

What is Enlightenment?

An inquiry into the most important spiritual questions of our time

Women, Enlightenment and the Divine Mother

Do Women Have the Inside Track on Spirituality?

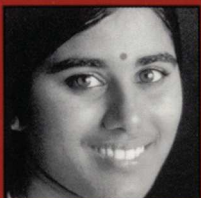
Featuring:



Vimala Thakar



Z. Budapest



Mother Meera



Anandamayi Ma

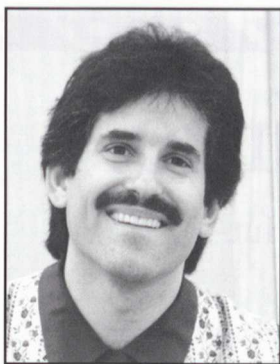


Georg Feuerstein

Elizabeth Debold

Arnaud Desjardins

Andrew Cohen



Andrew Cohen

SPIRITUAL TEACHER AND FOUNDER OF *What Is Enlightenment?* Andrew Cohen began teaching in 1986 after a spiritual realization transformed his life beyond recognition. Since that time the fire of his awakening has sparked a revolution in the hearts and minds of many people throughout the world. Andrew is outspoken in his questioning of many of the super-

stitious belief systems that are almost always associated with genuine Liberation teachings. This, coupled with his unwillingness to compromise in matters of the heart, has led to an original expression of a complete teaching that embraces both heaven and earth in a way that calls any who would hear it to question the definition of what is truly absolute. His teaching is modern in the sense that its reference point is the time that we are living in and yet its source is that unfathomable Mystery that never changes and always lies beyond the barriers of time and space.

Those who have been touched by Andrew's teachings have found themselves immersed in a profound recognition of their own true nature and propelled into a thrilling discovery of what it means to reach beyond all limitations. For many, this has been the catalyst for coming together in a way that transcends barriers of conflict and separation. In the past few years, communities dedicated to living these teachings have formed throughout the world, with a network of centers in North America, Europe, Israel and Australia. Andrew now travels extensively around the world every year, giving public talks and intensive retreats.

Andrew Cohen is the author of *The Challenge of Enlightenment, An Unconditional Relationship to Life, Enlightenment Is a Secret, Autobiography of an Awakening, My Master Is My Self* and the forthcoming *Freedom Has No History*.

Credits:

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"I have found and continue to find that there is so much confusion, misunderstanding and misinformation as to what enlightenment actually is and what it really means. That is why we publish this journal as a vehicle to present our ongoing investigation into this question, and to share our discoveries with those who are also interested in this vast and most subtle subject."

Andrew Cohen

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Dedicated to the discovery of what enlightenment is and what it really means

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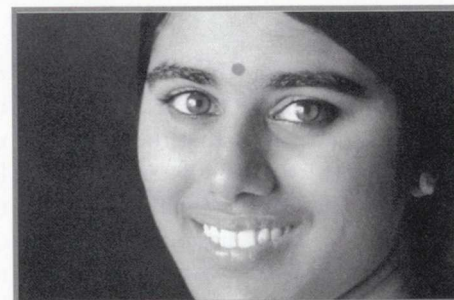
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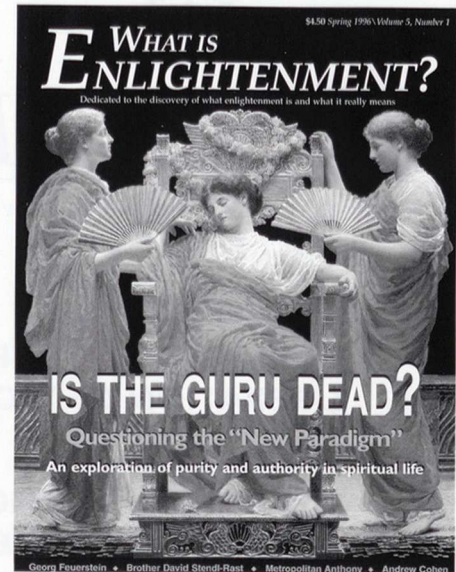
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Spring/Summer 1996

A MAN'S MAGAZINE

I FEEL IT WOULD BE HELPFUL to your readers to understand that the form of enlightenment you describe is a manifestation experienced mainly by men, which is why your magazine features articles about men who are sages, teachers and spiritual leaders. The popular and harmful misunderstanding is that men and women reach God in the same way, but that for some reason more men reach the ultimate union (enlightenment) than women. The truth is that women's path—more appropriately called “endarkenment”—is usually slightly different (not inferior), and is much less well understood, discussed or recognized in our culture. I'm sure there are many people who would appreciate clarification on the matter of women.

Caitlin Adair
Brattleboro, Vermont

YEP, IT IS A MAN'S MAGAZINE but that can't be helped. Men have to intellectualize before they draw information into their heart and soul. The female brain still retains a nubbin of the love that spoke directly to the gods. This makes the task of setting aside the ego

to allow the soul's intention to dominate much easier than for the male. As my Medicine Woman put it, “Sweat lodges are for the men. Women don't need it. Women don't need vision quests, either. It's easy for them to talk to Spirit.” I am a woman who thinks like a man, as I operate out of a high level of male energy, so I've always been interested in the “how to” aspects of the spiritual. I understand the truths in all your interviews and articles. They are neither provocative nor revolutionary. They are OLD NEWS. They all come with the territory of enlightenment. Why sensationalize? The irony is that it is impossible to verbalize the woman's way because the act of intellectualizing transforms it into the man's way. The source of wisdom and its quality are, in the end, identical, but the approach to opening to that source is quite different. Women leap directly into the place of no words—where vocabulary is inadequate—and they leave the experience there, they don't bother to drag it back into the place of intellectual analysis. Woman is apt to say, “Here, let me *show* you,” zap you into outer space, pull on the cord to reel you in when it's time to come back

and say, “See? Now, next time you can do it by yourself.” It doesn't translate well into a magazine article, now does it?

Eileen Novy
Sidney, British Columbia

CONGRATULATIONS

YOU WANT TO KNOW what your readers think of *What Is Enlightenment?* Well, I've just finished reading your last issue and I feel excited, moved, stirred and inspired. And I felt the same way after reading the issues before that. Speaking as someone who has been seriously studying spirituality for some thirty years, I think you are doing a wonderful job, and a tremendously important one. Best wishes.

Gordon Benson
Swansea, Wales

I WOULD LIKE TO take this opportunity to tell you how much I sincerely like *What Is Enlightenment?*. Frankly, it is the best spiritual magazine I have ever read. It deals in depth with the most important issues of our time—at least for those who have a sincere interest in spirituality. It manages to be both very serious and very pleasant to read. Your interview of Lee Lozowick [“Rock &

Roll, Crazy Wisdom and Slavery to the Divine," Summer 1995], and your account of your visit with the authors of *The Guru Papers* ["The Kramer Papers," Spring/Summer 1996], are models of excellent journalistic writing on subtle subjects. I also particularly liked Georg Feuerstein's piece, "The Guru in the Postmodern World" [Spring/Summer 1996]. I should tell you that praise does not fall easily from my lips. A writer by profession, I have published about a dozen books and conducted many interviews with all sorts of people, so I have some fairly high standards. But your articles have really impressed me, and it is a great joy for me to be able to give unqualified praise. I'll stop before your ankles inflate, as we say in France, but I really wanted to share my deep appreciation of your work. Please continue nourishing us with such good food for thought.

Gilles Farcet
La Voulte, France

IT KEEPS AMAZING ME how *What Is Enlightenment?* improves with each issue, especially the last three. It shows what intelligence, dedication and *hard work* can do. Your magazine is making an absolutely unique contribution to the spiritual world, and I wish you continuing success.

Bill Eilers
Rishikesh, India

I DROPPED BY A LOCAL BOOKSTORE and was impressed to see *What Is Enlightenment?* for sale. It was very SLICK. Somehow I'm not subscribed to it any more. I'll fix that when I get back from Tibet (lucky me).

Bob Bowman
Eugene, Oregon

IT'S QUITE AMAZING to find your site on the Internet. I would like to thank Andrew Cohen and all those who have been working to put out *What Is Enlightenment?*. It is a real gift, not only the teachings but also the autobiographical articles, and perhaps especially a gift to younger folks like me to be able to

read sincere and intimate accounts of various people's challenges. I feel graced by your honesty and directness, and by having certain traps of mind and understanding elucidated for me.

Tyee Bridge
via e-mail

SECULAR ENLIGHTENMENT

I JUST HAPPENED TO stumble across a copy of *What Is Enlightenment?* for the very first time. What a remarkable publication you have there—a delicious discovery. A quick question: I'm wondering if you have devoted any coverage to secular thinkers—those who define spirituality in wholly non-religious terms. The reason I ask? I'm currently involved in efforts to help elucidate a purely secular interpretation of what has generally been the remit of religious thinkers.

Nick Routledge
via e-mail

Editor's reply:

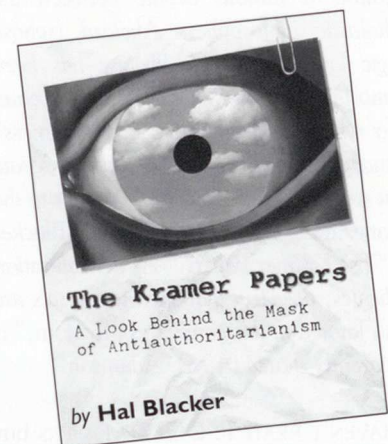
We are also interested in this fascinating subject. We hope to be able to devote an entire issue of *What Is Enlightenment?* to secular and scientific formulations of spiritual truths in the near future.

BLACKER VS. KRAMER

IN HIS INTRODUCTION to your last issue, Hal Blacker writes, "While the failures of so many modern spiritual teachers have undoubtedly contributed to the current mood of cynicism about purity and spiritual authority, we feel that the real root of this cynicism lies deeper in the human soul." This statement indicates a perhaps unconscious acquiescence to what antiauthoritarians such as Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad are saying. In many cases, these so-called "failures" are being judged as such by people like Kramer and Alstad who do not believe in the possibility of perfect enlightenment to begin with. The result is the application of scientific materialism to the actions of spiritual teachers. These "failures," if they exist, are only in the *samsaric*, physical-world activities of a handful of teachers, and

have nothing to do with whether the teachers are successful in advancing their students on the spiritual path. In fact, some of the teachers being attacked are among those *most* successful in advancing their students.

Briefly, I find the view expressed by the authors of *The Guru Papers*—that the ideal of selflessness is responsible for the mess the world is in today—astounding and fascinating. As soon as I read that "survival" was the basis of their morality, I knew that their premise was based on emotionality, with a veneer of intellectuality pasted on top. For example, Watergate and Contragate would both be sanctioned, not condemned, by the morality of "survival." However, I don't blame Mr. Blacker for not being able to counter every irrational concept on the spot,



since I myself am not particularly fast at discerning the holes in these kinds of arguments. But someone like Shankara would have made quick mincemeat of their point of view. Despite their claims of "oneness experiences," I don't think that Kramer and Alstad have had many of these, and they certainly don't understand the implications thereof, or the real philosophy behind, for example, Advaita Vedanta.

As for Andrew Harvey, there is some credibility in opposing something and then changing your mind, but there is no credibility in thinking someone was the savior of the world and then changing your mind, since in the second case one could just as

easily have been fooled when one changed one's mind.

Ken Stuart
via e-mail

IN REFERENCE TO your "interview" with Joel Kramer—the basis of your differences is as old as time. Go get a copy of Henry Adams's great book *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* and read the chapter entitled "Abelard." Read the entire book, for that matter. You will find that era to have a lot in common with our own. Namasté (a "Realist" greeting).

Victoria Adamson
Santa Teresa, New Mexico

Editor's note:

Henry Adams's *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* is a classic study of medieval history and thought. The chapter mentioned recounts a famous debate between the Scholastic philosophers Abelard (whose tragic love affair with Heloise has been immortalized) and William of Champeaux over whether universals such as "oneness" actually exist or are only concepts—a debate that was, at points, uncannily similar to the wranglings of Joel Kramer and Hal Blacker in "The Kramer Papers." As her salutation indicates, the view that such universals are real, known in this context as "Realism," is apparently shared by Ms. Adamson.

I HAVEN'T READ *THE GURU PAPERS* but I do see that the authors are right. Look, you have a very bad tooth. It hurts every time it is touched. That tooth is the "intellectual" understanding of "oneness." You have been giving yourself novocaine by associating with like-minded people who also have this "intellectual" understanding. Question: Is Hal Blacker trying to "save" Joel Kramer? In brotherhood, a fellow novocaine addict.

John Leaman
Napa, California

I WANT TO ACKNOWLEDGE your exposé, in the latest edition of *What Is Enlightenment?*, of Joel Kramer's severe confusion and its cynical effect on the cultivation of genuine spiritual under-

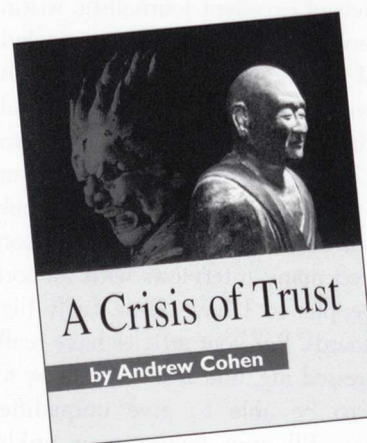
standing in our culture. I found your article courageous on two counts: 1) your honesty about your own vulnerability during the encounter with Kramer, and 2) your willingness to share your perceptions of the emotional imbalance around his point of view rather than just treating his ideas in an intellectual way. Yours is a much more whole treatment of the conflict than rendering it just as an argument of ideas. Are you aware of Ken Wilber's treatment of this topic of selfishness and selflessness, including a biting critique of Kramer's work, in his book *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*? Thank you again for your good work.

Eric A. Hornak
via e-mail

Editor's note:

In language idiomatic to the model of evolution outlined in his book *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, Ken Wilber writes: "The *Guru Papers* . . . is a quite typical example of a purely Descended approach claiming to have the Whole story. The authors mistake their ignorance of the Ascending current for a critique of all Ascending endeavors, and then interpret any challenge to their own divine egoism as being "authoritarian." Their effort is admirable when confined to the half of reality they admit, but it is an effort that remains, in its partialness, steeped in the violence and authoritarian dominance of *Descent*. Although [their approach] utterly lack[s] any depth, they make up for that in a type of fearless shallowness that confers great confidence on their reductive pronouncements and makes happy the hand of Thanatos that they so freely wave. The real lack of any Ascending current, any genuinely transformative interior disclosures, allows the bearers of [this] worldview to go on about their business fundamentally unchallenged in their divine egoism. There is no consciousness higher or deeper than their present state, only a different monological worldview that others should accept. So much for self-transformation. Their salvation is not a matter of transcendence in their own case, but in altering the views of others.

Hence the dominance inherent in *Descent*; hence the authoritarian stance claiming to combat authoritarianism; . . . hence the divine egoism coming to us as our glorious saviors, themselves already saved."



A CRISIS OF TRUST

I PURCHASED AND READ your magazine with great interest. As a practitioner of the venerable ancient path, I was surprised and somewhat taken aback by Andrew Cohen's allegations (unproved and undoubtedly second-hand) concerning the great spiritual master Baba Muktananda ["A Crisis of Trust," Spring/Summer 1996]. Sirs, Baba Muktananda, impeccable as he was, is well loved, revered and held in high awe and esteem by true men and women of yogic attainment everywhere, both in this world and above. It seems that the highest yogic platforms of profound love, respect and omniscience have yet to be experienced by Mr. Cohen. Had he true respect for others, the mere mention of Baba Muktananda's name would choke up his throat, bring torrents of tears to his eyes and overwhelm him with love, gratitude and awe.

Many who bow to a saint, offering him mind and body, consider the offering to be symbolic only, but the saint really does accept the offering and vows to shepherd the soul all the way home. This helps to explain why some promising spiritual teachers become more and more eccentric with the passage of time: the insanities, neuroses, obsessions, fixations, physical

ailments and *samskaras* [karmic traces] of the past lives of the aspirant come eventually to the self-proclaimed "guru," making him sick. How could anyone be so ungrateful to Trungpa (who was endorsed by the Karmapa himself) as to say so self-assuredly that he drank himself to death? Maybe so, but it was probably his disciples' impurities that killed him!

True Yogins, grateful for the gifts they've received from their Master, would never renounce their discipleship even on attaining guruhood. If Mr. Cohen wants to know the truth, he can know the tree by tasting the fruit—he should spend time with Gurumayi, Baba's disciple and successor.

J. Mateson
Oakland, California

I'D LIKE TO SUGGEST the addition of nonlinear, right-hemisphere paths of growing to *What Is Enlightenment?*'s comfort pattern with *jnan*, the path of knowledge. An artist who creates an object or a performance will very often leave an *imperfection* in his or her work. Anything "real" in this material world will have at least traces of human frailty and flaw. What better way than slightly "flawed" conduct might a great teacher have to winnow false disciples from those capable of continuing on the spiritual path to mutual co-enlightenment, than to impishly test our tendency to judgmentality? As Andrew Cohen writes in "A Crisis of Trust," "Indeed it is the divided condition of the human personality that has for so long created the endless cycle of conflict that has been and continues to be the crux of the spiritual dilemma of the race." May the thought be added: spiritual enlightenment at this stage is still not for everyone. A great spiritual teacher will almost always reserve certain teachings for those who have progressed past certain milestones. *Not* to withhold such secret teachings from the neophyte would be unkind and discouraging. Therefore a teacher with many, *perhaps too many*, followers may set split-level instruction after initiation.

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Retreat with Andrew Cohen

Rishikesh, India - February 8-23, 1997



Ten years ago in the sacred Indian city of Rishikesh Andrew Cohen first spoke about the powerful spiritual realization that was consuming his life. From this spark, the fire of a revolutionary teaching of Enlightenment was born. We are pleased to announce that Andrew Cohen will be returning to Rishikesh in February 1997 to lead his seventh annual India retreat. Every year hundreds of people come from around the world to immerse themselves in the transformative and liberating power of the enlightened perspective. The fourteen days of teachings, dialogues and meditation are an ecstatic occasion, alive with the discovery of our true nature and the recognition of an unimaginable possibility that can completely transform one's life.

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Boston
617-492-2848

www.andrewcohen.org

INTERNATIONAL TEACHING SCHEDULE 1996-1997

Sydney, Theosophical Society	August 31
Byron Bay	September 2
Sydney	September 6, 7
Sydney, One Day Retreat	September 8
Toronto	October 25, 26, 27
Boston	November 2, 3
New York, Theosophical Society . . .	November 8
New York	November 9
New York, One Day Retreat	November 10
London	January 11, 12, 1997
Paris	January 15
Amsterdam	January 18, 19
Cologne	January 24, 25, 26
India Retreat	February 8-23



INTRODUCTION

Towards the Spiritual Liberation of

WOMEN

TODAY, IN THE SPIRITUAL WORLD AT LARGE, the sacred feminine is growing in influence. Almost every spiritual bookstore has a section devoted to women's spirituality, celebrating the return of the Mother, the laughter of Aphrodite, and the immanent love and power of the Goddess. There is a widespread call for contact with the inner female, interest in female teachers who are seen as human embodiments of the Divine Mother, and much hope being placed in a potent constellation of associated spiritual, psychological, ecological and political ideas centered around women or femininity as divine.

Although Hollywood's view on witchcraft has evolved little between yesterday's *Rosemary's Baby* and today's *The Craft*, many people are taking prepatriarchal woman-centered religions like Wicca seriously as viable spiritual paths.

And why not? Goddess-centered religion is anything but new. Archaeologists point to the existence of matrifocal Goddess-worshipping societies as long ago as the neolithic era, or even earlier. The remains of their cities show peaceful civilizations that lasted millennia until their destruction by invading patriarchal tribes of warlike nomads around 5,000 years ago. The Goddess-worshipping people, some archaeologists believe, lived in harmony with nature and enjoyed material abundance, an equitable distribution of wealth, an absence of oppressive hierarchies, equality between men and women and a rich earth-centered spirituality that celebrated life, art, sex, pleasure, and the richness of creation.

In contrast, 5,000 years of patriarchal religion have bequeathed us a world where people are alienated from the earth and from each other, where spirituality is often linked with suffering and with escape from this world, where warfare and ecological destruction is a constant and where violence, aggression and the oppression of women and minorities seem to be the norm. Who can say that the sacralization of women, and the reestablishment of a woman-centered spirituality, might not serve us better?

Along with the view that woman-centered spirituality might be the answer to many of our problems goes the widespread belief that we should cultivate traits which are usually viewed as feminine. We desperately need, it is felt, more empathy, nonviolence, attunement to the rhythms of nature, love and connectedness with others if we wish to save our dying planet.

In many ways, the logic of this perspective seems compelling. But when seen in the context of enlightenment, important questions immediately arise. Can absolute truth really be identified with a particular gender? Isn't enlightenment a perspective that is nondual, and that is therefore beyond all limits or identity—even sexual identity? If so, what role does gender play in spirituality? Can one gender really have, in this arena, an advantage over the other?

For people who are serious about spiritual liberation, these questions are anything but academic. In our own case, in the mixed community of men and women who are students of spiritual teacher Andrew Cohen, we were compelled to investigate these questions very deeply by certain surprising discoveries that emerged about the female condition. This edition of *What Is Enlightenment?* came out of that investigation.

At first, like many people, we had assumed women as a group to be more spiritually inclined than men. In our community, initially women seemed to be able to more easily dissolve

the boundaries between themselves and others. Their devotion and wholehearted willingness to give of themselves was far greater than the men's. In contrast, the men as a group were often more selfish, and tended to be overly intellectual, competitive and sometimes aggressive. But over time, when men and women were challenged as equals to meet in an impersonal investigation of the truth, the women collectively demonstrated a shocking disinterest in going beyond the boundaries of the personal. As a result, we found to our surprise that the women seemed to have a much more difficult time meeting beyond all limitations in true love and intimacy.

How could we make sense of what we were seeing in light of our prior assumptions about the spirituality of women, and in light of the modern spiritual world's growing regard for the sacred feminine? And, in the public forum for inquiry that is *What Is Enlightenment?*, how could we open up such a subject without causing offense or misunderstanding?

Concerned about these matters, at one point while working on this edition of *What Is Enlightenment?*, I decided to call my sister. I was curious what she, a lesbian feminist artist, a practitioner of feminist spirituality and a Buddhist, would think of some of the more controversial discoveries we were making.

"One thing we have seen," I began to explain cautiously, "is that, compared to the men, when the women come up against obstacles or difficult things in themselves, they often have a hard time—"

"Being objective," she said, completing my sentence.

"Yes!" I exclaimed, relieved, and amazed that she had chosen the very same word that I would have used. "What makes you say that?"

"I've seen it in the 12-step groups I've been going to lately. In fact, that's why I stopped attending the all-women group that I began with, and now go only to mixed groups. The women often seem to get too personally involved in their emotions, and sometimes lack a kind of objectivity that men seem able to provide."

My sister's remarks were surprising, yet confirmed that what we were finding in our own experience was neither as esoteric as we had thought, nor confined to our community. Our surprise—and the certainty that we were on to something important—grew when we interviewed for this issue well-known feminist psychologist Elizabeth Debold and the extraordinary female spiritual teacher Vimala Thakar. Elizabeth Debold is an advisor to the Ms. Foundation and the best-selling coauthor of *Mother Daughter Revolution: From Good Girls to Great Women*. Vimala Thakar bears the distinction of being the only person whom the great J. Krishnamurti ever urged to teach (and he did so with great passion). She is an example of what real spiritual liberation for women can be. Both Vimala Thakar and Elizabeth Debold are strong, independent thinkers. Neither, by any stretch of the imagination, could be called a pawn of the patriarchy. Yet their personal experiences

and observations revealed aspects of female conditioning that are serious obstacles to spiritual freedom. And most of the obstacles they described to us were strikingly similar to what the women in our community were facing.

Then what about the sacred feminine? We widened our investigation, drawing from the experiences and insights of noted spiritual authors Georg Feuerstein and Daniel Roumanoff, and spiritual teachers Andrew Cohen and Arnaud Desjardins, who examine the phenomenon of female saints such as Anandamayi Ma and Mother Meera. Their articles raise fascinating questions about the nature of the attainment of women who are viewed as *avatars*, or human incarnations, of the Divine Mother.

To understand more deeply the popularity of Goddess spirituality in the West, we interviewed Wiccan high priestess Zsuzsanna Budapest, known as the mother of the feminist spirituality movement and the woman who coined its very name. Our conversation with her is a provocative exploration of the insights, and the possible limitations, of this perspective.

This edition of *What Is Enlightenment?* is concerned, as always, with the nature of spiritual liberation. But in this issue enlightenment is explored in the context of the spiritual emancipation of women. And in order to understand and further women's spiritual liberation, we look into the unique obstacles that women face on the spiritual path.

We know that some people might feel that to discuss female conditioning or to question the sacred feminine is harsh or offensive in a world where women are still generally denied their birthright of being treated as equals to men. But when the goal is real spiritual emancipation this investigation appears in a different light. If the spiritual emancipation of women is the point, shouldn't every aspect of female conditioning that obstructs liberation be the subject of a passionate inquiry? And if enlightenment is a perspective that is unbounded, shouldn't its identification with a particular gender be questioned as potentially limited?

