industry in the small South Indian town Mahabalipuram, where I stayed for some time. Thus, one interview was conducted in New Delhi, two in Chennai, and two in Mahabalipuram. I also visited a Oneness temple in Bangalore, but there no formal interviews took place, only casual conversations.

The Indian informants turned out to be a slightly less heterogenic group than the Swedish informants – they were all between around thirty-five and forty-five years of age; all still devotees of Amma and Bhagavan; four were male and two were female; all except for one, who was from Kashmir, originated from Tamil Nadu (although two of them were at present living in New Delhi).

## 5.3. Participant observation

The participant observation ran parallel with the interview-work, but I made the decision already at an initial stage not to make any interviews at the occasions where I was participating in programs. The reason for that was that the different events, mostly including meditation and deeksha, usually held an intensely emotional atmosphere, and it did not feel appropriate to ask people just after finishing a meditation if they would be interested in being interviewed about their experiences. Thus, during the participant observations I was only participating and nothing else (except, perhaps, making mental notes). The informants were found and interviewed elsewhere and not during the events where I participated.

In Sweden during autumn 2012, I participated in two half-day courses that were held in the home of two of the Oneness Trainers in Gothenburg. The first course included different kinds of meditation, deeksha, sharing, and a web-cast deeksha with Bhagavan. The second time there was an additional special program including an OM meditation with one of the three Swedish OM meditators. I also participated at a deeksha evening held weekly in Stockholm. During this evening, as well as at the OM meditation, there were also people who had recently been declared awakened who gave testimonies about their experiences. This was in October 2012, only two months before the awaited day, the 21st December that, according to Oneness, would be the starting point of a new cosmic era. Bhagavan had previously made an announcement that at least 70 000 people would get awakened before this date, and the expectations were therefore high on what was to come.

It must also be added here that my experiences of Oneness and deeksha in Sweden goes beyond these three occasions – I first came into contact with Swedish deeksha givers in 2005, and have since then throughout the years occasionally participated in different events that have included deeksha. Even if these fall outside the frame of the participant observation that has been conducted specifically for this thesis, they are nevertheless valuable experiences to draw on. The process of producing a thesis such as this, I would argue, starts at a much earlier point than when the actual fieldwork begins.

Given that I had less previous experience of Oneness in India than in Sweden, the participant observation in India became more extensive. My first encounter with Oneness in India took place in New Delhi in March 2012, when I first started to look into the possibilities of writing this thesis. That event, which took place at a private house in one of Delhis more wealthy areas, was the celebration of Bhagavan's birthday. It started off in a grand style with a procession of devotees moving around the block carrying the *Srimurti* or picture of Amma and Bhagavan, showering it with flower petals. Meanwhile, pamphlets

with information about Oneness were handed out to people passing by. After the procession, there was a program with deeksha held by one of the dasas from the Oneness University.

During December 2012-January 2013 I visited four events in different locations in South India: on the 21st of December in Nemam outside of Chennai, on two occasions a Oneness temple in Bangalore, and lastly the Oneness University itself, where Bhagavan gave darshan. In Nemam there was a special program held on the 21st December in order to celebrate the new coming era. This was held by a dasa from Oneness University, and really had the character of a celebration, with people dancing joyously. In Bangalore, I visited two weekly events that were held regularly at a Oneness temple located in a residential area of the city. These included similar points as the Swedish events, with deeksha and a web-cast with Bhagavan. The last visit, which was to the Oneness University, included a half-day course (of which I couldn't follow much, since it was all in Tamil), which ended with a half-hour darshan with Bhagavan himself inside the top floor of the huge Oneness Temple[44].

[44] This darshan I was only able to attend due to the kind efforts of one of my Indian informants, a woman from Chennai who had close connections to some of the dasas at the University. For reasons that are beyond my knowledge, Indian and foreign attendants are kept separately in different locations at the campus area, and are offered different courses. On this particular occasion, there was no foreign group present that I could join. I therefore asked if I could not join the Indian, Tamil-speaking group for the day. The dasas first refused me to do so, and it was only after a long negotiation held by my Indian informant that they reluctantly allowed me to join the group darshan.

# 6. Analysis

In this section the source material collected during fieldwork will be analysed through the lens of the theoretical perspective presented in chapter 2. Already at this initial stage, I would like to make a few remarks about some issues that arose during the fieldwork and the after following processing of the collected information. First, I must say that I underestimated the cultural impact on making interviews. Even though the questions posed were the same, the conversations turned out rather differently in Sweden and in India. While the Swedish informants seemed comfortable and natural with reflecting over their lives and experiences, the Indian informants usually kept their answers much more short. One of the reasons for this is probably connected with language – even if all Indians who were interviewed were more or less fluid in English, it was not their mother tongue, which was the case in Sweden (where the interviews were conducted in Swedish). But I think that it is also a question of culture. As the psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar has pointed out, Indians generally lack the habit of pondering over their individual life stories in the same existential way that is common in Western culture (2010:49). This difference can of course be looked upon as an interesting, valuable phenomena in itself, but when the task comes to putting the interviews side by side in an attempt to compare their contents, the differences in style becomes a bit challenging.

The second remark I would like to make is that there was a great richness and variety in the material collected during fieldwork. The challenge has therefore not been to find valuable information, but rather the opposite, to choose what to include and not. There were more interesting aspects in the material (such as the parallel engagement in other spiritual movements and healing practises of many Swedish informants) that I felt needed to be left out in order not to get too far away from the research question.

## 6.1. Analysis of research questions

We will in the following part focus on the research question (presented earlier in chapter 1.2) and its different sub-questions, and one by one analyse them in the light of the theoretical perspective discussed in chapter 2. More specifically, we will start with looking at the three sub-questions, and through them proceed to the overarching question of to which extent Oneness has adapted to the local culture. The research questions are as follows:

*In the process of diffusion of the Oneness movement from an Indian to a Swedish context, to what extent has the Oneness movement adapted to the local culture? Has any significant changes concerning the motivation, aims and practises of followers taken place?*

- What seem to have been the motivational factor for joining the Oneness movement for followers in India and Sweden respectively?

- What are the aims and objectives for joining - e.g. is it for an increased sense of well-being, self-realization, soteriological aims or any other reasons for followers in India and Sweden respectively?

- Have the practises and rituals performed remained the same in Sweden as in India, or have they been modified, taking on a more localized (glocalized) character?

*6.1.1. Motivational factors*

Among the Swedish informants, the answers to the question of what had been the motivational factor for joining the Oneness movement (either by receiving deeksha or becoming a deeksha giver) were simultaneously varying and similar. Starting with the similarities, all informants had, to different extents, a background as "seekers", that is, all of them had previous experiences of alternative forms of religion/spirituality. Many of them traced their encounters with different spiritual techniques and teachings to a diffuse feeling, often originating at an early age, of wanting to become "whole", or to "know more about reality". Dan describes it as follows:

> I guess I have always been a… how to say, a seeker at some level, without really knowing what I'm searching for. There has been a longing, subconscious of course, to find something. And I have been tapping into all kinds of areas. About fifteen years ago I came into contact with the shamanic tradition of knowledge, and that has been very exciting and giving. Then in 2004 I got my first deeksha, and I wondered, 'what is this??' It was strange what happened, how it opened up something.

The general motivational factor for all the informants thus seems to have been to achieve, or at least come closer to this sense of wholeness. Why they choose Oneness among the variety of different teachings and techniques available at the spiritual marketplace seems to vary slightly. Some simply heard about Oneness from a friend or saw a note somewhere about it, and decided to try it out. Through their experiences of deeksha, they then became interested

to know more and to engage deeper. At least two of the informants says that it was the *sensations* during and after receiving deeksha, that they "felt it in the body" that made them want to continue with Oneness. Anna, when asked what it was that attracted her with deeksha says:

> Well, it was that I felt a reply in my body. It was something I couldn't explain, there were no logical arguments at all, I didn't know anything about it.

Two of the informants talks about a kind of "deeksha hype" among the Swedish New Age community a few years ago that made them curious. Sven explains:

> It was a little bit like…It's like that with many different teachings, that it's something that comes that everyone talks about. As I remember thinking was that, yes, maybe this is it! And then I devoted myself.

Tilda, who first came into contact with the teachings of Amma and Bhagavan around 2003 recalls:

> I remember that there were advertisements, you saw advertisements for it in health magazines. And then Anandagiri came to Ängsbacka[45]. Mmm, he was there and he talked a lot for it. It feels like it was a bit of oral and written advertisement for it. You saw Ananadagiri on posters.

When asked what it was that made her attracted to Oneness Tilda continues:

> It was probably that, it felt like it was 'the one and only place where you can be enlightened', a bit like that. And because it was a little bit like, that you didn't have to meditate for forty years to get enlightened, that you could achieve it just like that. And then of course you want to try it! I'm curious, and I'm a seeker, so I wanted to try it.

Another informant actually mentions this last point, the relative effortlessness, as the main reason for making her want to try Oneness and deeksha. Lily has devoted a big part of her life to spiritual activities. She has got a number of initiations from various teachers and mediums, and is herself a teacher and practitioner of meditation and healing. After being an

[45] Anandagiri was at that time one of the main acharyas or teachers at the University. To my knowledge he is no longer part of the movement today. Ängsbacka is a Swedish retreat centre where a big New Age festival is held annually.

active deeksha giver for a few years, Lily has today more or less left Oneness behind. When asked about what it was that attracted her with deeksha, Lily says:

> It was because I felt tired of meditating so much myself. (…) I thought that, it was so comfortable just to receive something. Earlier I had always meditated regularly, and I got fed up with being so disciplined. To always do this every day, I felt that I was tired of living like that. I though it suited me well to just get it poured over my head, which is a bit absurd in a way. And I think that's why I left it also. Because it was a bit of a quick fix.

