

HEALING FOR THE MILLENIUM: MASTER DANG AND SPIRITUAL HUMAN YOGA^[1]

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Jean-François Mayer

University of Fribourg (Switzerland)

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In October 1991, American newspapers reported that a healer named Luong Minh Dang, established in St. Louis and running an organization then called International Human and Universal Energy Research Institute, had predicted that an earthquake would strike California. When wildfires began to rage through the hills of Oakland, several hundreds members of the Vietnamese community in California fled to Missouri, supposed to be a safe place, in order to seek Dang's advice. Some subsequently left him. But reporters noticed that Dang, who had settled in the United States in 1985 and had first been known only within the Vietnamese community, was already beginning to attract European followers **[2]**.

On January 16 and 17, 1999, more than 6,000 Level 5 and 6 initiates of Universal Energy -- renamed Spiritual Human Yoga (SHY) -- gathered in Geneva, but not without turmoil : Master Dang was prevented to attend, since he had just been arrested by the Belgian Police (he finally spent 65 days in jail there, before being released on bail)**[3]**. Some Swiss media had expressed anxiety during the previous days, describing the movement as an " apocalyptic cult " and claiming that Dang had scheduled a departure toward another planet on January 29, 1999 **[4]**. The congress took place without trouble. Worth noticing was especially the fact that participants had come from a number of countries around the world and that those of Vietnamese background were only a minority **[5]**. Despite the failed prophecies of the early 1990s, the small group launched ten years earlier by a Vietnamese refugee in the United States had become an international organization with a presence in more than 60 countries **[6]**. But the tendency of Dang to announce imminent planetary upheavals had not disappeared in the meantime and was putting him into trouble once again.

1) Luong Minh Dang and his movement

Luong Minh Dang was born in Vietnam on January 30, 1942. According to his own statements, he served in the South Vietnamese Navy from 1961 to 1975 and became an officer. Following the Communist victory, he went through difficult years, but finally managed to emigrate to the United States in 1985 and settled in St. Louis, Missouri. During the first few months, he used to work as a waiter in a restaurant, but apparently soon developed a fame as a healer and began to gather a following. In 1988, he used to describe his method as the "Neo Healing System". He undertook his first travels abroad in 1988-89 and launched his movement formally in 1989.

Dang claims to have inherited his technique from previous masters and it is said to have come from Sri Lanka (while having very ancient origins in old civilizations). The founder of the current "Spiritual School of Universal Energy" was allegedly a resident of Sri Lanka named Dasira Narada (1846-1924), described as the holder of a doctoral degree in philosophy and a civil servant in a high position, who spent the final years of his life in seclusion and spiritual pursuits. His successor, Dasira Narada II, about whom little information is given except for the fact that he was an Indian, allegedly initiated Dang in Vietnam in 1972 : Dang became Dasira Narada III. Dasira Narada II is said to have returned to Sri Lanka in 1974 and to have passed away

there in 1980 [7]. No independent confirmation is available regarding those informations or even the existence of a man called Dasira Narada, and only research in Sri Lanka might possibly allow to shed some light on those claims.

There is little literature available as a public introduction to Spiritual Human Yoga (SHY), except for websites in several languages operated by some local SHY organizations [8]. If one reads those texts as well as the teachings distributed to initiates learning the first levels of SHY, there seems to be no reference to apocalyptic events or planetary turmoils. Universal Energy is said to be found everywhere and to exercise a biological effects upon the bodily cells. SHY is supposed to allow to control Universal Energy and to use it for the well-being of everybody. Pyramids are supposed to have the ability to keep Universal Energy: students having reached the highest levels of SHY use small pyramids in order to stock Universal Energy. Chakras are used as gateways for Universal Energy to enter into our bodies; SHY students learn how to use the chakras. Energy can be transferred to people who need it (for instance as a complement to medicine for a sick person). From Levels 1 to 5, SHY students transfer the Energy with the hands; at the levels above, transfers are being made by telepathy -- which means that Energy can then be transmitted to people anywhere on the Earth. Chakras of the SHY students are opened step by step (30% at level 1, 60% at level 2 and 100% at level 3). Spiritual teachings are delivered from Level 4. Compared with other techniques, like Reiki, SHY is understood by its practitioners as being easier to use, less time-consuming and faster [9]. Other methods of yoga require a very long time in order to open the chakras, and success is never fully guaranteed, while SHY claims to "obtain the 100% opening of the six chakras" in "less than a month" [10]. According to Master Dang, SHY "enables the body to stay balanced, as well as to draw in energy from the universe, to teach others and open their chakras, as well as to treat all diseases" [11].