We feel that this kind of investigation is necessary, because spiritual liberation for women is so important, not only for women but for humanity as a whole. Like the proponents of views that sacralize the feminine, we want to see women spiritually and socially liberated. We want to see women who, like Vimala Thakar, are strong, enlightened, independent leaders. But in our view, this will not come about by mythologizing women (or men) or by elevating one gender over another. It will only happen by being willing to face any limiting conditioning that may exist. Ultimately, it is only through an investigation that pierces the veil of all limited or fixed ideas of self and other, even those as seemingly fundamental as gender, that spiritual freedom for women—and for humanity as a whole—will have the potential of becoming a living reality.

Hal Blacker

Liberation without a F Is Total Rev

by Andrew Cohen

IN THE TIME WE ARE LIVING IN, we have so often been told that the opposites within us must unite, that the male and the female must come together inwardly and outwardly to merge as one, and in so doing dissolve in emptiness, in the realization of nonduality. Who would argue with this? But the question is, in our desire for this union with ourselves, are we too easily satisfied merely spending our time in the separative stages of only reaching for that union? Are we satisfied simply with the knowledge that we intend to go beyond opposites rather than actually succeeding in doing so for more than just a few brief moments?

It is possible to step directly beyond opposites thereby bypassing the entire process of unification. The following piece describes that possibility.

The absolute is only the absolute. Truth has no gender. It has no name and has no face. That's why it is a mystery and that's why it will always be a mystery. A mystery so profound that through the mere contemplation of its absolute nature the individual comes face to face with his or her own nonexistence as form, thought or even feeling. A mystery so profound that its true revelation strikes fear in the hearts of any and all who would not and could not dare to embrace the ultimate fact of nonduality.

If the individual possesses that pure intention that empowers them to respond to the longing for transcendence with fearless abandon, then woman ceases to be woman and man ceases to be man. If the truth absolute has no face how can we, once we have discovered that fact, claim to have a name or a face, identify ourselves with being a woman or a man? If

indeed we are able to find the courage to abandon all notions of self, thereby making room for that indescribable mystery to reveal itself unobstructed by concept, then the fact of gender will in no way hinder or distort the full and complete expression and manifestation of that mystery as Self. Then a woman is able to be a woman freely and fully, thoroughly unpreoccupied with that fact of her own human existence. And a man is able to be a man freely and fully, thoroughly unpreoccupied with that fact of his own human existence. This is the whole point. For liberation means not only freedom from fear and delusion, but also freedom from all fixed notions of self. For our humanity—that means our womanhood or manhood—to be able to manifest and express itself freely, wholeheartedly and without inhibition, an unthinkable leap must be taken. It is imperative that the individual become so identified

face olution

with the ultimate and unfathomable mystery of their own existence that any and all notions of self, including gender distinctions, are abandoned as significant reference points. Only then can a truly faceless liberation occur.

Liberation without a face does not in any way avoid or deny the fact of our humanity, of our gender, of our differences. In fact, liberation without a face allows our humanity, our gender, our differences to manifest and express themselves without inhibition precisely because we have dared to allow the fact of difference to become absolutely irrelevant. This demands tremendous courage, for living in this way without fixed reference points as a safe refuge forces a state of unbroken and unselfconscious humanity to manifest and express itself as it ultimately and truly is, which is FREE. Free and

truly liberated only because the fact of difference is no longer in any way an essential issue to be distracted by. Finally liberated from the ceaseless distraction and fascination with difference, we can constantly realize and freely be who we are, as woman, as man, without fear, free from the need to assert the significance of difference over the ultimate fact of truth.

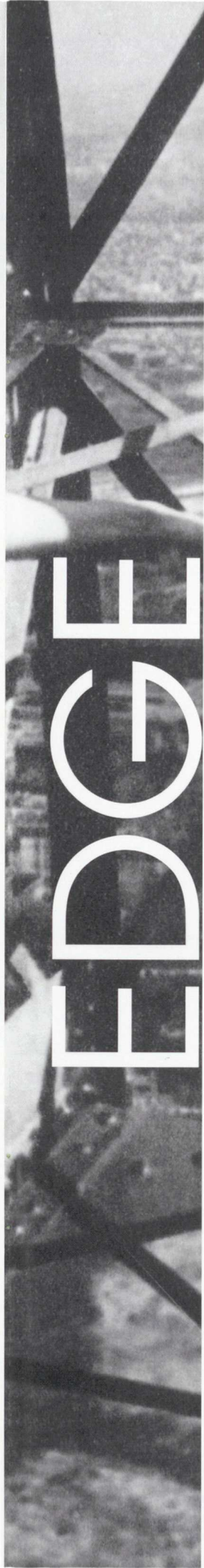
This liberation is profound because inherent in it is the end of conflict, the end of the battle of domination and submission, the end of the other. Liberation without a face is revolutionary by its nature because it demands absolute and total submission—submission of any and all fascination and identification with ideas of self, including those of gender, that in any way would be permitted to transcend the significance of the nondual fact of our nature.

IN TEN YEARS OF TEACHING the miracle of liberation I have learned a lot about the human condition. The most challenging matter for the seeker of enlightenment is learning what it means to be nobody. Many think they want to be enlightened but actually without realizing it they only aspire to be better people. Better means powerful, wise, compassionate, fearless. To be enlightened means that the very center falls away and we find ourselves standing nowhere in the middle of everything with nothing to hold on to—including power, wisdom, compassion and courage.

How many women have I seen who claimed they wanted to be free while at the same time tenaciously holding on to the idea of being a saint or a good person, deeply terrified of being nobody? How many men have I seen who thought they wanted to be enlightened, but who so obviously had infinitely more interest in power and knowledge than in emptiness?

It's not possible to be nobody as long as we insist on being somebody. ■





DANCING ON THE

A Feminist Speaks Candidly about Women and Liberation

"Part of the paradox of spiritual life is a movement beyond the boundary between self and other, beyond this apparent reality of boundedness. This requires one to fully shoulder, alone, an enormous amount of responsibility that can take one outside of conventional social relationships, and that kind of risk is something that women have been acculturated to fear, sometimes almost more than the loss of a limb."

An interview with Elizabeth Debold

by Simeon Alev

DANCING ON THE

EDGE



Elizabeth Debold

BEST KNOWN AS ONE OF THE COAUTHORS of *Mother Daughter Revolution: From Good Girls to Great Women*, Elizabeth Debold is a psychologist, a consultant to the Ms. Foundation, and a member of the Harvard Project on Women's Psychology and Girls' Development, a groundbreaking research project inspired and supervised by Harvard psychologist Carol Gilligan (recently cited by Time magazine as one of America's twenty-five most influential people). Published in 1993, *Mother Daughter Revolution* was cowritten with Marie Wilson and Idelisse Malave, respectively the President and the former Vice President

of the Ms. Foundation, and was announced to the world by both Gloria Steinem and Carol Gilligan as "the book women have been waiting for." Steinem wrote that it describes "the potential for a powerful new relationship between mothers and daughters which could change the relationship between all women and girls." *Mother Daughter Revolution* quickly became a best-seller and inspired mothers and daughters all over North America to come together in groups in order to explore its implications both for themselves and for women in general as female citizens of a male-dominated culture. Translations and special editions have since been published in Holland, Germany, Italy, Spain and Australia.

But Elizabeth Debold is not only a psychologist, a feminist and an author; she is also a spiritual practitioner. I first met her several years ago at the end of a silent ten-day Vipassana meditation retreat, and since that time we've engaged in many interesting discussions pertaining both to women's issues and to spiritual matters. When it was decided that this issue of *What Is Enlightenment?* would be devoted to exploring the nature and significance of spiritual liberation for women, I was naturally curious to know how she felt her two primary fields of study—women's psychology and spiritual life—corresponded or diverged, and what her research had revealed about the promises and perils of the spiritual path for female seekers. Elizabeth graciously agreed to an interview, and soon after we began our conversation it became apparent that we had embarked on a fascinating and far-reaching investigation, raising and delving into questions that spiritually interested individuals of both sexes would find compelling and provocative. Elizabeth's refreshing honesty and vulnerability, as well as her breadth of experience and discerning intellect, are evident throughout.

Our conversation was conducted by telephone from her home in New York City, where she is hard at work on her next book.

Photography by Simeon Alev

WHAT IS ENLIGHTENMENT?: *Let's begin with a summary of the Harvard project and its findings.*

ELIZABETH DEBOLD: The Harvard Project was formed around the work of Carol Gilligan to address the question, "What happens to make women the way they are?" Actually, up until that time there had been no real answer to that question within standard developmental psychology. In psychology all major theories of development—intellectual development, ego development, moral development, Freud's theories—were all based on samples of men or boys, particularly white privileged boys who occupy a certain space, as we all know, within our social structure or society. Within standard developmental theory, "the way women are" had always been defined as less than, not as good as, deviant from, a male norm. Carol Gilligan began to hear what she called "a

different voice" in women's moral development that placed a priority on relationship, and found *that* as the ground of morality, rather than a movement towards higher levels of abstraction, which was the criterion for moral development that modern developmental theory was based on.

One of the early projects involved listening to girls in adolescence because that's a key age at which moral questioning, as well as questioning of self, takes place. Gilligan said that she heard something in what the young women were saying that suggested that they knew far more than they were able to act on, which then led us somewhat serendipitously to the Laurel School in Cleveland where Lyn Brown, as project director, started a study of girls between the ages of seven and seventeen. And in that work and related work since then, work including more girls of color, poor girls,

"**G**IRLS BEFORE ADOLESCENCE
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INTEGRATED."



working-class girls, we have basically heard that what happens as girls move into adolescence (particularly middle-class white girls) is that they come into contact with the divisions that exist within the culture—between male and female, between mind and body. And they begin to internalize or incorporate a way of being that is associated with moral goodness that comes out of constructs of the “good woman” created in the eighteenth century. So our work has involved looking at that transition moment and being really deeply surprised by what we hear from young girls: the strength, the clarity, and the ability to hold together a lot of things that are then split apart in adolescence for girls and women and also within the culture as a whole.

WIE: *What you’re describing seems to be a transition from a condition of wholeness or undividedness to a condition characterized by a set of behaviors which we could refer to as “women’s conditioning.”*

ED: Right.

WIE: *Could you describe some of those behaviors, those conditioned behaviors?*

ED: First of all, a caveat, which is that it would be foolish to think that girls before adolescence are uncultured or perfectly whole or as they would be if they grew up, say, in a bottle. But girls before adolescence are able to hold together—they speak and know and exist from an integrated body/mind. They approach things from their senses, their being, in a way that is much more integrated. They are also capable of engaging in conflict, which they see as one of the *good* parts about relationship. What I’m saying now will be clearer when I begin to speak about women’s conditioning. Girls can more easily see what is obvious and visible—that people are different, that that leads to differences in perspective, that those differences in perspective are bound to lead toward disagreement and that positively engaged disagreement is one of the best ways to get to know someone else. They’re also vibrant, and when in adolescence and adulthood that vibrancy is translated into sexuality, the quality of that life force that girls have becomes minimized. Girls don’t judge themselves from outside themselves the way women do. They tend to be very grounded in their own sensory experience.

And what happens in that transition—or what happens after that transition for middle-class white women particularly—is that at about age ten or eleven we hear girls beginning to talk about this other girl, this perfect girl that they wish they could be like, and this perfect girl is a summary of, or a compendium of, or sort

of a younger version of what in Victorian times would have been called “the angel in the house,” the good wife. She’s attractive, she’s pretty—pretty is probably the better word—she’s neat, she’s obedient, she’s selfless. She puts aside her feelings of assertion, need, want and desire for the sake of other people, particularly for family members, both in the family that she ultimately creates (because that’s her destiny and her chief desire in life) and in her childhood family—her mother, her father, her siblings in the family where she’s a girl. What happens is that as girls move through adolescence they trade a self for an idealized goodness based on selflessness.

WIE: *An idea that seems to emerge very clearly from your research is that the psychological condition of women is a reflection of social and political aspects of our culture which all women come up against in one way or another. Although technically your research is psychological, do you have a perspective on this whole situation that could also be described as feminist?*

ED: I consider myself a feminist developmental psychologist, meaning that rather than looking at the personal individual, what my colleagues and I are looking at is the relationship between the individual and a cultural system that is oppressive to women, from the point of view of women’s development. As a feminist psychologist looking at male development, I bring the same concerns and the same perspective, but girls and young women move through an encounter with patriarchal culture that splits them psychologically along a number of dimensions. It takes them away from the world they have lived in, which is a world of women and girls, and says, “Your alignment now in order to find relationship has to be with men or else you will be considered deviant.” As a young woman, you suddenly find yourself in a place—your own body—that is vulnerable to objectification. You now have looks; you’re now looked at in ways that are often very frightening, and you have to manage your body in a very complicated way in order to be able to not attract too much attention and yet attract enough to be able to have relationships. So all of what happens to girls as they become women we understand—I understand—within the context of patriarchy.

WIE: *And that’s what makes your perspective a feminist perspective?*

ED: Yes, basically the recognition that patriarchy is a set of power relations which as a psychologist I see as thwarting men and women but which works in such a

way that the more apparent accommodations need to be made by women.

WIE: *Reading your book, I was very moved by the introductions you and your coauthors wrote because they gave me a very clear sense of the personal experiences each of you have gone through which compel you to do the work that you do. I'd like to be able to understand your spiritual practice in the same way.*

ED: I think that my spiritual practice is to listen to a part of myself that is outside myself—outside the self that is psychologically constructed—and to follow that; and what that has led me to is a couple of different forms of meditation. The one that I've been engaged with most recently is Vipassana meditation as taught by S.N. Goenka. Someone was asking me questions about it recently, "What kind of Buddhism is it?" and that kind of thing, but my focus is not to engage in meditation as an intellectual activity, so if it's Theravada rather than Mahayana that's something I just happen to know. It's not something that I'm studying or that I think of as an intellectual pursuit. I have enough of that already.

WIE: *But it's a Buddhist practice?*

ED: Basically yes, because from what I know and can experience, it seems that the Buddha—although certainly there have been other people—articulated things that I think make deeper sense than others.

WIE: *What personal experiences or, possibly, concerns about your own condition or the human condition, motivated you to become involved in spiritual life in the first place?*

ED: I had a fairly clarifying moment when I was about seventeen. I had a poetry-writing assignment for my eleventh-grade English class—I guess I was sixteen going on seventeen—and typically, for a variety of reasons, part of it having to do with growing up in a small house with too many people in it and having no space, I put it off. And probably at around one o'clock in the morning I was sitting on the floor by the dining room table, hiding from my mother because if she knew I was up and

working she'd be pissed off at me. But in just sitting there and looking for some small space in the house that wasn't crowded with stuff and "peopleness," I had a moment—I don't even know how long it was—outside of time. It could be called a spiritual moment, in which, as I explained it to people afterwards, it seemed that all the compartments in my mind were pulled apart. But it was beyond even that. It wasn't simply that

"THE PERFECT GIRL is a younger version of 'the angel in the house,' the good wife. She's pretty, she's neat, she's obedient, she puts aside her feelings of assertion, need, want and desire for the sake of



OTHER PEOPLE."

things blended together and synthesized, but that for just a short period of time I went beyond time, went beyond myself.

To bring it back to the realm of experience is of course what the mind immediately does with something like that, but it wasn't that kind of an experience, and afterwards it set me off in two parallel directions. One was to say, "Huh, what is it about writing poetry that does that to someone?"—because I had no other context within which to put this. And the other—since I had been raised as a Catholic—was to kind of listen in a different way to what Christ was saying. And I found that the translation of that into practice, particularly within organized Christianity, was so much like the game of telephone. Even though he was saying things that seemed to be profound, they seemed not quite right, or badly translated. But I found that this experience (although looking at my life outwardly it may have seemed like a peripheral thing) became the core of a quest. "What *was* that? What was that experience? What will help me to understand it?" And there was also an incredible craving to find it again . . . which is great—one of the tricks.

So I read a lot about writing and about people who write and I found that Rilke had said some extraordinary things about something that would happen to him that felt similar. Also, for example, Verlaine and Baudelaire, the Symbolist poets, who had looked for ways to distort their sensory apparatus to the point of being able to engage with that. And then somehow simultaneously, I think, because I was also interested in physics and math—and having read Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* as a girl—I found it really compelling that we could create equations and put time in the equation. That was always intriguing to me. What would that mean if you really thought about it? So that led me to Werner Heisenberg and what he wrote after he had been stunned by his own theorizing of the Uncertainty Principle.

WIE: *You mean the implications of it hit him in a—*

ED: In a very profound way—very, very profound—so that he did a series of writings on, I believe, Hindu theology. He said, "Huh, there are other cosmologies that have attempted to describe what it is that I have come to see as physical reality," and that became another way of pursuing the kind of thing that I was looking for.

WIE: *I'm also curious about anything that you saw in light of the experience you had, about yourself or about human life as it's lived, that ultimately motivated you to*

engage in spiritual practice. The work that you do as a psychologist and as a feminist is a response to certain cultural and sociopolitical realities of life that you see all around you; I'm wondering if the motivation to pursue spiritual life is also a reflection of some fundamental recognition about the way people live versus the way they ought to live.

ED: The more clarity I have, the easier it is to see how I personally have been conditioned as well as to see how others have been. So the path towards finding a practice or finding some way to work spiritually has been as instrumental as psychology and feminism in helping me to reckon with who I am as well as with how women are. And I think that in all of this my mother played a big part. Her conditioning, the pain that she lived with in her life, was so extraordinary because of fears that were grounded somewhat in socioeconomic reality but were even more deeply grounded in her root sense of herself. Meaning that were she to admit that her relationship with my father was not good—which was clear to her and to everyone—make a public declaration of that and defy her church by divorcing him or leaving him or something like that, then she would be a *bad woman*, and the threat of being a bad woman was so intense and so horrifying to her that it seemed better to her to stay in something that felt every day like lead in her veins. Growing up with that, and with her deep desire that I escape it in ways that *she* understood, and also with my own genuine desire for freedom—those things all worked together so that in her home I had a moment, a time out of time, of freedom. So wanting to remove all of that has always been my desire.

WIE: *You feel, then, that your spiritual interest fits more or less with your responsibilities as a feminist. Is there any way in which it conflicts?*

ED: It depends on how you define feminism and/or psychology. I think it's good work. I think it's really good work. And I think that my spiritual practice and my feminism inform each other and that particularly my spiritual practice is informed by feminism because it enables me to not be deluded by aspects of women's lives that are often idealized.

WIE: *Idealized by the culture?*

ED: By the culture, yes—and by women.

WIE: *Is there any reason to think that spiritual interest and feminism represent very different ways of perceiving human life?*

ED: I think that uncovering, bringing greater awareness to forms of oppression is still, within a personal realm, something that is an aspect of liberation, of spiritual practice or spiritual pursuit. Feminism, in looking to eliminate or, let's say, go beyond gendered oppression and the gendering of identity, is, within the personal realm, a social manifestation of something that I would say is a spiritual practice.

“**G**IRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN move through an encounter with patriarchal culture that splits them psychologically along a number of

DIMENSIONS.”



WIE: *That leads me to wonder if, judging from your studies and also from your own personal experience, you feel that women have any special advantages in pursuing the spiritual quest.*

ED: “Special advantages” implies a comparison with men.

WIE: *Yes, that's true.*

ED: O.K. Do I know from my research and my experience that women have, particularly within this culture, an enormous attraction to spiritual pursuits, a desire to embody goodness on a variety of dimensions, morally, spiritually? Yes. Outside of the fundamentalist tradi-

tions, there are far more women in this country who meditate, who are drawn to those kinds of practices, than there are men—I mean, that's a fact. It has to do with the way that being a woman, being a feminine subject, is constructed in our society—that it is related to goodness, particularly, again, among middle-class white women. And therein lies the rub: For so many women, goodness is about safety. It is a core piece of identity which is unexamined and which it is psychologically devastating to question. This is what makes really deep spiritual pursuit—a questioning of motives, a questioning of who we are and how we shape ourselves in venal ways—very complicated for women, and very difficult for women to engage in without, sometimes, a

real emotional devastation. Not that that's at all bad, in fact—but the threat of that or the edge of that can often be a reason for turning away.

WIE: *Are you saying then that women's intense interest in spirituality—which may initially look like an advantage—could actually, because of what's motivating that interest, be more of an obstacle than an advantage?*

ED: Right, because the goodness that many women construct their lives around is based on an act of self-preservation, and in that act of self-preservation you've subverted the spiritual goal.

WIE: *And this desire to be good is a prime motive or a very frequent motivation for women who engage in spiritual pursuits?*

ED: My hunch would be yes. Do I have data on that? No. But to bring myself into this—I'm not standing and judging this from a distance—I was working with a man named Shyam Bhatnagar at a time in my life, my mid-twenties, when all I wanted was to surrender (to use a term that I wouldn't have used myself, but it's a good term even if under the circumstances I may use it a little cynically). All I wanted was to give myself up to doing good works in the world and sort of go and knock over Mother Teresa and take her place. And I'm saying it that way intentionally: then I'd be *better* than she was, right? You know, I wanted to give up my ego, my self, whatever, all that stuff, and this man said to me, "You can't give up what you don't have." And I was shocked! "What does he mean by that?" And then sort of in a parallel track I was in a complicated relationship and in therapy and wondering what was going on and suddenly I got a glimpse of how true it was that, yes, I *didn't* have a clearly defined ego or self to give up, because it was all sort of cotton-wadded by this desire to do for others that was actually a self-motivation. There was actually motivation from within myself to create myself as good and beyond reproach, but there was something to it that was contaminated—worse than contaminated.

WIE: *Maybe that was the ego.*

ED: Yes, well, it was, but what Bhatnagar was saying was that until you can own that and play in it and feel that fully, you can't give it up, you can't transcend it—and that I had sneaky ways of manifesting ego that looked egoless.

WIE: *The way I hear what he was saying is that "owning" that is the willingness to face it in yourself.*

ED: Yes.

WIE: *Perhaps recognizing it as ego. And then—*

ED: And then you can do the real work. But you have to do that first. You can't say, "No, no, no, after you. No, no, no,"—you know—"what can I do for you?" as a way of being egoless, because it's a cop-out.

WIE: *So it's a matter of seeing what you're actually up to.*

ED: Yes. Yes.

WIE: *Is this what you were describing earlier as conditioned female behavior which is the result of certain oppressive social, political and cultural conditions?*

ED: Yes.

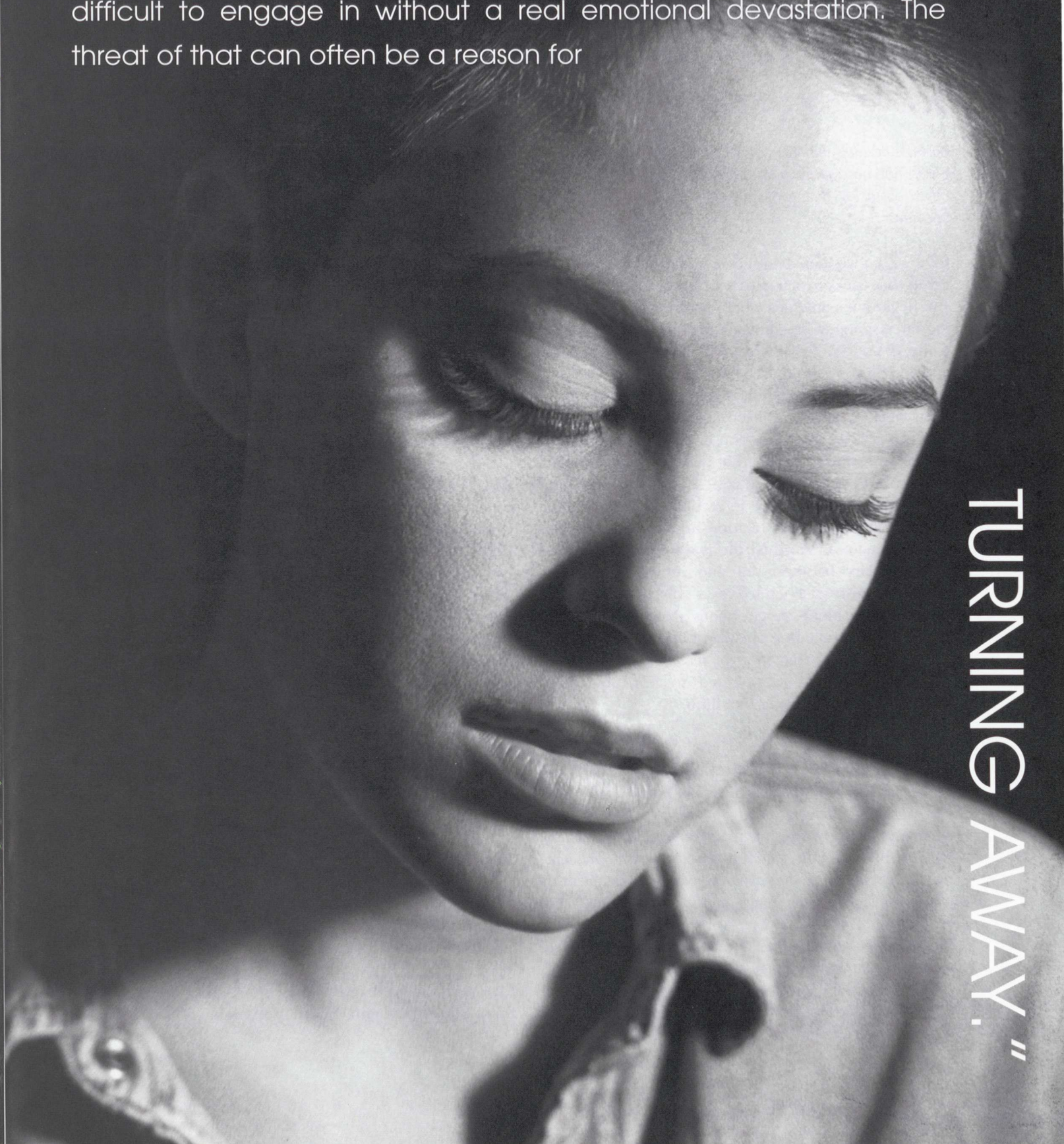
WIE: *And yet what's being suggested in the somewhat more rigorous spiritual context which you've just described is that you have to face that as a choice that you made—for whatever reasons.*

ED: Yes, and that as an adult you make choices continually, you know, day to day, moment to moment. And that when faced with all of that it is only the self, and often only the *nice* parts of the self, that you're really comfortable with.