As an interesting contrast to this we can look at a comment made by another informant, Gun, while discussing why many people in Sweden at present seem to leave Oneness and deeksha behind:

> I mean, this (deeksha) is not a quick fix method, that's the thing. This is more… that you can use deeksha, but it's not like it will from one day to the other make you into another person and eternally happy or something like that. That's not true. It comes up sometimes in discussions with other deeksha givers that are still here and continues, that, where are the others? Why are they not here? Especially when you have felt completely happy at some moment, then you wonder why the others are not here, why they have started with this or that instead. I guess it's about always looking for something that's better, that's stronger, that will fix something. This doesn't fix anything. It's more something of a slow unfolding.

While some of those who stopped using deeksha speak of it as a quick fix, deeksha givers who are still active turns the same argument around and claims that it in fact is the longing for quick fixes that makes people leave Oneness and start with something new. The tension between on the one hand freedom of choice, to try out different teachings and techniques, and on the other hand to hang on to one path and face the challenges that might come with it appears as a common theme in all the stories of the Swedish informants. Anna says:

> When you come in contact with deeksha you feel that, this is it, and it is at that time. But then, after some time perhaps something else appears that seems interesting. And you don't feel that you need to be faithful, you don't have any obligations. I know a lot of people that are into many different things, among them deeksha. People are mixing freely. But I also know someone who feels that deeksha is the only thing that is needed.

As opposed to the Swedish informants, most of the Indian informants did not mention spiritual quests as a primary motivation for engaging in Oneness. For them, the motivation

mainly seems to have stemmed from facing an acute problem in life, such as illness, a sick child or depression. Sunil explains how it happened that he and his wife, Neelam, became involved in Oneness:

> So what happened was that I was in Nigeria for a long period, and at that time my wife lost her father, but she was unable to come and attend the ceremony. From that she got really depressed, and she was unable to come out of the depressive mood. It kept on hurting her, the depression over that she was unable to see her father in the last moment. For that reason we went to some of the temples but she did not feel comforted. But after discovering Bhagavan, she came out of her depression and sorrow. Once she started to attend Bhagavans programs and taking deeksha, her confidence increased, and she totally recovered from her depression.

Another of the informants, Lalita, had desperately searched for a way to cure her son, who had had an accident as an infant. Seeing her despair, one of her friends had suggested her to see Amma and Bhagavan. She recalls:

> I used to go and knock on every door, actually. Because I was desperate, you know. I used to go everywhere. Wherever there was an astrologer, I would be doing that, if somebody would tell me to go to this temple, I would go there. So, spiritually also, and also to every hospital. I would go to Delhi, I would go to Bombay. Wherever there was a paediatrician, I would go for consultations. I was in a very, very bad shape. In great suffering I should say. (…) One of my friends from my area, she told me, "Why are you suffering like this? Come to Amma Bhagavan and pray, and the problem will be solved".

In spite of the dominance of health issues in the motivational factors among the Indian informants, there was however one of the six who had much in common with the Swedish informants. Prakash explains his situation before he met Amma and Bhagavan:

> I went and searched in so many places. Searching, researching, studying… I went to Transcendental Meditation, I read so many religious books, about so many belief systems. Not one – all Indian scriptures, I read the bible, I read the Quran. And I found out that whatever is there is truth, but what we are doing is not there! We are always hurting people, being violent…

When asked about what attracted him particularly with the teachings of Amma and Bhagavan, Prakash explains:

> There was so much freedom in the dharma. There were no procedures. I'm a person who don't like procedures, or rituals for that matter, like daily puja. I was not interested in all those things. So if this is the way, that you have to follow so many things, meditations, you have to be regular for so many years

to understand about spirituality… What Bhagavan taught me when I was a student was that you are what you are searching for.

As the Swedish informants, the Indian informants seem to have come into contact with Oneness either through friends or from seeing some advertisement. There is, however, one interesting exception here. I'm not sure how representative the story of Ali is, but since we are discussing Oneness in the light of globalization, his story serves as an interesting case. Ali, who presented himself as a moderate Muslim, was originally from Kashmir but lived since many years in the Tamil small town Mahabalipuram, a famous tourist spot for both Indian and foreigners, where he ran a shop. Ali tells how he first came to know about Amma and Bhagavan:

In 2000, some new foreign tourists started to come here. So, I didn't know before what this was. But some tourists they said they were from an ashram, of Amma and Bhagavan. Then suddenly I got to know that there is an ashram nearby here, people were coming from there, and it was very interesting for me what was actually there. So then I decided one time, after two years, when many people had been coming from there and I saw them here, I decided to go to visit this place and see what is actually there. So, then I thought that, that area, that particular area has some spiritual power. There is something, I mean, some power is there. We say it is a spiritual power. Or, there is like a energy. This kind of system I saw there.

Ali in the end did not join Oneness, but was deeply impressed by the atmosphere of the place and the people, who he said all had good energy. He also received deeksha from foreign friends. At the time we met, he still kept a small picture of Amma and Bhagavan in his shop.

### *6.1.2. Aims and objectives*

The next question concerning the aim with joining Oneness is closely connected to the previous question about motivational factors. For the Swedish informants being motivated by a search for wholeness or self-realization, the aim was mostly expressed in terms of finding this wholeness. Dan, who opened up the discussion about motivation, continues to elaborate on his purpose or aim with joining Oneness:

Well…I guess it's a mixture of curiosity and… I believe, without knowing, that we humans, well, me, have a subconscious longing to become a whole person. And it's not like, 'now I'm going to be whole, now I'm going to be this and that', but there is a pushing force somewhere that it is not possible to define, that goes beyond my reason.

For Sven, the answer to the question about his aim with joining Oneness came without question:

> To find complete peace. Become enlightened. To come home. To get away from messy feelings and all that shit.

Sven was engaged in Oneness for about three years but has today moved on to another teaching. While summarizing his more than twenty-five years of engagement in different spiritual teachings and techniques, Sven brings up another important aspect of the "seeking culture" in Sweden – the money issue. He says:

> The other day a friend asked me about what I had done before. And then I felt like, shit, I've done a lot of things! I've been in this for so long, and I've done so many courses, and I've calculated that I've spent at least a million crowns on trips, groups, all that I've done during these last twenty-five years. I don't think I'm exaggerating. It's close to that. It's expensive to seek.

Another objective for joining Oneness, except for self-realization, seems to have been to do something positive for the world and humankind. Lily for instance tells about how she, while being active in Oneness, had been participating in a group that regularly sent collective deeksha to different places in the world in need of peace. Likewise, Margareta when introducing herself tells about a life-long engagement for improving the condition of the world. Earlier, when working as a teacher, she had constantly been engaging her students in different social and environmental projects. She explains:

> You see, I've always had this in me. I was a member of FNL in the sixties and fought for Vietnam. It was all the time this, to create a better world. And this is the only thing what Oneness is about too, creating a better world. Because when I have peace and harmony within myself, then peace and harmony is created outside of myself.

When asked about what her aim had been with engaging in Oneness, she says:

> Well, it was this thing, simply a better world. That my children wouldn't have to live in this, and not my grandchildren either. The youths I was working with in school, that they would get something better. Because I thought things were only getting worse.

The idea of improving the world by working with yourself seems to be one of the foundational ideas in the Oneness movement. This is reflected on a larger scale in the eschatological belief mentioned earlier - that the many people said to have been awakened into higher states of consciousness before the 21st December 2012 by deeksha, helped the whole world to enter into a new cosmic era.

As previously mentioned, the motivational factors for the Indian informants to join Oneness seemed more to have to do with an acute concrete problem, often connected with illness, than with a vision about self-realization. Interestingly, their aim with following Oneness and Amma and Bhagavan does not seem to differ as much from the Swedish informants. Many of them tells how their initial motivation came from seeking a solution to a concrete problem, but after some time their aim with engaging transformed into something else. Sunil and Neelam, who had come into contact with Oneness during a period of despair when Neelam was suffering from grief of having lost her father, explains:

> Actually, when we joined Oneness, we were selfish. That is, we wanted to cope with our problems. Initially, we were expecting something from Amma Bhagavan, that we ought to come out of our problems. In the initial stage, whatever we prayed for to Amma Bhagavan, sometimes it didn't happen. And then we would get a bit angry, why didn't it happen? But then, after some time, we got the answer to that, if it didn't happen, why it didn't happen. Then, after some time we realized the meaning of what Amma Bhagavan has given to us.

Lalita sought the recovery of her sick child as she initially came into contact with Oneness. She recalls:

> This is a wonder, I should say. I just met Bhagavan through this prayer. After that Bhagavan gave me a lot, a lot of realizations, to prove that he is God. When I went for the first class, I was just going. Not even, I didn't even attend.

In connection with meeting Bhagavan, Lalitas son miraculously recovered. Lalita ascribed this recovery to the power of Bhagavan, and this, among with other realizations, led to a deeper engagement. When asked about what she recalled to be her aim with joining Oneness, she says:

> More and more and more! And to get closer to God actually. I mean, whatever I thought of God, I was having a framework. God will be like this. I wanted to go nearer to God. That was the aim, basically.

> And I thought that Amma Bhagavan would lead me to that. And now I understand that Amma Bhagavan *is* the goal. That time, of course, I was new.

The intention of helping others by engaging in Oneness was present among the Indian informants as well. Lalita, who is one of those who has been declared to be awakened by the dasas at Oneness University says:

> Whatever we feel is that we are happy. So that happiness should be spread. To end their suffering and they should be happy. That is our purpose, and that is Amma Bhagavan's goal also. They want to end suffering in this world. In fact, we are helping ourselves.

Siva, who were healed from years of severe digestive problems through attending courses at Oneness University (not only spiritual classes, but also health classes had been held at the University at that time) has a more practical approach to helping others:

> If we see any diabetic people, we tell them what is good for them to eat. We do it for Bhagavan, not for any personal use. We are telling to others, even unknown people, we are giving advice. I stand here in my shop and if I see any unknown person in the street who is suffering, immediately I call that person and ask what the problem is. Then I give an advice, you do this, you do this.