Dang's teachings cannot be connected to any specific tradition, but they are definitely part of the "cultic milieu" [12], of the alternative religious trends: Dang believes that the teachings of Universal Energy were practiced 6000 years ago in Egypt and later in India, he gives a great importance to ancient Egypt and refers to it often. He seems to believe that most (if not all) of his closest followers lived in Atlantis and in Egypt in previous incarnations. He refers to names like Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815) or Edgar Cayce (1877-1945). Dang once recommended to people attending a Level 5 seminar to read the (fictitious, but still popular) *Life and Teachings of the Masters of the Far east* by Baird T. Spalding (1872-1953), presented by Dang as an "eminent English scientist" [13]. Members are also encouraged to read *In the Light of Truth* by Abd-ru shin (Oskar Ernst Bernhardt, 1875-1941)" [14]. While a number of typical beliefs of the "cultic milieu" emerge in Dang's teachings, some are not integrated: for instance, Dang denies the existence of extraterrestrials. The orientation of Dang's teachings is not dogmatic, however, and he encourages his audience to take from his teachings only what seems adequate for them, depending upon their beliefs. Not surprisingly, a number of people practicing SHY were obviously quite familiar with alternative and esoteric teachings already before they became involved in SHY.

2) *The expectation of a rapid transition toward the new world*

It is not before the highest levels of SHY that teachings which have been termed by outsiders as "apocalyptic" (although this word does not seem really appropriate, as we will see) enter into the message of Universal Energy. In recent years, Dang has repeatedly warned his closest students that imminent, cataclysmic events would soon affect the entire world. As early as May 1996, during a seminar in the Netherlands" [15], and August 1996, during a seminar in Thailand, he informed the participants that there would be a great change in year 2000, although this would not be the end of the world" [16]. But there would be cataclysmic events: for instance, at an unspecified date, Japan is expected to disappear into the sea, apparently as a consequence of atomic tests, and there will be other major disasters as well" [17]. But SHY students should help to reduce the impact of those upheavals, and there will finally be a new mankind in harmony with Universal Energy on a new Earth" [18].

During a one week long meeting in the Netherlands with 138 selected students in February 1998, Dang detailed his beliefs regarding the next few years. Let's try to summarize the most relevant themes. Year 2000 will mark a great turning point for mankind: everything which we know from the past will disappear" [19] -- and Dang insists: the new era won't begin in 2001 or 2002, but in year 2000" [20]. January 29, 1999, was predicted as a fateful date: those who would begin to behave properly and decide to help mankind before that date would be in harmony with the new energy and would be able to remain in their

current bodies, otherwise they would have to die and to get new bodies [21]. There won't be a world or nuclear war, but a world economic crisis as well as environmental problems [22]. Illnesses will also be on the increase [23]. All the countries of the world will be paralyzed and only SHY students will still be able to help [24]. But here come the good news: from year 2000, all the problems of the world will be solved and mankind will develop incredible new abilities -- for instance, Master Dang promises to teach how to create a lesser density in order to reduce the weight of the human bodies [25]. We will be able to move through space at a very high speed [26]. Thanks to the technique of Universal Energy, we will be able to change the consistence of objects -- for instance to fold a cup in order to put it into our pocket [27]. Dang also taught that, from Autumn 1999, the climate would become temperate on the entire Earth, neither too warm nor too cold, without great temperature changes, like a perpetual Autumn [28].