WIE: *We've already spoken about this goodness, this cultivated goodness as, on the one hand, an advantage because it manifests as spiritual interest and, on the other, as an*

“FOR SO MANY WOMEN, goodness is about safety. It is a core piece of identity which is unexamined. This is what makes really deep spiritual pursuit—a questioning of motives, a questioning of who we are and how we shape ourselves in venal ways—very difficult to engage in without a real emotional devastation. The threat of that can often be a reason for

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“**T**HE GOODNESS that many women construct their lives around is based on an act of self-preservation, and in that act of self-preservation you’ve subverted the spiritual

obstacle because the motivation of that interest is not necessarily pure. Are there any other obstacles that women in particular encounter?

ED: Well, I wonder about risk-avoidance, given that the spiritual path is one where you never have any idea where your next footfall is going to be—I mean metaphorically, of course. You put your foot down and you drop, you’re in free fall. *You don’t know.* Whereas this goodness that we’ve been speaking about has been shaped out of a fear of loss, disconnection and risk at a very early age. So in connection with that I wonder about women; because our psyches, our selves—I use the terms “self,” “ego” and “psyche” fairly interchangeably—are more created within personal relationship; and because part of the paradox of spiritual life is a movement beyond the boundary between self and other, beyond this apparent reality of boundedness. This requires one to fully shoulder, alone, an enormous amount of responsibility that can take one outside of conventional social relationships, and that kind of risk is something that women have been acculturated to fear, sometimes almost more than the loss of a limb.

WIE: *You’re speaking in a very inspiring way about spiritual life as kind of a journey away from, or out of, or transcendent of, the apparent reality of boundedness. And I’m wondering, having asked you earlier about possible differences between, say, a feminist perspective and a spiritual perspective, if a feminist perspective isn’t in some ways a description of that apparent reality of boundedness which would be seen through in the spiritual experience or the spiritual vision. In other words, relative to authentic spiritual revelation, isn’t the feminist critique of social reality, no matter how progressive, bound to be limited?*

ED: I don’t know. I think that if you were really to take

feminism to its ultimate conclusion it wouldn’t be, but in the way that it operates within social reality, yes.

WIE: *Is that the context for the work that you do?*

ED: My goal is to help people find ways of thinking about themselves that remove limits. And the ultimate limits are about that bounded reality.

WIE: *As long as we’re on the subject of removing limits, do you think it makes sense to talk about the spiritual path as being different for women than for men? Do you think that the ultimate goal of spirituality is different for women than it is for men?*

ED: I would *hope* not. I mean, that would make no sense. But do I think, because we are socialized, because our psyches are formed within culture so differently, that there may be different stumblings on the path that may be patterned male and female? Yes, that is likely. That, you know, is very likely. But is the ultimate goal the same? Oh, absolutely. And would the practice of realization be the same? Yes. Might it be *experienced* differently by male and female—let’s say, when translated back into male and female experience? Yes.

WIE: *When translated back?*

ED: Meaning that masculinity and femininity are, in some ways, systems of meaning-making that often cohere as a self. So that having an experience of immanence, transcendence, whatever word you want to use—of boundlessness—and then losing that as we all-too-often do—what that experience means, what it’s about, how you interpret it, where it takes you, may be, on a mundane level, different. Once you come back into a more mundane experience of reality, how do you interpret that? What do you do next? How do you think about it? The question of what to do, I think, may then be twisted differently. The spiritual urge may be twisted, distorted differently by masculine and feminine personalities.

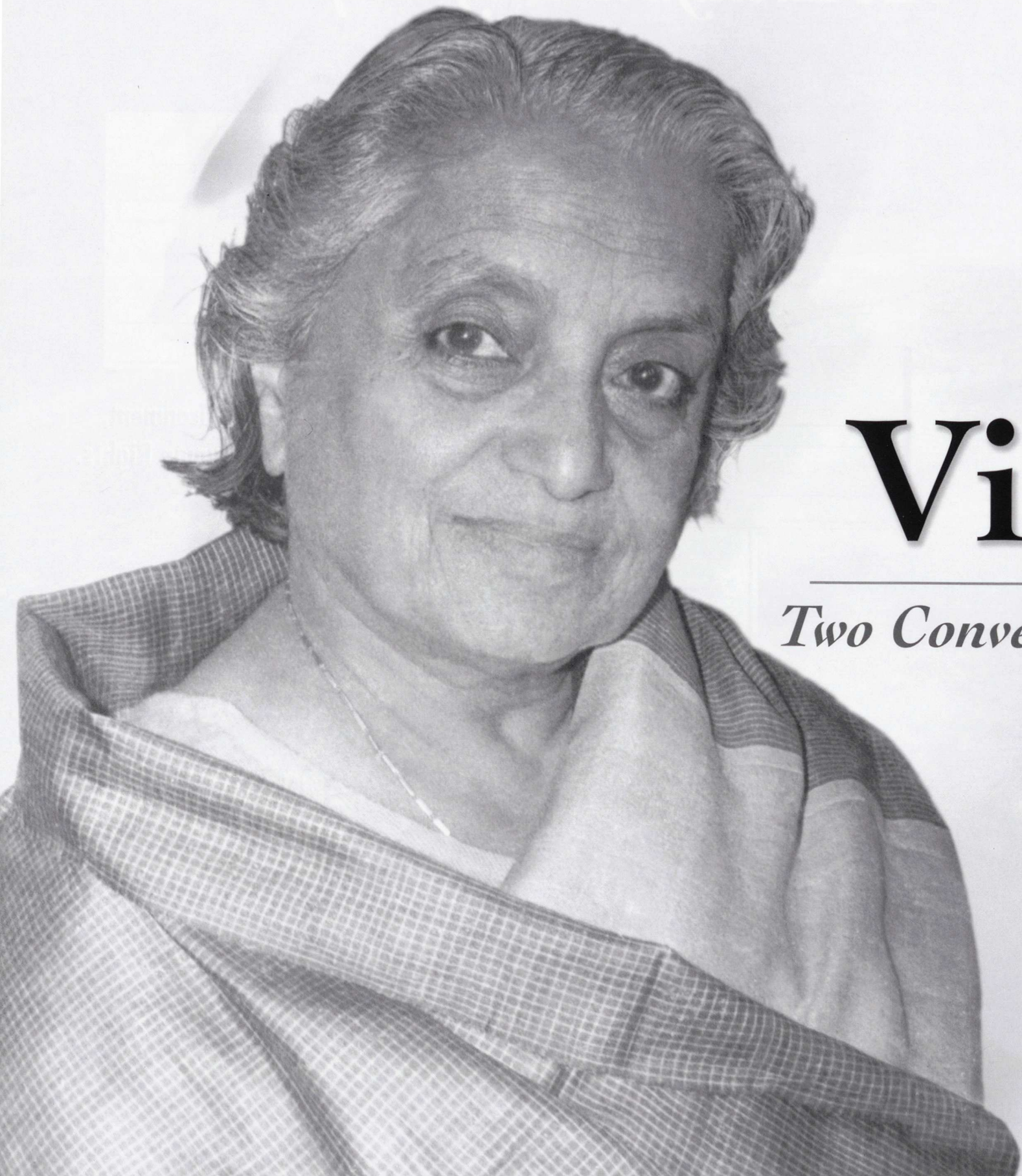
WIE: *But as far as the ultimate goal is concerned—*

ED: It would have to be the same.

WIE: *From your point of view, what best explains the fact that men who have pioneered revolutionary expressions of spirituality have far outnumbered women who have done so?*

ED: You have to consider the cultures that they came from. Since the eighteenth century, women have been

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AT A TIME WHEN WOMEN ARE STRUGGLING TO BREAK FREE of the limitations of both their inner psychological conditioning and their socially mandated roles, Vimala Thakar is a living example of the potential for an extraordinary spiritual liberation for women. "Since childhood the Unknown has haunted me," she writes in *On an Eternal Voyage*, an account of her meeting with J. Krishnamurti—a meeting which unexpectedly resulted in the death of her career as a leading social activist in the Indian Land-gift Movement, and her rebirth, at Krishnamurti's passionate urging, as a teacher of the inner revolution of awakening.

In January 1996, Chris Parish and Shanti Adams, two students of Andrew Cohen, had the opportunity to speak with Vimala Thakar at her home in Mt. Abu, Rajasthan, India. Their conversations with her provide both an inspiring portrait of a woman whose awakening transcends all boundaries of gender, and a provocative exploration of the challenges women must face on the road to spiritual freedom.

vimala Thakar

Conversations with an Extraordinary Woman

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ANANDA, IF WOMEN had not obtained the Going Forth from the house life into homelessness in the Law and Discipline declared by the Perfect One, the Holy Life would have lasted Long, the Holy Life would have lasted a thousand years. But now, since women have obtained it, the Holy Life will last only five hundred years. Just as when the blight called gray mildew falls on a field of ripening rice, that field of ripening rice does not last long—so too in the Law and Discipline in which women obtain the Going Forth, the Holy Life does not last long.

—Pali Canon, Vinaya, ii. x.



Linda Horvitz Post

The Challenge *of* EMPTINESS

Vimala Thakar on the Spiritual Emancipation of Women

by Shanti Adams

When I first read these words, attributed to none other than the Buddha himself, I remember my blood momentarily freezing as a ripple of fear went through me. It was as if I had uncovered some ancient curse. However, my mind quickly came to the rescue with a volley of rationalizations, rescuing me from that moment of acute existential insecurity. "It must have been the time, ancient India, a cultural prejudice. Perhaps women then, as now in India, were regarded as inferior, unfit for any role other than wife and mother," I thought. "Or maybe the Buddha felt that the introduction of women into the *sangha*, the spiritual community, would create the temptation to indulge in sexuality, which could distract, even destroy, the monks' single-pointed commitment to Liberation." These and similar thoughts fairly successfully assuaged my panic. However, because the Buddha ranked in my mind as one of those rarest of rare human beings, an individual of unparalleled wisdom and purity whose enlightenment was doubtless, I could never quite shake off a subtle uneasiness about the whole matter.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, this experience was my first introduction to the question of women's conditioning. Does it exist as separate or different from that of men? And is it by its very nature more inherently antithetical to the principle of nonduality, and therefore more difficult to transcend, than other forms of conditioning common to humanity? For the last twenty years, in fact up until fairly recently, my own response to these questions was definitely, "No. Liberation is not a matter of gender." Of this I was sure. However, having spent the

last ten years of my life living in a mixed community, or *sangha*, of people who have dedicated their lives to the realization and manifestation of the truth—a spiritual community where the depth and strength of one's realization is ultimately revealed by one's actions alone—I have been forced to seriously question my assumptions and to look more deeply. As a result of this, what has actually emerged over the years is a number of very distinct differences, at the most fundamental level, between male and female conditioning.

At first, women proved themselves again and again to be more generous, selfless and giving in practical matters. In contrast, the men generally seemed to be more selfish in this arena. But over time we discovered that men, although often tending to be overly intellectual and out of touch with their feelings, seemed to have an easier time facing themselves, even their more serious faults, with dispassion and objectivity. Indeed, to our surprise we found that women, when faced with their shortcomings, found it extremely difficult to renounce emotionalism and self-justification; they seemed to have greater difficulty looking starkly at things. Men, while initially having to wrestle with their deeply ingrained competitiveness, were able, once they broke through this obstacle, to come together in profound love and trust. Women, although conventionally considered to be more oriented towards loving relationships than men, on a deeper level, we discovered, found it much harder to trust in a way that would allow true love and communion beyond the personal to occur. Over time, the men seemed more easily able to put personal concerns aside and, together,

soar into a thrilling investigation and exploration of the unknown. Women, on the other hand, often found themselves stubbornly anchored to the personal, unable and unwilling to let go in such a way that would allow them to fly beyond the familiar into uncharted realms where identification with the personal had to be left behind.

As these discoveries of the differences between male and female conditioning appeared over and over again, I began to have the eerie feeling that perhaps the Buddha's prophecy about the effect of women on the dharma, the teaching, might be true. Why is it that women, who seem to have an innate ability to more easily express and give love, appear to have greater difficulty than men facing into the impersonal and absolute nature of reality, into emptiness? Why is it that men, who seem to be more self-centered and fearful of emotional vulnerability, appear to be able, given the right conditions, to transcend the personal in a way that makes possible a profound coming together in emptiness?

When the opportunity arose to speak to Vimala Thakar, an enlightened woman renowned for her wisdom, strength and independence, I knew that I had to ask her if she had ever encountered in herself or in her students any of the deeply rooted aspects of women's conditioning that my sisters and I were struggling with. To my surprise, in our far-reaching conversation, Vimala Thakar confirmed almost every one of our disturbing discoveries; yet, by the power of her extraordinary example, she demonstrated that it was possible, beyond any doubt, to utterly transcend and go beyond them.

Introduction



SHANTI ADAMS:

This morning I would like to talk with you about women in relationship to spiritual liberation.

In the course of the last ten years I have been part of a community of men and women who are students of spiritual teacher Andrew Cohen. We have been trying to live, together in a mixed community, what we have learned through being with him and through practicing and studying his teaching. Initially, the people who joined this community did not attach any particular importance to being either male or female. Speaking for myself, I was never drawn to women's movements. I was just interested in the truth. I'm not a feminist and I'm not an antifeminist either. I have no doubt that real freedom transcends nationality, transcends religious bias and also transcends gender.

At first there didn't seem to be any particular differences in our community between male and female conditioning when it came to spiritual practice or liberation. But over time, deep differences between male and female conditioning seem to have emerged. And this doesn't seem to be just an individual matter; each sex as a group seems to have its own distinct conditioning.

Let me give you an example. Really trying to live these teachings requires an ability to observe

one's conditioning, habits, and tendencies clearly—or objectively—and to actually transcend them or be free of them. One thing that is beginning to emerge is that women often have difficulty with that kind of objectivity. For example, when a tendency or habit is revealed, women often take it more personally and in some cases will initially be defensive. They tend to feel hurt and they seem to have more difficulty than the men not being distracted by their emotional response to what has been seen. The men don't seem to get quite so distracted by their fear or their pride, and they seem to be more interested in just looking objectively at whatever it is that they may be facing. This tendency to take things personally, and therefore to defend themselves, seems to be something that the women in particular are coming up against.

VIMALA THAKAR: The objectification of the inner psychological life is extremely difficult for women.

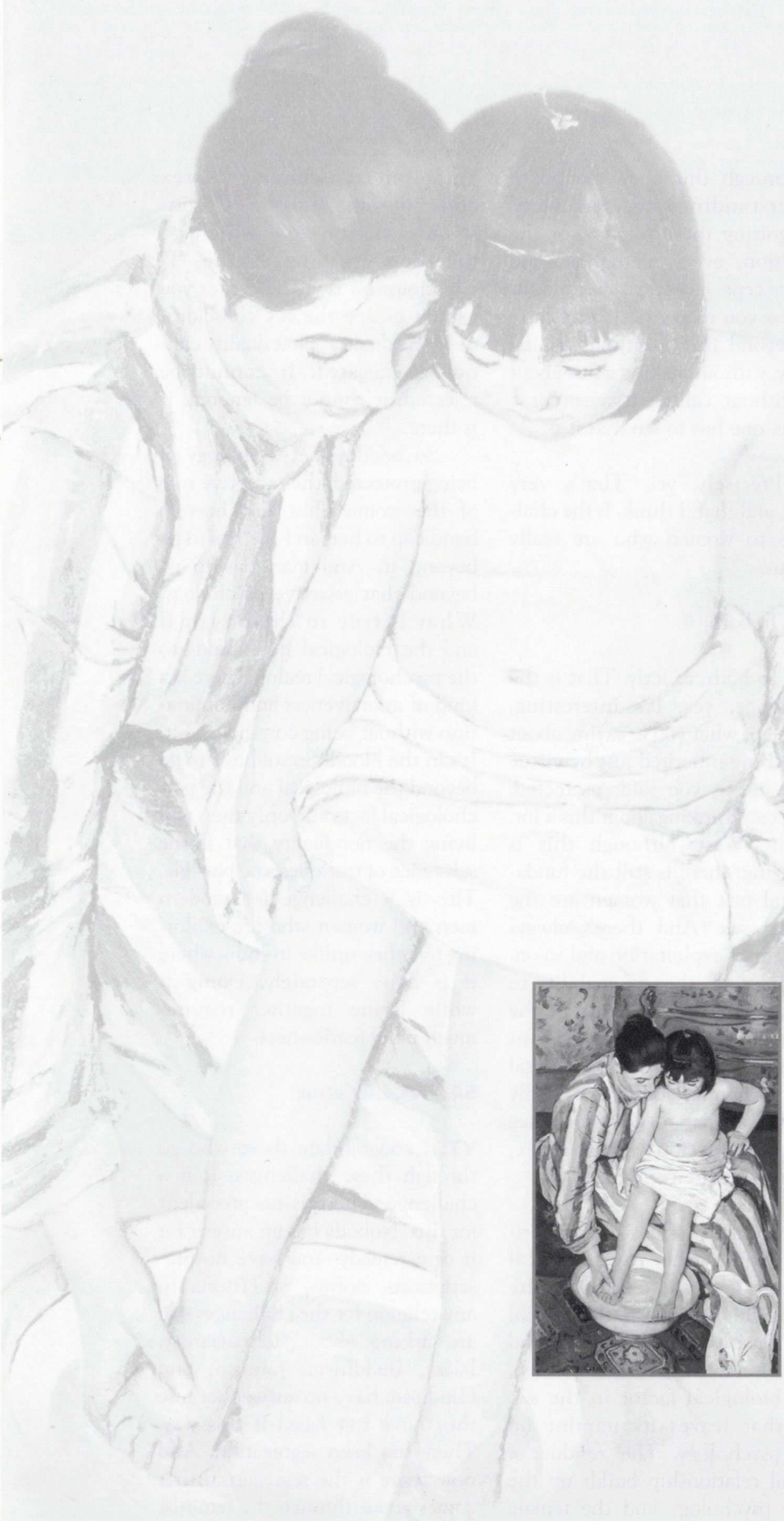
Woman has had a role to play in human history. She has been the wife, the mother, the sister, protected by others, especially by men. In India the Hindu religion says woman is always to be protected—in childhood by the father, in young age by the husband, and in old age by her son. It is said that she does not deserve freedom. That is the basic principle. And I feel that perhaps in other countries also she has had only one role to play. It is a secondary role, protected by the male, and she did not require

objectivity. As a subjective person she always has to react. Man has to act, man has to earn; she has to take care. In this secondary role, she never lived for herself as a human being. She lived for the parents, for the husband, for the children, for the family. The family institution has survived at the cost of woman. So the inner freedom of objectifying her own emotions or perceiving the situation entirely objectively is very difficult for women, very difficult. And man finds it easy, objectification. But it is very difficult for men to transcend their egos. Woman, through emotional strength and emotional integrity can go beyond the ego easier than man. Man can objectify more quickly and easier than woman.

There are certain limitations because of the role that man and woman have played in human history and civilization. The woman immediately withdraws into her own shell to protect her emotions, her reactions, everything.

SA: Yes, I recognize that.

VT: In India women have been prescribed the yoga of devotion, *bhakti* yoga. In identifying with a god, a goddess, an idol, or a guru, all the emotional strength and vitality is consumed so it doesn't trouble her in other human relationships. But that is not so all over the world. And in many places man and woman live together, which rarely happens in India. Even in ashrams in India men and women live separately. They come together only for



"As a subjective person

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prayers and for meditation in the presence of the teacher. But visiting each others' rooms and discussing things together—the kind of thing that takes place in other countries—has not yet come to India. So in India they may not have the problem you describe.

In your situation, men and women are on an equal footing. They are trying to understand the teachings and live together. So they will have to go through their different conditionings, conditionings that are not consciously adopted, but are inherited.

It is so true, you are so correct when you say that women withdraw into psychological isolation very easily. They feel that they can protect their feelings, their observations, that way. And that's a defect because that withdrawal, that retiring or retreating into their shell, prevents them from assimilating the essence of the teachings. They have to accept the world, they have to accept whatever happens in their interactions and be there.

SA: Yes, exactly.

VT: They will have to face attachment also. Without the context of the family, with men and women living together, the biological phenomena of attraction and repulsion are there. You cannot ignore or deny it. So that attraction or repulsion gets expressed in relationship. Like-minded people have come together, and their quest is the same, but after all they are human animals. The animality is there, the instinctive part is still there. It has to be transcended through meditation, but that duality is there. So woman and man have to

go through this phenomenon of understanding the attraction, recognizing the attraction or the repulsion, even infatuation, and not accept it but go beyond it. Unless you recognize it you can't go beyond it. So without feeling guilty, without making a fuss about it, without calling it a sin or a crime, one has to see it as it is.

SA: Precisely, yes. That's very clear, and that, I think, is the challenge to women who are really serious.

VT: To both.

SA: To both, exactly. That is the challenge, yes. It's interesting, Vimalaji, what you're saying about something inherited just by virtue of being, as you said, protected. I've been thinking about this a lot. In the West, although this is changing, there is still the fundamental fact that women are the weaker sex. And there's always this fear of exploitation and so on. I wonder whether an inability to trust, in the biggest sense of the word, has come from this. By trust I mean here a very fundamental trust in life, an ability to actually let go in order to be able to see things clearly for what they are, and not instinctively to defend.

VT: Shanti, besides the inheritance part, the psychological inheritance part, look at the biological factor. In the sexual relationship woman receives and man asserts. This cannot change, this biological factor in the sex life that leaves its imprint on the psychology. The residue of sexual relationship builds up the male psychology and the female psychology, unless one educates

oneself in transcending the sex consciousness and the "I" consciousness, the ego, which go together. As long as the "I" consciousness is at the center you cannot escape the sex consciousness, the duality. That duality cannot be negated. It cannot be rejected, it cannot be ignored, it is there.

So besides the psychology of being protected, the receptive role of the woman has also been a handicap to her, and she has to go beyond it. And man has to go beyond that assertive psychology. What is true in the physical and the biological he extends to the psychological realm. There is a kind of assertiveness and domination without being conscious of it. It's in the blood. So we have to go beyond the biological and the psychological facts and only then will living the nonduality that is the substance of truth become possible. This is a challenge for modern men and women who are exploring together, unlike in India where it is done separately. Doing it while living together requires much more fearlessness.

SA: Yes, that's true.

VT: I congratulate those who go through these challenges. It is a challenge. There is no precedent for this. Nobody has an answer for it or a remedy. You have no prescriptions, norms, or criteria in any religion for the challenges you are asking about. Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism have no answer because they have not faced it this way. There has been segregation. And now there is the segregation that comes about through the feminist movement. So when you say you

"Who will stand up

against all this and assert
the humanness concealed
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are neither feminist nor anti-feminist I feel very happy.

All the truths have not been verbalized. The last word in spirituality has not yet been said. Truth is infinite and there is hope for humanity because the human potential is inexhaustible. People will find remedies to these challenges, ways to meet these challenges.

SA: What you're saying about it is very helpful, Vimalaji.

VT: I have seen the difficulties of women in the West, in Europe, in America and in Australia. I have met them. And they do not understand the harsh biological realities, the roles that they have had to play, the scars and scratches and the residue of memory that were left behind, which inhibit the psychology. They have to be conscious of it, recognize it and go beyond it.

SA: Yes, that seems to be the answer, becoming conscious of it. The recognition of it has to precede going beyond it. I think that's why we are trying to open this up. Because we are beginning to see that there are limitations here that seem very deep, almost instinctive. They need to be penetrated in order for us to go further.

VT: Perception of bondage is the beginning of freedom.

SA: I'm very thrilled to meet you, Vimalaji, because it seems to me that there are very few women teachers like yourself who are teaching real liberation in the world. I haven't met many. I've met more men, such as Krishnamurti and Sri Nisargadatta

Maharaj. It seems that most of the women figures who are leaders in the arena of spirituality are kind of Divine Mother figures, and that's very different. They're apparently teaching unconditional love through the expression of who they are, in a sense. But there does not seem to be a real teaching of liberation there. So it's very inspiring for me to meet someone like yourself who has actually transcended the conditioning that we are speaking about. It seems to me to be unusual.