An interesting aspect is that when the Indian informants talked about their worries and troubles experienced before meeting Bhagavan, they all also mentioned miraculous events that had taken place. Except from ascribing the recovery of themselves or family members to the power of Amma and Bhagavan, there were also other miracle stories occurring. Sunil and Neelam showed me a picture on their mobile phone showing a *Srimurti* or picture of Amma and Bhagavan kept in their house, from which a substance they identified as honey had started to appear. Lalita told about events where Bhagavan had been able to read her thoughts and give her answers through mental conversations. This is perhaps not surprising if one considers that in the hagiographical story about Amma and Bhagavan written by Arjuna Ardagh that was referred to in chapter 4.1.1., it appears as if Amma and Bhagavan at an early stage in their career as spiritual leaders earned a reputation as miracle workers[46].

[46] This, one should add, is nothing exceptional in an Indian context. During the fieldwork in Tamil Nadu, I came across a number of posters and people talking about gurus with various *siddhis* or supernatural powers, such as the ability to produce objects, heal illness and the like. The late Sathya Sai Baba, who passed away a few years ago, is probably the most well known "miracle guru" with a world wide reputation and a large ashram complex in Puttaparthi, Andhra Pradesh.

Miracles, one could argue, seems to have been more or less expected to happen. Among the Swedish informants, only one explicitly mentioned having experienced a miracle, and she was the one who appeared to be the far most devoted in the group.

Looking at the material collected during the interviews, it also becomes obvious that, while most Swedish informants primarily spoke about the benefits and workings of deeksha, the Indian informants put far more attention on Amma and Bhagavan. With this not said that the Swedish informants did not talk at all about the founding couple, they did, but the Indian informants seemed more eager to praise them. This point we will return to and elaborate in the next passage.

### *6.1.3. Practises and rituals*

This question is a bit difficult to answer, since the practices recommended by Oneness have changed considerably throughout the years, and additionally, the "freedom of the dharma", as Prakash put it, is strongly emphasized. In spite of this, I do believe that it is accurate to say that the practices and rituals have – if not changed than at least been modified - when they have been introduced to a new cultural context.

At first, it seemed difficult to even get an idea about if there existed anything such as a recommended *sadhana* or spiritual practice for followers of Oneness. Most of the Swedish informants (as well as the Indian) were vague when asked if they were doing any fixed practise daily. Most said that they participated in deeksha events, but didn't really have any other regular practise. Some, like Anna, were simultaneously engaged in another healing method that she was using parallel with the deeksha. When asked if these different practises sometimes came into collision with one another, she replied:

> No, not that in particular. But then there can be quite a lot of collisions with living in this world and practise these things.

Gun and Dan told of the benefits of mixing different traditions:

> We could see for example when we went down to Guruji in Bangalore, he was an old Osho sanyasin, that man. So, then we had the shamanic, we had Amma Bhagavan and Oneness, and we had Osho input. And suddenly we could look at our soul, our I, our ego or whatever we want to call it, from three different directions! If one came with input it was like, ah, is *this* what Bhagavan means, is *this* what the shamanic path means, that was really exciting. And that doesn't mean that I despise the one or the other at all. I found it incredibly giving, instead of just following a dogmatic path where there is only one way.

Gun and Dan, who are both Oneness Trainers, also added some clarity to the question whether there are at all any practises recommended to follow in Oneness. They told that since some time back there are sadhanas in the form of different contemplations that one can do if one likes. When I asked Gun if this sadhana is something that Bhagavan and the dasas recommends followers to do, she explained:

> Yes, you can say that. What I like about this is that it's a very non-dogmatic movement. But it is there as an option. And one year ago, last autumn, all of a sudden there were so many, well I guess there were four, but it felt like incredibly many ceremonies that ought to be performed. And they were rooted in the old Vedic ceremonies. (…) We went through a small crisis there, like, what should we do with this??

Gun and Dan also told that some people in other Western countries had opposed this sudden use of Vedic ceremonies in the Oneness movement:

> Especially the Americans, they went mad for a while. They thought (these ceremonies) were far too Indian. At that time there was a wave that wanted to put a more Western touch to the Oneness movement. They succeeded with that for half a year or so and then it was completely removed. And then they went back to… I mean, Bhagavan is Indian. This whole Hindu and Vedic tradition is Indian, so why should he change in order for Westerners to understand?

From Gun and Dan's story it seems as if there has been some tension between the universalistic message and Hindu-derived practises both incorporated in the movement among (at least some) of the Western followers. They themselves seemed a bit ambivalent towards the particularly Indian features. When they were asked to start to perform Vedic-resembling ceremonies, they initially felt unsure of their capacity and authority to do so. On the other hand, Dan points out that Bhagavan is Indian, and questions whether he should have to change his ways only because of Western followers. Others, like Lily and Margareta, both expressed being completely comfortable, and even attracted to, the more Indian characteristics of Oneness.

In the same way as most of the Swedish informants were engaged in one or more other practises or traditions besides Oneness, the Indian informants, who all except for one were of Hindu origin, engaged in the religious practises of their family. Many of them even said that their Hinduness had been strengthened after joining Oneness. When I asked Lalita about her religious upbringing, if she was Hindu, she said:

> Yes, I was brought up in a Hindu family. There are so many restrictions and so many rituals… of course, I started liking them all. After coming to Bhagavan, I started liking every ritual, everything. Whatever they are doing, Bhagavan used to teach, that, this is why they are doing this, for this purpose, like. So you will understand something and then doing it. Before we would just be doing it, we were forced to do it. Now we are not forced to do it, but we understand that, yes, this is done for that reason.

I then asked Lalita if she felt that Oneness and the Hindu practises went well together, and she replied:

> Of course. It's beyond religion. Oneness is a spiritual movement that is beyond religion. Any religion, any religious people can come and see their truth, and they can also have a revelation of their own.

For all the Indian informants, the universality of the teachings of Oneness and the particularity of the Hindu faith seemed to be without contradiction. Similar to the Swedish informants, they also said that their prime practise was to participate in deeksha programs. These also normally contained practises such as *arti* and *bhajan* singing[47], something I didn't hear of in Sweden. When also taking into consideration the different courses and functions arranged by members of Oneness in both Sweden and India, I would say that overall, the structure seems to have remained the same but the rituals and practises have been modified. That is, the events included similar topics such as the giving of deeksha; viewing the web-cast darshan with Bhagavan; and similar types of meditation. But while in Sweden the non-sectarian aspect of Oneness was emphasized, in India (perhaps not surprisingly) the events had much more of traditionally Hindu practises incorporated, such as the arti and bhajan singing previously mentioned.

## 6.2. Local and cultural adaptations

Looking at all the empirical material, the interviews and the participant-observation, I would suggest it is justifiable to say that the Oneness movement has adapted itself to the local culture. Precisely to which extent this is so is difficult to say, that would probably need a more long-term observation in order to answer. But at this point, it seems clear that at least in some areas adaptions has definitely been made. As we have seen, the motivational factors,

[47] *Arti* is a foundational Hindu practise meaning ceremonial worshipping of a deity or divinity in any form. It usually contains the waving of a fire flame around the image, offerings of flowers and incense, as well as singing. An arti can be anything between an elaborate ceremony and the simple offering of a flower. *Bhajans* are religious, devotional songs, an important ingredient in the practise of *bhakti* or devotion.

aims and practises of informants appeared to vary between Sweden and India. While the Swedish informants seemed to have an abstract longing for peace and enlightenment as primary factors for joining Oneness, and put the fulfilling of this longing as their aim, the Indian informants were, at least initially, motivated by more concrete issues such as finding solutions to health problems for oneself or a family member. It is interesting to note that these results correspond to the presentation of the contents of the different courses held for Indians and Westerners at the Oneness University discussed earlier in chapter 4.1.2. (p.38). Moreover, when it comes to practises and rituals, the material showed that some Western followers of Oneness at times had been critical when they thought that Oneness became too much "Indian". These two points can perhaps suggest that the differences between Indian and Western (in this particular case study Swedish) followers, the cultural adaptations, has not only taken place within the different countries, but also within the Oneness University itself. Thus, adaptations to Western culture are to be found already in India, at the main centre of the movement. Courses are designed differently for Indians and Westerners in order to cater for their different aims, needs and expectations.

Additionally to this discussion on adaptations, there are a few more points of difference I would like to highlight. What is perhaps the most striking example of differences between Oneness in India and in Sweden is the focus put on either deeksha as a non-religious, universally applicable method for spiritual growth, or Amma and Bhagavan as divine avatars with particular supra-human abilities. My overall impression from the participant observations and interviews is that there is far more focus put on Amma and Bhagavan in India, while in Sweden the focus seems to be more on deeksha only. Stories from the informants confirm this. Lily said:

> I've never been able to fully take in this Bhagavan as a proper teacher, I couldn't. I always felt there was something with that. Because I got deekshas long before I even had seen Bhagavan. It was not like they instantly introduced them who were behind the movement, they were very careful with that. It was a very careful introduction and finally you could get a picture of Amma and Bhagavan. And then it grew as you opened up more for it, but they didn't want to share all that straight away. They probably knew that people could react a little…

While doing fieldwork in Sweden I picked up a flyer at a New Age bookstore advertising a deeksha event in Gothenburg. The event, which would be held at a yoga centre, was described as "Meditation and deeksha". This was followed by a short introduction to what deeksha is and the benefits of the technique, but there was nothing at all written about

Amma and Bhagavan. The only thing linking the event to Oneness was that in the end it was mentioned that the arranger was educated from the Oneness University in India. I even, when speaking with informants, got the impression that Amma and Bhagavan had never travelled abroad. This would mean that a good part of deeksha givers around the world have never actually seen the founding couple, which assumable can make the relation with them less intimate. This can be put into contrast with the stories of the Indian informants, who all at an early stage seems to have become aware of the founders and the hagiography surrounding them. As I was searching for the Oneness temple in Bangalore, I was told by the people whom I asked for direction that Oneness was locally known as the "Kalki movement[48]".

