

# Peter Cooper: the investor who looked inward

[Damon Kitney](#)



[Fund manager Peter Cooper and his wife Suparna Bhasin, in Melbourne. Photo: The Rich List/Julian Kingma](#)

From [Business](#)

1 hour ago

12 minute read

The Art of Living International Centre is spread over 65 acres of flowering foliage, a peaceful lake and winding footpaths, just over 20km southwest of the bustling Indian city of Bangalore. Its stunning, lotus-shaped central building, a five-storey architectural

masterpiece with 81 pillars known as Vishalakshi Mantap, draws more than 1.2 million visitors every year for yoga and meditation programs.

It is named after the mother of spiritual teacher Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, who is to Vedic knowledge what the Dalai Lama is to Buddhism. Gurudev founded The Art of Living (AOL) in 1981 as an international educational and humanitarian organisation to revive, preserve and grow ancient Vedic knowledge traditions based on the oldest scriptures of Hinduism. On August 4 last year, he presided over a very special ceremony at the Bangalore Ashram: the marriage of Peter Cooper and Suparna Bhasin.

**Don't miss your copy of The List: Australia's Richest 250 on Friday, March 24, exclusively in The Australian.**

Cooper, the founder of famed funds management group Cooper Investors, rode into the ceremony on an elephant. His wife-to-be was dressed in a traditional red Indian sari.

There were 85 guests, including Peter's 90-year-old mother Fran and his 89-year-old father – also named Peter – plus his son from his first marriage, Dylan. He also has two daughters from that marriage, Bronte and Paris.

"It was very special to have somebody of Gurudev's stature and achievements," Cooper says. "He's been able to pull off an incredible feat around something that I've thought endlessly about. He has found the sweet spot that intersects the secular, the spiritual and philosophical worlds, so that they can operate in harmony and not in conflict. No small accomplishment in today's world.

"I have always been drawn to the pursuit of greater freedom and liberty. And a big part of that is the freedom of the mind, which is

what attracted me to Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's teachings. The Art of Living is about fostering human values, and is dedicated to creating a stress-free, violence-free society. And what I love is Sri Sri backs it up with do do, not just talky talky."



[Fund manager Peter Cooper and his wife Suparna Bhasin, in Melbourne. Photo: The Rich List/Julian Kingma](#)

For Cooper, the day capped a decade-long personal transformation that began when Bhasin introduced him to meditation, and the calmness and peace that can be found in a life that honours mind, body and spirit. They now spend around two hours together every morning from 6am, walking, swimming, practising yoga and meditation – including the Sudarshan Kriya, a rhythmic breathing technique that leads to a state of alert calmness and is the backbone of the Art of Living Happiness Program.

Cooper says that after 21 years of building Cooper Investors (CI) and now transitioning the firm to its next generation of leaders – a process he calls the CI Way 2.0 – the Art of Living has brought a centred, calm focus to his work life that had long been missing.



**Australia's best business newsletter.** Get the edge with AM and PM briefings, plus breaking news alerts in your inbox.

"My issues with work were around too much intensity, and expectations of myself," he says. "That led me to being impatient, overbearing at times, stressed, with poor sleep patterns and self-limiting behaviour. So I think Suparna has brought true equanimity into my life, and that makes the work of an investor much more effective and sustainable.

"That's been a huge help for me in terms of discerning what is important and what is not, making me a better business owner, investor, leader, father and husband.

"What excites me about Cooper Investors is that after 21 years in business, we have all the people and the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle on the table for a multi-generational investor organisation. That is no mean feat in a Darwinian sport like investment management. But that's still not good enough. I'm seriously excited about taking the CI Way 2.0 to the next level, which means the transfer of our tacit knowledge in a systematic way for the benefit of our clients and employees. The results, by which we live or die, will tell the story over the coming years, for which I can't wait."

CI now manages \$10 billion and for the past 21 years has been one of the best-performing fund managers in the nation. Its trademark has long been its so-called VoF investment process, which focuses on value latency and carefully evaluating operating industry/strategic trends and focused management behaviour in making investments.

Cooper and Bhasin met a few months before the September 11 terrorist attacks of 2001 – the year he started CI – on a stunning 100-acre pastoral campus nestled in the beautiful Berkshires of western Massachusetts. Over the decade their friendship developed,

and in May 2013, she invited Cooper to a dinner with 15 friends at an apartment in the hip neighbourhood of Williamsburg in Brooklyn, New York, that would change his life.