VT: My dear, it is unusual because, for example in India, Hinduism says woman can never be liberated in a woman's body. If she behaves, if she follows bhakti yoga, then she may be born again in a male body and then she will be liberated. Buddhists and Jains also never accept that a woman in a woman's body can be emancipated. Nor do the Catholics accept it. So at best a woman becomes a mother figure, such as Anandamayi Ma, or this figure or that figure. And she teaches as the Mother, not as an emancipated person.

Shall I tell you something? I was visiting Los Angeles in 1968 and I was staying at Ramakrishna Mission. I was asked to give a talk to the inmates of the ashram but they said, "You cannot speak in the chapel because you are a woman. Only *sannyasins* [monks] can speak there, and a woman cannot be a *sannyasin*." The Swamiji there was Swami Prabhavananda, who was a very powerful swami. He wrote books along with Christopher Isherwood on the Bhagavad Gita, and commentaries on the Gita. He knew J. Krishnamurti, and so on. He was

a very fine person. I said to him, "Swamiji, excuse me. Will you please remove the photographs of Sarada Devi, Ramakrishna's wife, from the chapel?" There were two photographs there. So I said, "Since you tell me that I cannot give an address in this chapel, I will not give an address. But, will you please remove those photographs?"

Even in Ramakrishna Mission there is a differentiation. So who will stand up against all this and assert the humanness concealed in woman's body, the divinity concealed in woman's body, and demand equality on that level—not just on the physical and psychological levels?

So it is unusual. But let us be thankful that it has happened here.

SA: Yes.

VT: It is something in the orbit of human consciousness. Whether it happens there or here is immaterial. But it *can* happen.

This person has been hurt in many ways by the ancient Hindu authorities. When I wanted to study the Vedas, the Brahma Sutras, in Varanasi, I went with folded hands to the authorities on the Vedas and they said, "No, a woman should not study the Vedas. What have you to do with the Vedas and the Brahma Sutras?" they said. "No, we won't teach you." "Alright," I said, "I will study by myself."

For a woman to be unconditionally and totally emancipated is something unacceptable at least to the Indian consciousness, and maybe to the non-Indian consciousness also. This differentiation has to go. There is differentiation that has to do with the

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take to meditation. They take to devotion, bhakti yoga. They can take to service, seva yoga, or karma yoga. But not meditation, dhyana, samadhi. Consciously, intellectually they understand everything, because regarding the brilliance of the brain there is no distinction such as male and female. But psychologically, at the core of their being is this fear. And that fear has to be dispelled."



body, with different kinds of limitations. But that doesn't mean that woman is not entitled to liberation.

I am so glad that you are talking about this and that you are looking at the issue in this way. This challenge has to be met. Not aggressively—you don't have to fight for it, you have to work for it.

SA: Yes, I feel that very strongly because I've experienced within myself the very conditioning that we are talking about. And I can see that unless I can recognize this very deeply within myself I cannot transcend it. So I feel this is very important. I feel that it's up to women individually to meet the challenge of being a woman and all the conditioning, as you were saying, that is biological, hereditary, psychological and so on. I think that's what you mean by working for it, earning it.

VT: Have you discussed these matters with your teacher?

SA: Very much so. He's incredibly observant and very passionately interested in each person's liberation. And initially he had no concept of any differences between the conditioning of men and women. But then over time he was actually the first person to recognize in his female students what he called female pride.

VT: Oh yes, oh yes!

SA: So he was the first person to really get us to start looking at that ourselves. He's very interested in this, and he's also very concerned that his female students really meet this challenge. Because some of them are not interested. There

is quite a lot of denial still going on among some of his students. But in others there is the recognition that there is something that we need to meet, to understand, to penetrate, in order to be free. There is an awakening to the fact that, as women, to really be able to live what we understand we need to come to terms with this. He's encouraging all of us individually to really have the fire and the fearlessness and the humility to actually recognize this and to take it on.

VT: How nice.

SA: We were speaking earlier about women seeming to have a bit more difficulty than men being objective and impersonal. When things about themselves are pointed out to them, they often take it personally and defend themselves at first, taking time to come around to accepting what has been revealed, and then overcoming or transcending it. There sometimes seems to be an almost innate visceral response of defending, of protecting, of surviving and maintaining that operates in women. The reason I am saying this is because while I know that men have tendencies they have to face—male traits such as selfishness, aggression and even cowardice have been revealed in our investigation—the men do seem to be able to more easily accept the impersonality of their condition. They do not seem so proud or defensive about these negative tendencies. I was wondering whether underneath their defensiveness women have a deeper fear of nonexistence, a deeper existential insecurity or fear of emptiness, than men.

VT: Nothingness, nobodyness, emptiness—even the intellectual understanding of this frightens women. It frightens women! At the depth of our being there is fear because of our physical vulnerability, because of our secondary role in human civilization. It is in the subconscious, not in the consciousness. On a subconscious level there is fear. If I get converted into or if I mature into non-duality, into nothingness, into nobodyness, what will happen to my physical existence? Will it be more vulnerable? Will I be able to defend myself in case of difficulty, in case of some attack against me? That is a basic fear among women.

So women very rarely take to meditation. They take to devotion, to bhakti yoga. They can take to service, *seva* yoga or karma yoga. But not meditation, *dhyana*, *samadhi*. Consciously, intellectually they understand everything, because regarding the brilliance of the brain there is no distinction such as male and female. But psychologically, at the core of their being is this fear. And that fear has to be dispelled. Woman has to understand that nobodyness or nothingness, the emptiness of consciousness in *samadhi* or meditation, generates a different kind of energy and awareness which is more protective than self-conscious defensiveness. When woman appreciates that, when she understands that, then this fear will be dispelled. Otherwise it is very natural for a woman to feel frightened even by the idea of nothingness.

SA: It's amazing, Vimalaji. Everything you say rings perfectly true to our experience. The areas women excel in are exactly what

you have said—in service they are very strong, they give everything to help and to support. Physically and emotionally they are very, very giving. They will give everything and work very hard, very selflessly. So it's very interesting what you say about women being naturally inclined to devotion and to service because that is exactly what is happening in our community. And yet on the other hand, as we have been saying, to really engage with meditation in the truest sense, to really let go into being nobody—many women are unwilling to do that.

VT: There is a subconscious resistance.

SA: Yes, exactly.

VT: They don't find any resistance on the conscious level. They will say, "No, we do not resist," and they are being honest. And yet at the deeper level of their being there is an un verbalized resistance.

SA: Exactly. That is exactly what is happening.

VT: That has to be perceived. That has to be recognized. Perhaps if the women recognized the resistance at the subconscious level, it might disappear, it might dissolve.

SA: Yes, that seems to be the only possibility. And I think some of us are just beginning to recognize that. I know, for myself, for many years my teacher pointed this out, and I said no. Because consciously I accepted and was thrilled by the idea of being nobody, by the concept of freedom that that means. But now I'm

beginning to see that subconsciously there is a resistance which needs to be completely met in order to be truly free.

VT: To allow the divinity or the absolute truth to use your body, your brain, your mind for the service of humanity is one thing. "I want to serve and I get pleasure out of that service. I'm serving so and so, the cause or the individual." There is pleasure in that. But to let go of that pleasure and allow the truth to shape your life, to mold it, to give it a direction and to use it for the cosmic purpose, requires tremendous fearlessness. And very few are willing to let go of the last noble pleasure for that.

It's a noble pleasure to serve. You're offering service and you're offering your life and here is someone who says, "No. Not that, not the conscious service, the 'I' doing the service. No, not the 'I' devoting itself. You are again creating a different field for the survival of limitations. Let it go." Then the resistance comes, the inhibitions come. Women begin to suffer. They don't like it if you point it out, even on a conscious level. They hear it, but they don't receive it. It doesn't go in because of the subconscious resistance.

SA: Yes, that's absolutely true.

VT: Oh, yes. One has seen it happening. One has seen it happen in people around you. The emptiness, the nobodiness, as you have rightly put it—that frightens them. Me doing the service, me giving, me working; that is O.K. Yes, we are dealing with the crux of the issue here. Hitting the nail on the head. Such merciless perception of truth, merciless analysis

of the subjective world, is very rare to come across. People find it unbearable. Even the verbalization is unbearable to some.

SA: Yes, definitely.

VT: One has to go very slow. That during our first visit we could do that together is an exceptional occurrence. So I have to congratulate your teacher.

SA: Thank you.

VT: Thank you for raising these questions. You are the first person in the last ten years to raise these questions. Non-Indians come to me from at least twenty countries here. Women come from many different nations and discuss with me the problems of women in modern Western culture, but not the question you have raised this morning. It is from a very deep level that this question has come. I'm glad about it.

SA: Thank you. It's been a fabulous opportunity to explore this together.

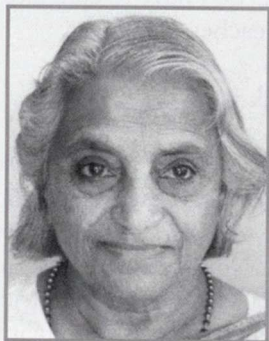
VT: For both of us to share. Life is fulfilled in sharing. Not only meals and clothes and money, but when you share your flesh and blood then there is a rare fulfillment.

It takes two to have a conversation, a dialogue. One person can't do it. ■

Shanti Adams is a student of Andrew Cohen living in London, England. Her previous contribution to What Is Enlightenment?, "The Long and Winding Road" [July 1994], describes her many years as a spiritual seeker in India.

"SET THEM *on* *FIRE!*"

A Portrait of a Modern Sage



Vimala Thakar

"I AM A SIMPLE PERSON, a human being who has loved life and who has seen life as divinity itself. I have lived in love with life, madly in love with the human expression of life as divinity!"

Her voice is deep and confident, ringing with an underlying passion. She enunciates each word very clearly and without hesitation, giving the impression of a person who meets life head-on, someone who is unapologetically and fully present. Her eyes are soft and fearless. She sits on the edge of her seat, alert and leaning towards us, dressed in a clean, crisp, white sari. Immovably still, she has an undeniable power, yet she is in a flash gentle and gracious as she serves us tea.

This is our introduction to Vimala Thakar, the well-known spiritual figure, who traveled the world teaching for over thirty years. I have eagerly awaited this moment, the chance to talk to and interview this unusual woman. I heard her speak once in London twenty years ago and her words left a lasting impression on me. It was my recollection of her integrity and understanding that made me recently resolve to meet her again. She is the only person, as far as I am aware, whom J. Krishnamurti,

the great spiritual revolutionary, ever pleaded with to go forth and teach.

Together with my old friend Shanti Adams, I've sought out Vimala Thakar here in Mount Abu, a hill station in the remote southern corner of the Indian desert state of Rajasthan, where she spends the winter months. Her house, which has been donated, is tranquil, set among the huge rock formations that dot the landscape.

Vimala meets us punctually at 9:30 A.M. in a small study off the entrance hall of her house, and I mention the proposed interview. My heart sinks when she says that while she is more than happy to have a dialogue with us, she doesn't wish to be published and photographed. "I'm socially dead," she adds.

It's a great relief to us when, after further discussion, she very kindly makes an exception and allows us to interview her for *What Is Enlightenment?*. It occurs to me that her dislike of publicity is one reason why she is not better known in spiritual circles. I have never seen an interview with her or an article about her. Yet she has traveled and taught in thirty-five countries, has

by Chris Parish

students and friends in all continents and has published many books in a number of languages.

In 1991 she decided to stop traveling outside her native India. But at seventy-four years old, she is still busy seeing the individuals and groups who make their way to her at Mount Abu, or in Dalhousie in the Himalayan foothills, where she stays during the heat of summer. She conducts inquiry groups and meditation camps with people from all over the world, ranging from yoga teachers and Buddhists to industrialists and Indo-Pakistan peace activists.

"Let me live as an invisible teacher—not a master but a teacher," says Vimala in a voice which commands your attention. "I have been exploring a dimension of the relationship between the inquirer and the enlightened one on the basis of equality. It's an exploration in a revolutionary relationship. All my life it has been a sharing, like members of a spiritual family, on the basis of friendship, cooperation."

Her words, spoken so distinctly and unwaveringly, seem to intensify the atmosphere of silence that I feel in the room. I'm aware of a single sparrow on the window ledge keeping up a constant background chirping.

Vimala Thakar's background is an extraordinary story. She tells us about her childhood and how her spiritual search began at the unusually early age of five. Born into a Brahmin family in India, she used to see her mother engaged in the worship of God and wondered, "How can God be that tiny thing—that statue?" So she asked her grandmother, who told her that God lives in the forest. Vimala ran away from home to the forest, searching for God, imploring God to reveal himself.

She attributes her nonauthoritarian approach to spirituality to her father who was a rationalist through and through. From a very early age he knew that her life would be dedicated to liberation. When she was seven he said to her that he didn't mind her devotion to spirituality, but asked her to promise never to accept any human being as the final authority, since the light of truth was in her own heart. He encouraged her to go to ashrams, to visit every spiritual celebrity, and he himself arranged for these trips. Spirituality was accepted in her family, and her grandfather was a close friend of the famous Swami Vivekananda.

She experimented with spending time in caves doing retreats, exploring concentration and other practices. As a young woman she became involved with the Bhoodan Movement—the Land-gift Movement of Vinoba Bhave, which encouraged rich landowners to voluntarily share their land with the very poor. She toured India constantly, addressing public meetings for a number of years. It was on such a tour in January 1956, when she was in Rajghat, Kashi, that a friend invited her to come to a series of three discourses to be given by J. Krishnamurti, the renowned Indian spiritual figure.

The talks had a very powerful effect on her and she at once understood all that he spoke of. She felt carried to the fountainhead of life, and it didn't feel like she was listening to a speech. Then she attended his talks in Madras and had private interviews with him, which deeply affected her consciousness, catapulting her into profound silence.

Of her meeting with Krishnamurti, she told us, "I was very glad that a world-famous celebrity was confirming what I had learned. Krishnamurti said nothing new to me when I heard him for the first time. It was a verification of the truth that one had understood, and I was very happy to have met such a person. The verification came through his life, through his communications." As a result of this meeting, she ultimately felt compelled to give up her work with the Land-gift Movement.

Vimala's small autobiographical book *On an Eternal Voyage*, written in 1966, contains a beautiful and moving account of her meetings and experiences with Krishnamurti. In 1959 she started to have terrible ear trouble with unbearable pain, bleeding and fevers. An operation didn't help, and by the end of 1960 she was prepared for and resigned to death, although at the same time she felt strangely and impenetrably calm within. Her last hope was a trip to England to consult ear specialists there. At this point she met with Krishnamurti again and he offered to help her. He told her that his mother had often said that his hands had healing power. She had mixed feelings about his offer, somehow feeling that she might mar the purity of the reverence and affection she felt for him as a teacher if she were to feel obligated to him. But after reflection she did accept his offer, and his laying on of hands brought her immediate relief. The fever and bleeding ceased and she experienced precious freedom from pain. He gave her more sessions and her hearing returned to normal.

Vimala went ahead with her visit to England, where the ear specialists confirmed her cure, and then went to recuperate in Switzerland at the invitation of Krishnamurti. She spent time with him in the summer resort of Gstaad. She was concerned to understand what had happened in the healing. At the same time she was experiencing a great upheaval in consciousness. "Something within has been let loose. It can't stand any frontiers. . . . The invasion of a new awareness, irresistible and uncontrollable . . . has swept away everything," she wrote.

She felt this change was also associated with the healing and was uncomfortable with the sense of indebtedness to Krishnamurti that she felt. He had to convince her that they were unconnected and that he himself didn't know how the healing had happened. He said, "You have been listening to the talks. You have a serious mind. The talks were sinking deep into your being. They were operating all the time. One day you realized the truth. What have I done to it? . . . Why make an issue of it?"

She wrote an open letter to her colleagues and friends in the Land-gift Movement to explain why she had left: "No words could describe the intensity and depth of the experience through which I am passing. Everything is changed. I am born anew. This is neither wishful thinking nor is it a sentimental reaction to the healing. It is an astounding phenomenon. . . . Everything that has been transmitted to our mind through centuries will have to be discarded. . . . I have dealt with it. It has dropped away."

Vimala went to meet Krishnamurti in Benares in December 1961. He asked her what she had been doing and she told him that she spent most of her time speaking with friends who were interested in her life.

"That is quite natural," he replied. "But why don't you explode? Why don't you put bombs under all these old people who follow the wrong line? Why don't you go around India? Is anyone doing this? If there were half a dozen, I would not say a word to you. There is none. . . . There is so much to do. There is no time. . . . Go—shout from the house tops, 'You are on the wrong track! This is not the way to peace!' . . . Go out and set them on fire! There is none who is doing this. Not even one. . . . What are you waiting for?"

This conversation shook her to the core, but she also felt that "putting bombs under people" was not the whole story. Surely, she felt, one must also show people the right line of action and point out the way to rebuild the house. Further talks with him convinced her, and dispelled ideas which she saw were holding her back—for example, the idea that she should have her own language before starting to speak publicly—and also her fear of making mistakes. This was a pivotal moment, and in her words, "the burning ashes became aflame."

From this point on she started traveling and addressing meetings in various countries in Europe to which she was invited. She soon encountered opposition both from those who did not like the fact that she spoke on her own authority and not as Krishnamurti's messenger and from those who accused her of plagiarism.

Krishnamurti was supportive: "I know the whole game. They have played it on me. They want authority. Is not the world sick? I was afraid you would have to go through it. I was hoping that you wouldn't have to. . . . It is not easy to stand up alone. It is extremely difficult. And yet the world needs such *sannyasins*, true Brahmins who would stand up alone, who would stand up for truth. You know if I had money I would give it to you. But I have none. I go everywhere as a guest—I have not even a place of my own."

After this she met with Krishnamurti now and then, but she felt the need to spend time with him was

finished, "as you only want to meet a person who is away from you." Since 1962 she has felt Krishnamurti's presence within her. From then on she spent her life traveling all over the world giving talks, teaching wherever she was invited, up until 1991, when she decided to remain in one place. She now prefers conducting meditation camps to giving talks, finding the extended time with people a more effective way to share her understanding.

As I sip the lemon tea she has served us, I feel slightly unsure how to interview this powerful woman, but her naturalness and warmth quickly dispel my doubts. Vimala is completely available for any questions so I plow right in.

"Vimalaji," I say, "these days a lot of people are interested in spirituality and yet it seems that only in very few is there a radical transformation of their consciousness and of their life."

Vimala immediately responds, "My dear friend, they do not dedicate their lives to the truth they understand. They have desire for worldly pleasure, worldly recognition. Spirituality is *one* of the desires. It is not the supreme priority. Immediately start living the truth you understand!"

"Intellectually people may aspire for emancipation or enlightenment but emotionally they love small bondages around them. They go on weaving the network of bondages. They want to belong somewhere emotionally—to the family, to their religion. In the name of security they create these emotional loyalties and a sense of exclusive belonging, while intellectually they aspire for absolute freedom, enlightenment. How can the two go together?"

"They are incompatible, and yet human beings who become *sadhakas*, inquirers, live a double life. They are not dishonest—I'm talking about an inner division. They feel satisfied by knowing about liberation, reading about it, imagining it. They feel satisfied about this because the word 'liberation' has its own intoxication, the emotional feel about the meaning of the word has an intoxication. And they live by that intoxication. But there is no factual content. So this inner division causes the pathetic phenomenon that in the evening of their lives, their hands are empty. They only have the shells of words with them, not the inner substance of liberation."

Her unequivocal words stop me short. They have the ring of truth, spoken by someone who is deeply intimate with the actual condition of human beings.

"What can a person do if they recognize this divided condition as themselves?" I ask, eager to find out what solution she has for this fundamental issue.

"One has to educate oneself. So first one discovers the division inside. Then, to eliminate the division,

"I am a simple person,

a human being who has loved life and who has seen life as divinity itself. I have lived in love with life, madly in love with the human expression of life as divinity!"



purification through education has to take place, because impurity is the only imbalance. Educate and sensitize and refine and purify the biological and the psychological aspects of our being—then I think the inner division disappears." She suggests that seekers devote a minimum of three, and preferably four, hours each day to their spiritual practice.

We move on to the subject of attachment and I remark that often people can have an understanding of the truth and still remain strongly attached to certain things. Vimala stops me in midstream.

"If attachment cannot be dissolved by the understanding of truth, that understanding is only verbal. If you have had that, how can there be attachment?"

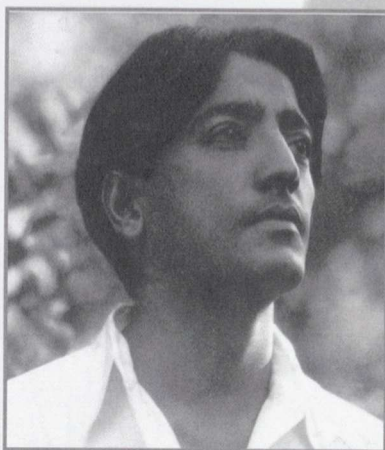
I pursue my point to clarify the matter. "I've heard you speak of all attachment just dropping away effortlessly when one understands the truth, but it often happens that someone has had some genuine understanding or realization of the truth and yet the totality of the attachment, all the conditioning, does not drop away immediately and completely."

"Never mind," says Vimala, brushing aside my objection. "Even after having understood the truth some people may cling to untruth for the sake of pleasure or security. People are afraid of living, they are afraid of dying. The intellectual aspiration for truth is there, but

this fear of life and death is also there. That's why the dropping of the attachments does not result. If that is the case then at least such a person should be conscious that there is a duality in him or her, that understanding of truth is there on one level and that attachment is also there. If there is a genuine desire that the attachment should be dissolved, eliminated, if that consciousness is there, it will work as a prick. It will keep him awake. Attachment will be there, he will act out of attachment, then he will feel sorry for it. For some time this goes on. It will be gradual. It depends on the earnestness."

I bring up the fact that various spiritual teachings seem to view the final goal of the spiritual life as abiding in the Absolute and are then not at all concerned with the world of time and space, with relating to people. When one has discovered the limitless, how does one simultaneously live in it and relate to others and to the world?

She replies with passion, "Even after the discovery you are still there in your body, aren't you? You have to feed it, you have to clothe it, you have to live in the world. So after the discovery, the understanding, then there is the awareness. With that awareness you behave in the limited world. Some people talk about escaping from it, withdrawing, but even after withdrawal you need a place to live."



"Why don't you explode?"

Why don't you put bombs under all these old people who follow the wrong line? Go—shout from the house tops, 'You are on the wrong track! This is not the way to peace!' Go out and set them on fire!"

"After the discovery of the truth—with that inner perfume of the constant awareness that life is a dance between the manifest and the unmanifest, the limited and the limitless, that which is measurable and that which is immeasurable—then you relate to both. With awareness you are related to the absolute and with your body, mind and thought you are related to the relative. Relative and absolute—there is no dichotomy, they are not opposites.

"The limited world and the absolute truth together form the wholeness of life. Life is indivisible, you cannot fragment it, you cannot divide it. So there is no problem in relating to the limited world. The crookedness, the violence—you see them as they are and you relate to them. You have to not cooperate with the violence, you have to discourage the hatred, the possessiveness, the domination. You have to encourage the sharing psychology, the attitude of cooperation, the value of friendship. By your life you do it, by living you do it."

I ask her about living in relationship with others. Vimala has this to say: "The truth has to be lived in the

movement of relationship, it can't be lived in physical isolation. It can be appreciated, it can be talked about, but that's not life. To live is to be related and when that truth is allowed to express itself without fear, without ambition, without the desire to assert and dominate, when the truth is allowed to flow in that movement of relationship, then there is the fulfillment that you call enlightenment. It is the consummation. It is easy to perceive the truth, it is very difficult to allow it to consummate in your life. It's like an unconsummated marriage." She laughs deeply and freely—whether spontaneously or because she is amused by her unusual analogy, I'm not sure.

I am interested to learn that several of her students live in her house with her and that this is a formal arrangement; they requested to live with her and she views her acceptance of them as a commitment which must be honored. "Commitments are a very precious thing—to say yes to someone, to allow someone to come and live with you. Then you have to understand

the person, their likes, their dislikes, their weaknesses, their excellences."

"Seeing the strengths and weaknesses of your students, is it part of your commitment as a teacher to respond to what you see in them?" I ask, interested to find out to what extent she is involved with students personally.

"My dear, one sees the inexhaustible potential contained in them of which they may not be aware at all. So you respond, you hit at their weaknesses so that their personality is free of that. You try to create situations where the best in them will come out. So the role of teacher and the honoring of the commitment requires that in the light of my perception I strike when striking is necessary and I cooperate where cooperation is necessary, whether they like it or not. If they don't like it they go away, because there is no binding.

"It's a very important question you ask, thank you. Because sometimes you have to be very strict. The purpose for which they come has to be honored. They don't just come because they want a change of place; they come as inquirers. The relationship between the teacher and the student is something sacred. I am involved as far as correcting their imbalances is concerned. I am not involved if they cry. I just ignore their tears. If their ego is hurt, I just ignore it. I am involved to the extent that the purpose for which they come is not forgotten by them. It's a beautiful way of living."