Connected to the different ways of perceiving the founders is also the different ways in which Oneness as an organization functions in different countries. In India, Amma and Bhagavan are conceived as divine avatars able to perform miracles, an idea harmonizing with the religious doctrines of the Hindu tradition. In Sweden, deeksha is presented as a universally applicable method for healing and harmony, without any religious connotations. Similarly, as presented in an earlier chapter, at the Oneness University in Andhra Pradesh there is a group of men and women called dasas, that live a life very much resembling that of an order of monks and nuns. This means that they are supposed to follow rules of purity, and live in celibacy. The dasas also take care of administrative tasks and are the ones who organize the courses held at the University. In other countries such as Sweden, administration and the organizing of courses is taken care of by Oneness Trainers. I did not get the impression that the Trainers had to follow any special code of conduct, but they rather seemed to live as laypeople. Thus, not only in the way of perceiving the founders, but also on an organizational level, Oneness in India seems to have much more of religious connotations.

Another point that seems to differ between Sweden and India is what can be described as the "missionary enthusiasm". This, I believe, is connected with the different emphasis put on Amma and Bhagavan. As previously mentioned, the Indian informants all seemed very keen on speaking about the miracles witnessed by themselves and others in connection with the founding couple. They also seemed happy about the opportunity to do so, and two even said it was a kind of *seva*, selfless service, on their behalf towards Amma and Bhagavan to speak about them with someone like me. The Swedish informants,

[48] This goes back to an earlier stage of Oneness, when Bhagavan was looked upon as being the tenth avatar of Vishnu, called Kalki.

although also having positive things to say, had a much more low profile when it came to praising Amma and Bhagavan. Altogether I got the impression that it was more important for the Indian informants to sort of "spread the word" about Oneness.

An interesting example of this missionary enthusiasm could also be seen in two different examples of sadhanas given out in India and Sweden respectively[49]. While I was participating in the celebration of Bhagavan's birthday in Delhi in March 2012, there was a big marching around the block carrying around the Srimurti. During this marching, a flyer was handed out to people passing by. When I asked what this flyer was, it was explained to me that this was a list of sadhanas suggested to perform for receiving the grace of Amma and Bhagavan. When I later read the paper (which was in English), I was struck by the missioning tone of it. Most of the sadhanas were about spreading the teachings of Oneness through sharing experiences or inviting friends and family to participate in programs. An example – one is suggested to perform a seven months vrata to "earn sat karma in your life." The vrata is explained as: "Motivate 11 people to receive Rohini and Shatabhisha Nakshatra Deekshas for seven months. And ask them to distribute 21 Amma Bhagavan Srimutrtis for 7 months." As a contrast to this, we can look at another paper with a suggested sadhana given at one of the half-day programs in Gothenburg. This sadhana starts with introducing five presuppositions for spiritual growth: Contemplation over the teachings of Oneness; awareness of self-centeredness; sat karma (doing good deeds); true listening; and oneness. The rest is about contemplating over twenty-one emotional and psychological conditions which binds the mind. Nothing is mentioned about spreading Oneness to others, and I wonder how a suggested sadhana such as the one given in Delhi would be received in Sweden. My guess is that it would be difficult for people to accept it.

Downplaying the importance of the founding couple Amma and Bhagavan and their divinity (and in connection to that an organizational structure with less religious connotations), as well as having less of missionary enthusiasm, appears to me to be two of the major adaptations that have taken place in the process of diffusion of Oneness from an Indian to a Swedish context. But, on the other hand, I would like to emphasise that even though this seems to be the general tendency, there are also exceptions to it. As an example, Margareta, one of the Swedish informants, was incredibly devoted to the founding couple and appeared to have a strong emotional bond to them. Conversely, Siva in India said that when he speaks with people who are not part of Oneness, he choose his words carefully when talking about Amma and Bhagavan, since he had noticed that people had difficulties in

[49] These two sadhanas are available in their full length in appendix 2.

believing in the miracle stories surrounding them. There are thus no clear-cut distinctions. It is therefore probably more accurate to look upon these adaptations as tendencies rather than definite conclusions.

## 6.3. Glocalization

As Tulasi Srinivas (2002) among others has pointed out, globalization is not a one-way movement – rather it is better understood as working in a two-way direction between two or more cultures. The material shows that Oneness is a prime example of this kind of two-way exchange. The very foundation on which the movement rests is an eclectic mixture of traditional Hindu beliefs and practises, a scientific vocabulary and New Age-doctrines. During the fieldwork, this eclecticism expressed itself in many concrete ways. As an illustration I would like to describe the celebration of the 21st December in Nemam where I participated:

On the 21st of December 2012 a large crowd of people (I estimated around 800-1000) gathered at the Oneness temple in the small village Nemam, Andhra Pradesh. Some of them had come from Chennai an hour drive away, but most seemed to be villagers from nearby towns and villages. They had come to participate in what within Oneness had been said to be the entering into a new cosmic era. The celebration started in a traditionally Hindu manner with arti, the worshipping of the Srimurti and the padukas (the picture of Amma and Bhagavan and a pair of silver feet representing them.) Then followed a short speech by one of the dasas from the University, and a meditation accompanied by calm, enchanting New Age music. Then came the highlight of the evening, a live web-cast from the Oneness University with Amma and Bhagavan, broadcasted simultaneously around the whole world. When the couple appeared on the big TV screen placed in the front of the hall, people started to loudly express their joy and excitement. The web-cast lasted only for a few minutes, but afterwards people continued to pray intensely, some loud and some silent. In the background, the calm New Age inspired music was again playing. Afterwards I was told that the dasa had said that this was a day where all would reach a state of awakening, perhaps that was the explanation for the intense devotion. Slowly, the rhythm of the music became livelier, and the mood of the crowd went up with it. One by one, people started to stand up, dancing ecstatically, some even going into a trance-like state, falling down on the floor. After about half hour of dancing the music stopped, leaving a happy crowd, all with a big smile on their face. Some then proceeded to the nearby temple to do *pranam*, bow down in devotion, while others went to the food stall to get some refreshments.

A few things were particularly interesting at this program. First of all, the very celebration of the date 21st December 2012 can be said to be an outcome of a sort of cultural exchange. Originally mentioned as an important date in the Mayan calendar, 21st December 2012 achieved an almost mythical status among New Age followers the last years. Exactly what would happen on this day no one seemed to be sure of – while some said it could be the end of the world, others meant it was the opposite, a beginning of a new era. To my knowledge there is nothing found in any Hindu scriptures about this particular date. Another thing that struck me was the music that was played, most of it belonging to a kind of New Age genre, with soft melodies played on synthesizers and Indian instruments. Most songs were Indian mantras sung by Westerners, using different scales than what is found in traditional Indian music. One song that particularly caught the listeners and made them dance ecstatically was a recording of the moola mantra[50] performed in a South American Latino style (I later found out that this was a recording made by a devotee of Amma and Bhagavan who was a famous singer in South America).

The fact that Indian villagers celebrated the coming of a new cosmic era the 21st December 2012 by viewing a live web-cast of their Indian gurus, seen by thousands of people simultaneously around the world, and then danced to a Latino version of an Indian mantra, gives a good picture of the factual outcome of globalization. The main question posed in this thesis is how Oneness has adapted moving from the Indian to the Swedish culture, but in order to answer that question, one also needs to take into consideration that Oneness in India is a sort of adaptation or hybrid itself, drawing on Western as well as Indian influences. If we recall the previous discussion on globalization in chapter 3, Peter Beyer describes the basic idea of globalization as consisting of the spread of particular social forms across the globe, which constitute their universalization. Further, these universalized forms do not simply spread as such, but become *particularized* to various local situations. That particularization of the universal repeats the universal, but also *transforms* it. Such transformation can, in turn, be the subject of another universalization that becomes particularized in new contexts, and so on (Beyer 2006:24). So, the particularization and transformation of Oneness moving from India to Sweden is in fact a continuation of a process of the same kind starting already in India with the founding of the movement.

[50] One of the most important mantras within Oneness, frequently recited and sung.

## 6.4. Result

The purpose of this thesis is to see to what extent Oneness has adapted to the new culture in the process of spreading to Sweden from India. This has been done partly by looking into the motivation, aims and practises of followers in India and Sweden respectively. In the previous chapter, the interviews and observations were analysed in the light of these questions.

The material shows that there does seem to be differences in the motivational factors, as well as the aims and the practises of Indian and Swedish informants respectively. If we start with the motivational factors, the Swedish informants seemed motivated by an ideal of self-realization and higher awareness. This is perhaps not that surprising, given what sociological research has suggested the last decade or so, that religion in modern Western culture in many ways has given place to non-denominational spirituality where the individual herself is in focus[51]. The Indian informants, on the other hand, often mentioned a crisis in connection with disease or depression as the initial motivational factor for turning to the teachings and practises of Oneness.

When it comes to the aim of the engagement in Oneness, it seemed as if some of the Indian informants initially had had what they described as "selfish" aims, that is, getting a healthy and happy family, success in life and business etc., but that, after having been involved for some time, their aims changed and became more about self-realization. The Swedish informants seemed to have been less focused on material aims and more on a similar kind of self-realization. In the end, the ultimate end for all informants seemed to be to reach the state of awakening that is said to be possible by receiving deeksha. Two of the informants, Lalita and Prakash, had already been declared awakened by the dasas at the University, and had thus succeeded in their attempts. Another important aim for most informants, both Swedish and Indian, was to help others. The idea that you can help the world by developing yourself seemed to be commonly accepted.

