EWHATIS ENLIGHTENMENT?

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

THE MODERN SPIRITUAL PREDICAMENT

An inquiry into the popularization of East-meets-West spirituality

KEN WILBER

"Authentic spirituality is revolutionary. It does not console the world, it shatters it."

GEORG FEUERSTEIN

"Genuine teachings are being butchered in order to better suit our consumerist mentality."



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THE MODERN SPIRITUAL PREDICAMENT An inquiry into the popularization of East-meets-West spirituality

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RELEASING THE UNSPEAKABLE GLORY OF THE ABSOLUTE

"The degree to which we are willing to allow ourselves to respond to the call of the Absolute is the degree to which the explosive power of Truth and Love, unrestrained by the status quo, will make itself known in this world."

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A SPIRITUALITY THAT TRANSFORMS

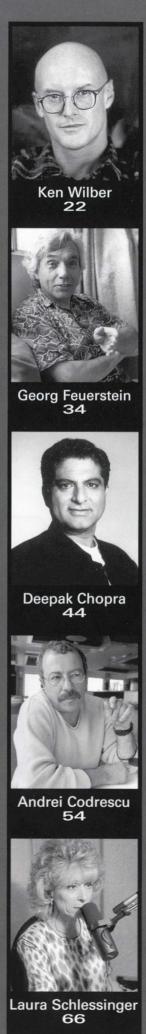
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by Kenneth Moyle

ENLIGHTENMENT?

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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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ANDREW

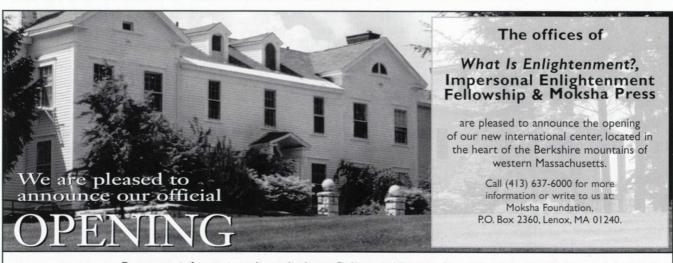
Spiritual teacher and founder of What Is Enlightenment? Andrew Cohen began teaching in 1986 after a spiritual realization transformed his life beyond recognition. Since that time the

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 superstitious 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 Freedom Has No History, An Unconditional Relationship to Life, Enlightenment Is a Secret, Autobiography of an Awakening, My Master Is My Self and other books.



For more information about Andrew Cohen and his teaching, please contact:

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LETTERS



Spring/Summer 1997

What Is Enlightenment? would like to hear what you think about our articles and the issues we raise. We welcome your letters. Letters may be edited for length and clarity.

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A BASKETFUL OF THANKS

A BASKETFUL OF THANKS for sending me your current issue on "Science and Enlightenment." I have read every article with great interest. The interviews are penetrating and provocative, for students both of the sciences of matter and those of energy.

Vimala Thakar Dalhousie, India

A CLOSE READING

CONGRATULATIONS on your "Science" issue (and its lovely cover!). You've done a tremendous job of covering a very large waterfront and allowing radically different viewpoints to interact without losing their cutting edge. For instance, counterpointing Fritjof Capra's dialogue with E.F. Schumacher with that particular selection from Schumacher himself was brilliant. You also managed to allow Amit Goswami a genuinely fair go (with some support from the second go by Capra and your delightful openended review of Frank Tipler's The Physics of Immortality) even while offsetting the hegemony of physics with Huston Smith's heavy philosophical guns (plus some nice sharp-shots from Ken Wilber) and Rupert Sheldrake's equally telling case that any science which doesn't start from living creatures is only a shadow science.

While tending on the whole to agree with the Smith/Schumacher critique of the Goswami enterprise, I'm also aware that at least once before in the history of modern science a really major advance was made by taking a lead from spiritualitynamely Faraday's invention of field theory after considering that basic physical reality should reflect God's nature in being totally present at every separate point in space and time. The trouble with Goswami at the moment is that unlike Faraday, he's not yet gotten sufficiently down to testable specifics to know whether he has anything to offer science that couldn't be offered by any one of a thousand other theories which produce nice comprehensive explanations of known phenomena, including overcoming current paradoxes, by introducing consciousness as an extra variable in the situations.

Rupert Sheldrake is open to the same criticism as far as the more far-

reaching aspects of his own new field theory are concerned, but he can be forgiven at the moment because he's a dedicated experimentalist (and an admirer of Faraday to boot, I'm interested to note from your interview) and for the present is putting his main emphasis on getting some basic experimental evidence for the general idea of natural law as habit rather than mathematico-legal fiat. Overall, I thought his contribution was the jewel in the crown of your issue for several reasons, one of which I've already mentioned (his critique of the hegemony of the mathematical/ abstraction approach which currently dominates science, where he comes not from philosophy like Huston Smith, but from science itself, like Faraday in his day). Another is his very personal style, telling us what the various issues have actually meant to him in his life. A third, perhaps the most important, is his grasping of the nettle that when spirituality and science try to interact only at the level of physics, they are nicely able to skim over the "red in tooth and claw" aspects of nature, which must be taken into account by any spirituality.

Congratulations too on shedding real new light on the Bohm-Krishnamurti relationship and what they were severally trying to achieve through "dialogue." In fact the highest compliment I could pay you is that What Is Enlightenment?, and this issue of it in particular, is a living example of the kind of thing they were both aiming at, in which genuine exchange transcends mere argument or debate while doing real justice to individuality.

John Wren-Lewis School of Studies in Religion University of Sydney, Australia

H.P. BLAVATSKY ON THE LIMITS OF SCIENCE

THANK YOU for sending a copy What Is Enlightenment? to me and the speakers at our Theosophy/Science Conference at Tekels Park, Surrey, a few weeks ago. I for one found it most interesting and valuable. Our work has a common goal, and I send our best wishes to you and your staff.

It may be interesting to quote H.P. Blavatsky: "Official science is surrounded on every side and hedged in by unapproachable, forever impenetrable mysteries. And why? Simply because physical science is self-doomed to a squirrel-like progress around a wheel of matter limited by our five senses." (Collected Writings, 1890)

Also: "... the tardiness of Scientists to recognise that other instruments of research may be applicable to the mysteries of Nature besides those of the physical plane, and that it may consequently be impossible to appreciate the phenomena of any one plane correctly without observing them as well from the points of view afforded by others." (Secret Doctrine, 1888)

Harold Tarn The Blavatsky Trust, Tyneside, U.K.