I remark that while some people would appreciate this, I'm sure others wouldn't like it.

"Some would withdraw, some would go away, that's their right to do so. People do not like self-reliance. When I throw them back on themselves, many don't like it, they can't take it. They have come for security. And I say, 'Look, if you do this, if you do that, this is the result. Now choose, make your own decision.'"

"The reflection that you're giving reveals how truly genuine is that person's interest in freedom," I find myself uttering, more as a spontaneous comment than a question.

After a pause she says with gravity and feeling, "Yes, and if you come across two or three who are genuine, you have lived your life. It's not the number that matters."

The atmosphere in the room is vibrant. Amidst our dialogue a tangible current of meditation has come into being and the room pulsates with silence. It's a rare experience to be with someone who is so present and available and who has such depth to share.

We discuss the value of a *sangha*, or community of inquirers, based on what she is speaking about. We talk about how much can be learned in such an environment, whereas on one's own, one cannot receive

an accurate reflection from others. In this way, I suggest, a spiritual community can become a very powerful vehicle for evolution.

"I would say the only one," she says suddenly, stunning me with her absoluteness. Before I can consider the implications of this statement, she continues, "I would just go a step further because here in India, physical isolation and withdrawal have been overemphasized. Retreats and physical solitude are useful and are relevant as a process of education. They are necessary, but not as a dimension to live in."

I suggest that if the individuals associating together in a community genuinely have a passion for the truth then it seems to me that there's a possibility for a different dimension of relationship—it's not just people getting together to escape something or to prop each other up because they are not strong enough to face life.

"That's right," she continues with passion. "If inquirers and explorers get together and begin to live together, then one presence fertilizes another presence. You're vulnerable, exposed, so you are on your toes all the time, there is no self-deception.

"Truth is not a theory, it's a fact of life. Truth vibrates in the movement of relationship. The perfume of peace can be there when you are with others. I have spent months alone in a cave. I know what that kind of peace means. And when we sit together, the perfume of peace that we feel in togetherness is a different quality. It's alive.

"In spirituality there is nothing to acquire, only to understand the truth and live it. When you are honestly inquiring, truth reveals itself. The 'I' has everything to lose, not get. And in that sacred nothingness and nobodiness, the wholeness gets revealed. So if the inquirers, those who live together in a sangha, realize that spirituality is not an acquisitive movement but a movement of learning, then it becomes easy. A new dynamic of human relationship will be brought about by this approach to spirituality."

The morning has passed in what seems like a few moments and I suddenly become aware of the surroundings, of the bright sunlight glancing on the walls of the small room. I realize how enthralled I have been and looking over to my companion, I sense that this is not just my experience. What Vimala Thakar has just been speaking about—the perfume of peace that can be felt in togetherness—is literally true and palpable. And it most definitely feels alive. ■

Chris Parish is an associate editor of What Is Enlightenment?, and a founding member and leader of the community of Andrew Cohen's students in Sydney, Australia.

WHILE THE FIRST PART of this edition of *What Is Enlightenment?* focuses primarily on the unique challenges that women face on the spiritual path, our next section investigates the feminine as itself sacred, or the "Divine Feminine." Noticeably absent or relegated to a minor role in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic faiths, the feminine face of the divine is given a prominent place in some other religions. In India, although women have usually held far less power than men in society, there is a long tradition, continuing through contemporary times, of Divine Mothers, or Mas—women who embody a quality of the sacred that is held to be specifically feminine.

Among these saintly women, there are some who transmit an irresistible spiritual power of unusual purity and strength. Merely to be in their presence can temporarily still the discursive mind and lift one's soul to unimaginable heights of peace and bliss. Many who have entered the orbit of such women have been deeply affected by them, and have experienced a profound certainty that they have finally come home.

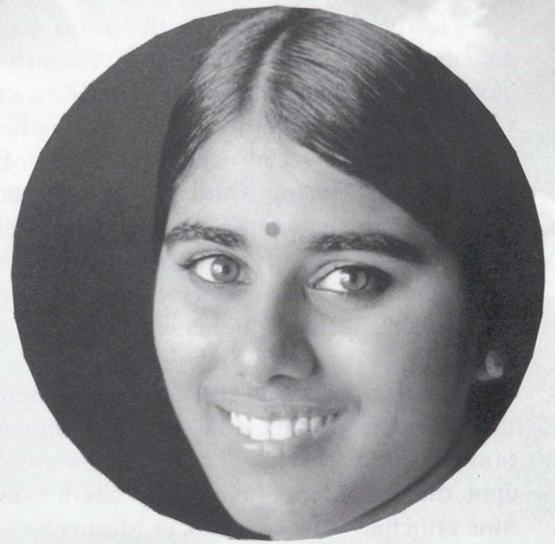
Yet the phenomenon of the Divine Mothers also raises many fascinating questions. What is the nature of their attainment? If it is realization of the Absolute, why is it specifically feminine? Could their example in any way reflect the restricted parameters of society's accepted roles for women?

The following four articles help to further the investigation of these challenging issues. The first three are vividly experiential and personal accounts by noted spiritual authors and practitioners Georg Feuerstein and Daniel Roumanoff and spiritual teacher Arnaud Desjardins—three men who have been deeply touched by the Divine Feminine. They write of their experiences with two of the most powerful and influential female Indian saints of modern times, Mother Meera and the late Anandamayi Ma. Following their articles, Andrew Cohen raises the intriguing question of the relationship between unconditional love and discrimination.

The

Divine Mother

A
Philosophical
and
Personal
Quest
by Georg Feuerstein



In the following essay, Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D., a spiritual practitioner and the author of over twenty books, recounts both an unexpected spiritual experience of the Divine Mother and his powerful meeting with the famous Indian saint Mother Meera. Written with great candor by one of today's foremost interpreters of spiritual thought, this vivid and fascinating description of his experiences, and his philosophical struggle to make sense of them, provides a context for our inquiry into the nature of the sacred feminine and the significance of the Divine Mothers.

*"If we meet no gods,
it is because we harbor none."*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

IF GOD DID NOT EXIST, said Voltaire, it would be necessary to invent him. Elsewhere he rounded out his statement by saying: "If God made us in His image, we have certainly returned the compliment." This echoes an insight, expressed already by some ancient Greek skeptics, that our gods look suspiciously like ourselves.

Clearly, there is some truth to this statement, as anyone who has even a smattering of comparative religion knows. Yet it does not by any means convey the whole truth. Materialism would have us believe that our economic or social experience shapes, if not predetermines, how we think about ultimate things. According to materialist dogma, metaphysics is the product not of spiritual realizations, mystical intuitions, and high intellectual considerations, but of rather mundane factors, such as whether we are hungry, smothered in wealth, or troubled by a toothache.

The truth, it would seem, lies somewhere between the two extremes of materialist reductionism and reductionistic spirituality. In light of this, how should we look upon the age-old tradition that speaks of a divine feminine principle—the Goddess, or Mother?

For psychologists, the feminine Divine is a powerful archetype innate to the collective unconscious, though there is no unanimous opinion about precisely how that potent image was generated and how it is transmitted across cultures and eras.

For the average intellectual, thoroughly steeped in the humanist ethos of our age, the issue is not one of metaphysics or metapsychology, but of misguided knowledge, or delusion, passed from one generation of believers to the next. For "Death of God" theologians, the Goddess is as much a projection as has been the patriarchal God of Deism. This summary dismissal is vehemently contested by those for whom the feminine Divine is not an abstract concept but a living reality—those many who contact Her in their prayers, find solace in Her, and even unite with Her in mystical attunement.

Until a few years ago, I skirted this whole philosophical issue, and wrote about the feminine cosmic principle in purely abstract terms as a metaphysical construct that is as plausible as most others. As an ex-Lutheran (with only a lukewarm religious upbringing) I

had never been exposed to the Marian doctrine, which looms large in Catholicism. My intellectual encounter with the divine female was by and large confined to the Shiva-Shakti doctrine of Hinduism. Here Shakti is the feminine pole of the divine reality, whereas Shiva represents the masculine aspect of the same ultimate being, manifesting in the form of particular Gods (*deva*) and Goddesses (*devi*) as stepped-down versions of that all-comprehensive Reality.

I gave little consideration to the fact that this metaphysical doctrine of the polar aspects of the Divine has its concrete ritual and experiential counterpart in the religious life of millions of pious Hindus. The lofty metaphysics of nondualism, or Advaita Vedanta, for which Hindu philosophy is famous in the West, is largely the prerogative of learned pundits, whereas religious practice in India is widely based on Goddess worship.

While pursuing a nondualist contemplative practice, the dimension of the polarized Divine remained an enigma to me. Then, one day, as a natural outcome of my inner work, I found myself opening up to the experiential possibility of the Goddess. Suddenly the bare theological bones of my consideration were wrapped in the flesh of immediacy: I encountered the sacred presence as a maternal force—sustaining, nurturing, protecting and enlivening me as, on the human plane, only a loving mother could do. Tears of recognition and gratitude rolled down my cheeks. I knew something momentous had happened on my contemplative journey.

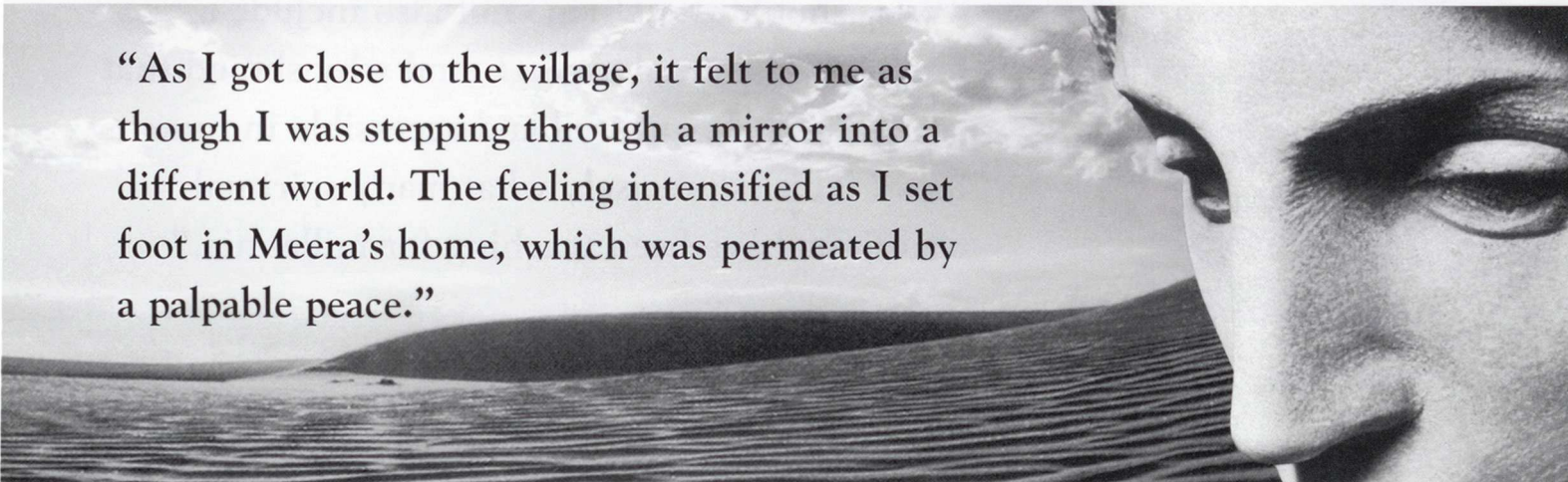
I was as delighted as I was perplexed by my experience. Until then, in my meditations and prayers, I had always experienced the sacred presence through a veil of masculine qualities—as awesome, impartial, remote and exacting. At an early age, and after considerable philosophical reflection, I vigorously discarded from my parcel of inherited beliefs the Creator-God idea fed to me by my parents. Yet in retrospect it appears that I had not been entirely successful in eradicating from my psyche this overwhelming archetypal image of the Divine as supreme male. Even though I had wrestled my way through to a nondualist version of metaphysics early in life, my experience of the Absolute contained recognizable traces of the image of the unyielding Creator-God who I thought I had jettisoned.

The question posed itself: Had my experience of the sacred as a male force merely been a construct, or had that presence in itself been qualitatively different from the presence that presented itself in a maternal way? If it had been entirely a construct of my mind, then the maternal presence was likely to have the same unreliable source. After much heart searching I concluded that both experiences of the sacred were referring to something that was real in itself but that they were nonetheless overdetermined by my intellectual and emotional disposition.

As a nondualist by conviction I had to concede that the sacred, or Reality, could be neither masculine nor feminine in its absolute condition. However, this was clearly not my experience. In my encounters with the sacred, I have usually experienced a predominance

But what is that Mother? At the time of my first meditative encounter with the maternal presence I was preoccupied with the ecological problems besetting our planet and human family. I was considerably aggravated by the magnitude of the devastation caused by our thoughtless applications of modern science and technology, and the astounding lack of wisdom among the world's political leaders. In fact, I vividly remember being pained by it all to the degree that for a period of time my meditations turned into doleful (though retrospectively necessary) cathartic states in which I emotionally hooked up to our oppressed environment.

Previously I would always seek to stifle any emotional upheaval before even sitting down to meditate, and then during meditation my whole focus would be on establishing and maintaining a crystalline mental



“As I got close to the village, it felt to me as though I was stepping through a mirror into a different world. The feeling intensified as I set foot in Meera’s home, which was permeated by a palpable peace.”

of qualities that could be described as tending toward either the masculine or the feminine.

This does not disturb me, though, as it does not entail any irreconcilable contradiction. For, I do not subscribe to the kind of radical nondualism characterized, for instance, by Shankara’s Advaita Vedanta. When pushed to state my philosophical credo, I am more apt to vote for the qualified nondualism taught by Shankara’s great rival Ramanuja, who lived several centuries after Shankara. Like Neoplatonism, Ramanuja’s metaphysics does not regard the world as an illusion but sees in it a manifestation, a lower gradation, of the ultimate Reality.

Thus, I came to understand my experiences of the sacred presence as a maternal force as having an objective referent that could be called Goddess, or Mother, while at the same time being colored by certain predispositions within my own psyche.

equilibrium. Now, however, I allowed my feelings to take their course, while somewhere in the back of it all I gently witnessed this inner turmoil. I felt a deep connectedness to the earth and its countless creatures, and my sense of being in touch with life slowly extended to the living cosmos as a whole. It was then that the breakthrough occurred.

Suddenly the sacred as an unbounded feminine presence impinged on my consciousness. I felt a current of warm joy coming from infinity and engulfing my being, and a sure sense that the universe is inherently right and good, and that I need not be overly concerned about the sorry state of our planet and species. In that moment, I felt loved, accepted, embraced, nurtured, and healed.

With that experience I discovered an aspect of the Divine that had long been a feature of religious and spiritual life. Yet that same feature has largely been

banished from our materialistic culture with its patriarchal mind-set that constantly struggles with the feminine, whether in its human or divine manifestations. Clearly, the sacred reality comprises many mansions, or dimensions, which have been explored by the gifted psychonauts of the world's spiritual traditions.

A year or so later, in 1992, I had a more immediate and direct encounter of the sacred as a feminine presence, which engraved itself into my soul as an unshakable certainty of being permanently in the lap of a higher Reality. This time the experience was not

was quickly filling up. I managed to find a seat a few rows away from where she would be sitting. I looked around for a little while, studying the faces of the people entering the hall. How many different backgrounds and karmas were represented here! I estimated that there were well over a hundred visitors.

Then the peaceful atmosphere drew me inward, and I found myself meditating and becoming oblivious to the shuffling and whispering around me. I almost missed Meera's quiet entry when she, punctually at 7:00 P.M., walked up to her chair and sat down.



“Why should the Divine not also include a feminine, maternal aspect? And why should that aspect not be expressed and accessible in human form? This is precisely what many spiritual traditions have been teaching for millennia.”

meditative, or at least not merely meditative, for it occurred through the time-honored principle of spiritual contagion. To be more precise, it happened in the presence of a human being who in traditional terms could be described as a saint, though she would seem to be far more than that. That person was the Indian woman known simply as Meera, or “Mother” Meera.

Since 1983, she has lived in the sleepy German village of Thalheim, north of Frankfurt. Those who want to have her *darshana* (lit. “vision”) must be prepared to embark on something of a pilgrimage. In my own case, it involved a car ride, long hours at two hectic international airports, endless hours in flight on a crammed and noisy plane, a mercifully short train ride, a taxi to a local inn, and from there a thirty-minute walk across fields in pouring rain.

As I got close to the village, it felt to me as though I was stepping through a mirror into a different world. The feeling intensified as I set foot in Meera's home, which was permeated by a palpable peace. I had experienced a similar sensation in the proximity of other highly evolved souls, but never to such an overwhelming degree.

The hall in which Meera was to grant *darshana*

I couldn't help but be surprised at her diminutive stature. But regardless of her size, she emanated an aura of great authority which seemed as palpable as the peace filling the hall. People had risen from their chairs and greeted her in Hindu fashion with palms pressed together and held in front of the chest. As she walked in, her glance was on the floor in front of her—a gesture both of unaffected humility and concentration. Throughout the session, which lasted for over three hours, Meera never looked around but focused entirely on each person as he or she stepped up to her chair to receive her blessings. There was a flowing rhythm to all her movements, which I found fascinating to watch.

Most of the time, however, I found myself drawn naturally into a state of meditation. Then came my turn to receive her blessings. There was no formal sequence, but everyone could step up to her chair when inwardly prompted to do so. And I experienced that inward prompting as a clear and undeniable call.

I knelt before her and, with a naturalness that surprised me, I lowered my head so that it came to rest at her knees. Next I felt her hands on my head, and opened myself to her blessings. There was no transmission of

power (*shakti-pata*), no inner fireworks, no extraordinary sensations. It all was incredibly simple. I felt a presence whoosh by my conscious mind, entering deep into my being where I could not follow. But I had a clear sense of being blessed beyond all reasonable expectations.

Then Meera removed her hands from my head, I sat back, and for fifteen seconds or so I was able to gaze into her eyes. This was the second phase of her work with visitors. As I had been told, she was now working on the personality. Again I had no obvious sensations during this operation, but I felt a great gratitude and love welling up in my heart, and my whole body must have smiled at her.

I bowed again and walked back to my chair. The remaining two hours or so I spent in deep meditation, getting up only when the hall had emptied and it was time to leave.

I had three more darshanas that weekend visit. Each one had its own distinct quality, but always there was this atmosphere of peace that adhered to my bones so that it stayed with me for hours afterward.

Even years later, I still have no explanation for what exactly occurred during those encounters with Mother Meera. What I know, though, is that since then my life has taken an unexpected but most welcome turn. I have been given all the necessary external and internal help to grow further, for which I am very grateful.

Meera does not have a formal teaching, and I never regarded her as my teacher. Rather, from the outset I saw in her a portal to the Divine—a being whose declared purpose is to manifest the divine light on earth, to bring down the *paramatma-jyotis*, the light of the Supreme Self. I do not profess to rationally understand what this means, though I have an intuitive and perhaps even an experiential sense of it.

Meera calls herself an *avatara* [incarnation of the divine], but she makes no claim to exclusiveness. Our skeptical Western minds have a hard time accepting that there are beings who do not share our confusion, obsessions, lack of purpose, or godlessness, but who are always and vibrantly alive in the Divine. We find it extremely difficult to accept that there might well be beings in human bodies who serve a higher evolutionary purpose.

Why should the Divine not also include a feminine, maternal aspect? And why should that aspect not be expressed and accessible in human form? This is precisely what many spiritual traditions have been teaching for millennia. We can dismiss such teachings as mere mythology, but we would do so only at a great spiritual loss. My personal philosophy in such matters has always been to remain open to all possibilities.

The rational mind is a wonderful tool, but it should not be entrusted with determining *a priori* the limits of reality. Experience offers a better standard for this. While we need not blindly accept each and every religious dogma, we must guard against the kind of intellectual hubris that debunks all traditional knowledge as mere superstition and fantasy. As experience shows us time and time again, this universe is far more wondrous than the rational mind likes to admit or feels comfortable with. Our human lives are too brief and too important to deprive ourselves of the grace that is available in the world, including the grace of the Divine Mother. ■

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HOLY MADNESS

by Georg Feuerstein

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Memories Ananda

Legend has it that one evening, in the midst of a festival of religious song, the Divine Mother Anandamayi Ma suddenly stood up and walked out of her ashram. To the two disciples who anxiously followed her and asked where she was going, she only replied, "Sarnath," the name of a town miles away. A mail train she boarded mysteriously made an unscheduled stop there. Then she proceeded without hesitation to an unknown inn, past the innkeeper and directly to the room of a disciple who, unbeknownst to anyone else, had been stranded there penniless a few hours before, crying and praying to Anandamayi Ma in desperation. The rest of the night was spent laughing and teasing the now overjoyed disciple about her anxiety and fear.

Born in a village in East Bengal (now Bangladesh), Anandamayi Ma, by the time of her death in 1982, had become one of the most revered female saints of this century. Her photographs alone testify to her luminous beauty and her extraordinarily powerful divine intoxication. There are innumerable stories of her healings, miracles and prescience. Although she was almost illiterate, over time an entire complex theology grew up around her. She was held to be an avatar, a divine incarnation who was enlightened from birth. Her actions were said to have been the result of her *kheyal*, her divine inspiration, and she was thought to have had no motivations of her own. Indeed, after the age of about twenty-eight she stopped feeding herself and had to be fed by her disciples like a young child.

She traveled ceaselessly and established a network of ashrams throughout India. Her admirers included such eminent personalities as Mahatma Gandhi, Indira Gandhi, and Gopinatha Kaviraj, one of the most respected of Indian scholars who, when he visited her, felt that she, an uneducated woman, had finally answered all of his spiritual questions.

Arnaud Desjardins and Daniel Roumanoff were among Anandamayi Ma's earliest Western disciples. They both met her in India in 1959 and spent years as her students. In the following two articles they recount memories of their time with her. Their stories paint a vivid portrait of a modern female saint who was larger than life, and directly communicate what it was like to be close to her. She catapulted both men into profound spiritual experiences, and at the same time challenged to the core their love and devotion towards her. Yet the conclusions that each man finally drew about her are radically different. Where one saw only the inscrutable and profound play of the Divine, the other perceived profound limitations in her teaching and her actions. Taken together their articles raise fascinating questions about this influential Indian Divine Mother.

French-born Arnaud Desjardins is a highly respected teacher of Eastern spirituality, and is also a noted filmmaker and author. His work has been instrumental in introducing Eastern traditions to the European world. Author Daniel Roumanoff holds a doctorate from the Sorbonne, and is a successful businessman and corporate executive.

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The Embodiment of Transcendence

by Arnaud Desjardins

THOUGH SRI MATAJI ANANDAMAYI MA was not, strictly speaking, my guru, she certainly played a major role, to say the least, in my life and my *sadhana* [spiritual practice]. In fact, she still does today. Her memory is alive deep within my heart and there are several pictures of her on the walls of the ashram where I now teach.

From my first physical encounter with her, in 1959, to the day in 1965 when she gave me her blessing to go to Sri Swami Prajnanpad (1891-1974), a relatively unknown master who was to become my guru—though I'd rather say of whom I gradually became the disciple—I considered Mataji as my guru. During those years, I repeatedly stayed with her for extended periods of time. Even after meeting Swami Prajnanpad, I always felt her active influence and kept visiting her, up to my last trip to India a few years before she left her body.

To state things simply, I could say that, though in the course of my search and travels I have had the privilege to closely approach quite a few extraordinary beings—Tibetans, Sufis, Hindu gurus and Zen masters, many of whom left a deep imprint in my heart—to me Anandamayi Ma was and remains the embodiment of transcendence, the living proof of the actual existence of a transcendental reality. “Extraordinary,” “superhuman,” “divine”. . . I still feel today that no adjective is big enough to describe her presence, particularly when I met her, in the full blossoming of her radiance. I could barely believe that such a being could walk the earth in a human form, and I have no difficulty understanding how a whole theology was developed around her. I never, never met a sage whose divine appearance I admired so much. In truth, I admired her beyond all words.

Thousands of pilgrims were of course similarly touched by her extraordinary presence, but I'd rather insist here on another aspect of Mataji: the relentless way in which she sometimes crucified the ego of those who wanted more than her occasional blessing. In fact, in her ashram, there was a very clear distinction between two kinds of visitors: those who came for her *darshan* [personal audience] and who received a warm welcome, and those who insisted on being considered her disciples, who were challenged and put on edge, to the limit of what they were able to bear—but never beyond. No guru

wants to bring someone to absolute despair or to leaving the path because of unbearable trials.

During the years when Denise Desjardins and myself were spending several months within the ashram as candidates to discipleship rather than as mere visitors, we went through a lot of that “special treatment.”

Of course I realize, as I am about to recall a few examples of that treatment, that these stories may look very innocent, not so terrible to casual readers. The truth is, it is always easy to hear descriptions of someone else's *sadhana* and to imagine: “Oh, had I been in this situation, I would not have been affected in such a way. I would have immediately taken it as a lesson, a challenge to my ego, etc. . . .” When you actually are tested, when your mind and ego are being provoked through situations which sometimes are in themselves very simple disappointments and difficulties, you are not hearing a story anymore. You're in the fire, plunged into what constitutes the essence of all *sadhanas*: a persistent, sometimes harsh challenging of your ego and mind through situations which call into question your present identifications and attachments.