The practises seem to be simultaneously varied and similar among Swedish and Indian informants. While the overall practises appeared to be similar, such as the giving and receiving of deeksha, and the way programs were arranged, the Indian programs had a lot more of Hindu features such as arti and bhajan singing in them. While talking to some

[51] See for instance Heelas and Woodhead's *The Spiritual Revolution* (2005). Drawing on material from a survey conducted in England, Heelas and Woodhead concludes that even though there yet seems to have been no major spiritual revolution taken place, the subjective turn that has penetrated many parts of Western culture (such as educational system, health care and business) also seems to have affected the religious life.

Swedish informants, it became clear that there had been tensions among some Western followers when directions had come from the University that clearly Hindu-derived practises such as homas, fire ceremonies, ought to be performed by devotees. The objections were that these practises were not in line with the universal spirit of Oneness.

Other interesting aspects that appeared during the fieldwork was that there seemed to be much more focus put on Amma and Bhagavan in India than among Swedish followers, and also that the missionary zeal seemed more strong among Indians. This first aspect I believe can be an important key in which light we can interpret the other previous questions about motivation, aims and practises.

In India, with its long tradition of saints and gurus, a couple such as Amma and Bhagavan does not really stand out as an exceptional phenomenon. In Sweden on the other hand, gurus are not part of the national tradition and are therefore alien and potentially dangerous, something looked upon with suspicion, I would argue. The fact that gurus are worshipped as divine beings in which hands the devotees should put their lives does not make them easy to digest for people in a nation which celebrates the spiritual autonomy of the free-thinking individual as the highest good. Thus, it seems only natural that less emphasis should be put on the founding couple when Oneness was introduced in Sweden. A conscious strategy or not, this was probably a necessary choice in order for Oneness to gain a larger number of followers in Sweden.

Similarly, I would argue that missionizing is a stigmatized subject in Sweden, at least more than in India. Religion and spirituality is regarded as a private matter, and attempts to try to convince an individual to follow a certain path or teaching is looked upon with suspicion. We can only look at the negative connotations a word such as "sect" carries in Western society[52]. The fact that priests working in the Swedish church goes to India to become deeksha givers and later gives deeksha in church says a lot about how far Oneness is regarded to be from any kind of organized religion in Sweden.

Now, when it comes to the motivational factors, aims and practises of followers in Sweden and India, I would say that these reflect the different views on the role of the founding couple. In India, having a long tradition of consulting spiritual doctors and healers for all kinds of physical, mental or material ailments (see for instance Kakar 2002), it would seem only natural to turn to a couple such as Amma and Bhagavan for help when yourself or a loved one is ill. This also seemed to be the case for many of the Indian

[52] See for instance Danièle Hervieu-Leger's "France's obsession with the "Sectarian Threat"" in Lucas and Robbins *New Religions in the 21st Century* (2004).

informants. When it comes to practises, a foundational part of the teaching of Oneness in itself advocates a kind of religious freedom to which deeksha can simply be added. Some of the informants told that Bhagavan had encouraged them to stay within their own religious tradition. Thus, in India, the practises of followers of Oneness reflects their Hindu background, while in Sweden those same practises have been modified in order to better suit the inherent cultural and religious traditions. The fact that this has happened is perhaps not so sensational in itself, but the extent to which Oneness has succeeded with its modification is quite remarkable.

At this point it can be interesting to recall some parts of the globalization discussion in chapter 2 and put it in connection with the results of the analysis. First, we have Irving Hexham and Karla Poewes descriptions of new religions as global cultures: "One could say that a global culture is a tradition that travels the world and takes on local color. It has both a global, or metacultural, and a local, or situationally distinct, cultural dimension" (1997:41). Applying this to the Oneness movement, one could say that the global or metacultural dimension is the shared practice of deeksha and the ideal of awakening oneself and the whole planet as ultimate goal. Examples of situationally distinct, cultural dimensions on the other hand can be said to be the different roles and expectations put on the founders and the more secular approach in Sweden that stood in contrast with the more Hindu-derived practices found in India.

James A. Beckford presents a similar, but at the same time slightly different conclusion when discussing the relation between globalization and NRMs. Beckford makes a distinction between the *global aspirations* of some NRMs and their *transnational modes of operation* (2004:257). According to Beckford, while many NRMs puts effort into creating a sort of global consciousness and interconnectedness that aims at transcending national and ethnic boundaries, their modes of operation, although being transnational, nevertheless carry on to have a local character, coloured by their place of origin. This last point I would say divides Beckford's conclusion from that of Hexham and Poewe, since he writes that the local character of a new religious movement continues to be coloured by its place of origin. Hexham and Poewe on the other hand talk about a situationally distinct, cultural dimension. These two standpoints are probably not irreconcilable with one another, but they do carry different connotations.

Applying Beckford's theory on the Oneness movement, it appears to be less self-evident than that of Hexham and Poewe. Oneness definitely carries the kind of global aspirations that Beckford sees as being characteristic of many NRM:s, but when moving into

a new cultural context, their transnational modes of operation seems to have changed, carrying less of the imprint of their place of origin. If it is a correct assumption that less emphasis is put on the founding couple and on spreading information about Oneness in Sweden than in India, then I believe one must say that the modes of operation has at least partly changed. On the other hand, there are still many commonalities between Oneness in Sweden and in India, such as how the deeksha programs are designed, and the mission to help others through developing oneself. So, perhaps a conclusion could be that Oneness still carries imprints of its place of origin – a similar, transnational mode of operation, but that the traces of the place of origin has become less palpable in Sweden than in India. To put it in other words, the "Indianness" is still there, but in a much more light form. This would also fit well together with the philosophy of Oneness – to function as a secular meeting point between people of different faiths and cultures rather than to dictate one single path for everyone (to which extent this actually works in practise is another thing).

We can also here consider Thomas J. Csordas (2009) proposal of making use of the two aspects of *portable practice* and *transposable message* in order to determine what kind of religious modalities that travels well and thus have a big chance to spread globally. It seems as if Oneness has been highly successful in creating both a portable practice in the form of deeksha, as well as a transposable message, striving for what is called awakening for not only individuals but for all humankind, in other words a universal message. What actually seems to have changed has less to do with practise and message as with how the movement is presented, and what aspects of it. In India, Oneness is a guru-centred movement with (I would say, at least) strong links to the Hindu tradition. In Sweden, it is a spiritual network that makes a point out of being non-denominational, almost secular. Still, the practise – deeksha, is the same in both countries, as well as the message of creating a sort of universal awakening. In both places the scientific legitimation seems to play a relatively important role, Oneness claiming awakening to be a neurobiological shift in the brain, disconnected from all sorts of religious and philosophical ideas.

## 6.5. Answered and unanswered questions: some closing reflections

Throughout the time I have been working with this thesis, far more questions has arose than those that were part of the initial idea. These new questions have included both methodological, theoretical and not the least ethical issues. I could probably fill as many more pages as the thesis in itself about these matters, but I will try to keep it short.

Working with the Oneness movement has been very instructive, not the least because of their relatively recent origin and the speed in which they have established themselves around the world. Some important things within the movement also took place during the time of my field studies, such as the long awaited dawn of a new cosmic era, which, according to Bhagavan, took place at the 21st of December 2012. The months before this date were full of activities, and many people were declared as awakened. It was very interesting to follow the process leading up to the grand finale on 21st December, in some way it felt like seeing a part of history unfolding. These months of study has not only provided me with more information about the Oneness movement, but has also taught me something about how transnational groups function. Thus, my hope and belief is that this study can be of interest not only for those who are curious to know more about the Oneness movement, but also those interested in the much broader field of religion in relation with globalization. My intention has been to provide empirical material illustrating the processes of 'glocalization', to try to see what actually happens on a very concrete level when a religious (or spiritual) movement is transferred from one culture to another.

As the empirical material showed, there does seem to be quite many adaptations taking place in order for a movement such as Oneness to be able to settle in a country like Sweden. To put it simple, the "Indianness" is less, and the universal features (such as putting emphasis on a secular approach, and the benefits of giving and receiving deeksha independent of religious belonging) of Oneness are more emphasized in the Swedish context. But it is also important to point out that, when one starts to look even deeper into the question, things are not as black and white as they first might appear. For example, in this thesis I have treated the "Indian context" as one single homogenous entity. I found this necessary in order to be able to do any kind of meaningful comparison with the Swedish context, without becoming completely lost or overwhelmed by diversity and information. But, while doing fieldwork in India, I became aware of that there probably also exists great varieties within the Oneness movement in India. Kathinka Frøystad (2006; 2011) has described Indian New Age as a middle class phenomenon, and the people with whom I was in contact with also belonged to this category. But I noticed during the programs I participated in that many of the people gathered also seemed to be local villagers, who would probably not be considered as belonging to the middle class. Seeing this I started to wonder how similar the views of these villagers were in comparison with their fellow countrymen belonging to the English speaking, educated middle class. Does Oneness fill the same functions for them? Put in other words, the question that came to my

mind was what plays the biggest role, ethnic culture or education/class, in forming a relation with the gurus Amma and Bhagavan and their movement? Do the members of Oneness from the Indian middle class have more in common with their Swedish counterparts, or with the villagers living side by side with them? I am far from certain what the answer to this question is, and it would be an interesting topic to continue further with.

This was only one of many question marks that arose in connection with the cross-cultural approach of the thesis. Where to draw a line between what is one culture and what is another? Following the advice of Peter Beyer (2003) on doing comparative studies, I found an aspect of difference that was convenient to use for my purpose of doing a cross-cultural study. In this case I used the nation state as the basis for defining the two different fields of research. I am aware of the fact that if I would have chosen another definition, such as class for defining cultures, the result of the study might have turned out completely different (with this not said that either one of the possible results would have been more "true" than the other).