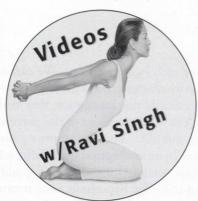
TRANSCENDENTAL PHYSICS

I BEGAN AN EARNEST SEARCH for intellectually and logically sound ways to find answers to the really important questions confronting humanity-like, What is reality?, What are we? and Why are we here?—as an undergrad physics student in 1956. Some thinkers represented in your Spring/Summer 1997 issue, like Ken Wilber, Huston Smith and E.F. Schumacher, express the idea that modern science is unable to answer, or even address, such questions. I agree that it has not been able to, but I do not agree that it is unable to answer these guestions. Science, as it exists, cannot answer our most important questions, but that is because we started with certain simplifying assumptions in the beginning. So we must change science in a way that will equip it to answer such basic questions. We can do this by changing basic assumptions—specifically the assumption that reality exists independent of the perceiving subject. This assumption, the most basic assumption underlying scientific materialism, does not qualify as a scientific hypothesis since it cannot be tested, proved or disproved. There is no way to investigate a reality without consciousness. In addition, we now have compelling evidence, with Bell's theorem and the Aspect experiment, that this assumption is simply false.

We've been asking whether consciousness can be explained in terms of matter and energy. This is the wrong question. We should be asking: Can matter and energy be explained in terms of consciousness? And the answer is: It can be. When the assumption of the existence of a reality independent of consciousness is replaced with the assumption that consciousness is the ground of all reality, a vital new scientific paradigm is the result. Amit Goswami argues very convincingly for this view as the metaphysical basis for a new scientific idealism paradigm in his book The Self-Aware Universe, but falls short of proving the point. I have recently published a book, Transcendental Physics, which goes to the next step. Using the basic principles of quantum mechanics and a mathematical approach based on G. Spencer Brown's Laws of Form, the logic of infinite de-

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Letters continued

scent proves that consciousness had A DIFFERENT REALITY to preexist physical reality, not the other way around.

> Edward Close Jackson, Missouri

KNOWING AND NOT **KNOWING**

I WANTED TO WRITE to say what a fantastic issue you've produced. There are so many truly great things about it that I don't know where to start. The design is exquisite, beautiful to look at and very, very readable.

I was really excited to see this issue, as I have read books by almost all of the contributors and been very interested in the whole area of the connection between physics and spirituality. It is fascinating to see that however wonderful and cosmic the physical theories may be, what counts most is the quality of the individual scientist and what he or she is bringing to the investigation—basically either arrogance or humility. I never understood so clearly that human freedom cannot be reduced to any form of scientism, because then it would be known in a way that is incompatible with freedom itself. The whole issue is completely fascinating. a huge play of the struggle between knowing and not knowing.

To me, Frank Tipler's The Physics of Immortality is a frightening example of what happens when a scientist takes it all the way. I was shocked to read of Tipler's conclusions and his implicit view of a humanity that could be reduced to a 100-gram computer. What kind of life would that be? I don't feel very attracted to eternity in cyberspace, however many cosmos there may be to explore!

Many, many thanks for such a stunning production.

> Rick Asherson London, England

IT SEEMS TO ME that the new scientific paradigm has to do with the deep yearning that all of us have to understand the meaning of our existence, as well as what happens to us after we die. Science has been the boon of our generation, but although it has allowed us to live farther away from our roots than any civilization or generation in history, it has not allowed us to stay "forever young." So what has science really given us except a fake sense of "self"? Modern religion has largely been co-opted by the miracles of scientific discovery and invention. Most religions have bought into the idea that in duality we can enjoy all the fruits of our creations, that man reigns supreme on earth, and that somehow we needn't think about our relationship to earth or to the origins of our being. Thus our sense of separation from the reality of who and what we are widens, and as this separation widens, so too does our anxiety. There is a deep hole in our psyche that is filled with a restless sorrow that somewhere we went down the wrong path, and we want to go back and start over again; we want a different reality.

If we could take all of the combined wisdom of the scientists' words in all of your wonderful articles and somehow condense them into an elixir and drink its contents, what would we know? Simply that, like the rest of us, many scientists have a deep yearning to rest in the arms of the beloved. We would know that when trying to verbalize the vastness, the boundless, the eternal, the ineffable, we are all reduced to some primitive form of intelligence which is no more capable of doing this than were our ancestors who pictorialized it on the walls of caves in total darkness.

To be aware that we are living on one plane of many realities is, to me at least, the definition of what it means to be conscious. What your

magazine did on this trip around the block was to confirm in our minds that there are many realities existing together at the same time. We have learned that we can bear witness to the shadows of the other realities even as we exist in form. We are conscious of the fact that we "know" something, but what is it that we "know"? Only that there is some energy, some source that seems to guide us and lead us in learning while we are in form.

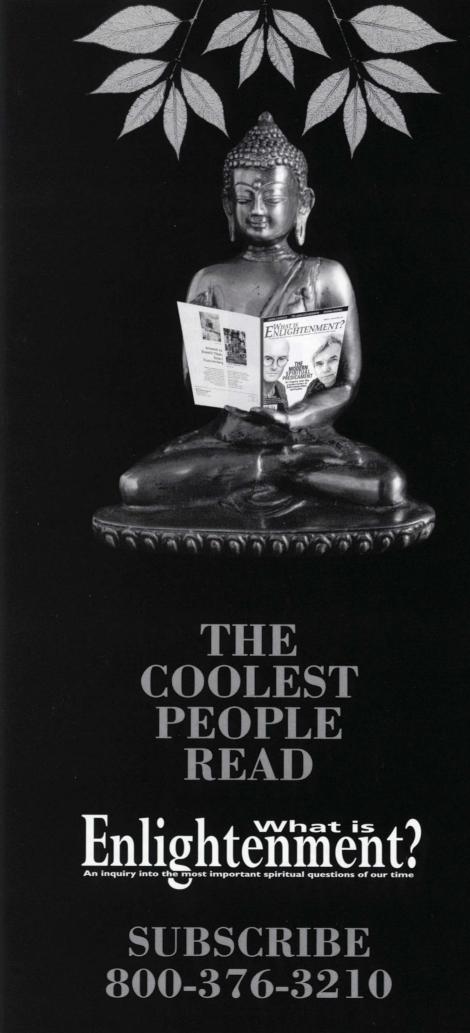
We live on this planet in a state of consciousness that is pretty much reactive to the events and stimuli that can be seen, heard or felt physically. But there are those among us who can stand back and look at themselves from a "higher" vantage point or from a different perspective that enables them to understand what an experience means in the totality of their lives, not just in the moment that it is happening. To all the scientists out there who have discovered that they are souls first who also happen to have some knowledge of the physical universe, I would say that they have the best insight on "knowing" other planes of reality and other truths. But I would also say that when we meditate together we will realize that we all know all that there is to know, that we are bound together by the oneness that is everything and everywhere.