In those years, I was a professional filmmaker, working for French television. One of the things Mataji used to crucify my ego and teach me was the film I was shooting in her ashram. She sometimes granted me exceptional opportunities and then caused me to waste my last rolls, which I had very much been counting on. This was hard to accept. Following the advice of one of her ashramites, I had preciousely saved three rolls of film until the very end of my stay. This had caused me to renounce shooting scenes which could have been important. Then, during those last days, every time I started filming, Anandamayi Ma, in front of everybody, either turned her head or winced. This was all the more cruel to me since I believed the person who had asked me to save those rolls had been inspired by Ma. Eventually, Ma only allowed me to shoot one roll. As this was after sunset, I was convinced there would be no visible image on the film. Incredible as it may seem, there *was* something: three of what may well be the most beautiful shots of the whole film, where Ma can be seen at night surrounded by a few disciples. These miraculous forty seconds were worth the sacrifice of those three rolls. Once she asked me to project the

“I could barely believe that such a being could walk the earth in a human form.”

images which to me were most precious with some worn-out Indian equipment, when I knew for sure that it would irremediably damage the film.

I also remember a particular incident. I had always dreamed of meeting what I then called true yogis—not yoga teachers, but yogis having attained mastery over certain energies or developed certain powers. To me, those yogis embodied the whole legend of India. They lived in the high valley of the Ganges where I had not yet been able to go, since the Indian government had not granted me the special permit then necessary to travel to that region. One of those famous yogis was about to come down to the plains to visit Anandamayi Ma. On this very day, Ma asked me if I could travel with my Land Rover to a distance of some 150 kilometers where I was to pick up some luggage and bring it back. The roads were not tarred, it was raining, there was mud all over, so that when I left the ashram, the yogi had not arrived, and when I came back, he had already left. To me, at the time, this was a terrible disappointment indeed, a broken dream.

Every time my ego desperately wanted to be acknowledged by Ma, circumstances were such that I could not see her privately for weeks. But once, when, after having gone through what one usually calls intense pain, I at last changed my inner attitude, she herself took me for a ride in the car. I was alone with her, the driver, and a great pundit whom I very much admired. She had me sit next to her and did not allow anyone else to go with us.

We often had the impression that others were also brought to teach us and that the whole world was consciously or unconsciously serving Mother's purpose. She was an incredible source of energy, the center of a huge activity.

It is difficult to imagine what surrender to Anandamayi Ma, as some of her closest disciples were



living it, could mean. I remember one monk whose ideal of life was to meditate. He had been meditating in an isolated ashram in the Himalayas and was very happy, until Ma appointed him as the swami in charge of the Delhi ashram. Every day, he had to deal with curious visitors, Europeans, people from the embassies and consulates. He was forced to be no longer a meditator but an administrator, immersed head to toe in active life—the exact opposite of what he had been aspiring to. He was working twenty hours a day and I even once saw him slowly fall down. He had simply fallen asleep while walking. Just contemplating Anandamayi's radiant smile, one could not imagine the pressure she put on some—in the name of ultimate freedom.

To conclude, I'd like to say that, remembering Ma as well as my guru, Swami Prajnanpad, I feel especially

grateful for the occasions when they caused me pain, when they brought suffering to my ego. They, of course, never did me any harm. On the contrary, everything they did, whether they smiled or were angry at me, served my ultimate good. But they certainly made me feel severely hurt at times.

And the truth is, one cannot make any progress in one's sadhana if one's ego and mind are not sometimes painfully shaken. ■

Arnaud Desjardins is the author of many books, including two which have been translated into English: Toward the Fullness of Life (Threshold Books) and The Jump Into Life: Moving Beyond Fear (Hohm Press). He resides and teaches at his ashram, Hauteville, in the south of France.

A Tragic Passion

by Daniel Roumanoff

The following excerpts are taken from the author's diary, written during his time as a disciple of Anandamayi Ma.

6 October 1959

After changing trains in Bareilly, I sit in the third-class car of the Dun Express that crosses India from Dehra Dun to Calcutta. A young man approaches me and says, "I can see from your face that you are interested in spiritual matters."

I nod yes.

"Aren't you going to Benares?"

"Yes," I answer, surprised.

"And, aren't you going to visit the ashram of Anandamayi?" Once again I feel the odd sensation that I have experienced since the beginning of this trip. It is like something or someone is guiding me by the hand from encounter to encounter.

The stop at Benares worries me. Should I go directly to stay at the ashram, or should I look for a hotel? People warned me at Almora that because of the caste rules being followed in Anandamayi Ma's ashram, it is difficult for foreigners, who are considered outcasts, to stay there.

"Then," continues the young man, "I would like to ask you a favor. My aunt over there is going to the ashram as well." He points to an imposing woman wearing the traditional white sari of Bengali widows. "I cannot accompany her because I am going directly to

Calcutta. But I don't like the idea of her going to Benares on her own. Can you be her traveling companion and help her to deal with the rickshaws and the coolies? Is it too much to ask of you?"

8 October

When we arrive, my companion introduces me to the person in charge and requires, as if it were a given, a place for me in the ashram. I put my pack in a corner and scrutinize the crowd of disciples that are in the courtyard. Some are sitting on the ground, singing *kirtans* [devotional songs] and playing drums, cymbals and harmoniums. Suddenly they stand up and form a circle while singing.

And then I see Ma, all in white, sitting on a kind of stage. The people in the crowd press forward, bumping into each other. I can see her through all the moving heads dancing back and forth in front of my eyes. And with each vision of her there is a sort of flash that pierces straight into my heart, a flash of happiness, of a bliss that I know and recognize to be the most intimate and profound part of myself. I have experienced this feeling two or three times while meditating, but now its great intensity carries me to heaven. I feel perfectly myself and happy. Ma is the incarnation of who I truly

and deeply am. The identification between Ma and myself is complete. She is present in me, not different from me. This conviction imposes itself with the clarity of obviousness: "Yes, I have arrived. I have found what I was looking for." Yet, no excitement. I feel calm and free. Serene.

9 October

Mataji is sitting near the temple where a *puja* [religious ceremony] is happening. I am standing in the middle of the courtyard, part of the crowd. When the celebration is finished, Mataji goes to sit on a wooden bed that the young women of the ashram have covered with blankets, shining satin cloths and pillows. The disciples who approach her offer her flowers and presents, and bow down. Mataji gives out blessed food, *prasad*—sweets, fruits.

I still feel carried by the experience of yesterday, by a kind of euphoria in which everything seems to be floating in a general harmony, despite the presence of the excited crowd which is gathered and squeezed together in order to be closer to Mataji. For my part, I am totally calm and immersed in a profound joy that leaves me in a state of total satisfaction. I am happy and want nothing.

Then, a young woman comes to tell me that Mataji saw me in the crowd and wants to speak with me. I am very surprised, but pleasantly flattered, not understanding how she could have noticed me in such a dense crowd.

Mataji is in a corner of the courtyard sitting on the stone banister of a little staircase. I go up one step and bow to her, putting one knee down. I feel clumsy in that position so I stand again in front of her and she stares at me attentively. She asks me where I have come from and if I have any questions for her. I answer that I don't have any. "Good," she says and looks somewhere else, as though indifferent. She gives me half a banana as a *prasad*. I take it and go away after again bowing to her, my hands on my chest, clutching the sticky banana.

I have seen Mataji a few times more and each time I experience again this flow of joy that goes through all the fibers of my body.

I look around me and answer the questions with which the disciples assail me. One of them says to me "What? You refused a meeting with Mataji! Even if you have no questions to ask, you should have taken the opportunity of her offer. Being alone with her to receive her *darshan* [personal audience] is so important." I submit to his prompting, prepare a list of questions and ask for an interview.



see Ma, all in white, sitting on a kind of

stage. With each vision of her there is a sort of flash that pierces straight into my heart, a flash of happiness, of a bliss that I know and recognize to be the most intimate and profound part of myself. I feel perfectly myself and happy. Ma is the incarnation of who I truly and deeply am."





“*W*hat if Ma is a

sorceress that attracts and seduces, catches you in her net and then eats you up? ‘Yes,’ people answer. ‘She is the mother Kali. She is destroying your ego.’”

10 October

A young *brahmacharini* [female celibate student] leads me to a remote bedroom around 11:00 A.M. where a devotee’s family lives. I will be picked up from there to go and see Mataji. I wait nearly two hours in vain. Mataji will come to see me later. At night, at 8:45 P.M., during the quarter of an hour of silence practiced in the ashram and by many of the devotees at

home, I find myself in a little courtyard of the ashram, sitting almost right in front of Mataji. It is then that I have a particularly powerful experience. I find myself in meditation posture and the meditation is taking place very easily. I am the Peace, the Joy, the Quietness, the Living Reality. There is an explosion of blinding white light. Mataji and I are one. Mataji is the very incarnation of this Peace, this Joy, this Quietness. There is no difference between Mataji and what I truly and really am.

At 10:00 P.M. someone takes me to Mataji’s bedroom. Everyone else is asked to leave, even Didima, her old mother, and the young *brahmacharini*. Even the doors and windows are closed despite all the protests of the disciples who are hanging onto the bars of the windows to see her.

I find myself sitting on the carpet in the bedroom, alone with Mataji and Ganguly, who is going to translate. Mataji is sitting on her bed in front of us and looks at me smiling. Ganguly asks me to sing the kirtan that I’ve learned at Sivananda’s ashram. That makes Mataji laugh a lot, and I feel like a little boy naively reciting a poem he learned at school in front of his dad and mum, a little boy who feels appreciated, admired, loved for what he is doing and for who he is.

The whole interview occurs in a profound joy. The questions are not important, nor the answers. What

matters is the continual renewal and increase of this joy every second of our meeting. The questions and the answers are just pretexts, a formality that allows this joy to happen.

When the interview is finished, Mataji offers me a garland. When I leave her bedroom, most of the ashram is asleep and the lights are dimmed. There is no light in the bedroom next to mine, and I can hear my neighbors snoring. In the dark, I worm my way into my sleeping bag, my heart full of joy.

18 October

It is now ten days during which I have lived in a profound and constant joy every moment. Will this joy persist away from Mataji? I want to assimilate what I have received and check its strength.

[Daniel spends several weeks traveling in India and visiting other teachers.]

9 November

Back at the ashram. I sit in the tent at my reserved spot where I have left a little carpet of dry reeds. Ma sees me and asks Citra, the young woman that takes care of her, to tell me to wait for her in her bedroom on the first floor. I wait for nearly an hour. When Ma arrives, she is not a tired old woman any more, nor even a sixty-year-old woman with a profound look, surrounded by an aura of light. Her face lights up, becomes much more youthful, and suddenly she looks like a young woman of twenty-five. She doesn't stop speaking and bursting into laughter.

14 March 1960

A few people come to inform me that Mataji will give me an interview tonight. When I arrive in her bedroom, Ma orders everyone to go out of the room and to close all the doors and windows. I am impressed by all the preparations.

Ma: "Speak . . ."

"I have spoken to you before about my mother and father. I want you to know that my father loves you dearly and always keeps your picture with him."

Ma laughs and says nothing.

"I have to go back to France very soon to serve in the army."

Silence. Then, "What is your name?"

"Daniel."

"I am going to give you a new name—Dhyanananda [one who finds joy in meditation]. Do you like this name?"

"Yes."

"Stay in contact and write if you have any difficulties.

Do you want anything else?"

"Please give me a spiritual practice."

"Achaa! What are you practicing?"

"I practice meditation, I do some hatha yoga and a little bit of *pranayama* [breathing exercises]. Should I do some *japa* [repetition of a name of God]?"

"Do you want to do some?"

"It is for Ma to decide."

She moves toward Kamalda and, following the traditional ritual of initiation, whispers a mantra three times in her ear. Kamalda whispers it in my ear in the same way. Then Ma gives me a *mala* [Hindu rosary] that she has blessed and asks Kamalda to give me some instruction on how to use it. The interview is finished and I bow down. She blesses me, putting her two hands on my head.

Kamalda is very surprised by the interest that Ma showed towards me. "It is the first time, as far as I know, that she has given this kind of instruction, a mantra and a mala to a foreigner," she says.

In a few days, I will take a boat from Bombay and return to France.

[For the next three years, Daniel lives in Europe and the United States, visiting the ashram yearly.]

New York, November 1962

I just wrote Ma to ask for her permission to practice my *sadhana* [spiritual discipline] with her as a novice monk. My mother just received a pension from the government, which will allow her to be financially independent. Therefore I am free from any duty and commitment and I can make my old dream of becoming a "monk in Tibet" come true. Just after I apply for a long visa the response from Ma arrives: "When the goal is to know oneself and to realize one's true nature, the duty of a human being is to immerse oneself in effort, to practice meditation and *japa*."

I don't receive any answer to my visa application. Later I will find out that the police asked those responsible at the ashram and they pretended to not know me. They replied, "Can someone really know those foreigners? What if they are spies?"

I decide to go without waiting any longer. I apply for a three-month tourist visa, which the Indian Embassy will give me in Karachi, where I will transit before taking the boat to Bombay.

India, January 1963

Ma asks Citra why I have come.

"He resigned his job to come and live here," she answers.

"What?" replies Ma. "But I never told him to do that!"

Citra repeats these words to me and I feel destroyed. I feel like a total foreigner to Ma, totally misunderstood, and the victim of an illusion that makes me believe that Ma knows everything, understands everything and is interested in me. I came to her to offer her my heart and my life with her approval and then she pretends that she doesn't know anything about it, as if I had taken the initiative without asking for her consent in advance.

During darshan, while looking at me, Ma asked someone to tell me that she will give me an interview in the evening.

My mind is totally empty and I have only one question to ask her: "Ma, will you allow me to stay with you at the ashram?"

"You may stay, but not always. It is not possible for you to follow me everywhere. Do you agree?"

I am relieved and answer: "Yes, Ma."

"Do you understand? Do you agree that you will not stay with me all of the time?"

"Yes. But I would like to stay with you for some of the time."

"Achaa!" Then she asks me a string of questions: "How are you? What are you eating? Where? Where are you sleeping? Do you have a bed? Other furniture?"

I don't have any questions to ask for the time being. I am not ready and I don't want to force myself in an artificial way.

She continues: "For Mataji, there is no foreigner. Do you understand? They are all the same, *eka-atma*. There is only one Self." She repeats those words a second time, smiling at me.

Kanpur, 16 February

For several weeks Mataji seems to not pay any attention to me. I felt agitated and depressed in Jodhpur, where the conditions of my stay were particularly difficult. Sometimes I feel squeezed by a slight anxiety and sometimes I again feel peace in her presence. But the blissful feeling has disappeared. Yesterday I became submerged in total acceptance. "Ma is my guru. I surrender to her will. Everything that she is doing is the best for me."

Hardwar, 19 February

I ask a few disciples about some things that have been troubling me at the ashram.

"Why is there a preference shown for the rich and the powerful? Why are they given privileged treatment?"

The disciples answer: "Ma didn't come here to change the world. She treats people according to their rank in society, in harmony with the social norms. She would never make a minister wait. His time is too

precious, and many things depend on these people. The administration can make it difficult for the ashram, arguing about such and such donation, imposing such and such tax. It is better to have them on our side. Ma is acting for the good of the ashram and the ashram members. And besides, she has her reasons. She knows the hearts of people. She knows what she is doing and why she is doing it."

"And what about the poor illiterate peasants that run to see her? Why are they sent back so roughly?"

"They are ignorant. They do not come here to follow a spiritual quest. They want material advantages. If we allowed them, they would walk on Ma. We need to contain the crowd, we need to protect Ma."

"What about the rules concerning caste? Why are they followed so strictly?"

"If the rules about caste are not respected, those who follow them can't come to see Ma, while following these rules doesn't stop people who do not follow them from coming. Ma didn't come to abolish but to accomplish. She is here to preserve, encourage, support the tradition. Oriental Bengal, where Ma is from, is the most traditional area of India, where the rules are applied the most strictly. But Ma herself is beyond any rules. Look, she welcomes you, she speaks with you, she touches you. In contrast, her mother—poor thing!—if a foreigner grazes her she shrivels up, afraid of being polluted by this contact."

"But it is not easy for a foreigner to bear being treated as an outcast."

"We must apply the rules. If foreigners don't understand, they have to live outside the ashram and come only during darshan. But as far as Ma goes, there are no foreigners. For her, everything is Universal Consciousness, which acts through her."

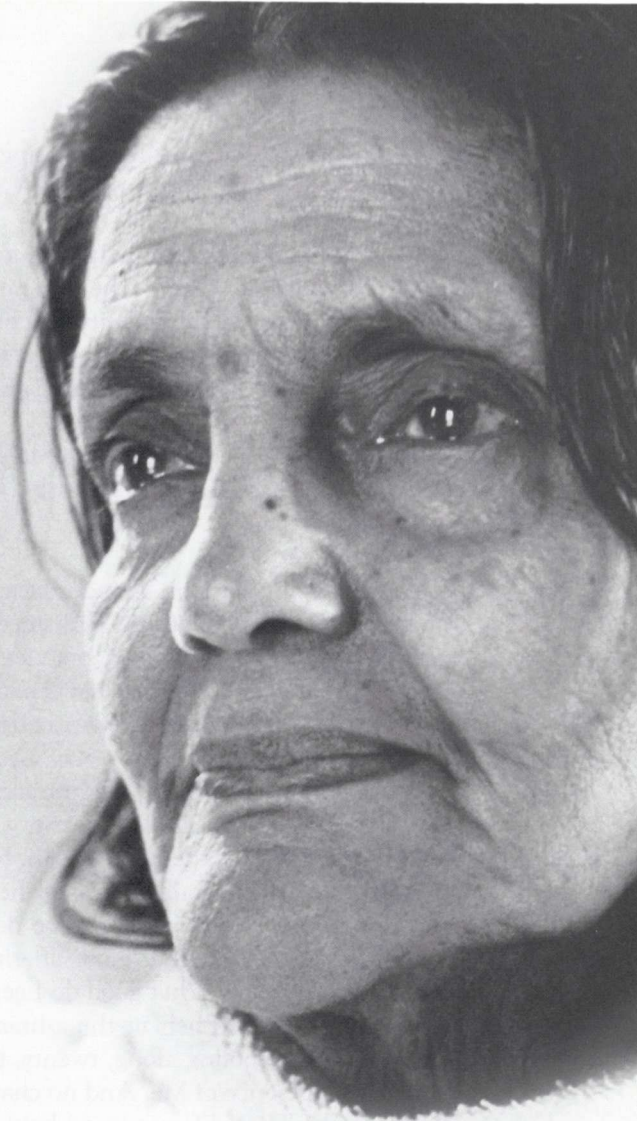
"Yet, she expresses a particular affection for the people she knows better, especially for the Bengalis, and even more so for those from Oriental Bengal. And why is the health of those around her so deteriorated?"

"And so what? Following her is not easy. It is about facing challenge after challenge and not making room for what is personal. This is the reason why nobody can really follow Ma. After a while, she tells the person to stay at such and such place, to do their sadhana and stop following her around."

5 March

People around her are tense, contracted. Almost all of them are sick. There is such a difference between them and the people who come from outside, who are very often vibrant, or anyway much more so than those who stay at the ashram.

“The poor crew of foreigners that have stayed in India near her are not great examples of success. They are haggard and dejected, looking after their wounds and their little miseries. Their hearts were taken by a passion, by the attraction to Ma, and this passion has destroyed them.”



4 April

Not asking any questions of Mataji. Meditating and staying beside her in silence. An answer from the silence is the most powerful thing that I can receive.

3 May

I am feeling disenchanted with the ashram and the ashram members, and even experience an unvoiced irritation with Mataji. The excessive deference given to the rich and important people and the obvious contempt toward the poor are unbearable.

I am fairly fed up with all of her inimitable smiles and graces, which seem almost automatic. I am irritated by her movement backward when people want to touch her feet, her expression of distaste as she covers her nose and mouth when someone is speaking to her too closely, her insistent indifference towards the poor, her kind smiles for the rich, and the privileged spot that

is given to them at her side. Her bedroom doors seem always to remain open for them. Clearly I wouldn't have stayed nor come back if I had perceived sooner everything that was going on here. And even now that I see, I stay!

17 May

My view of Ma has changed in a manner similar to the way my attitude towards the ashram has changed. First, I became indifferent and detached from the ashram and wished to have as little as possible to do with its people. In the same way, what is most important, my relationship with Mataji, has been transformed.

I feel tremendous love, respect and devotion towards her, and her presence is a source of inspiration for me. But she says that she is not a guru. I have discovered that she seems to spread the traditional ideals of Hinduism, which seem to me not at all related to real

spirituality. The essence of her teaching conveys and recommends simplistic orders such as, "Carry on a pure life with good morality."

It seems that I am describing a generally negative picture. The positive aspect is the inspiration, the quiet mind and the sense of spontaneity and harmony that I experience in her presence. And this is the expression of what is the deepest and the truest part of me.

[Daniel becomes severely ill for several weeks and Mataji advises him to go back to France to recover.]

France, Summer, 1963

After arriving back in France, I came to stay at Oppedette, a small village in Provence. My goal is threefold: Get physically better, practice the sadhana, and try to understand what has happened to me in the last few months—sort out the inner contradiction that I experience.

What if Ma is a sorceress that attracts and seduces, catches you in her net and then eats you up? "Yes," people answer. "She is the mother Kali. She is destroying your ego." But not only the ego. She is destroying my body and my health. Can she be doing me good despite myself? It is true that I am suffering. But is this suffering good for me? What good do I get from it?

What about the others at the ashram? I see them being unhappy, hobbling along, twenty, thirty years in the constant presence of Ma. And no change! Did they follow a path? Their life seems to have no meaning. They didn't live, they didn't go forward in any way. They have been trapped—trapped by a unique passion that has eaten them up.

No! Ma is not a witch! What could that mean anyway? Would she act for the misfortune of those that she attracts? No, her intentions are not bad. It must be because of ignorance that she is misleading them to their destruction. But can this ignorance be compatible with the Universal Consciousness that knows and can do everything?

How can I allow myself to speak about ignorance? She knows and I am ignorant.

Yes, I am ignorant but I found out facts.

Yes, facts, but I interpret them.

And I am willing to interpret them in another way if someone can give me the beginning of a proof of something else. Instead, I only find out that everything begins like a fairy tale and ends like a witch story. What *did* happen? The promises have not been kept. After the dazzle of the beginning, a shift, a sliding away has happened, and the dazzle has become darkness and suffering. Dazzled, I didn't see what had always been there, because everything seemed so beautiful and marvelous.

I gave myself unconditionally. I went to my limits. And yet it didn't work. Why? Is it because of me? Was there something that I should have done, something that I didn't do? Or is it simply that there is no room for Westerners, and even for non-Bengalis, beside Ma Anandamayi?

The poor crew of foreigners who have stayed in India near her are not great examples of success. They are haggard and dejected, looking after their wounds and their little miseries. Their hearts were taken by a passion, by the attraction to Ma, and this passion has destroyed them.

People say that we cannot judge. Maybe in their secret hearts there is something happening that we don't see. Maybe I judge from false appearances. Maybe they are all going to be suddenly enlightened.

Come on! I only see unhappy human beings, not enlightened in any way.

Leaving Ma saved my life.

* * *

The work of discrimination is finished. The contradiction is solved. I have been able to discriminate between the teaching of Anandamayi Ma and the awe and wonder that I experienced in her vibrant presence. And through this discrimination, I have unlocked the door of the trap that imprisoned me. I know today that my path is other than this one. ■

—Translated by Christine Mallet



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Daniel Roumanoff's published works include Swami Prajnanpad: A Contemporary Master (*La Table Ronde*), and the story of his travels in India, *Candide Au Pays Des Gourous: Journal de Voyage d'un Explorateur de L'Inde Spirituelles (Dervy-Livres)*, from which this account of his experiences with Anandamayi Ma is drawn.

TEACHINGS OF LIBERATION

An Unconditional Relationship To Life

The Odyssey Of A Young American Spiritual Teacher

Andrew Cohen

An Unconditional Relationship to Life

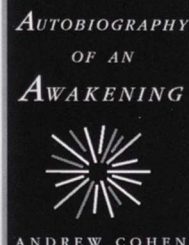
Andrew Cohen's most recent book is a strikingly original and powerfully experiential journey through the modern spiritual world both East and West. Describing the evolution of his own understanding through his meetings with teachers from various traditions and through questioning many of the current spiritual paradigms, Andrew Cohen opens a door to a deeper understanding revealing what the goal of liberation actually is, unencumbered by the usual myths and superstitions which are so rampant in the spiritual world today. The author's bold call to think independently challenges the reader to look beyond that which may have become all too familiar, in a way that both inspires and liberates.

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Autobiography of an Awakening

is a portrayal of Andrew Cohen's uncompromising search for liberation, his profound awakening, and finally his painful struggle to come to terms with the discrepancy between his teacher's realization and his own. The essence of his story is a captivating and provocative inquiry into the nature of enlightenment.