To sum it up, doing cross-cultural research was more complex than I thought. But in spite of the difficulties, I don't regret choosing this perspective. It is my conviction that if one wants to try to find new interesting angles to a subject, then one needs to be willing to take methodological risks and be a bit inventive. After beginning to read about cross-cultural studies, I was hesitating whether it was at all a realistic idea to go through with this kind of study I had in mind. The obstacles appeared so big, the task of defining cultures and then trying to make something meaningful out of that definition. I was wondering if I unconsciously followed in the footsteps of the early comparative tradition which all too often reduced different cultures and religions to handy little boxes easily comparable (Paden 2005:216-217). Did I have too big ambitions? In the end I decided to anyway go through with my idea, thinking that, if one is only aware of the artificial character of the definitions and boundaries one puts up for research purposes, then one does not necessarily need to end up in the trap of starting to generalize too much. I leave it up to the reader to decide whether I have succeeded on this point or not.

Another aspect I would like to make a short note on is the richness in the material that came into my hands. The focus of this thesis has been on the transnational character of the Oneness movement, and for the sake of not ending up too far away from that, I have tried to follow that line of thought. But, throughout the work, many other interesting aspects revealed themselves. For instance it turned out that, as with many other

Godmen in India[53], Bhagavan has had problems with the Indian authorities, and has been accused of different illegalities. This I was completely unaware of until I started the fieldwork in India, and found out that accusations had been directed towards him earlier. I never found out exactly what the accusations were about (tax crimes was the thing I heard mentioned by many) and also not whether Bhagavan ever was convicted for any of the crimes he allegedly had been accused of. For that reason I chose not to go deeper into this question in the thesis. But it is interesting in the sense that in India, everyone I asked seemed to be aware of the accusations, no matter what they thought about it. In Sweden, conversely, nobody mentioned anything about this, not even people who were critical to Oneness, and it thus seems that these accusations must have passed more or less unnoticed among Swedish deeksha givers.

Another interesting topic I would have liked to go deeper into is the social work that Oneness is involved in. Apparently, Bhagavan and the Oneness community "adopted" several villages, among them one called Varadaiahpalem, around the area where Oneness University has been built. This area is in Arjuna Ardagh's book described as having been marked by severe social hardships in the form of poverty, alcoholism and unemployment (2007:155). According to Ardagh and one other Swedish informant, the presence of Amma and Bhagavan together with social help programs had eventually completely transformed the villages. The one and only time I had the opportunity to visit the Oneness University (which was during a public darshan with Bhagavan) I was restricted in my whereabouts and therefore did not get the chance to visit Varadaiahpalem or any of the other nearby villages, which I would have liked to do. As a contrast to the miracle story retold by Ardagh, Ali, the Indian Muslim informant with whom I made an interview, told me that during his visit to the Oneness University a few years ago, the locals had been upset because they were refused to set up chai shops and small stores around the University campus, something which would have brought them an opportunity to earn some needed money. What Ali told made me wonder if there was not more to the story about the nearby villages and their affiliation with Oneness. It would have been interesting to find out more about how these villagers looked upon Oneness. I would imagine that when a big area like the Golden city or Oneness University with its elaborately built temple and foreign guests is constructed next to poor villages, some tension might easily arise.

[53] To take but a few examples - one of India's most famous contemporary gurus, the late Sathya Sai Baba was recorded to have been accused of faking miracles as well as the more serious crime of having sexually abused young boys (Gogineni 1999). Bhagavan Shree Rajnesh, also known as Osho was another controversial Godman of India who was renowned to be in conflict with the authorities.

These last two points brings me in to another area that is perhaps what has been most challenging in the process of writing this thesis, that is the ethical part and the personal opinions and relations I developed with what I was studying. I often felt grateful towards the informants for sharing their thoughts and life world with me in such a generous way as they did, and while listening intensively to them, their stories became very vivid. Because of my openness and willingness to understand the informants, I was often put into delicate situations. At least three times it happened that after an interview the interviewee would ask me if I would like to become a deeksha giver, and offer to help me with arranging that. Then I would have to explain to them that I actually didn't have any plans to become involved myself, which seemed to lead to a slight disappointment. Coming close to someone's life world in an attempt to try to understand it without becoming emotionally involved seems difficult I must say. Even though I never felt any desire to dedicate myself personally to Oneness, I still felt a kind of loyalty towards my informants, which made it a bit difficult to criticise what they were doing, and to ask questions about sensitive issues such as the accusations towards Bhagavan.

I was often struck by the contradictions in the stories that I came across. The most extreme case was probably those about the founder of Oneness – while some portrayed Bhagavan as a divine avatar, even the saviour of the world, others saw him as a greedy charlatan. Similarly, while some said to have been thrown into a state of spiritual awakening through receiving deeksha, others saw it as just another questionable technique to create emotional "peaks". And among all these stories I could not find one that seemed more "true" than the other. This was at times very frustrating. I guess I should have been prepared for this kind of situation to appear – after all, contradictory worldviews is but a natural consequence of the very foundation of religion – faith. But still I was struck by the power in people's convictions, whether it was thinking Amma and Bhagavan are divine avatars or something less favourable. Each and every interview I did was like peaking into a separate universe, and, even if it might sound like a cliché, I must say that it made me see how relative such a thing as "reality" is (or, rather, how relative the perceptions of reality among human beings appear).

What about my own reality then? Even though it hasn't been the purpose with this thesis to discuss my subjective standpoints, having said this much I suppose it is not more than right that I should also make a few remarks about my personal experiences of Oneness. I never felt very attracted to Amma and Bhagavan and I must say that even if I find their goal of awakening the world noble, these kinds of universal claims always makes me a

bit suspicious. Anyway, I am not in the position to judge whether the claims of having awakened hundreds of thousands people is "true" or not. What I can say on the other hand is that I was very touched the times I participated in different events, whether it was from the deeksha or the emotional atmosphere I cannot say, but I found it many times to be a profoundly healing experience. While I was moved by the devotion and determination of the people, their leaders left me untouched.

So far the discussion here has turned around the working process itself with its difficulties and rewards. I would also like to say something about the result. One of the most interesting aspects of what came up was the remarkable plasticity – the amount of portability in practises and universality in message, to use Csorda's words, in the Oneness movement. The transformation from being a local guru-centred movement with (at least in my view) clear links with the Hindu tradition, to becoming a universal phenomenon adopted even by ordained Christian priests – all in a period no longer than twenty years – must be seen as quite remarkable. Where lies then the key to this easy transformability and diffusion into different cultural spheres? What is it that has made people from such different parts of the world attracted to this movement? The answer, I would guess, lies in the promise of "awakening" in a relatively short time into something universal that goes beyond religious and cultural belonging. In interviews, Bhagavan states again and again that Oneness is completely outside the sphere of religion, almost secular even. That anyone can give and receive deeksha beneficially despite religious belonging is repeated almost like a mantra. But then again, the universal approach seems to now and then have clashed with the Indian roots, as was pointed out by two of the Swedish Oneness Trainers that were interviewed. According to them, when directions came from Bhagavan that members of the Oneness community were to start to perform *homas*, Indian traditional fire ceremonies originating from the Vedic culture, people especially in America had protested, meaning that this went against the universal spirit of Oneness.

The whole idea of something universally applicable is in itself problematic. In the case of Oneness, one could for instance claim that the very idea that there is such a thing as the possibility of "awakening" origins from a specific cultural setting, that is, the Indian. I was quite surprised to hear that priests belonging to the Swedish Church (as well as priests and bishops from many other countries too according to Ardagh (2007:163)) had been in India at the Oneness University, and were giving deeksha in church. I would have assumed that teachings from someone who claims to be an avatar, a divine incarnation, would not fit well together with the basic Christian doctrines. But apparently the universal message of

Oneness has had a stronger pull than the specific metaphysical details concerning the founders.

It seems to me that the Oneness movement is a result of a great longing of our time – the longing for unity in diversity, for something that reaches beyond all the apparent contradictions of our global society. Oneness offers a platform where people from different cultures and religions can come together and create a common goal. But then again, the question is how far this inclusiveness is able to stretch, and also, if Oneness is able to fulfil the promises they have made. If people feel they are not getting what they have been promised, the question is how long they are willing to stay on. It seemed to be the case in Sweden that many had left the movement already after a few years. It will be interesting to see what will happen in the future.

# 7. Summary

This thesis has focused on the Oneness movement, a spiritual organization founded in the late 1980's in Andhra Pradesh, South India, by a couple known as Sri Amma and Bhagavan. The work of this movement seeks to alleviate human suffering at its roots by awakening humanity into Oneness. Inner transformation and awakening, it is believed, is not an outcome of a mere intellectual understanding, but a neurobiological process in the brain. The essential practise of Oneness consists in the giving of *deeksha*, a kind of energy transmission said to reduce stress levels and intensify the levels of love, joy and awareness.

The Oneness movement at an early stage started to attract international followers. According to themselves, since starting to conduct courses in 1989 they have reached over 1,5 million people across 126 countries. One of the first Westerners who came into contact with Amma and Bhagavan was Swedish, and thus Sweden became one of the first countries outside India introduced to Oneness (Ardagh 2007:36-37).

Oneness shares many of the features generally associated with the New Age movement, such as focus on individual growth and wellbeing, the use of a scientific vocabulary (Frøystad 2006), along with a universalistic outlook and refusal to be categorised in terms of religion (Beyer 2006). At the same time, the Indian origin of the movement is still, in some ways, palpable.

The purpose of the thesis has been to highlight the Oneness movement through the perspective of it being a transnational institution. The main research question has thus been formulated according to that perspective, and has been the following: *In the process of diffusion of the Oneness movement from an Indian to a Swedish context, to what extent has the Oneness movement adapted to the local culture? Has any significant changes concerning the motivation, aims and practises of followers taken place?*

An answer to this question has been sought by the conducting of a cross-cultural case study of the Oneness movement in India and Sweden respectively. The case study was based on fieldwork in the form of participant-observation and qualitative interviews with followers in India and Sweden. The empirical material collected during fieldwork was thereafter analysed in the light of relevant theories on globalization, focusing on Oneness as being a transnational institution.