Dang's utopia definitely has all the features of a millennial scenario. "Everything which is ancient will be erased" [29] and leave place to a transformed world, in which the air will be pure and from which dangerous microbes will be banished [30]: it will be a regenerated Earth where a new mankind will be able to live in peace and to cultivate new abilities -- some of them quite unusual ones, for instance the prediction that, at some point in the future, women will no more need men in order to beget children and will be able to have hundreds of children each with very short pregnancies thanks to Universal Energy which should allow to speed the growth! [31] It is true that Dang is not particularly of a Malthusian inclination and declares himself convinced that the Earth should be able at some point to accomodate 80 billion human beings...

Basically, Dang's message is that SHY holds the key to all the problems of the present and of the future world: "we will bring happiness and prosperity to mankind" [32]. Dang seems to think that he has a solution for most current problems: at the beginning of 1999, he even published a book claiming to "help the world to avoid the total global crash" caused by the Y2K problem, offering a temporary solution for the next 10 years [33].

Even if some readers understood it as apocalyptic, Master Dang's message seems to be rather optimistic. There will be "a positive change not only in just one country, but all over the world" [34]. One might even be tempted to describe it as excessively optimistic, since he takes the risk to announce major and positive changes within a short timespan, which means that disconfirmation is quite likely -- we will very soon be able to see if the climate has changed for the better or not!

3) Luong Minh Dang and SHY: lessons for millennial scholars

A few comments can be made about Dang and his millennial message:

- SHY is no part of any specific millenarian tradition. It is an eclectic brand of millenarianism, using a variety of widespread topics: we can expect to see more and more such kinds of millenarianism during the years to come. Dang does not refrain from using older apocalyptic themes: he even claims that there is a lot about himself in the Message of Fatima [35]. Generally, however, Dang refers to modern fears: economic crisis, Y2K, pollution... It is definitely very much a late 20th century picture. Accordingly, appropriate techniques should be able to solve those problems: Universal Energy is the solution. Dang is also playing upon the feeling that the entrance into a new millenium must be associated with major changes. Actually, SHY is one of the very few relatively large groups (and probably even the only one with a following of that size) announcing that year 2000 will mark the beginning of a new era.
- Universal Energy appears first as a healing technique. But there is an extension from the idea of individual healing to collective healing -- healing of the planet through the combined efforts of SHY followers. The new way of life on Earth will be made possible by the application of this technique; in addition, the technique makes the transition from the old to the new age easier, reducing the turmoils usually associated with the entrance into the millenium. This appears to be the bridge between healing and the millenium.
- SHY can probably not be described as a religion in the strict sense of the word. For instance, it does not seem to have any kind of worship or ceremonies associated with major steps in life. But on the other hand, Dang considers Jesus and Buddha as having been the two greatest beings [36] and,

while stating that one should not believe in Dang in the same way one believes in Jesus or Buddha [37], claims to be helped by God and to "communicate with many of the Divine Beings" [38] and that those Divine Beings "always are near, constantly teaching me the new information, so that I can continue on with this journey to help all of you" [39]. People who have had their chakras opened are said to have constantly two Higher Beings with them, who help them [40]. There is also a discrete criticism of established religions [41]. It is true that healing groups have often been seen as being orientated rather toward the fulfillment of individual concerns; but, in his research on a movement from the Philippines (Pranic Healing), James Beckford had already remarked that global concerns were not foreign to its adherents [42]. The same could definitely be said of SHY students: there seems to be a strong altruistic impetus (to help individuals as well as the world). SHY fits at least to some extent into the category of "new religious and healing movements" described by Beckford [43]. It would be interesting to examine to which extent such millenarian views are atypical or could actually be found in a wider range of such movements.