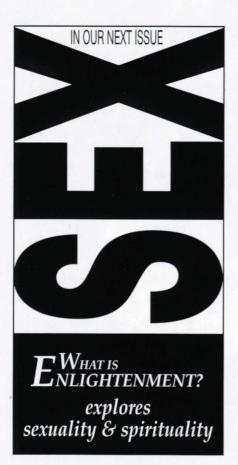
> Thomas Borin Tucson, Arizona

THE FIGHT AGAINST ILLITERACY

JUST A FEW NIGHTS AGO I stopped off at a Barnes and Noble in my hometown New York City. I pulled down the latest issue of *What Is Enlightenment?*, bought a tea, sat down at a table and began to read. Here are some of my thoughts and feelings about *WIE*:

It was as though some boy had







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Letters continued

graduated high school and was summing it up: "Religion, particularly prayer, is cool; the rest is bullshit and irrelevant—particularly science, knowledge of which cannot make me happier. And what, after all, is the purpose of life if not to be happy?" In case I am not being clear, I find this thinking to be sophomoric and I felt that way about much of what I read in your magazine.

One of the great challenges, in this country and in the world, is the fight against ignorance and illiteracy. Unfortunately, two of the greatest Western religions (Christianity and Islam) seem not to discourage ignorance as long as the adherent lives a good or holy life (as defined by their orthodoxies). Your magazine, I daresay, is certainly not contributing intentionally to the tragedy of illiteracy, nor to contempt for knowledge; it just felt that way. Unhappily, the only evidence I found for WIE's not preferring spirituality over a solid secular liberal education was the fact that only a liberally educated person could understand or appreciate your magazine. The domain of the liberally educated is your editors' and writers' source and the source of your readers.

Why do I care about your science-bashing? For one thing, it is unseemly. The Scopes trial was seventy years ago, Galileo and Copernicus several hundred. Have we not progressed? For another thing, true enlightenment cannot exist in disdain of one of the greatest creations of the human mind, science, and its painfully achieved knowledge of the (physical) universe. Science has brought us the modern world, whether we like it or not, its good and its evil. Enlightenment must be able to show us the way to avoid Mad Max, a scientific apocalypse. Turning our backs on science, failing to see its genius and its contributions, will not do. Mad Max is as much the consequence of the failure of wisdom as of the arrogance of science.

We are in real trouble if we discard the deduced truths of science because they conflict with the stories of the Bible. A viable religion, for modern, educated men and women, had best include stories that are planetcentered, not man-centered, not even Adam's God-centered. These stories can honor the physical universe and our hard-fought knowledge of it; honor life in all its forms, animal and vegetable, mammal and insect; honor mankind for its ability, finally to recognize that its own greatness lies partly in the acceptance of its own nondivinity; and, most of all, honor our common home.

> David Abraham via e-mail

GOOD WORDS

THANK YOU so much for your journal. It is quite fascinating. Whether the topic is women or science you always manage to approach a delicate and controversial subject with honesty, intelligence, and the exact blend of rigor and creativity that makes What Is Enlightenment?, in my opinion, by far the best spiritual magazine available today. The right questions are addressed to the right people in the appropriate spirit of inquiry. Once again, I can only wholeheartedly applaud.

Gilles Farcet Hauteville, France

THE LATEST ISSUE of What Is Enlight-enment? is incredible! It is a mind-blowing issue that literally redefines what a magazine can be. Its cohesiveness is a web that reflects back on itself—each article complements or challenges the others, making the magazine a literal forum, an alive gathering. The letters add to this immensely, and the brilliance and creativity with which everything is presented draws the reader in from the

start and never lets go! You couldn't have a more serious magazine, nor one more engaging—it's a living, breathing entity. Its contents are enough to engage one for the entire six months until the next issue arrives.

The power of What Is Enlightenment? is its accessibility without compromise. Most amazing of all is the depth of perspective you bring to the subject, in that your questions about where the scientists are really atwhat their motivations are—are the main subject of the magazine. It is an unprecedented perspective, and your framing the issue with the articles from Andrew Cohen both sets the tone and deeply answers the question, while still leaving everything open.

> B. Roth Washington, D.C.

THANK YOU very much for the latest issue of What Is Enlightenment? It is a very handsome publication and I guite admired the articles, especially those which presented a debate between people or points of view. I have read other magazines of the same general type, and yours struck me as superior, just because it involved some dialectic.

Martin Green Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford, California

THE LATEST ISSUE of What Is Enlightenment? cuts sharper than a razor through the hubris of the scientificmaterialist paradigm. I find myself discovering all the ways I have put my faith in the arrogant version of the scientific perspective. The issue beautifully communicates this in so many different ways. You chose a very diverse but tremendously clarifying group of scientists and critics of science to explore the range of this topic.

> Mo Riddiford Sydney, Australia

THANK YOU very much for your very interesting magazine. There is definitely a need for the work that you're doing.

Michael E. Zimmerman Department of Philosophy Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana

I WAS QUITE IMPRESSED by the content and quality of your latest issue. What Is Enlightenment? is a profound magazine, and it has all the seriousness and weight that most magazines of its genre lack.

> Montserrat Plá Barcelona, Spain



WOMEN AND ENLIGHTENMENT

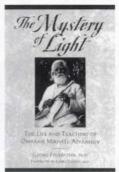
READING THE FALL/WINTER 1996 issue of What Is Enlightenment? I was, quite honestly, very impressed—especially with the inclusion of the against-the-grain views of persons like Shanti Adams, Z. Budapest and Daniel Roumanoff. The issue had a remarkable unity of theme while offering a provocative diversity of perspectives, and you've achieved a nice look as well.