The result of the analysis has shown that Oneness does seem to have undergone some significant changes during its process of diffusion into the Swedish culture, the most fundamental of these changes being found in the way of perceiving the founding

couple. The importance of Amma and Bhagavan as divine avatars seems to have been played down in Sweden, while deeksha is emphasised more as a universal, non-denominational phenomena. Put in other words, the Oneness movement seems to have undergone a process of glocalization. Conversely, the overarching aim of bringing the world into a state of awakening, as well as the importance of giving and receiving deeksha seems to have remained the same in Sweden as in India. This could be said to show that the Oneness movement has a high amount of portability in its practises and a high transposability in its message, to use Thomas Csorda's words.

The purpose and relevance of this study has been twofold: First, to give an introduction to the history and teachings of Oneness since no academic in-depth study has been previously produced on the movement. Presenting the growth and spread, as well as the basic doctrines of Oneness thus serves the purpose of filling a gap in the general knowledge about recent developments in the field of New Age and NRMs.

Second, the study has not only aimed at presenting Oneness in itself, but also the more abstract process of diffusion of a movement from one culture to another. By providing empirical material on the views of followers, the celebration of functions, courses etc. from two different cultural contexts, it also has the potential of adding something of importance to the wider discussion on the process of globalization.

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# Appendix 1

## Interview questions

- Could you tell a little bit about yourself (age, profession, family)?
- How did your spiritual engagement start, have you had any previous engagement with any other guru/teacher?
- How did you come into contact with Oneness?
- What was it that made you feel attracted to Amma and Bhagavan?
- What was your aim with engaging in Oneness?
- Do you have any particular sadhana? If so, what do you do, and how much time do you devote to it per day?
- How do you look upon Oneness and Amma and Bhagavan over time – can you see any difference in how things work now from when you started?
- Was there anything that you had difficulties with embracing, something that felt alien to you when you came into contact with Oneness?

# Appendix 2

## Suggested sadhanas

The two following texts are suggested sadhanas or spiritual practises (referred to in chapter 6, p.68) that I have copied from pamphlets handed out on two different Oneness programs. I have included them here partly as an illustration of the argument about different missionary obligations that I put forward in the thesis, but also to serve as examples of what types of activities that are encouraged within the Oneness movement. While the giving and receiving of deeksha no doubt is the prime activity, these sadhanas are examples of what a devotee can do more to speed up the process towards awakening, the final goal.

*This sadhana was handed out as a pamphlet during the celebration of Bhagavan's birthday in Delhi in March 2012. Besides from the text, the pamphlet also included a photograph of Amma and Bhagavan sitting in meditation, and another picture of the Oneness temple:*

Om Satchitananda Parabrahma Purushottama Paramatma
Sri Bhagavati Sametha Sri Bhagavathe Namaha[54]

*Significance of Sri Amma Bhagavan's Srimurti*: The Srimurti or picture of Amma Bhagavan is an embodiment of Sri Amma Bhagavan's consciousness. It is a source of miracles and an abode of Grace. Carrying the Srimurti along with you would keep negative energies away from you and give you Divine Protection.

*Siginficance of the Moola Mantra:* The Moola Mantra is a benediction from Sri Amma Bhagavan to all those seeking to end their suffering and to reach heightened states of consciousness. The mantra is a 'Sarva Roga Nivarani' and a 'Sarva Papa Prashamani'. It is like a telephone number that would connect us to Sri Amma Bhagavan and their Grace. Chanting moola mantra 21 times, everyday over a period of 49 days would lead to Sankalpa siddhi.

[54] This is the *moola mantra* (root mantra) of Amma and Bhagavan.

By Sri Amma Bhagavan's Grace, so many devotee's lives have been changed. And they have been experiencing peace and causeless joy. To receive Amma Bhagavan's blessing permanently in your life, you can choose any of the below mentioned paths.

*Satsang:* The uniqueness of Sri Amma Bhagavan's satsang is that Grace reaches out to people in the way they seek for it – be it as miracles, as transformation, as fulfilment of both mundane and spiritual desires or as an awakening and God-realisation. The easiest way to commune with God is through the Sankeerthans which are conducted at the satsangs.

Sadhaks meet in the satsang with a sense of Oneness where they share, care, meditate and pray together in mass prayer. Healings and Deekshas are also given in the satsangs which would awaken you to Divine Grace. 2nd Sunday of every month at (address). For timings contact (name and phone number).

*Deeksha:* The Deeksha is a phenomenon where the Avatars through the power of their consciousness bestow upon the seeker, an altered state of consciousness. Such Deekshas are being given in the satsang which are known as Nakshatra Deekshas.

*Shatabisha Nakshatra Deeksha:* Receiving healing from a person who has attended the first level deeksha at the University, would give you an experience of the power of Sri Amma Bhagavan.

*Rohini Nakshatra Deeksha:* Receiving a Deeksha from Maha Deeksha participant could also give you a taste of higher states of consciousness, which of course would become permanent when you are enlightened.

*Seven Months Vrata:* To earn satkarma in your life, one can do the 7 months vrata.

*Vrata:* Motivate 11 people to receive Rohini and Shatabhisha Nakshatra Deekshas for 7 months. And ask them to distribute 21 Amma Bhagavan Srimurtis for 7 months.

*Kalasha Puja:* The devotees who have visited or partalen in any programmes (homas/Vara Deeksha/Youth Deeksha) can perform Kalasha puja in their houses for 41 days (see 'Sri Bhagavathi Puja Vidhi' book in Hindi). These pujas are done to get in tune with Sri Amma

Bhagavan's Grace. One can perform this Kalasha puja in 101 houses (either individually or in a mass).

*Maha Mangalarati:* Pattern – (for 7 weeks you can perform in your house either for 7 Tuesdays or Fridays).
Invite all your friends, relatives and neighbours to the puja.
Decorate the Srimurti with flower mala and light the lamps.
When people are entering the house for the puja, offer kumkum to them, invite them happily.

*Aradhana:*
Karpoora arati-Moola mantra thrice and chant Tvameva Mata.
Do Sashtanga Pranama and sing 2 bhajans.
Share any 2 experiences or miracles which has happened either to you or any other devotee.
Or show Oneness Series CD.

*Prayer:*
*Individual prayer:* Everybody will pray and ask Amma Bhagavan for their individual desires.
After the prayer they will keep 'Mannat' that immediately after their desire is fulfilled they will come fro Amma or Bhagavan's Darshan and convey gratitude.

*Mass prayer:* Everybody will pray for all other to receive Amma Bhagavan's Grace. End the prayer by chanting: "Amma Bhagavan Anugrhitosmi" (3 times).
Give arati with 1 batthi, 3 batthi, 4 batthi and 7 batthi.
Give Maha Mangalaarati (with 49 batthi or 108 batthi or nakshatra arati).
Speak about the programmes held at Nemam, Oneness University and in your place.
Announce the next date of Shatbisha and Rohini nakshatra Deeksha in your place.
Give Deeksha (if any Mahadeeksha devotees is present) or Healing (if any vara Deeksha devotee is present).

*40 Days Sadhana:* To earn satkarma and to receive grace you can do 40 days sadhana.

*Give food to animals everyday and choose any one Sadhana out of the following and perform for 40 days:*

1. Do kalasa puja in one house everyday.
2. Distribute 21 Srimurtis everyday.
3. Distribute 3 pooja books everyday.
4. Distribute 2 Amma Bhagavan's Nama book everyday.
5. Conduct satsang in one house per day.
6. Do 40 days seva in Nemam.
7. To put Amma Bhagavan's Dolla to others.
8. Speak miracles and give Deeksha.

*Note:* The seva has to be done continuously for 40 days without break. If any break you have to start again from the first day.

Those who are participating in padadarshana-devotees themselves to prepare Arogya, Kutumba Kshema Kalasas in their house only and offer along with Mudupu in Nemam.
Take Deeksha on Shatabisha and Rohini Nakshatra day.
Do Maha Mangalarti for 7 days on every Tuesday.
7 months Srimurti Vrata (give Deeksha to 11 people and distribute 21 Srimurti per month).
Devi Homas are performed separately during Navaratri Festival at Nemam.

*The second suggested sadhana presented below was handed out to the participants during a one-day deeksha program held by two of the Swedish Oneness Trainers. As I understood it, the idea was to each day contemplate over one of the twenty-one points presented. The text was originally written in Swedish, but I have here translated it into English, trying to keep as close to the original as possible. (It can be interesting to know that the Oneness Trainer who introduced and explained the sadhana emphasized that in the last part about praising the Divine, one could use any image of the Divine, and not only Amma and Bhagavan.)*

FIVE PRECONDITIONS

1. CONTEMPLATION OVER THE TEACHINGS OF ONENESS

Each day contemplate over the teachings of Oneness (especially the weekly teachings about awakening on the webcast).

2. BECOME AWARE OF SELF-CENTREDNESS

The self cannot dissolve unless it sees and discovers that it to its nature is self-centred. All that is required is to just become aware of your self-centredness in every action during the day. There is no reason to try not to be self-centred.

3. SAT KARMA

Do a maximum of good deeds in order to make the biggest possible amount of people happy. Help animals, humans and nature. For this to really benefit you, you have to take help of the feeling and passion for it; it cannot only be a physical action.

4. TRUE LISTENING

When you listen to the other you are attentive to what is going on inside of you without judging. When you listen, you will feel a wish or a need; it is what the other person wishes for or needs. True compassion naturally arises when you do this. Since you are experiencing yourself as the other, this persons needs are now your needs.

5. ONENESS

Contemplate and realize the fact that you cannot exist as a separate being, all life supports each other, all life is dependent on each other. You are one with all. YOU ARE THERE BECAUSE OF EVERYTHING ELSE.