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Enlightenment is a Secret

Andrew Cohen

Enlightenment Is a Secret

Taken from the teachings of Andrew Cohen, this collection of dialogues and essays is a manual for personal liberation. This remarkable work addresses every question crucial to the spiritual quest in a timeless and deeply illuminating way. Having become a spiritual

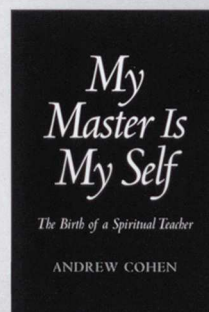
bible for many, *Enlightenment Is a Secret* is one of the most original expressions of awakened understanding by a Western teacher in our time. Each excerpt is a meditation on emptiness which brings the reader to a depth greater than the mind can grasp. Love, renunciation, surrender, humility, detachment, the mind, spiritual practice and many other topics are addressed with a clarity so powerful that it constantly challenges the reader to go further and further.

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is the compelling story of Andrew Cohen's single-hearted dedication to the discovery of the truth and the profound spiritual realization that irrevocably transformed his life. Through diaries and letters it chronicles his meeting with the then little-known Indian teacher H.W.L. Poonja, and describes how his own teaching began. Portraying the unfolding of a remarkable awakening and the birth of a profound spiritual teaching, *My Master Is My Self* has come to be regarded as a modern underground spiritual classic.

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Mother ^{of} the Universe

by Andrew Cohen

THE FEMALE SAINTS CALLED “DIVINE MOTHERS” are unquestionably extraordinary women whose outpouring of unconditional love has profoundly moved and opened the hearts of many. But how is one to understand the nature of their attainment?

*Ultimately, understanding the attainment of the Divine Mothers is only possible if one understands the nature of enlightenment itself. The following article, taken from spiritual teacher Andrew Cohen’s autobiographical work *An Unconditional Relationship to Life*, examines the experiences of two disciples of Indian Divine Mothers, experiences which raise important questions about the relationship between unconditional love and liberating discrimination.*



IN THE SUMMER OF 1994, I was invited to teach in southern France. The occasion was unusual. I was invited there by another spiritual teacher to speak to a large gathering of mostly his own students. We had met for the first time several years earlier in Israel and had become friends. During this, my second visit, my wife and I stayed as houseguests with him, his wife and their two teenage children. They were gracious hosts and our meals together were always festive gatherings, with friends, other teachers, writers and students in attendance. These times were often highlighted by serious and occasionally intense dialogue.

It was during those meals together that I met a German man and his wife, who had been specifically invited by my host to spend some time informally with me. My host had told me that this man had been a longtime devotee of one of the most famous Indian female gurus of our time. He said that his friend had recently left her and was still very upset and confused about what had happened. Knowing my own story, my host thought that I might be able to help him.

His guru was known for her extraordinary compassion and unconditional love. I had read about her and had been very impressed by her purity, utter abandon and intense ecstasy. Affectionately called "Mother" by her devotees, she was supposed to be an *avatar* (an incarnation of God, the rarest and highest manifestation of enlightenment) and thousands flocked to receive her blessings as she traveled around the world.

During the weekend, over lunches and dinners together, he told me his story. He said that he had met his guru fifteen years earlier, well before she had become famous. He had lived in her intimate company for the first few years and had taken a formal vow of *brahmacharya* (celibacy). Along with long hours of meditation, he spent the rest of his time in her service. His descriptions of her were both marvelous and intriguing. There was no doubt that she was a profoundly awakened human being whose experience of the Absolute was far beyond the bounds of most. He said that after nine years with her in India, she asked him to go to Europe and serve her teaching work there. This involved setting up and procuring ashrams, arranging her travel schedule and representing her through teaching in her name. She said that when necessary she would "speak through" him. Surviving on

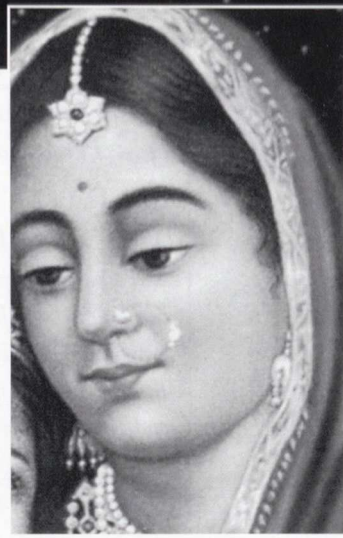
what were only meager donations, he described to me how he worked for her tirelessly, eighteen hours a day every single day. He said that because of this, at one point he became so sick that he almost died.

After fifteen years in her service, he asked her permission to give up his vow of *brahmacharya*. He told her that for some time he felt he had been living a lie. She responded by saying that she didn't care he was living a lie, and went on to say that if he gave up his vow it would weaken the resolve of the other *brahmacharyas*. He described how in her way of thinking, giving up celibacy was tantamount to giving up true spiritual life altogether. After some time, he felt he had to be true to himself in spite of her refusal to meet his request and took the bold step of marrying one of her Western devotees. According to his story, they were both summarily rejected from her circle and denounced as having gone back to the "world." This was apparently unbearably painful for both of them as she was not only the center of their universe, but to them was literally none other than God incarnate. The agony of this separation from their beloved was written in the lines in their faces. His wife, to my surprise, even expressed a fear that their guru had put a "curse" on them. Seeing the terror in her eyes, I couldn't help but encourage her to begin to make the effort to question some of her ideas and also to be willing to take greater responsibility for the choice that she had made. This was to no avail.

Then the story became even more complex. He described how over his years as her servant in Europe, he had accepted large donations in her name and at her request had funneled them all through his personal bank account, apparently because she felt the governments in the West were as corrupt as in India. He said now, years later, he was living in fear of the day that the government would ask him to pay taxes on that money. He was afraid he would have to go to jail. He said that he was at that time in negotiation with her lawyers, asking only that they provide him with a written statement saying that none of the money had been his own, but had all been given to her. So far they had been unwilling to do so.

Over breakfast on Sunday morning, to my surprise my host told me an alarming story about yet another world-renowned incarnation of the divine mother, Mother Meera, who is also considered to be an *avatar*.

*“If their love
was truly unconditional,
what kind of conclusions
was one to draw from this? If these
stories were true, what did they
say about enlightenment?”*



The story is by now well known. Her longtime devotee and messenger, the famous scholar and poet Andrew Harvey had left her. Harvey, openly homosexual, claimed that his former guru was homophobic. He said that she wanted to break up his relationship with his male lover and told him that he had the choice of either being celibate or getting married to a woman. If he chose to marry, she wanted him to write a book about how the force of the divine mother transformed him into a heterosexual. He even claimed that she censored some of his writings, removing all references to his homosexuality.

I took a deep breath and turned my head, momentarily taking in the stunning beauty of the rolling hills, covered here and there with thick vineyards and patches of trees that made up the landscape of this part of southern France. I thought to myself how several of my students had been to visit Mother Meera and were impressed by her purity, simplicity and love.

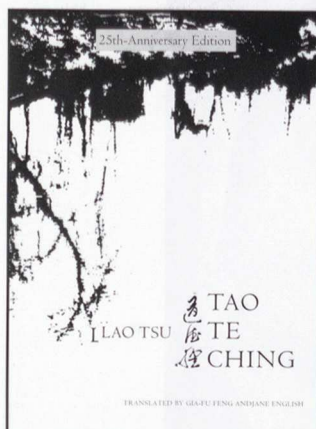
I was amazed but my amazement soon turned to fascination. Both of these women were said to be avatars, incarnations of the divine mother and living expressions of unconditional love and compassion. They were known for the depth and power of their *samadhi*—absorption in joy so deep and profound it was beyond description. If their love was truly unconditional, what

kind of conclusions was one to draw from this? If these stories were true, what did they say about enlightenment?

What I found so fascinating was that these two remarkable women, in spite of their rare, extraordinary and unquestioned spiritual attainment, still seemed to be attached to fixed ideas! The knowledge of and ability to express a love that was profound beyond measure, the experience of and ability to share intoxicating bliss and joy apparently were not necessarily enough to liberate the mind. This was staggering.

For some time it had been clear to me that one definition of enlightenment is none other than the attainment of freedom from all fixed ideas. Why? *Because it is the liberating experience of freedom from all fixed ideas which alone enables the awakened individual to see clearly.* Indeed, it is precisely because of the freedom from all fixed ideas that the awakened individual is able to discriminate in a way that is profound, extraordinary and evolutionary.

Without that attainment, even unquestioned purity is not enough to insure that the powerful and penetrating discrimination that is the expression of a truly liberated mind will arise. Without it, that perfect response that is the consistent manifestation of the attainment of that middle place between all pairs of opposites where heaven and earth meet will not occur. ■



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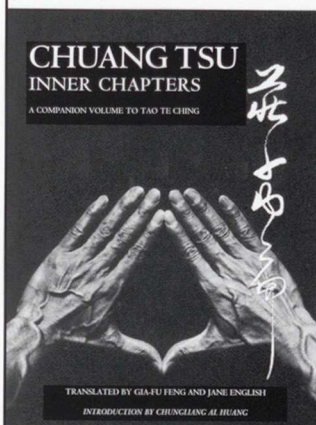
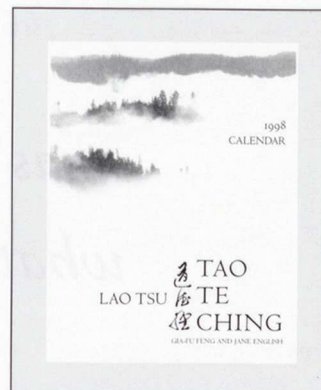
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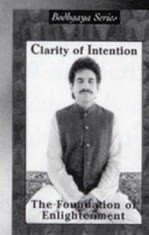
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DAUGHTER *of the* GODDESS

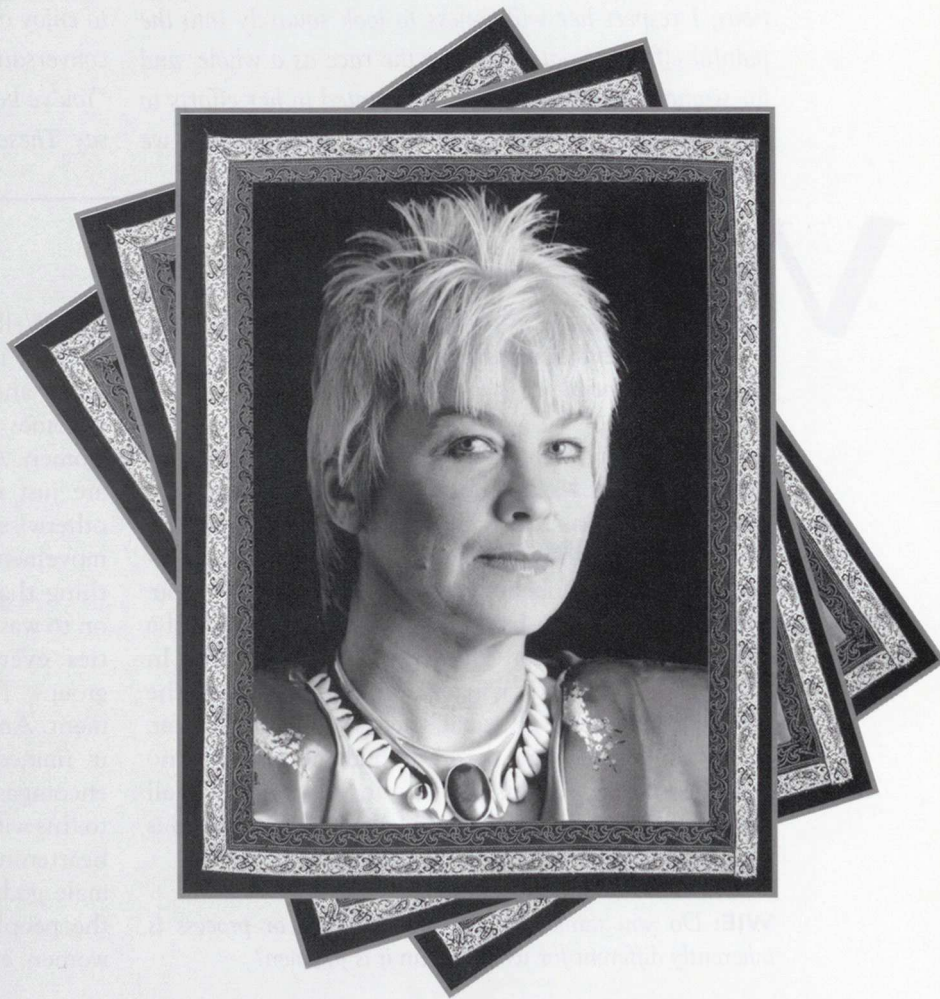
an interview with

Z. BUDAPEST

by Susan Bridle

THIS ISSUE OF WHAT IS ENLIGHTENMENT?

would be incomplete without considering the women's spirituality movement and the contemporary pagan and Goddess religions with which it is closely aligned. Modern paganism, loosely based on prepatriarchal Old European myths and traditions, is one of the fastest growing religions in the United States today. It attracts both men and women who feel suffocated by Christianity and who want an alternative to the patriarchal values of domination which have proven so destructive to our planet's ecology and to many of the world's peoples. Worship of nature and a Goddess or "Great Mother" figure are often associated with pagan



practices and rituals, and many women's groups have formed in recent years to celebrate a female deity and to create a new religious culture that empowers women.

Zsuzsanna Budapest, better known as "Z," is a passionately committed feminist who sees Goddess religion as a crucial ideological and psychological support to the work of feminism. She is considered to be one of the founding mothers of the women's spirituality movement, and coined the term "feminist spirituality." She is the author of *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries*, *The Grandmother of Time*, *Grandmother Moon*, *The Goddess in the Office*, and *The Goddess in the Bedroom*. A High Priestess within her tradition, she leads Goddess-centered retreats and celebrations throughout the year.

From the moment we began our conversation, Z was utterly unapologetic and often outrageous. I found myself in a refreshingly frank dialogue with a woman who has vigorously rejected the constricting ideas that women should be sweet and meek, seen but not heard. In complete accord with her about many of her observations, I respect her willingness to look squarely into the painful effects of patriarchy on the race as a whole, and for women in particular. Z is undaunted in her efforts to liberate women from the life-inhibiting conditions that we

still confront in so many ways in the world today. Yet at the same time, in speaking with her, I wondered whether the women's spirituality movement, in its reaction against what it sees as patriarchal religions' imbalanced emphasis on transcendence, goes too far in the other direction. And while the feminist critique of patriarchal religions is valid and valuable, I wondered if it overlooks the true spiritual impulse that is the source and inspiration of those traditions.

Though left with questions about her views, I couldn't help but delight in the opportunity of speaking with this remarkable woman. Z approached this interview with the same unbounded passion and generosity of spirit that characterizes her work. I was affected by her fiery independence and natural confidence, and immediately understood why she has inspired countless women to fight for their own self-respect and personal freedom. Despite our differences, we engaged in a lively and penetrating discussion that is exactly the kind of dynamic exploration that *What Is Enlightenment?* is all about. And Z seemed to enjoy our dialogue as much as I did. At the end of our conversation she told me with her customary directness, "You've been a wonderful, challenging interviewer, I must say. These interviews usually bore me to death."

WIE:

What would you say defines women's spirituality as distinct from spirituality in general?

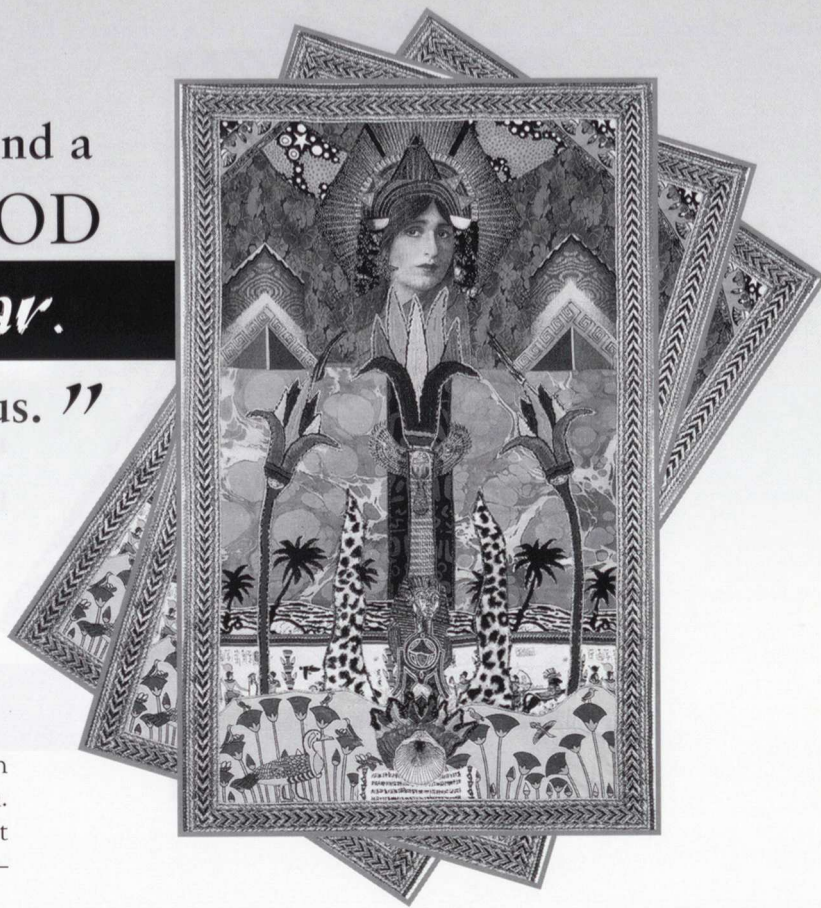
Z. BUDAPEST: Women's spirituality is Goddess-centered. That is a revolutionary idea because all the reigning religions are male-God-centered. And the values taught in those religions are jealousy, possessiveness, exclusivity, obedience, guilt, punishment, fear. They are mostly fear-based religions. When you find a male God you find fear. They're sort of synonymous. In turning it around and saying all children come from the Goddess, then we're all equal, there's no reason for fear, there's no punishment, there's no judgment, there's no possessiveness or exclusivity. It's inclusive in that all come from the Goddess, and it's female values, which is the children are all equal.

WIE: *Do you think that the spiritual path or process is inherently different for women than it is for men?*

ZB: Well, I don't think the spirit has gender. I do think, though, that once the spirit is manifest in a physical body and therefore acquires a gender, spirituality becomes maybe less important for men than it is for women. And the reason I'm saying this is because men are just not that interested in consciousness raising, otherwise they would have created a vigorous men's movement by now that would be promoting it. The first thing that the women's liberation movement latched on to was consciousness. Right away in the early seventies everybody was going to consciousness-raising groups. There is nothing parallel in the men's movement. And there is no political agenda. For the women it immediately spilled into the political arena, it encompassed the entire reality. You don't see a parallel to this with men. And the other thing that is sort of disheartening is that in all denominations—and that is male god, female god, whatever religion you've got—the people who go and promote it and follow it are women, eighty percent, and twenty percent males. Now

“When you find a
MALE GOD
you find *fear.*”

They’re sort of synonymous. ”



why is that? Ask why that is and the only answer I can find is that the shoe doesn’t hurt that much for men. The women want change and the men just want what men want, mainly making a living and having a wife—which is a big payoff from patriarchy.

WIE: *Do you think women are inherently more spiritually endowed or spiritually inclined than men?*

ZB: I think in this time and space, in this age of the earth, yes. But it was different in other times. I think back to when we all worshipped the Goddess and the men did not need a jealous and possessive male god to enforce privileges for them. There was once a vigorous fraternity all over Europe dedicated to Pan or Zagreus, the male principle of the universe, who was a joyous guy. He was a party-goer. He played the pan pipes. He was not a rapist, he was not a master and he definitely wasn’t a husband. He was an equal with women, and his celebrations were just as numerous and well attended by men as the women’s celebrations were by women. And then on occasions when the theme of the season included both sexes, they celebrated together and gave a very vigorous celebration for life. There would be like twenty-one holidays in a year compared to the measly five holidays we have each year in patriarchy.

WIE: *It is sometimes said that the paths are many but the goal is one. But recently I’ve heard people saying that while men seek enlightenment, women’s wisdom is about something altogether different—which has even been called “endarkenment.”*

ZB: Oh, that’s bullshit. That’s total bullshit and enlightenment is bullshit too. There’s no such thing as enlightenment. Transcendence and enlightenment—these are buzzwords for new goals that are hard to achieve. Like it takes you fourteen million years to learn how to levitate, if ever. This is all hierarchy. It’s setting up hierarchy and I already smell something funny here: if the women are “endarkening,” it’s relegating us to the negative. That’s just another way of disempowering women after we have worked twenty-five years to get our power, and I reject that totally. It’s dualistic, linear thinking pushed into the spiritual realm—and that this is being listened to by someone like you is astonishing to me. How hard they try to disempower women even here where we reign supreme! It’s ridiculous.

WIE: *Actually, “endarkenment” is a term I’ve heard women use to describe a connectedness with the body, with the earth. I think what they are getting at is the question of transcendence versus immanence. Because the women’s spirituality movement criticizes Judaism, Christianity, Islam and many of the Eastern traditions for a misguided emphasis on transcendence—and instead focuses on immanence. When you speak of the Goddess in your religion, is there a transcendent aspect to it, or is it purely immanent?*



“THERE’S
no such thing as
enlightenment.

TRANSCENDENCE and
ENLIGHTENMENT
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Like it takes you fourteen million years to
learn how to levitate, if ever.

This is all
***Hierarchy.*”**

ZB: You mean, is any part of the Goddess beyond nature? No, there’s nothing beyond it. There’s just more nature beyond nature. Everything is nature even if you don’t know it yet. A hundred years from now we may learn something new but that was nature all along, we just didn’t get it.

WIE: *But the path of meditation points to an experience of something that actually does seem to be outside of nature. Something that is beyond change, beyond time . . . the unmanifest.*

ZB: The unmanifest is nature too, it doesn’t matter. Whatever we in nature can perceive has to be natural. If the Dalai Lama is doing it, it’s natural. Whatever the meditation path has come up with is all nature. They just learned a little bit more about nature.

WIE: *I’d like to ask you what your own spiritual experience has been and how you’ve come to know the Goddess and to recognize the Goddess as your spiritual path.*

ZB: Well in my case I was born into it. My mother was a witch and an artist, and she created Goddess images out of clay for home use as well as for shows and

museums. She had two statues standing on major plazas in Budapest before she was twenty-four years old. She was a psychic, traveled in other realms, was a medium. I grew up with all these possibilities happening around me and it didn’t seem unusual. For example, she would pray on the winds and the winds would rise and I would feel them. And she would pray whenever we needed something and then I would see it a little later come to pass, manifest. So for me the Goddess was just a certainty, easy to contact, no need for temples. All you need is to walk out in nature. If you have nothing, just a blade of grass, you pray with that one blade of grass and she will still come. It seemed like a loving, ever present deity who liked to take care of her own, appreciated being prayed to.

WIE: *Your situation is unusual—being born into Goddess religion. How did you begin helping other women find a connection with the Goddess?*

ZB: Well, my work as a priestess took a lot more growing than just being born into a witch family. Because nobody else I knew other than our family was into this, I distanced myself from it when I left Hungary. And I sort of fell asleep, my consciousness was asleep. I got

married very early, at nineteen, to a childhood sweetheart and quickly I started having babies, two sons, and my consciousness was just totally taken up with that. Things were just smooth and fine and clattered along until my Saturn cycle when I turned thirty, and then a big inner shift happened. This inner shift made me very restless and unhappy and I started asking questions like, "What is my role in life? What am I supposed to do?" I hadn't done anything yet. Even though I had two beautiful sons, I didn't value that. I felt like I myself was not created.

Eventually I ran into a demonstration in Los Angeles, a women's celebration of getting the vote. That was what the Saturn cycle brought me: feminism. Then I suddenly had names for the pain. I started seeing myself as a woman, and feminism gave me back my womanhood. And I gave back to feminism, in turn, the center of feminism, which is feminist spirituality—which I carried without really having earned it yet because I was born into it. But I recognized that these two things belong together. Without the Goddess, feminism is not going to work, because you're going to burn out. You've got to have spirituality connected with your political aspiration because that's how this animal works.

WIE: *So for you, the spiritual impulse or spiritual passion has been fueled by, and is therefore really not separate from, feminism. In your experience they're synonymous.*

ZB: Yes, because feminism gives you your womanhood and an analysis of what it's like to be a woman in this time and space. Without feminism, if you think that you are just like a man, that it doesn't matter what

gender you are, you are in a huge denial. Because it matters every bit what gender you are in this time and space. If you can accept that and you get to be female identified, then you can start working with the Goddess in earnest. Because then you are her daughter and you can see your reflection in the divine.