Philip Novak Department of Philosophy and Religion Dominican College, San Rafael, California

I RECENTLY BOUGHT your magazine and was delighted by the articles on women and enlightenment. I was

continued on page 13

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Letters continued

particularly touched by the conversation between Shanti Adams and Vimala Thakar.

For many years I have followed a path that advocates no questioning and silence as the means of attaining liberation. I have experienced much and been much blessed but I have not yet attained freedom. It is as if I remember, but can't remember what it is that I remember. There are glimpses of great light, of great peace, but still I feel I am not there. The grace of my master is loving and generous but I ask myself why I am dependent on another human being to live in a state of grace which feels to me like it is the birthright of every human being. Perhaps the truth is all so simple that it has been experienced but not recognized by me, and if it has been experienced, perhaps I have been unable to sustain it. I am driven by a force that demands liberation.

I firmly believe that this process is different for men and women, and Shanti expresses it so well that even though I have been unable to express my experiences in this way, I recognized immediately the truth in her article.

I thank you. God knows we need lots of encouragement and inspiration to keep going at times, and your magazine does this very well.

> Carol via e-mail

WITH REGARD TO the article by Daniel Roumanoff on Anandamayi Ma in your Fall/Winter 1996 issue: It is quite clear that even at this late date Mr. Roumanoff still feels guilty about (and thus the need to publicly rationalize and justify) what was undoubtedly the great mistake of his spiritual life: his total failure to come to terms with the grace given to him by Anandamayi Ma. He tells us how after less than five months as a would-be monk in her ashram, he

bolts the first time his ego feels confronted, concocting a specious argument that Anandamavi Ma was giving more time to the so-called VIP visitors to the ashram than to the "common people" (as though as a foreigner with comparatively little experience of India he could have had any sense of traditional protocol in these matters). At this early stage in the game Mr. Roumanoff, as a neophyte sadhaka [spiritual aspirant], should have been focused on his spiritual practice rather than already finding fault with an extraordinary spiritual master, held throughout India in the highest esteem, to whom he had only recently devoted his life. With a sigh of relief he relates how he was saved from the obscurity of a life of disciplined mystical absorption in India so that he could find himself as a born-again French businessman. Such superficiality is of course all too common with the contemporary Western seeker, but I am a bit dismayed that What Is Enlightenment? would see fit to print such a thing.

Few teachers of modern times have been as accessible to the sincere spiritual aspirant as was Anandamayi Ma, as Mr. Roumanoff's many private meetings with her bear witness to. There were many Westerners both before and after him who had close and extensive contact with Anandamayi Ma as well as a host of distinguished Indian seekers, scholars and yogis, none of whom would share his assessment of her. As we all know, the ego is only too adept at concocting any argument, however implausible, to save its skin when actually confronted with the authenticity of a genuine transformative mystical structure. It seems obvious to me that Roumanoff flunked a very preliminary test given him by Anandamayi Ma and that she was only too happy to let him go his own way. Rather than deny his desire to live in her ashram, particularly as he states that he had come to India for that purpose





GINTRODUCTION

The Modern Spiritual Predicament

An inquiry into the popularization of East-meets-West spirituality

by the Editors

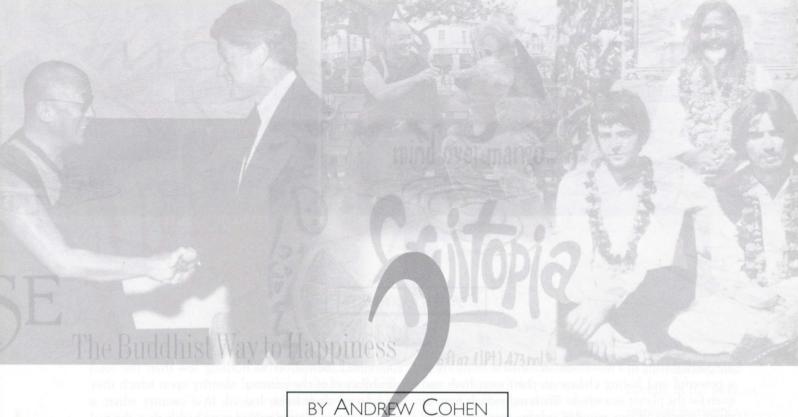
o all appearances, contemporary America is in the midst of an unprecedented explosion of interest in spirituality. Over the past thirty years, millions of Americans have ventured beyond the Sunday school religions of their youth and the materialistic promise of the American Dream, in search of deeper wisdom, extraordinary experiences and a more meaningful way to live. The forms this search has taken are many. From the Beatles' LSD-inspired forays into Transcendental Meditation to Carlos Castaneda's magical and mysterious apprenticeship with Don Juan; from Richard Alpert's triumphant return from the East as the newly christened Ram Dass to the ever evolving identities of Da Free John; from the orgiastic ochre-clad following of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh to the conceptshattering "transformational technology" of est; from the many incarnations of Shirley McLaine to channeled messages from the Pleiades, from Hatha Yoga to Hare Krishna; from Zen Buddhism to Tibetan Buddhism to American Buddhism; from Creation Spirituality to Jews for Jesus; from Autobiography of a Yogi to The Celestine Prophecy, the powerful impact of America's multifaceted spiritual quest has left an indelible mark on our cultural landscape.

Indeed, it's hard to find a branch of our popular culture that has not at least been touched by the surging wave of American spiritual fervor. Spiritual bookstores abound. Even mainstream bookstores now stock grow-

ing spiritual sections with an avalanche of books, tapes, videos and magazines purporting to transform, illuminate, or at least enhance the life of the buyer. Every week, in more and more cities all over the country, newspapers bristle with announcements of speaking engagements and booksignings with celebrated spiritual figures. Teachers, preachers, shamans and gurus from traditions East, West, North and South are finding themselves overrun by eager American aspirants hungry for their wisdom. Everyone seems to know someone who has become involved with a personal growth, selfhelp or spiritual group. Even some of today's best-known celebrities from the worlds of business and popular entertainment—corporate executives, financiers, movie stars and pop musicians—are unabashed about publicly declaring their allegiance and gratitude to spiritual authority figures as diverse as Deepak Chopra and the Dalai Lama, figures who only a few years ago would have been considered overly esoteric or culturally marginal. Even the current occupants of the White House are known to have sought the advice of one of the most popular spokespersons of the New Age. And in the once-impenetrable world of Western academia, previously questionable oriental mystical ideas have now found their way into the discourse of disciplines ranging from physics to ecology to psychology.