- While Dang tends to distance himself from any suggestion that he announced apocalyptic events and explains that he had just stated that current problems might doom mankind if not properly addressed [44], there is no doubt that, during the past few years, he has often mentioned imminent cataclysmic events as well as major world transformations in a very near future. Considering his previous predictions in the early 1990s, it is obvious that upheavals and disasters fascinate Dang. At a more practical level, it is certainly a way to motivate people and to incite them to engage into collective action. However, announcing such short-term events also means that the likeliness of empirical disconfirmation runs very high. This tendency to play with the topic of disasters and cataclysms means that: a) Dang will continue to get regularly into trouble, since it will create anxieties among people having relatives in the group as well as in law-enforcement agencies eager to prevent further "cult tragedies"; b) there will necessarily be disappointed followers leaving the movement. However, it is by no means sure that this will lead the movement to a premature disappearance -- if only because there will always be many people who had not heard about the previous predictions. In addition, while millenarianism certainly creates a sense of urgency among those who listen to those teachings, one should not forget that the millenarian message is only explained at the higher levels and that people do not initially become students of SHY because of this millenarian element, but due to the healing possibilities offered by Universal Energy attract them: the attractiveness of Dang's message is not primarily based upon millenarian expectations. In addition, for those at the higher levels, Dang is already offering something which might be seen as a compensator for the failure of prophecy: for the first time, Level 7 of SHY will be unveiled at West Palm Beach (Florida) in late November, and certainly excitement must be great among practitioners of SHY due to this new opportunity -- still associated with the idea "to help Humanity to step into a New Era starting from the 21st Century" [45].
- How is it possible to determine if a group like SHY might cause trouble, since this was obviously the concern of some law-enforcement agencies in Belgium, Switzerland and France last January? There were references at that time to statements by Master Dang during internal meetings, claiming that the purpose was "to reach rapidly the 4th dimension" [46]. Some people feared that it might indicate a willingness to stage a "Transit", Solar Temple style. However, if one reads those comments into context, without isolating them, they obviously have nothing sinister associated with them. One could actually find, among Master Dang's sometimes strange statements, elements which might cause concern, but his accusers have apparently not been aware of some of those potentially quite controversial remarks [47]. Master Dang certainly belongs to the category of rather unpredictable spiritual masters, he is not afraid of contradicting himself or of being proved wrong by the turn of events, and in addition there is no authority beside him for checking what he is telling. However, at this moment (1999), SHY cannot be seen as the most likely candidate for some tragic outcome: the group is thriving, the number of followers is increasing, it has the potential to reach new territories. In addition, the reactions at the meeting in Geneva in January 1999, at a time of controversies and while Dang himself was in jail, were quite self-contained and not hysterical. Briefly said, compared with cases of deviant millenarian groups (since such a comparison is at this point the only way which we have in order to try to assess a potential for dangerous developments), SHY does not at this point exhibit the features of a group likely to engage into dangerous actions (the question of possible problems arising from reliance on SHY's healing methods being left aside here, since it is not the question under discussion).

SHY is an illustration of new varieties of millenarian experience which we discover today, outside of any previous millenarian tradition. But under new guises, it remains the same hope of a new Earth with a better future for mankind, where death would be no more or nearly so [48], where all illnesses could be cured: a healthy mankind will experience "paradise on Earth" [49], which is the ultimate goal of SHY as of so many other, different millenarian movements.