WIE: *In your Holy Book of Women's Mysteries you speak about a primitive, instinctive, deep part of the brain, which you have called the "Slothwoman," that you teach women to evoke. But what about the ideal that spirituality is supposed to be a movement toward something higher or more sublime or less primitive?*

ZB: Male idea, it's totally a male idea. It's a linear thing to go higher up, it sets up duality, it sets up hierarchy. There is no such thing. We are here, this is it. What's higher? You want to go to space? Fine, watch *Star Trek*. All of this about questing for higher things, these are male ideas. They *need* quests. You have to give them goals, they are happier that way because then there's an achievement. They can bring out their warrior, they can have clanking of the swords and male bonding. And then they sell it to women as well. The interesting thing is that when these big quests are happening, there are very few men actually following it—it's mostly women who listen to males. And they learn nothing and twenty years later there they are, gray-haired, and they're doing dishes in the same ashrams. It's a pitiful thing. Women must take themselves back from these places. Anything that sets up hierarchy will leave women out, I guarantee that.

Even the Buddhists, who I like—who is the female equivalent of the Dalai Lama? There's always going to

"IT matters every bit what **gender** you are in this
TIME AND SPACE. If you can **accept** that and get to be
female identified, then you can start working with the
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DAUGHTER and you can see your reflection
in the **DIVINE."**



“MANY WOMEN don’t want it.
I have to really, really **push**
women into **LEADERSHIP,**
BECAUSE THEY  *RECOIL FROM IT.”*

be a male chosen to be the top of that particular path. Even though he himself admits that there have been great female Bodhisattvas and adepts, you never know their names. I wouldn’t trust something like that with all my heart and soul, would you? They are so seductive. It’s wonderful to applaud these splendid males in their robes. They are not violent, they are not going to hurt us, they want something good. Females like to see males like that because it makes us feel better, it makes us forget that every minute a woman is attacked in this world, either raped or killed by somebody near and dear. And trafficking in women is on the rise in Asia, where Buddhism is practiced, where Hinduism is practiced. You have to look around with open eyes and see behind those good books, because everybody’s holy book is a very good book. Nobody’s holy book says it’s O.K. to traffic in children. But when you actually see what effect this religion has had on people, then you see what the power of this religion is. Can it transform society? Can it create a better world? And then you ask: What are the women doing in this religion? The answers to these three questions will tell you if this is an effective good book or if it can be just passed by, if it’s already passé.

WIE: A big part of your work with women seems to be about personal empowerment and personal satisfaction. For example, many of your books contain rituals to accomplish personal aims such as finding a lover or a job or a house. How is this a spiritual matter that is different from just a very practical, self-interested, not particularly spiritual urge?

ZB: Happiness is a spiritual value. The spirituality that puts bread on the table and puts a roof over your head is a very valuable spirituality. A spirituality that disregards that your stomach is empty and you don’t have

a roof over your head and you don’t have any self-esteem is not spiritual, it’s just somebody’s money-making scheme. Spirituality has to address practical matters. Finding the purpose in your life would find you meaningful work. I think that’s spiritual. Finding a mate with whom you share your soul and body is spiritual. Finding your self-esteem, which is my main focus—ninety-nine percent of my work is about self-esteem—is finding your spiritual center and getting the courage to go on and evolve instead of giving up. This is the state of womanhood right now in this time. You have to work on the self-esteem. That comes first. The self-esteem of all women is under a constant barrage of attack—from their environment, the media, the way they are viewed and treated. You have to daily build back your self-esteem: “No, I’m not a sex object. I *do* count. I *am* important.” Women with no self-esteem shine the shoes of the priest who says that women have no power and no place in the church. With self-esteem women would say, “F— you, shine your own shoes.”

WIE: Within your tradition and within women’s spirituality in general, the emotional, the instinctual, the sensual realms of experience are considered sacred. But aren’t there emotional and instinctual impulses within us that are not so wholesome or sacred, and that can be destructive, like jealousy, competitiveness and anger?

ZB: You see, now that’s how politics comes in. If you had been in a consciousness-raising group you would have learned that jealousy is a trait of scarcity. When there’s not enough, women have to fight for the meal ticket—the men. The men resent just as much being meal tickets, they would rather be seen as themselves. So it rips off both sexes when there’s scarcity, but only

in raising your consciousness do you realize these things. Otherwise you think, "I'm a bad person because I'm jealous," or, "I'm a bad person because I'm angry." Anger is sacred when it comes out of a righteous situation. Women *should* be angry about the way they are treated, and they should guard this anger as a sacred anger because it will help them to say no, help them to say no when it counts.

WIE: *Do you think the consciousness-raising work that you're speaking of helps one to discriminate between this anger and anger that isn't so wholesome?*

ZB: The anger that's not wholesome comes from impotence, when you feel powerless and you thrash around and hurt everything around you. Yes, if you raise your consciousness you can look at your anger and say, "Where does this come from?"—and you'll be able to tell. And you learn skills of how to let go and how to maintain, how to even grow certain feelings that you really need every day. Women are told not to be ambitious. Why not? Look at my morning glory in the back yard. When I put her in, the first thing she did was send out probes. The next year she took over the garden. I had to cut her back. I said, "Look, morning glory, do not kill my apple tree, my lemon tree, but you can have all this." Nature is very ambitious. Everybody wants to take over, everybody wants to suck up all the energy there is, everybody's striving. If they have one little chance they take it.

WIE: *But isn't it part of the spiritual path or the spiritual work to get beyond this urge for survival, this ambition, this desire to be on top? I don't think these are spiritual urges.*

ZB: I'll tell you what, the moment they start telling that to men I'll believe it. It seems they've told women not to be ambitious. The moment they tell men not to be ambitious, not to strive, I'll rest my case. It's not going to happen.

WIE: *The women's spirituality movement, in its effort to be inclusive, tries not to judge or make distinctions, and tries to make room for everyone to "find their own truth." Yet at the same time there are women who have leadership roles, and within your tradition, you have high priestesses. What is the role of leadership in an environment where everyone has to find their own truth? How does it work in your community of witches?*

ZB: Well, first of all the leadership is rotated so everybody gets to learn leadership. This is something women love to do, because even if you watch little girls when

they play, they rotate roles. But many women don't want it at all. I mean, I have to really, really push women into leadership because they recoil from it. What is leadership? Leadership is work. Leadership is directing an orchestra. The orchestra is your coven, everybody has a part, they all play their instruments. You're the one who says, "We start now," and then you give space for each of the instruments to do their thing and then at the end you say, "Now it's finished." It's not like a church where you pontificate and the people listen and then they go home, that's not how women's groups work. Women's groups are in a circle and everyone is active at all times and they all have some kind of a role.

WIE: *Yet it also seems important that we come to respect individuals who have gone further than we have, or who are examples of a bigger perspective or a bigger heart or a greater passion than we ourselves have. It's important to recognize differences when there are differences.*

ZB: I think I know what you are saying. And since I'm one of these persons, I can say that I am not sure if I have a bigger heart, I'm not sure that I have a bigger perspective, but I definitely have a talent that most people don't. And this talent is what was there all along and the work simply sparked it into being. I see that out of every 200 women maybe one more comes out like that. Maybe even 300 women. And when it happens I encourage it and then those women take up the work. And I'm not sure that I'm further on the path because of this talent. I would say that if you would conceive it as a field of flowers, I would be like a special flower that is not very often, that is rare. But I would not say that I am the most magnificent flower because of that, or that I have to have personal service or be compensated. I've just been given this special talent. And the other talent I have is a Hungarian passion which is endless. It will last to the end of my days. And this passion ignites other people's passions. This is why I have been very effective. It's an osmosis kind of teaching. If you have it, it will come out in my presence. If you feel it, it will be bigger in my presence. But again, I would rather say that the simile is a field of flowers and I'm a rare one. In every field there would be two or three flowers like mine and they would not be next to each other. They would be very far apart as if the wind planted us. It is a strange phenomenon, but thank Goddess for it happening. ■

Illustrations: Amy Zerner's fabric collage tapestries were selected from Paradise Found: The Visionary Art of Amy Zerner by Monte Farber ©1995.

the holders of moral goodness and purity within the Western cultures that we're talking about—you know, Europe and America—but in almost every other tradition, men play that role. So for example at S.N. Goenka's Vipassana meditation retreats, apparently the women's side fills up much faster than the men's side in the United States, but in India it's the other way around. Birth control is also probably a huge factor. You know, if you are giving birth to a child every ten or eleven months, and you are responsible for caring for all these people, and if it's part of your responsibility—as it is in many cultures—to make it possible for your husband to go to the temple or to meditate . . . you know, *he* does that, almost for the family, but *you* don't.

WIE: *I completely agree that much of the disparity I mentioned may be attributable to the fact that fewer opportunities have existed for women in this sphere. But do you think there might also be other factors having more to do with women's conditioning internally—conditioning which somehow reflects the role of maintaining and preserving those social structures which allow for the continuation of the race?*

ED: That wouldn't make much sense to me. Because when women are denied access to education, for example, they have no authority within a culture through which to attract disciples. Historically, I would imagine that in most cultures to say that you were following a woman would have been absurd—you know, really an absurdity, something that just didn't make sense. So who knows? Women may have been nursing children and been, you know, beyond all of it. But it wouldn't have been translated into knowledge that could be disseminated, practiced and organized. There's an enormous amount of evidence that marriage and motherhood, as they have been constructed within this set of power relations, are really institutions that women are oppressed and diminished within. So are women within them supporting and maintaining a set of social relationships that borders on the mundane? I don't think so. I think the maternal, nurturant role is something that is deeply human, and *not* gendered, that women get idealized by and enmeshed in too often and that men, conversely, often don't realize within themselves, or cut off or disconnect from within themselves.

WIE: *Still, I remember reading in your book that pretty early on in their development there is a feeling of fulfillment and power that girls in particular find in the arena of personal relationship; and you mentioned earlier that women tend to avoid the kind of responsibility which would take them outside of conventional social relationships. We were*

speaking about spiritual life as a movement beyond such relationships, and beyond the apparent reality of boundedness—a movement which can make it possible for the spiritual seeker to face directly into the identity of self and other and, therefore, into the fundamental impersonality of human experience. In fact, this movement beyond personal reference points is one of the ways that the goal of Buddhist meditation practice is often described: the experiential understanding of emptiness and no-self. What is your understanding of that teaching? What does it mean to you?

ED: There are so many and so few answers to that. Part of an answer would be to say that it has to do with the way you framed the question: that ultimately, it's about the impersonal. That ultimately, it's not about *you*. You know—this isn't about *you*. And it's also about, oddly enough, an alignment with truth that is *also* not about *you*. And I guess the question then becomes: What's the relationship? What's the relationship between *that* and one's personal living? You know, how can we *live* that? And it also then becomes a generosity of spirit, a joy, a felt connection: that is what life is, and it's not personal. What life is, is about that boundlessness. It's not just *about* that, it is that.

WIE: *That's what life really is.*

ED: Yes. That's what it ultimately is.

WIE: *We seem to be speaking about a particular, for lack of a better way of describing it, dimension of reality—an impersonal dimension of reality.*

ED: Well, I think that when we say "an impersonal dimension of reality," it implies that there are other dimensions of reality. There are other *experiences* of reality. There are other ways to *approximate* reality, or to guess what it's up to. But then it becomes personal. Then it's like, well, there's "my reality." I mean, "My reality in this situation is *this* and yours, well, what's yours?" And I don't mean that.

WIE: *Have you found that as a woman, facing into the impersonality of human experience is difficult for you?*

ED: Absolutely. Absolutely difficult.

WIE: *Could you say how?*

ED: Yes, I find it absolutely terrifying. It is terrifying. Because it feels to me as though it threatens absolutely every aspect of who I am. And it should. It should. That is what it's *about*. So, I find that I do a dance on the edge

“EVEN THE BEST WORK can be a dance on the edge. Almost everything that we do we can convert into a way of avoiding that ultimate encounter, and feminism is no more or less a part of

of it. I find both that I do a dance on the edge of that, and that I am engaging in psychological work to come into a different psychological alignment in relation to my fear that will then allow me to let go more easily.

WIE: *Do you feel that the realization of this kind of impersonality or emptiness is necessary to achieve the fulfillment of the spiritual path?*

ED: Yes, if we're talking about the same thing. If we're talking about the same thing, it is the only true human fulfillment. You know, language aside, it is what makes us human, this potential. And I think this potential is also probably what screws us up.

WIE: *You're going to have to explain that one!*

ED: Yes, right. Hello! Well, I think that's because it is about death. It is about the death of what we know. And it's about the fear of being limitless, the fear of being without self, the fear of being unknown to oneself. All of that, in psychological terms, is about death. It's about killing the self. It's about having the self, as it exists now, not exist any longer. You know, the dances that I personally do on the edge of that have been elaborated culturally into most of the things that are oppressive and distressing to us. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud wrote that we have constructed this civilization that is acutely uncomfortable to us because we are so afraid of knowing who we are.

WIE: *Knowing who we really are?*

ED: Yes. Which then may be how I see feminism and spiritual life connecting. Because another way of looking at this is that men have often sought to aggrandize themselves—sought power that would take them beyond nature, that would enable them to feel stronger than the maternal to which they were subjected as children—and to move beyond and deny connection, deny relationship, to free themselves from those ties in ways that can be, and have been, destructive to the planet and to important aspects of human life. I interviewed an eighth-grade girl who talks about how when

you grow up you lose your mind—what she means by “mind” is that felt sense of connection with everything—and I don't think she's wrong. I think that that is the process of embodying culture, or rather, disembodying or disconnecting in order

to acculturate. But if girls were able to continue without the obvious disruption that patriarchy causes in their ability to explore connection, and if children—girls and boys—were able to grow within a context which allowed them to take for granted their connection with others, wouldn't they then be able to come more quickly to that boundlessness, rather than becoming wounded individual selves? *That's* what's interesting and exciting about girls—not that their be-all and end-all is to experience power within personal relationships. I just don't think it is innate or natural that we perceive ourselves as bounded as we do in this culture. I mean, I *know* that's not the case. But right now, within Western culture, to speak about the fundamental interrelatedness of everything and ourselves with each other is still really a laughable idea to most people because all they experience is “Me.” But were we to define ourselves in different ways, that concept might be less foreign and the path easier to wonder about. Or that call within oneself would be easier to hear and understand. If we were to transform our cultural relationships, if we were to have a civilization that was less dishonest and less of a constant cover-up of our fear of being able to let go and be who we really are, that would be a spiritual transformation.

WIE: *O.K. Now I just want to be completely clear. I want to make sure that I understand you correctly.*

ED: Yes, you do that, because I'm not sure I do!

WIE: *The transformation you describe—which compared to the world we live in sounds not too far from heaven on earth—is deeply inspiring to hear about and to consider. But*



THAT.”

because you've framed the human condition as a cultural problem—a symptom of patriarchy—I do find myself wondering how to think about all this in a context that implicates you and me personally, and which addresses what must actually happen in order for the revolution in consciousness you seem to be speaking about to become a real possibility. Are you suggesting that the realization of genuine intimacy and union with other human beings is possible without the individual—male or female—having become firmly established in the realization of emptiness that we've been speaking about?

ED: No. No of course it's not possible. Everything else is some sort of—again—dance, approximation, longing.

WIE: Longing?

ED: Longing, yes. Half-truth. Close but not close enough. Close but no cigar.

WIE: Could you describe your personal experience or intuition of that condition of emptiness, or that dissolution of the self, and your personal response to it?

ED: O.K., so you want a profile in human foibles? O.K.! What do I feel? It is an experience of compassion and clarity that is unlimited. It's also an experience of extraordinary peace. Followed by enormous loss, by a sense of having lost something unbelievably precious.

WIE: Oh, I see. You're talking about the experience of stepping back from it.

ED: Right. So following an incredible sense of stillness, of peace and compassion and clarity, comes something that feels more personal, more like the best “me” I can be rather than something unlimited or impersonal. But what's interesting is that for me each such experience has also created a seed that has rooted, that is very powerful, that is about terror, that is, “Oh, in relation to that, I was gone!” That is the experience. And as a matter of fact on my first Vipassana retreat, I was in a place where I was experiencing an extraordinary flow of energy up and down, and it was going faster and faster and faster, and I kept looking at myself to see if I had dissolved because I was like, “How could I still be in my body and have this experience?” It was very strange.

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And as it went faster and faster, and because I was also beginning to be able to experience this feeling of emptiness on a deeper level, I was getting more and more terrified to the point that I leapt out of bed and ran down the hall looking for someone to help me before I disintegrated. "Please, please, I'm just about to explode, implode, or *something*. . . ." And then I realized, "Ah, yes, there it is, there it is . . . both everything that I want and everything that I'm afraid of."

WIE: *I'm curious about this dance that you describe yourself as doing on the edge of emptiness or dissolution. For some reason I keep seeing an image of the work you do as being part of that dance—*

ED: Yes, I think you're absolutely right. What's really complicated about it is that I have a feeling that if I were not dancing, if I were jumping, or if I had whatever it takes to do that, then my relationship to this work would change completely. I think that I might be able to do it better. But it's also very possible that I wouldn't want to do it at all, because there might be some other way to go. I just don't know. I was talking with a friend about what it would be like if I were not compelled to do this work from such a personal place; if I were engaging it from a more impersonal place what would it look like? One of my responses, as I said, was that I might not do it at all, and that feels like a loss to me which is somehow personal, but I

don't know that my fear of losing this hard-won identity is really what that feeling of loss is about.

WIE: *What do you mean?*

ED: I think you need to realize that everything, even the best work, even the work that is spiritual, that is for liberation, can be a dance on the edge—anything can be. Almost everything that we do we can convert into a way of avoiding that ultimate encounter, and feminism is no more or less a part of that. In fact, women in our culture tend to feel so bad about themselves—for obvious reasons—that many of them will listen to anyone, pay them any amount of money, and subscribe to the most ridiculous New Age ideas, just to be able to sustain and idealize a part of themselves that is basically false and personal. So from my perspective, are there people who define feminism in ways that are much more about aggrandizing something that is sort of the Personal Female blown up? Of course there are. But somehow I don't think that my attachment to doing this work, and to being the person who does this work, is as deep as something else. So that while my work may be a part of my dance on the edge, it isn't what is keeping me from jumping. What keeps me from jumping is something else, something much deeper, something which is the very root of my fear. ■

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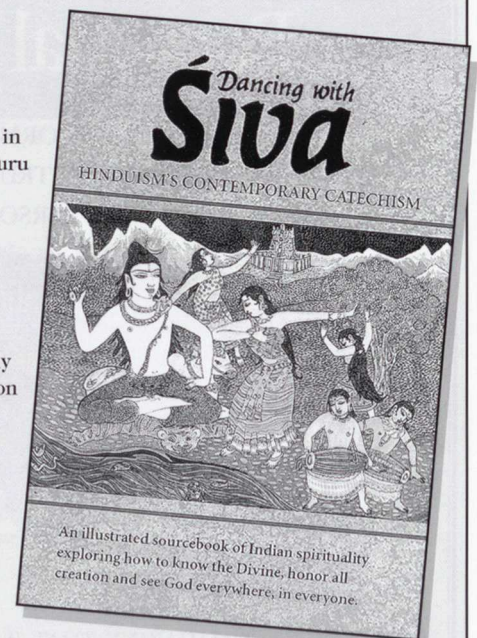
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If gossip of the teacher's indiscretions as done for the benefit of some—exaggerated and taken out of context by mere words heard at second-, third- and fourth-hand—overwhelms me and so the ego wins after all, I deserve to be left behind. Of course, the above is not inconsistent with turning away from the perverse immorality of a false guru. But what better way for a true guru to separate the wheat from the chaff, as it were, than, as an act of love, to set a humorous trap for the ego's judgmentality?

David Trumper
Bala-Cynwyd, Pennsylvania

A CONTINUING JOURNEY

THANK YOU for your excellent and revealing journal. I was utterly appalled to read the first-hand account of abuse at the hands of Da Free John in your last issue; I had no idea that such things happened. It is now eminently clear to me why Andrew Cohen places so much emphasis on integrity and purity. There is, however, an aspect of his approach which concerns me. If the goal of *absolute* perfection is unattainable in human life—simply because there is no goal as such, only a continuing journey *into* perfection—how does this render “profound spiritual attainment . . . almost meaningless,” or “lead us to believe that there is no way out of the human predicament?” Even though I am suggesting that there is no such thing as *full* enlightenment—since this would be to erect a boundary to that which is without limits—I am still talking about a way out of that predicament, and about profound spiritual attainment. Perhaps I can use the metaphor of climbing a mountain: when we reach the summit, what we see is a yet higher summit beyond; and so it goes on. Are we not satisfied with knowing that we are not separate from the Ultimate, and that we are traveling along the way of ever deepening perfection and purity? If we can only be satisfied by knowing that we have actually *achieved* the Ultimate, then I suggest we are in the grip of a subtle type of greed. I would very much

like to know how Andrew Cohen's teaching relates to my own understanding as outlined above.

Tony Horner
Northampton, England

Editor's reply:

Your investigation of these issues is precisely the kind of inquiry that we hoped our last issue would inspire. Too often the idea of the unattainability of ultimate purity and enlightenment is used to justify unethical actions of spiritual teachers and others. As Andrew Cohen states in the letter that you quote, “The meaning and significance of Enlightenment in my teaching I define as coming to that point in one's own evolution when one no longer causes suffering to others through acting out of ignorance.” In our view, such an attainment is the antithesis of greed, subtle or gross. And ceasing to cause suffering to others through acting out of ignorance does not in any way imply a condition that is limited or static. Indeed, it is only through such an attainment that enlightenment's unlimited potential, and its destruction of any boundaries between oneself and

others, can be expressed. In our view, it is the expression of this final attainment in the lives of great realizers that is the inspiration to undertake the spiritual path.

A SILVER LINING

“IS THE GURU DEAD?” Though it's not my inclination to take such statements literally, I would agree that there is indeed a paradigm shift taking place. Many have now reached a level of development that compels them to “walk” of their own accord, intuitively sensing that *true* realization of Self requires that they stand unsupported on their own two feet. Anything short of this is to remain in a dualistic state of parent/child in which the “other” is always above and beyond us. So perhaps we can state that the guru is dead, at least in the most rigid traditional sense of the guru/disciple relationship wherein the disciple allows the guru to literally “carry” them toward liberation or God.

An aspect of this shift in our spiritual development is the unveiling of false gurus that we have been witnessing in the past decade—a movement beyond the adolescent projection of perfection on the less-than-perfect teacher. The dangerous negative side of this is to fall into a state of cynicism—a total rejection of all authorities as well as the possibility of true perfection. But there is a purposeful silver lining within that cloud of cynicism, a healthy and necessary growing beyond our childish relations with the guru.

You have indicted the likes of Andrew Harvey, Ram Dass, Jack Kornfield, Da Free John and others. I would certainly agree that those who have claimed the highest levels of realization especially need to be held accountable for their actions. I differ with you, though, with regard to Jack Kornfield, Ram Dass, etc., in that they do not claim to have reached perfection and are extremely honest in openly exposing their remaining “obscurements.” Ram Dass has always held up his guru as an ideal. His threefold “advice” is to “Honor your guru, deepen your emptiness, deepen your compas-

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sion." Kornfield's words are filled with a beauty that inspires the heart. But "corruption," if I understand your perspective, also lies in the perpetuation of the belief that perfect freedom is not within grasp of this lifetime—nor even the true goal—and here the lives of Ram Dass and Kornfield as example contribute to this belief.

Andrew Cohen often states, however, that it is the extremely rare individual that is able to "go all the way." And Georg Feuerstein states in his article "The Guru in the Postmodern World" that "an authentic guru, even if not yet fully enlightened, amounts to much more than the eye can see or the mind fathom." Reportedly, the Buddha himself resisted the tendency to make him a god, insisting that he was very much human and that he had weaknesses and remained fallible. And even the beloved Krishnamurti has been exposed as having led a double life. How should all this be seen? I arrive at two conclusions. First, true corruption is found in that individual that claims perfection, using that "claim" to establish unquestionable authority

over others, and then falls into patterns of falsehood or abuse. Second, it is a "good" that individuals who have experienced certain levels of realization do not fall into false claims of perfection if it has not actually been achieved—particularly in light of the difficulty and rarity of arriving at true perfection, and the evidence of so many highly realized teachers who have exhibited "human shortcomings."

Dan Derezinski
Amherst Junction, Wisconsin

HEARTFELT GRATITUDE

I AM A DISCIPLE of Swami Bhoomananda Tirtha who lives in Trichur, Kerala. I am doing *sadhana* [spiritual practice] under the guidance of my Gurudeva. With the grace of my Gurudeva I have received insight into the Self. Never on account of Self-knowledge have I felt that the final goal has been reached. My Gurudeva has told me that when all desires fall away the great outcome of Self-realization is attained. My Gurudeva is an Upanishadic teacher. Your perspective was really touching and enlightening to

my heart. Andrew Cohen's answers on the real meaning of surrender ["Surrender Means Having No Control," Summer 1995] were more so. My heartfelt gratitude to you. Reading your journal strengthens my *sadhana* and intensifies my devotion to my Gurudeva.

Pankaj Bhatia
via e-mail

A BURNING FIRE

I FELT GUIDED TO *What Is Enlightenment?*. While and since reading it I feel a fire burning amid a sense of surrender. I have made a commitment to end suffering in my life. As written in so many ways in your Summer 1995 issue ["Impersonal Enlightenment"], I have decided at this most timely point in my life: if enlightenment is not now it will forever be a few steps away.

The sometimes paradoxical viewpoints your interviews and contributors express only add to the validity and freshness of your publication.

John R. Hall
Temecula, California

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