If all of this is any indication, then American seekers may have good reason to feel, as many do, that they

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The philosophical climate in the modern spiritual marketplace where East meets West is and has been for some time now somewhat like the weather in California: very pleasant. Not too hot, not too cold, but just right. This climate is pleasant because it is comfortable. And it is precisely because it is so comfortable that it has become so popular. In this climate comfort has become more relevant than truth and, because of this, over time many ideas have become sacred in order to ensure that no clouds will appear in an otherwise blue sky. There is a status quo in the alternative spiritual subculture and it has its own laws, its own commandments and its own tenets. And while it is obviously very important that more and more of us find ourselves being drawn to embrace the spiritual dimension of life, as long as we do not closely examine for ourselves what that dimension actually is, it will be all too easy for us to draw conclusions about that dimension that may ultimately reveal themselves to be insubstantial. As the current interest in the spiritual dimension of life continues to grow, now even beginning to enter the mainstream, simultaneously it seems that the deeper implications of spiritual revelation are increasingly becoming submerged beneath the prevailing climate of pleasant feelings, naive expectations and too-often sentimental hopes and dreams. In the midst of this current surge of interest, all-important distinctions that help us find our way have become

INTRODUCTION

continued



are participating in a movement destined to bring about a powerful and lasting change in their own lives and even for the planet as a whole. With individuals from so many corners of our popular culture participating in what appears to be nothing less than a spiritual renaissance, could it be that America has finally discovered its true manifest destiny—as the harbinger of a message of *spiritual* freedom to a world in desperate need of enlightenment? Has the United States, for almost a century the military, industrial and economic leader of the free world, finally found its truest and most noble calling?

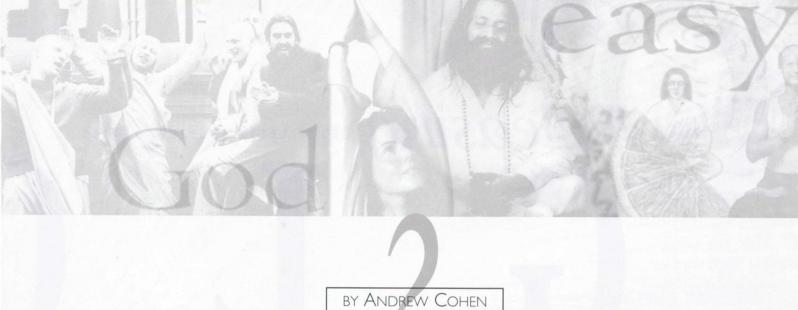
Without a doubt, something significant and unprecedented is happening here. Perhaps never before have so many people ventured across cultural and ideological boundaries to pursue their spiritual potential. Aided by computer technology and electronic media capabilities undreamed of in any previous era, Americans now have unlimited access not only to the broadest range of contemporary teachers and practices, but also to the accumulated wisdom of the ages. And the fact that this fertile environment is making it possible for such a large number of people to become interested in a more spiritual way of life is clearly a good thing. In a world gone mad with material obsession and lust for power, who would argue that the desire to cultivate greater compassion and awareness could be anything but positive?

And yet, despite the powerful impact this spiritual resurgence is clearly having on the lives of many, many people, and for all the society-transforming potential it seems to hold, we wonder if, in the excitement of America's exuberant embrace of all things spiritual, the radical implications of genuine spiritual awakening are really being considered. Throughout the ages, those who have sincerely aspired to spiritual heights have

committed themselves to nothing less than the total annihilation of the personal identity upon which they have based their lives. Indeed, in a country where a good imitation is often valued more highly than the real thing, where image reigns over substance, where the skill with which politicians create an impression is of greater interest to the public than what they actually have to say, the fact that the pursuit of the transcendent suddenly seems to have captured the interest of a mass audience should make us stop and think. Could we, as modern Americans, really be as interested in the ultimately revolutionary implications of spiritual practice and experience as a growing number of us think we are?

With spiritual bestsellers such as Chicken Soup for the Soul and It's Easier Than You Think pouring off the bookstore shelves, with spiritual workshops of all kinds promising transformative results in two days' time, and with light and sound machines purported to "meditate you" into higher states of consciousness, it would seem that several important questions beg to be addressed. How much of what is being taught today as a way to transformation actually has anything to do with true enlightenment? Could any radical spiritual attainment be less ultimately demanding in the age of electronic mass communication than it was in the times of Shankara, the Buddha, or Jesus Christ? And, could it really be true, as many believe, that as we stand poised at the brink of the millennium, our collective evolution has uniquely prepared us to make a quantum spiritual leap?

What is going on here? In our endeavor to find out, we spoke with some of the most respected spiritual thinkers and cultural critics of our time. What they had to say we found fascinating, challenging, and above all, inspiring. Buckle your seatbelts—because this issue turned out to be quite a ride!



blurred. It would seem for example (if you read all the fine print) that meditation and massage therapy, self-inquiry and a vegetarian diet, a weekend intensive and full monastic ordination all lead us, sooner or later, to the same place. The crucial distinction between self-improvement and self-annihilation (enlightenment) is more and more becoming obscured. And the most significant result of this is that the distinction between the sacred and the mundane is becoming lost.

As the spiritual marketplace is flooded with ever more information about the most esoteric and profoundly subtle reaches of human consciousness, it is worth noting that instead of a greater reverence for that which is unfathomable, intellectual overfamiliarity has created an environment that is more casual than truly awake with regard to that which is sacred. While greater interest has undoubtedly created more sympathy for the spiritual dimension of life in general, we should not assume automatically that there is equally greater interest in real depth.

One of the most fundamental commandments of the spiritual status quo of the time we are living in is "Thou shalt not judge," which is really only a fear of making important distinctions. The light of truth unfettered by hope, superstition and sentimentality is ruthless in its absolute simplicity. Succumbing in any way to fear of its austerity automatically will distort its reflection in this world. Reluctance to draw conclusions for fear of making judgments, coupled with attachment to pleasing beliefs, creates an environment that allows little room for real depth.

Direct realization of that profound wisdom which has the power to destroy ignorance requires enormous courage and rare independence of spirit. Sustaining that realization demands an ever wakeful readiness to question our experience in such a way that would leave little room for falsehood.

