

## A Master of Memory in India Credits Meditation for His Brainy Feats

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[http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/18/world/asia/prodigy-in-india-credits-feats-of-memory-to-meditation-and-jainism.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/18/world/asia/prodigy-in-india-credits-feats-of-memory-to-meditation-and-jainism.html?_r=1)

MUMBAI, India — The young man sat cross-legged atop a cushioned divan on an ornately decorated stage, surrounded by other Jain monks draped in white cloth. His lip occasionally twitched, his hands lay limp in his lap, and for the most part his eyes were closed. An announcer repeatedly chastised the crowd for making even the slightest noise.

From daybreak until midafternoon, members of the audience approached the stage, one at a time, to show the young monk a random object, pose a math problem, or speak a word or phrase in one of at least six different languages. He absorbed the miscellany silently, letting it slide into his mind, as onlookers in their seats jotted everything down on paper.

After six hours, the 500th and last item was uttered — it was the number 100,008. An anxious hush descended over the crowd.

And the monk opened his eyes and calmly recalled all 500 items, in order, detouring only once to fill in a blank he had momentarily set aside.

When he was done, and the note-keepers in the audience had confirmed his achievement, the tense atmosphere dissolved and the announcer led the crowd in a series of triumphant chants.

The opportunity to witness the feat of memory drew a capacity crowd of 6,000 to the Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel stadium in Mumbai on Sunday. The exhibition was part of a campaign to encourage schoolchildren to use meditation to build brainpower, as Jain monks have done for centuries in [India](#), a country drawn both toward ancient religious practices and more recent ambitions.

But even by Jain standards, the young monk — Munishri Ajitchandrasagarji, 24 — is something special. His guru, P. P. Acharya Nayachandrasagarji, said no other monk in many years had come close to his ability.

“Munishri’s mind is like a computer during the download process,” the guru said during an interview in a temple in central Mumbai on Monday. “Many processes can happen in his mind at one time.”

“Like when I forgot No. 81,” Munishri chimed in. “The rest of the processes continued, and then, later, that one process began and I remembered it. It takes no effort. I’m simply able to extract it from my subconscious, where I have stored it.”

He sees brainpower as directly proportional to sacrifice, however, and he and his guru have made some great sacrifices.

The guru, now 58, said he had worked in a diamond-cutting workshop as a young man, but at 23 he became disillusioned by the material world and renounced it, including his family and profession. Three years later, he took a vow of almost complete silence and solitude, and set out to walk across [India](#) barefoot, living off alms, chanting, praying and translating Jain scripture from Sanskrit into Gujarati.

In 2000, he passed through Unjha, a town in Gujarat State, where Munishri Ajitchandrasagarji was a 10-year-old boy known as Ajay. The guru made such an impression on the boy that Ajay gained the blessing of his family to join the guru in his travels, and two years later he, too, began a life of itinerant solitude, meditation — and total recall.

Munishri Ajitchandrasagarji has committed more than 20,000 verses of Jain scripture to memory, the guru said, adding that in the privacy of the temple, he has been able to retain as many as 800 random items in order.

The monk does not see himself as specially endowed, or some kind of rare genius. “I have sacrificed everything, and that is why I can do this,” he said. “Anyone can do this, it is not a miracle. My message is this: When you know your own capacity, when you get rid of your distractions, the power of your mind is immense.”

Many followers of the Jain religion have been successful in Indian politics, science and business, particularly in the diamond industry. The recollection event on Sunday was financed by a private nonprofit group called the Saraswati Sadhna Research Foundation, using donations from a lengthy list of Jain benefactors. The foundation says that more than 14,000 children have received training in meditation at its centers, and that the goal is to reach a million children in the next 10 years.

Jainism is the smallest of India’s major organized religions, with around five million adherents. Some Jains revere gods and goddesses that Hindus also worship, including Saraswati, the embodiment of knowledge, creativity and intellectual enlightenment. Munishri Ajitchandrasagarji follows a knowledge recollection method centered on devotion to Saraswati.

A trustee at the foundation, Girish Shah, said that for India, a country whose education system is largely based on rote memorization, meditation is a way to strengthen the mind so that the hours students spend studying will pay off. “Memory, I.Q., concentration ability, interest in studying and moral upliftment will all increase with meditation,” Mr. Shah said. “It offers many practical advantages for young people.”

Four other young disciples of Munishri’s guru have also performed feats of recollection, but so far only 100 or 200 items. Munishri is working his way up to 1,000.