Notes

1. [back] This paper (especially its second chapter) is partly based upon an analysis of internal material available only to initiates of Levels 5 and 6 of SHY. The author is not and has never been a member, but has been able to get several volumes of this material, due to fortunate circumstances.
2. [back] *San Jose Mercury News*, October 23, 1991; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 18, 1991, and November 24, 1991. Many thanks to Mike Kropveld (Info-Cult, Montréal), who had investigated the movement in the early 1990s, for having kindly provided those articles as well as for having allowed me to peruse his files during my visit to Montréal in June 1999.
3. [back] Regarding SHY in Belgium and the problems it experienced in that country, additional information can be found on the webpage of Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) : <http://www.hrwf.net> .
4. [back] *Tribune de Genève*, January 9-10, 1999.
5. [back] However, Dang continues to consider Vietnam as a special country from a spiritual perspective, despite the problems which he experiences in his attempts to go there in order to spread his teachings (Luong Minh Dang, *Séminaire Spécial-Spiritualité du 3 au 7 août 1997 à Genève, Suisse*, s.l.n.d., p. 76). When asked in the early 1990s "why was Vietnam chosen?", Dang replied by quoting the following "prophetic verse": "Small country among 1000 other countries, but which will be at the top of the universe", explaining that it refers to a spiritual help and not to a political domination ("Niveau III. Notes de cours. Cours du 24 avril au 1^{er} mai 1991", p. 79). In some later texts, Dang seems to distance himself from a Vietnam-centered perspective, explaining that he had first given priority to Vietnam, but, due to his failure there, had subsequently chosen other countries, especially Thailand (Luong Minh Dang, *La Retraite de Boomhoek du 13 au 22 mai 1996 à Loosdrecht, Pays-Bas*, s.l.n.d. : Spiritualité-Humanité-Yoga, p. 66). However, recently, in a July 1999 internal directive for the Level 7 Seminar to take place in November 1999, Dang mentions the Vietnamese people several times and mentions that priority will be given: 1) to directors of the centers who are Vietnamese and to the Vietnamese staff of centers; 2) to directors of centers and special people who are foreigners; 3) to Vietnamese SHY students who have completed the Level 6. This is not surprising: in the same way, there are a number of Indian or Japanese movements, for instance, which preach universalist messages strongly associated with nationalist views of the very special role of their own country.
6. [back] According to statistical data provided by the movement (and probably accurate), in 1998, 30,000 people had visited the course for Level 5, 25,000 Level 5.1, 15,000 Level 5.2 and 10,000 Level 6 (Quyên Xuan Nguyen, *Les Traitements par l'Energie Universelle. Une méthode naturelle de soins*, s.l.n.d. [199], p. 10).
7. [back] *La Retraite de Boomhoek*, p. 159.
8. [back] A good one (in French) is the Swiss SHY webpage, with links to several other webpages: <http://www.melswitzerland.com/>.
9. [back] Quyên Xuan Nguyen, *op. cit.*
10. [back] Luong Minh Dang, *A Study of the Applied Yoga of Universal and Human Energy in Medical Treatment*, Saint-Louis / Paris: SHY, 1995, pp. 79-80.
11. [back] *Ibid.*, p. 98.
12. [back] As Colin Campbell defines it ("The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization", in Michael Hill [Ed.], *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain*, Vol. 5, London: SCM Press, 1972, pp. 119-136).
13. [back] *La Retraite de Boomhoek*, p. 154. Spalding was actually an "independent Spiritualist teacher and author", who became famous when the first volume of the *Life and Teachings* was published in 1924: "In the preface he claimed to have taken a trip to India in 1894 as part of a scientific expedition sponsored by a famous university. In reply to the university's response that no such expedition had occurred, the revised edition stated that Spalding was merely an independent member of a "research party"." Only in 1935 did he visit (briefly) India (J. Gordon Melton, *Biographical Dictionary of American Cult and Sect Leaders*, NewYork / London: Garland, 1986, p. 274).
14. [back] It was sold in French, German and English at the January 1999 congress in Geneva -- significantly, it was the only literature not published by SHY which was on sale there. *In the Light of Truth* is published and distributed by the Grail Movement, with headquarters in Austria; there is practically no scholarly research available on the Grail Movement, and the only good and relatively recent overview by outsiders is a research paper written by two German Protestant theologians: Karin Verscht-Biener and Hans-Diether Reimer, *Die "Gralsbewegung"*, Stuttgart. Evangelische Zentralstelle für Weltanschauungsfragen, 1991 (Series "Orientierungen und Berichte", N° 18). There seems to be no organizational connection or contact between SHY and the Grail Movement.
15. [back] *La Retraite de Boomhoek*, *passim*.
16. [back] *Séminaire spécial sur la spiritualité (Pattaya, Thaïlande, août 1996)*, s.l.n.d., p. 19.
17. [back] *Ibid.*, p. 24.