TWENTY-ONE CONDITIONS

About these twenty-one conditions:

Awakening is to become free from the mind.

These 21 points are like ropes that hold the mind up.

When you become aware of each point, the ropes are cut, which makes the self dissolve quickly.

For all these points there are three ways to help you grow:

a. Practise these conditions externally in your daily life – then it is possible.
b. Become aware of that you don't have these qualities. Only then is it possible to gain them.
c. Pray and ask AmmaBhagavan/Your Divinity to give you these qualities. (Prayer is answered only when you have established a connection with the Divine or AmmaBhagavan).

1. LACK OF PASSION

The difference between passion and a wish: A wish you can let go of, but the passion you cannot. You live because of the reason of this passion.
Wish can be transformed to passion if you understand the seriousness and the need for it.
In order to have passion for awakening, you first have to realize that you are suffering.
The three types of suffering are:
Physical – when the needs of the body are not fulfilled, you will have physical suffering.
Psychological – as long as you have the mind, you will have psychological suffering. When any of the six needs are denied, you will suffer:
Security/safety
Variation
Meaning
The need to be loved, to love
Growth
Contribution

Spiritual – to exist is suffering. Suffering without reason. The feeling of separation is this suffering. All suffering comes from spiritual suffering alone. It is alienation between human and human, human and God.
The equation for suffering is: spiritual+psychological+physical= constant. The constant is not constant, but is dependent on how much separation one experiences in life at a certain point.
The constant needs to go down to zero. That's when suffering goes down to zero. The constant depends on the alienation you feel towards humans or God. When you come closer to God, the constant becomes less.
Become aware of your lack of passion.

2. LACK OF FORGIVENESS
See that you cannot forgive others who have hurt you. Forgiveness is a very essential quality, which you should develop. By getting hurt you are torturing yourself. To cling on to the pain is torture. See how it's torture for you. Become aware of the lack of forgiveness. Pray to AmmaBhagavan that they help you to forgive.

3. LACK OF ASKING FOR FORGIVENESS

You're not seeking forgiveness from others. Many times you have hurt others, some times unconsciously, even when you are aware you explain and don't ask for forgiveness. You try to justify your opinion. Become aware of how you lack the ability of asking for forgiveness.

4. SENSITIVITY

Due to the babbling of the mind, the senses cannot experience anything. We are constantly thinking about ourselves and we are not sensitive to other peoples feelings and priorities. Become aware of your lack of sensitivity.

5. RELATIONS

Whenever you relate to people, things and subjects, there is life in the relation as long as it is comfortable. When it becomes uncomfortable, you end the relation. Slowly you become as if you're dead in your relations. This can be called non-relation. Become aware of the lack of relation.

6. INNER INTEGRITY

Learn to be honest to yourself. Lie to others is not such a big thing, but in the moment we lie externally, we try to lie to ourselves internally. A lie in the outer is a thousand lies within oneself. The lies you have told yourself have taken you away from your true self. Become aware of the lack of inner integrity.

7. LOOKING BACK AT LIFE

Start to see how you are hurting others. If a person cannot see his faults in life, how they affect others, it is very difficult to grow. So look at your life.

8. CONFRONT FEAR

There are two types of fear – biological – this is an inherited mechanism in the body to protect you, and you don't have to do anything about it. Psychological – there are four kinds: fear of failure, rejection, the future, the unknown. Confront it!

9. APPROVAL

To be able to accept yourself. We always find someone who is responsible for our suffering. Turn inwards and see who you are and accept it. Then you will live in peace with

everything. Accept your role in society or the system; however small it may be, however insignificant it may be.

10. CRAVING FOR SIGNIFICANCE

One of the biggest obstacles for spiritual growth is the craving for significance. It is in the nature of the self to crave for significance in everything. Become aware of the craving for significance.

11. HUMILITY

Become aware of the lack of humility in your life. Realize that in life, you are a part of the whole and very insignificant; that would help you to grow. Most people feel as if they understand everything. Humility is necessary for awakening, since awakening is something you receive, not achieve. Become aware of the lack of humility.

12. HOLINESS

Modern civilization believes it can understand and explain everything. This makes life loose its mystery, which is joy, awe/respect and holiness. The explanations of humanity have killed the mystery of life and holiness. “Everyone Who Is” can never be understood. God is not possible to recognize. When you can realize this, you start to feel holiness towards the Divine and everything in life. The greatest knowledge is that you never really can know anything. Become aware of the lack of holiness.

13. THE DIVINE HAND IN LIFE

Become aware of how there is a Divine hand in your life.

14.BOND/CONNECTION WITH AMMABHAGAVAN

Establish a personal bond with AmmaBhagavan. In order to come into contact with the Divine phenomena Awakening, which AmmaBhagavan have taken down to this planet, you need to feel communion with AmmaBhagavan. The stronger bond, the more Divine grace you experience. When you have a bond, things will happen quicker. Do you have a strong connection? Become aware of the lack of bond.

15. LACK OF TRUST

Become aware of the lack of trust you have to the process and AmmaBhagavan. To see how the mind tells different stories about how your Awakening cannot or will not happen. Realize that it (the Awakening) is happening all over the planet for thousands of people, and will happen to you. Become aware of the lack of trust.

16. CAPITULATION

See the condition of the mind and become helpless. Know that you cannot do anything to get there, you have to get help from the Divine. To give up is to realize that there is nothing you can do about it. When you are helpless, the Divine helps you. If you are desperate you are lost. Become aware of the lack of capitulation.

17. LACK OF GRATITUDE (QUALITY)

We take life for granted and give it a frame of responsibility and duty. Become aware of the lack of gratitude.

18. SEVA

Help others. The greatest Seva is to help others to Awakening. Become aware of how you're not using possibilities of doing Seva.

19. COMPASSION

See how you lack compassion. When you focus on achieving something without being distracted, then it's passion. If you have the same passion for fulfilling other people's wishes, then it is compassion.

20. TO PRAISE THE DIVINE OR AMMABAHAGAVAN

All holy scriptures talk about praising the Divine. When you praise the Divine you will receive an overflow of grace.

21. FORMAL GRATITUDE TO THE DIVINE

Many times we say: "Lord, you have done so much for me, how can I express my gratitude?" When we say this, we are escaping. To one of the devotees, his Antharyamin Bhagavan told him that it is true on a deeper level. You cannot do anything, but on the physical plane you are living together with me, so express your gratitude formally. By doing this you bind me and I have to do you a favour. Your personal relation grows.

1. We are here when the Avatar is here on this planet – express gratitude.
2. To see the feet of the Lord is a great blessing, we receive Deeksha from the Padukas – people in India see this as a good karma that has accumulated through many births – express gratitude.
3. We can listen to lecture straight from the Avatar – express gratitude.
4. Only by calling out the name of Amma Bhagavan we receive, without problems, grace – express gratitude.
5. The Avatar gives us Mukthi (liberation) – express gratitude.
6. AmmaBhagavan is there to protect your family always – express gratitude.
7. We have been given the possibility of serving (Seva bhagyam) – express gratitude.
8. AmmaBhagavan solves our health- and financial problems – express gratitude.
9. We will witness great changes that will take place on this planet – express gratitude.
10. For the awakening of humanity AmmaBhagavan needs all your help, since you are helping. They express gratitude. That AmmaBhagavan expresses their gratitude is a role model for us.

# Postscript

Gothenburg, June 2013

Six months have now passed since I finished the fieldwork with the Oneness movement. It was an exiting time in many ways, not the least because of all the preparations going on for the entering into a new cosmic era, said to take place on the 21st of December 2012. That very day I celebrated in Nemam, Andhra Pradesh, together with about a thousand people from nearby towns and villages. Two weeks thereafter, after a detour to a Oneness temple in Bangalore, I finally reached the Oneness University and got to attend a darshan with Bhagavan himself. This marked the end of the fieldwork, as it was time to start with the task of to going through all the collected material.

Lately, while discussing the work on Oneness with friends, fellow students and teachers, some questions have come up repeatedly: What happened then?? Did the world enter into a new era? And, since Bhagavan in Ardagh's book mentioned that Oneness as an organisation might cease to exist after 2012, what has happened with the movement? In order to still the curiosity of those who pose these questions, I would like to share an email I received from a Oneness mailing list on the 21st December 2012:

> Mission Fulfilled!
>
> Namasthe,
> This day marks the beginning of a New Age!
>
> Sri Amma Bhagavan's mission and vision has been to assist humanity in this transition. The mission was to create a critical mass shift in human consciousness by awakening over 70,000 people. This Mission is Fulfilled!
>
> The great awakening for humanity is now fully underway as we witness tens of thousands of people awaken each month in ever increasing numbers!
>
> Welcome to the Golden Age!
>
> Regards,
> Oneness
>
> (Sent from Oneness India (mail@onenessindia.ning.com))

I will let the letter speak for itself as an answer to the first question. Regarding the second question, after a taking a brief look at Oneness official website (www.onenessuniversity.org), my conclusion is that there are no signs indicating that the movement is about to close down. Courses are still held, as well as regular webcasts with darshans on the Internet. The only difference seems to be that, while entering the Oneness website, a picture of Amma and Bhagavan appears with the headline: Mission Fulfilled! Under is written the following numbers:

- People Awakened are over 806,000
- People living in the presence are over 913,000
- People in Awakened states are over 312 million
- People experiencing the presence are over 540 million

Compared with the same list of numbers from 31st October 2012 (presented earlier in the thesis in chapter 4.2.2, p.44), it appears as the people experiencing these different states have multiplied many times over. My conclusion of this is that, even though one mission of Oneness might have been fulfilled, new missions will be created as time passes. As the title of this thesis suggests, there seem to be many different kinds of "Oneness", in an organisational as well as soteriological sense. And I believe that these different kinds of Oneness will continue and multiply as long as the flexibility and cultural adaptations that have been discussed here are maintained.