"In the philosophical climate in the modern spiritual marketplace, comfort has become more relevant than truth and, because of this, over time many ideas have become sacred in order to ensure that no clouds will appear in an otherwise blue sky."

Releasing the unspeakable

Absolute

Shortly after I spring of 1989, I discovered what was wrong with the modern American spiritual scene.

I found that the absolute necessity to put the call of the spiritual life and its demands above and beyond anything else if moved to northern one truly wants to be free in this life was too great for most modern-day seekers. Indeed, the shocking degree of compro-California in the mise that has become the status quo in the modern spiritual world hit me as never before. What had been a naive assumption on my part, that most seekers are true seekers—which means clearly understanding the price that has to be paid by any man or woman who wants to win true spiritual freedom in this life—was soon shattered. It became obvious that very few seekers and meditators take seriously the possibility of going all the way. In fact, it gradually became clear that for the vast majority of seekers, spiritual experience provides merely an escape from the mundane. The call from the Absolute—the call to go all the way—fueled by an enthusiastic willingness to give up anything in order to succeed seems to strike far too deeply into the solar plexus of many.

> The call to liberation is an impersonal one. It is a call from the Absolute. A beckoning from the Self to the self. When that call is heard directly, even if only for a split second, uncensored by fear or time, in that second one knows everything. One recognizes, even if only for that brief instant, that only that is real and all else false. In that realization

> > by Andrew Cohen

"When the spiritual status quo of any time is allowed to remain anything less than one of constant and permanent

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comes the understanding that attachment to and investment in that which has been recognized as being false, impermanent and unreal is ignorance, and causes bondage, suffering and potentially endless stagnation. The vision of unending liberation, that vast expanse without beginning or end, poses a great threat for the majority of seekers who still remain attached to the mirage of selfhood, and who more often than not choose to create the illusion of movement through gradually approaching no limitation by slow and always calculated incremental steps.

The call to awaken from the Self to the self is absolute by its very nature. How could it be otherwise? Those who are pure of heart, when recognizing this fact, do not object. But those whose investment in this world is still great experience the call of the Absolute as the ultimate threat to all that has come before and all that they hope will be in the future. The response to the uncompromising nature of the call from the Absolute in the individual who is still attached to this life is experienced as a deep, visceral NO!

Little do they know that the joy experienced when giving spiritual evolution the highest priority is extraordinary! Allowing oneself to embrace a life without compromise and free from pretense is utterly liberating in its depth and singularity. Like none other, it enables the individual to give their full and undivided attention to the destruction of all that is false, wrong and untrue. The individual who has taken the bold step of leaving the world and all the compromise that it represents

DIUTION

of body, mind and soul, the inevitable result has to be the suppression of the very force of life itself."

behind in order to completely and irrevocably destroy the very seeds of that compromise in themselves, when successful, often becomes the enemy of the source of that compromise. The source of that compromise is, in the collective/individual mind, a fundamental and deeply existential fear of dissolution, nonexistence and insignificance. It represents an absolute and final loss of freedom for the false and limited notion of self. This fear, which usually remains unconscious and unquestioned, causes the individual to blindly adhere to fixed notions about the nature of reality, including shallow and destructive notions of a personal self that almost always serve to create a world where profound evolution becomes impossible and the law of the spirit is one of stagnation.

The modern spiritual world is in many ways in a similar condition. In spite of the fact that more and more people seem to be expressing interest in the spiritual dimension of life, the deeper layers of the fundamental attachment to time and history usually remain largely untouched. Most revealing about the time we are living in is that even now, when one dares to consider without reservation the deepest implications of the uncompromising call of the Absolute, that individual often becomes suspect in the minds of many. And when one not only considers the implications of that call but dares to respond to it unconditionally, thereby stepping outside the collective norm, one is often viewed with suspicion, fear and sometimes even hatred, not only by society at large, but also by those who profess deep interest in the spiritual life themselves.

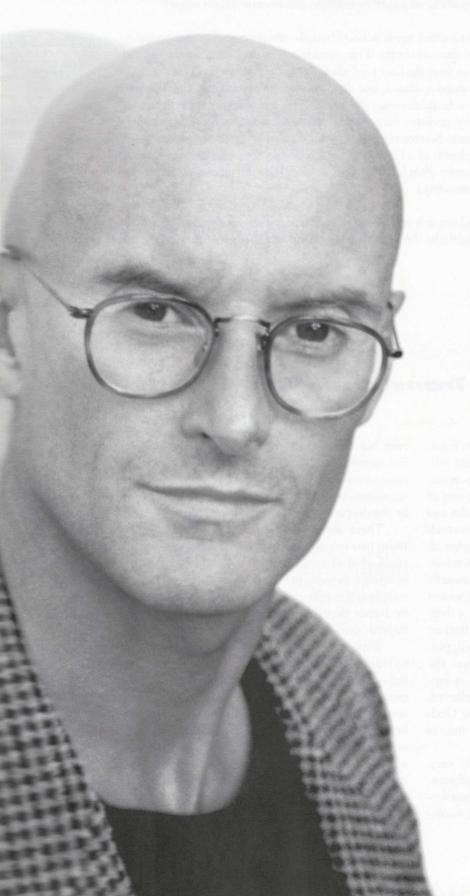
The spiritual status quo of the time we are living in shies away from extremes for fear of making the same mistakes that many have made in the recent past either by becoming too intimately involved with charismatic and too often corrupt spiritual leaders, or by allowing oneself to take the call of the Absolute so seriously that one would begin to neglect more worldly concerns in a way that would be considered irresponsible. This is understandable. But the fact is, the Absolute cares not for our fears or our worldly concerns! The true Self cares only about itSelf. The degree to which we are willing to allow ourselves to respond to Its call is the degree to which the explosive power of Truth and Love, unrestrained by the status quo, will make itself known in this world. Liberated from the grips of the visceral no, that power reveals itself to be a hurricane of destruction leaving in its wake only perfect peace and unqualified harmony. When the spiritual status quo of any time is allowed to remain anything less than one of constant and permanent revolution of body, mind and soul, the inevitable result has to be the suppression of the very force of life itself.

In the time we are living in, as in the past and as always will be, unless we are willing to take enormous risks, unless we are willing to step outside of and beyond the status quo, unless we are willing to respond fearlessly and wholeheartedly to the call from the Absolute, the unspeakable glory of our own true nature will remain locked within the forbidden depths of our own heart.