18. [back] *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.
19. [back] "The entire Earth will experience a total change", he had already explained a few years earlier (*La Retraite de Boomhoek*, p. 90).
20. [back] Luong Minh Dang, *La Retraite de Tiel (20-28 février 1998)*, s.l.n.d., p. 14.
21. [back] *Ibid.*, pp. 38, 47, 76 and 116.
22. [back] *Ibid.*, pp. 1 and 37.
23. [back] *Ibid.*, p. 70.
24. [back] *Ibid.*, p. 7.
25. [back] *Ibid.*, p. 47.
26. [back] *Ibid.*, p. 74.
27. [back] *Ibid.*, p. 91.
28. [back] *Ibid.*, p. 136.
29. [back] *La Retraite de Boomhoek*, p. 113.
30. [back] *Ibid.*, pp. 55 and 90-91.
31. [back] *La Retraite de Tiel.*, pp. 77 et 157.
32. [back] *Ibid.*, p. 85.
33. [back] Luong Minh Dang et al., *A Global Solution for the "00" of the Y2K (Year 2000)*, New York: Universe Press, 1999, pp. 33-34.
34. [back] Luong Minh Dang, *Level 5.2 Seminar (Special Spiritual), December 26-30, 1998 (St. Louis, Missouri)*, s.l.n.d., p. 55.
35. [back] *La Retraite de Boomhoek*, p. 44.
36. [back] *Séminaire spécial sur la spiritualité*, p. 11.
37. [back] *Ibid.*, p. 13. Not that he has a small idea of his own role: according to him never before in 6 billion years of human history did a Master teach both in the material and in the spiritual domains in such a short time (*La Retraite de Boomhoek*, p. 14).
38. [back] *Level 5.2 Seminar (Special Spiritual)*, p. 242.
39. [back] *Ibid.*, p. 261.
40. [back] *Séminaire Spécial-Spiritualité du 3 au 7 août 1997*, pp. 18-19.
41. [back] "In our days, there are many churches, but without spirituality" (*ibid.*, p. 13). Christianity has not been able to bring a credible and tangible solution to mankind, in contrast with SHY (*La Retraite de Tiel*, p. 117).
42. [back] James A. Beckford and Araceli Suzara, "A New Religious and Healing Movement in the Philippines", in *Religion*, 24/2, April 1994, pp. 117-141.
43. [back] Some interesting general observations can be found in James A. Beckford, "The World Images of New Religious and Healing Movements", in R. Kenneth Jones (Ed.), *Sickness and Sectarianism: Exploratory Studies in Medical and Religious Sectarianism*, Brookfield (VT): Gower, 1985, pp. 52-93.
44. [back] See his reply in the Belgian newspaper *Le Soir*, April 12, 1999.
45. [back] SHY Worldwide, Internal Directive, July 15, 1999.
46. [back] *La Retraite de Tiel*, p. 131.
47. [back] For instance this comment in December 1998, which might just have been a joke, but could certainly be perceived as bizarre at least if it was not: "A lot of times as I teach I feel exhausted. As I went on the airplane and they see me sitting in the airplane, they ask what I'm praying for. I told them I pray for the airplane to crash. For dying together with me, then everyone would go with me to the light. Each time I go on the airplane, I keep on praying for the airplane to crash. I don't want to crash on land. I want it to crash on the ocean." (*Level 5.2 Seminar*, p. 181)
48. [back] According to Dang, in the 21st century, the only deaths will be those due to accidents (*Séminaire spécial sur la spiritualité*, p. 6).
49. [back] *Ibid.*, p. 2.

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