On his many trips to New York, as he built CI into a firm that now values his wealth at \$541 million, Cooper had been used to drinking beers and visiting wine bars and the occasional cigar den. Indeed, many outings in his life – from school fetes to boat trips and Friday night drinks – had involved alcohol as the lubricant for celebration.

This evening in New York felt very different. There was no alcohol or meat. On the menu were light snacks of vegetarian Indian food, fresh fruit and non-alcoholic drinks, including green tea. The entertainment was Indian Vedic music and chanting in an event known as a Satsang. He recalls it as an “incredible, memorable evening.”

“I remember the sweetness of it,” he says. “I was home in bed at 10pm. I just remember thinking in the cab ride home that it was one of those moments. I have never experienced such an enjoyable night out. I had a warm inner glow.”

The couple got together romantically a year later and Cooper proposed to Bhasin on the sidelines of one of the outer courts of Melbourne Park at the Australian Open tennis tournament in early February 2021. They don't eat meat or drink alcohol and they still love their tennis.

“The biggest change that I see in his whole life, especially at work but in general, is Peter finding his voice,” Bhasin says. “He now says: ‘This is what I stand for. These are my values – curiosity, humility, authenticity’, but behaves and sets boundaries in a way that honours those values. He's found his voice and an ability to stand up for himself in a non-angry way. I've seen that at home with very

intensely challenging family dynamics, but also at work, where he says 'This is actually who I am and this is acceptable or unacceptable according to my values'

"His love has been incredibly healing for me," she adds. "His love for me has made me feel very safe – both emotionally and financially – in a way that I can build myself up, go out in the world and give my greatest gifts. Let me really tell you why I married him. Not for his good looks, not for his money, even though those are good things. Those would not be anywhere close to enough if he did not have the commitment he has to becoming the best version of himself."

Suparna Bhasin was born in Cleveland, Ohio, on August 18, 1971. After an arranged marriage in India, her parents – Anand and Ranjana Bhasin – had moved to America in the 1960s. Bhasin jokes that there is actually a name for people like her: ABCDs, or American Born Confused Desis. A Desi is an Indian/South Asian person.

Her undergraduate education began at Emory University in Georgia. She progressed to Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, where she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations. She then worked as a trainer and manager for a large regional bank in Baltimore, Legg Mason, where she had the opportunity to explore what she was good at and for a time loved the inside of a very traditional firm.

But the breakdown of her first relationship in 1996 turned her world upside down. She cried for two months.

In September 1996, she was accepted into a Masters in Arts in Organisational Psychology program at Columbia University but delayed going there for a year when she was diagnosed with a mental health condition, hospitalised at John Hopkins Hospital and put on antidepressants.

To this day she believes she was misdiagnosed and it led her to seek alternative remedies, including SKY breathing and mantra-based meditation, as well as yoga and regular silence retreats – all led by The Art of Living.

She took a two-month leave of absence from work – just before the 9-11 attacks – to visit the Option Institute in Massachusetts, a training centre for personal growth and happiness. Being trained in the tools and technologies of The Option Process is intense. The course is six hours a day, five days a week for eight weeks straight. In June 2001, 50 people had enrolled: 40 women and 10 men, including Peter Cooper, whom Bhasin met for the first time. They were just passing acquaintances in the group but in the following years came to establish a significant spiritual connection.

While Cooper is best known for starting his investing career at NSW State Super before moving to BNP Paribas, Mercury Asset Management and Merrill Lynch, then starting Paradice Cooper with fellow investment legend David Paradice – part of which became Cooper Investors – little is known about his early years. He was born on August 25, 1959, and for three and a half years his family lived in the working class inner-city suburb of Brunswick in Melbourne, while his father worked as a prison guard at Pentridge jail. To this day CI's flagship fund is known as the Brunswick Fund. At Pentridge, Peter senior got to know warder George Hodson, who was famously shot dead outside the jail by inmate Ronald Ryan on December 19, 1965.

The family moved to Darwin for a time and then Pine Creek, a boom-to-bust outback town of 150 people known as the gold mining capital of the Northern Territory, where Peter senior ran a wild outback pub for many years. His son, who has one sister named Karen, later did his secondary schooling on the Gold Coast, and went

to university in Toowoomba and UNE in Armidale.

Peter senior had come to Australia from New Zealand with nothing after his family's fortune had evaporated with the demise of a firm started by his great great grandfather called F. Cooper Seeds, once a world leader in the production of seed peas and a supplier of agricultural chemicals to commercial and household growers.

