



Kumaré

Discussion Guide

Director: Vikram Gandhi

Year: 2011

Time: 84 min

You might know this director from:

KUMARÉ is Vikram Gandhi's first feature-length documentary film.

FILM SUMMARY

Vikram Gandhi was born in New Jersey, the son of first generation Indian immigrants and raised on a hearty spiritual diet of traditional yoga, meditation and rituals passed down from generation to generation, but from an early age the spectacle and worship of religious icons seemed suspicious. When it was time to ship off to college, he decided to major in religion in hopes of reaching some kind of greater understanding of the spiritual world, but instead he was left even more doubt. Eventually, he travelled to India with the intention of studying with a variety of true-to-life Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh gurus, practicing their methods, filming their teachings, and eventually unveiling an alarming trend of gurus taking advantage of their followers for their own personal benefit.

Rather than merely painting a broad picture of gurus exhorting their divine enlightenment over their followers, hailing themselves as someone of a higher power than your average fellow human, Vikram decided to film himself as he attempted to invent a guru-like figure as a test to see if your average person could just up and become a guru, and if so, examine if it is possible to use such a figure to teach people that they in fact do not need a guru to help themselves. Enter Kumaré.

Vikram grew out his hair and beard, donned traditional Indian garb, adopted his grandmother's accent and found a pair of yoga instructors to introduce him as Sri Kumaré, a revered yoga master, often known to his contemporaries as Adarsha or "The Mirror." His teachings explicitly stated that he is a fake and that his students need only to look within themselves to find the guru they are seeking. What at first seems like a misguided prank quickly develops into a truly transformative spiritual journey that yields truth via deception.

FILM THEMES

Vikram Gandhi's spiritual experiment tests the moral foundation of religious gurus everywhere by faking his way into garnering a following and teaching them that he is a fake and that they do not need him. In doing so, his film ruminates on spiritualism, faith, why people seek out a higher power and how they might reach some form of personal enlightenment.

SPIRITUALISM VS. WORSHIP

Kumaré was born out of frustration with society's tendency to seek out and worship icons of power, whether it be a beard-bearing guru, a movie star celebrity, the pope, a mountain of cash or the Buddha himself, rather than reaching a personal spiritual enlightenment within one's self. Vikram believes in the old Zen koan that states that "if you meet the Buddha, kill him." In his mind, worshiping an icon does little more for one's own well being than belittling one's self beside their chosen icon, while finding some form of soothing spiritual peace within one's self can yield a wealth benefits. Even Buddha should be a mirror of spiritual inspiration rather than a figure to be lavishly praised.

YOGA AS HEALING TOOL

Despite all the wariness revolving around gurus, the yoga teachings that form the foundation of nearly all of their instruction proves to be a tried and true method of healing, both mental and physical. Combining physical postures, breathing exercises and meditation, yoga has been proven to improve physical fitness, relieve stress, and enhance one's quality of life. Though Vikram did invent a few nonsensical poses to integrate into his teachings, he is truthfully a well practiced yogi himself and has implemented yoga as the basis for his method of instruction.

BLIND FAITH IN FAUX AUTHORITY

Time and time again, as Kumaré, Vikram asks his devotees to look within themselves rather than bathe icons around them in praise. He explicitly points out that he is a faker that they have no reason to put their trust in him, yet they follow him, speaking of him as though he was some kind of religious prophet. It is this blind faith and faux authority that Vikram unconsciously addresses in his final unveiling, poignantly exposing his true identity as a means to show that he is not the guru his followers thought they needed.

EVERYONE IS SEARCHING FOR RELIEF

Each of Kumaré's devotees decided to follow Vikram because they were searching for relief from one thing or another. Whether it be from the insecurities of empty nest syndrome, the stresses of one's job, the feeling of being lost in one's career, the void left after indulging in a life of drink and drugs, etc, each of them had their reasons for seeking a spiritual guidance. Recognizing that you need help is the first step toward relief.

"If you meet the Buddha, kill him."

Linji

"Faith begins as an experiment and ends as an experience."

William Ralph Inge

"It is you real gurus that make us fake gurus so necessary."

Kumaré

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Kumaré's teachings are based on the idea that everyone can be their own guru. Do you believe this to be true? Could you be your own guru?
2. Vikram Gandhi made up the Kumaré character as an experiment to see if any random person could become a guru. This act would take an enormous amount of confidence. Is this something you think you could do? Do you think anyone could become a guru?
3. Part of Kumaré's message was that he was a faker, and eventually, he unveiled that he was indeed speaking the truth. How do you think you would have reacted to this news if you had been one of his followers?
4. Yoga is the sixth most commonly used complementary health practice among adults. Have you practiced yoga yourself?
5. Yoga is associated with both physical health healing and spiritual health healing. Do you think this is a coincidence?
6. Have you personally sought out a spiritual leader? If so, why? What has your experience been like?
7. How familiar are you with Buddhism, Hinduism or Sikhism?
8. New age teachings are often associated with Eastern religions. Why do you think this is? Do you believe in any new age guidance?
9. In the West, new-age groups and gurus have been linked with cults. Have you heard of this trend, and if so, why do you think this is?
10. Do you believe you can become a better person by becoming more spiritually in-tune?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- According to Yoga Journal, there are over 15 million Americans who currently practice yoga.
- In the United States, \$27 Billion is spent annually on yoga products.
- In a study of 90 people with chronic low-back pain funded by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, it was found that participants who practiced Iyengar yoga had significantly less disability, pain, and depression after 6 months.
- After premiering at the 2011 SXSW Film Festival, KUMARÉ won the Audience Award.
- After completing KUMARÉ, Vikram Gandhi remained off the grid until 2014 when he began to produce and host the HBO produced Vice news series.
- According to Sikhism, the purpose of life is to overcome the self, align life with the will of God, and become a “saint soldier,” fighting for good.
- Due to an increase of skepticism around new age ideals and Eastern religious ideologies, there have been warnings in Western media that warn of faux gurus taking advantage of followers.
- Doing yoga is free from home with the help of online videos and guides, but expect to pay anywhere from \$10 to \$30 dollars per class depending on where you live. Many yoga studios have a one-time drop-in rate if you want to try a single class.
- According to the North American Studio Alliance, the number of facilities offering yoga has gone up from 31% in 1996 to 85% in 2002.
- Ten of the fourteen people who followed Kumaré still keep in contact with Vikram after revealing his true identity at the ‘unveiling’.
- Though it takes years of practice to receive any benefits from meditation, a study led by Harvard University and Massachusetts General Hospital found that as little as eight weeks of meditation not only helped people experience decreased anxiety and greater feelings of calm, it also produced growth in the areas of the brain associated with memory, empathy, sense of self, and stress regulation.
- A 2012 study by the Pew Research Center found that just over one percent of the general public in the United States is Buddhist.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Share** this film. Give others the chance to learn from the story of Kumaré.
2. **Become** your own guru! Look within yourself to find your own version of enlightenment.
3. **Recognize**, if you are in need of spiritual guidance, the difference between spiritualism and blind worship when seeking assistance.
4. **Start** practicing yoga! Research a basic regimen you can practice at home (you can find a lot of free instructions on Youtube) or join a local yoga studio for more in depth practice.
5. **Familiarize** yourself with a religion you know little about. Maybe you’ll find something you like, maybe not. Either way, it will enrich your knowledge of the world.

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In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

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