A Spirituality that



TRANSFOMMS



Ken Wilber needs little introduction. A genius recognized in his own time, this prolific author is widely acclaimed for his innovative and critical synthesis of philosophies East and West, and has been hailed by many as one of the brightest lights of the modern spiritual world. With an ever growing influence, his ideas claim adherents from an enormous diversity of ideological camps-while he, a practicing Buddhist, remains fiercely independent, aligned only to the force of his own inquiry. Not afraid to take the risk of being controversial, he has been harshly criticized for his outspoken and fearless questioning of many of the most cherished ideas of the modern progressive status quo. Yet it is this very quality in him, his unrelenting passion for genuine inquiry—a quality all too rare in the modern spiritual arena—that we find so refreshing. In the following original essay Ken Wilber shouts from his heart, imploring each of us to take up the challenge of embracing "a spirituality that transforms."

Hal Blacker, a contributing editor for *What Is Enlightenment*?, has described the topic of this special issue of the magazine in the following way (although this repeats statements made elsewhere in this issue, it is nonetheless worth quoting at length, simply because of its eloquence, straightforwardness, and unerring good sense):

We intend to explore a sensitive question, but one which needs to be addressed—the superficiality that pervades so much of the current spiritual exploration and discourse in the West, particularly in the United States. All too often, in the translation of the mystical traditions from the East (and elsewhere) into the American idiom, their profound depth is flattened out, their radical demand is diluted, and their potential for revolutionary transformation is squelched. How this occurs often seems to be subtle, since the words of the teachings are often the same. Yet through an apparent sleight of hand involving, perhaps, their context and therefore ultimately their meaning, the message of the greatest teachings often seems to become transmuted from the roar of the fire of liberation into something more closely resembling the soothing burble of a California hot tub. While there are exceptions, the radical implications of the greatest teachings are thereby often lost. We wish to investigate this dilution of spirituality in the West and inquire into its causes and consequences.

I would like to take that statement and unpack its basic points, commenting on them as best I can, because taken together, those points highlight the very heart and soul of a crisis in American spirituality.

-K.W.



Translation vs.

Transformation

n a series of books (e.g., A Sociable God, Up from Eden, and The Eye of Spirit), I have tried to show that religion itself has always performed two very important, but very different, functions. One, it acts as a way of creating meaning for the separate self: it offers myths and stories and tales and narratives and rituals and revivals that, taken together, help the separate self make sense of, and endure, the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. This function of religion does not usually or necessarily change the level of consciousness in a person; it does not deliver radical transformation. Nor does it deliver a shattering liberation from the separate self altogether. Rather, it consoles the self, fortifies the self, defends the self, promotes the self. As long as the separate self believes the myths, performs the rituals, mouths the prayers, or embraces the dogma, then the self, it is fervently believed, will be "saved"—either now in the glory of being Godsaved or Goddess-favored, or in an afterlife that insures eternal wonderment.

But two, religion has also served—in a usually very, very small minority—the function of radical transformation and liberation. This function of religion does not fortify the separate self, but utterly shatters it—not consola-

tion but devastation, not entrenchment but emptiness, not complacency but explosion, not comfort but revolution—in short, not a conventional bolstering of consciousness but a radical transmutation and transformation at the deepest seat of consciousness itself.

There are several different ways that we can state these two important functions of religion. The first function—that of creating meaning for the self—is a type of *horizontal* movement; the second function—that of transcending the self—is a type of *vertical* movement (higher or deeper, depending on your metaphor). The first I have named "translation," the second, "transformation."

With translation, the self is simply given a new way to think or feel about reality. The self is given a new belief—perhaps holistic instead of atomistic, perhaps forgiveness instead of blame, perhaps relational instead of analytic. The self then learns to translate its world and its being in the terms of this new belief or new language or new paradigm, and this new and enchanting translation acts, at least temporarily, to alleviate or diminish the terror inherent in the heart of the separate self.

But with transformation, the very process of translation itself is challenged, witnessed, undermined and even-

"With translation, the self goes sleepy

tually dismantled. With typical *translation*, the self (or subject) is given a new way to think about the world (or objects); but with radical *transformation*, the self itself is inquired into, looked into, grabbed by its throat and literally throttled to death.

Put it one last way: with horizontal translation—which is by far the most prevalent, widespread and widely shared function of religion—the self is, at least temporarily, made happy in its grasping, made content in its enslavement, made complacent in the face of the screaming terror that is in fact its innermost condition. With translation, the self goes sleepy into the world, stumbles numbed and nearsighted into the nightmare of samsara, is given a map laced with morphine with which to face the world. And this, indeed, is the common condition of a religious humanity, precisely the condition that the radical or transformative spiritual realizers have come to challenge and to finally undo.

For authentic transformation is not a matter of belief but of the death of the believer; not a matter of translating the world but of transforming the world; not a matter of finding solace but of finding infinity on the other side of death. The self is not made content; the self is made toast.

Now, although I have obviously been favoring transformation and belittling translation, the fact is that, on the whole, both of these functions are incredibly important and altogether indispensable. Individuals are not, for the most part, born enlightened. They are born in a world of sin and suffering, hope and fear, desire and despair. They are born as a self ready and eager to contract; a self rife with hunger, thirst, tears and terror. And they begin, quite early on, to learn various ways to translate their world, to make sense of it, to give meaning to it, and to defend themselves against the terror and the torture never lurking far beneath the happy surface of the separate self.

And as much as we, as you and I, might wish to transcend mere translation and find an authentic transformation, nonetheless translation itself is an absolutely necessary and crucial function for the greater part of our lives. Those who cannot translate adequately, with a fair amount of integrity and accuracy, fall quickly into severe neurosis or even psychosis: the world *ceases to make sense*—the boundaries between the self and the world are not transcended but instead begin to crumble. This is not breakthrough but breakdown; not transcendence, but disaster.

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But at some point in our maturation process, translation itself, no matter how adequate or confident, simply ceases to console. No new beliefs, no new paradigm, no new myths, no new ideas, will staunch the encroaching anguish. Not a new belief for the self, but the transcendence of the self altogether, is the only path that avails.

Still, the number of individuals who are ready for such a path is, always has been, and likely always will be, a very small minority. For most people, any sort of religious belief will fall instead into the category of consolation: it will be a new horizontal translation that fashions some sort of meaning in the midst of the monstrous world. And religion has always served, for the most part, this first function, and served it well.