"There's that saying that the first generation makes it, the second generation enjoys it and then the third generation blows it," Cooper says. "Cooper Seeds started in 1860. By 1970, it had 110 years of building an incredible global businesses. But nepotism and poor financial management saw it eventually sold in 1974 to arch rival Arthur Yates & Co for a pittance and there was basically no money left."

That tragic downfall has driven Cooper's financial conservatism and a burning desire to preserve wealth for the future, leading to the establishment of a Cooper family office. "We have the chance to innovate and explore ways to build an enduring stewardship family model," he says.

"I have been working my arse off for 40 years, without much of a break, nor boats, planes, Ferraris or Range Rovers. I still feel like Sisyphus pushing that boulder up the hill.

"I'm looking forward to the next 200 years of building a sustainable family business that incorporates social enterprise, not for profit philanthropy and ensuring that we – my children, Suparna and I – are responsible custodians and managers of the family assets and its activities. I am convinced we can make a valuable contribution, and if that doesn't work, give it away to people who can do a better job."

Cooper's passion for freedom and liberty has manifested in the focus



of the family philanthropic vehicle he has established with Bhasin known as the MaiTri Foundation. MaiTri is a Sanskrit word meaning loving kindness.

"We are going to be doing more philanthropy together aimed at leaving this world better than we found it," Bhasin says. "I never wanted to have children, but I do feel I'm here to mother the next generation so that we create a completely different world from the one we have right now. Because I think that's going to be required."

The \$20 million MaiTri Foundation has a dual focus: helping to solve the mental health crisis in the world; and spreading the philosophy of individual liberty and freedom. One of the most exciting projects it is supporting is The Art of Living's Intuition Process on brain activation, which teaches children and teenagers simple and powerful techniques to delve into the sixth sense known as intuition.

"There is a good quote that underpins my philosophy, and it really has come from many conversations with a good friend of mine, Dr. Evian Gordon," Cooper says. "If you can't align your thinking, rational mind with your non-conscious emotional brain, you are just walking around in the dark. You will continually be making the same mistakes that end in suffering. The intuition process is bringing a different type of intelligence to the way we live, the way we problem solve, the way we think. It is another type of intelligence. The freedom of mind not only solves problems, but it is also at the heart of creativity and innovation."

Cooper first saw the Intuition Process at work at a school in India at the Art of Living Ashram. "I saw children who were able to replicate drawings and read books with fully covered and blindfolded eyes. That deserves real attention and research to understand this phenomenon," he says.

Through The Art of Living, the Intuition Process was launched in 2015 for children who lived in the Bangalore Ashram where Cooper and Bhasin were married. The group is now working with several reputable scientific research institutions to explore how the Intuition Process affects anxiety, depression, academic performance and emotional regulation among school-aged children.

"Let's run the experiments in a rigorous way to fully understand what is happening here," Cooper says. "Then we can assess the educational infrastructure required to ensure it goes on a pathway of good and is not just seen as a magic bullet, which it is not." With support from the Cooper family office, led by Bhasin, The Art of Living will also support the teaching of Intuition Process courses in Sydney and Melbourne in 2023. They will be run by Mala Sundareshan, the Global Head of the Children teacher's program.

"We've got a lot of families whose kids are being introduced to this and we are looking to get an entree into some top schools in Melbourne," Bhasin says. "A documentary film is also being made.

"It is the unconscious mind, the rotting mind and the angry mind that is creating hell in the world. If we raise a generation of kids that have ultra-high integrity who would never think to hurt themselves, each other or the planet, that's the opportunity. They will be the future leaders of governments and corporations. The way they would imagine a world can be very different from the one we are living in."

**The 2023 edition of The List – Australia's Richest 250 is published on Friday in The Australian and online at [richest250.com.au](https://richest250.com.au)**

Columnist

Damon Kitney writes a column for The Weekend Australian telling the

human stories of business and wealth through interviews with the nation's top business people. He was previously the Victorian Business Editor ... [Read more](#)

## Topics

[richest 250](#)

## **No Comments**

You can now update the display or screen name associated with your Subscriber account. [Click here for details and guidelines.](#)

Reader comments on this site are moderated before publication to promote lively, but civil and respectful debate. We encourage your comments but submitting one does not guarantee publication. You can read our comment guidelines [here](#). If you believe a comment has been rejected in error, email [comments@theaustralian.com.au](mailto:comments@theaustralian.com.au) and we'll investigate. **Please ensure you include the email address you use to log in so we can locate your comment.**