I therefore also use the word "legitimacy" to describe this first function (the horizontal translation and creation of meaning for the separate self). And much of religion's important service is to *provide legitimacy* to the self—legitimacy to its beliefs, its paradigms, its worldviews and its way in the world. This function of religion to provide a legitimacy for the self and its beliefs—no matter how temporary, relative, nontransformative, or illusory—has nonetheless been the single greatest and most important function of the world's religious traditions. The capacity of a religion to provide horizontal meaning, legitimacy

"Transformative spirituality, AUTHENTIC SPI

and sanction for the self and its beliefs—that function of religion has historically been the single greatest "social glue" that any culture has.

And one does not tamper easily, or lightly, with the basic glue that holds societies together. Because more often than not, when that glue dissolves—when that translation dissolves—the result, as we were saying, is not breakthrough but breakdown, not liberation but social chaos. (We will return to this crucial point in a moment.)

Where translative religion offers *legitimacy*, transformative religion offers *authenticity*. For those few individuals who are ready—that is, sick with the suffering of the separate self, and no longer able to embrace the legitimate worldview—a transformative opening to true authenticity, true enlightenment, true liberation, calls more and more insistently. And, depending upon your capacity for suffering, you will sooner or later answer the call of authenticity, of transformation, of liberation on the lost horizon of infinity.

Transformative spirituality does not seek to bolster or legitimate any present worldview at all, but rather to provide true authenticity by shattering what the world takes as legitimate. Legitimate consciousness is sanctioned by the consensus, adopted by the herd mentality, embraced by the culture and the counterculture both, promoted by the separate self as *the* way to make sense of this world. But authentic consciousness quickly shakes all of that off its back, and settles instead into a glance that sees only a radiant infinity in the heart of all souls and breathes into its lungs only the atmosphere of an eternity too simple to believe.

Transformative spirituality, authentic spirituality, is therefore revolutionary. It does not legitimate the world, it breaks the world; it does not console the world, it shatters it. And it does not render the self content, it renders it undone.

And those facts lead to several conclusions.

Who Actually Wants to

t is a fairly common belief that the East is simply awash in transformative and authentic spirituality, but that the West—both historically and in today's "New Age"—has nothing much more than various types of horizontal, translative, merely legitimate and therefore tepid spirituality. And while there is some truth to that, the actual situation is much gloomier, for both the East and the West alike.

First, although it is generally true that the East has produced a greater number of authentic realizers, nonetheless, the actual percentage of the Eastern population that is engaged in authentic transformative spirituality is, and always has been, pitifully small. I once asked Katigiri Roshi, with whom I had my first breakthrough (hopefully, not a breakdown), how many truly great Ch'an and Zen masters there have historically been. Without hesitating, he said, "Maybe one thousand altogether." I asked another Zen master how many truly enlightened—deeply enlightened—Japanese Zen masters there were alive today, and he said, "Not more than a dozen."

Transform?

Let us simply assume, for the sake of argument, that those are vaguely accurate answers. Run the numbers. Even if we say there were only one billion Chinese over the course of its history (an extremely low estimate), that still means that only one thousand out of one billion had graduated into an authentic, transformative spirituality. For those of you without a calculator, that's 0.0000001 of the total population.

And that means, unmistakably, that the rest of the population were (and are) involved in, at best, various types of horizontal, translative, merely legitimate religion: they were involved in magical practices, mythical beliefs, egoic petitionary prayer, magical rituals, and so on—in other words, translative ways to give meaning to the separate self, a translative function that was, as we were saying, the major social glue of the Chinese (and all other) cultures to date.

Thus, without in any way belittling the truly stunning contributions of the glorious Eastern traditions, the point is fairly straightforward: radical transformative spirituality is extremely rare, anywhere in history, and anywhere in

RITUALITY, IS THEREFORE REVOLUTIONARY.

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the world. (The numbers for the West are even more depressing. I rest my case.)

So, although we can very rightly lament the very small number of individuals in the West who are today involved in a truly authentic and radically transformative spiritual realization, let us not make the false argument of claiming that it has otherwise been *dramatically* different in earlier times or in different cultures. It has on occasion been a *little* better than we see here, now, in the West, but the fact remains: authentic spirituality is an incredibly rare bird, anywhere, at any time, at any place. So let us start from the unarguable fact that vertical, transformative, authentic spirituality is one of the most precious jewels in the entire human tradition—precisely because, like all precious jewels, it is incredibly rare.

Second, even though you and I might deeply believe that the most important function we can perform is to offer authentic transformative spirituality, the fact is, much of what we have to do, in our capacity to bring decent spirituality into the world, is actually to offer more benign and helpful modes of translation. In other words, even

if we ourselves are practicing, or offering, authentic transformative spirituality, nonetheless much of what we must first do is provide most people with a more adequate way to translate their condition. We must start with helpful translations before we can effectively offer authentic transformations.

The reason is that if translation is too quickly, or too abruptly, or too ineptly taken away from an individual (or a culture), the result, once again, is not breakthrough but breakdown, not release but collapse. Let me give two quick examples here.

When Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a great (though controversial) Tibetan master, first came to this country, he was renowned for always saying, when asked the meaning of *Vajrayana*, "There is only Ati." In other words, there is only the enlightened mind wherever you look. The ego, samsara, maya and illusion—all of them do not have to be gotten rid of, because none of them actually exist: There is only Ati, there is only Spirit, there is only God, there is only nondual Consciousness anywhere in existence.

Virtually nobody got it—nobody was ready for this

radical and authentic realization of always-already truth—and so Trungpa eventually introduced a whole series of "lesser" practices leading up to this radical and ultimate "no practice." He introduced the *Nine Yanas* as the foundation of practice—in other words, he introduced nine stages or levels of practice, culminating in the ultimate "no practice" of always-already Ati.

Many of these practices were simply translative, and some were what we might call "lesser transformative" practices: miniature transformations that made the bodymind more susceptible to radical, already-accomplished enlightenment. These translative and lesser practices issued forth in the "perfect practice" of no-practice—or the radical, instantaneous, authentic realization that, from the very beginning, there is only Ati. So even though ultimate transformation was the prior goal and everpresent ground, Trungpa had to introduce translative and lesser practices in order to prepare people for the obviousness of what is.

Exactly the same thing happened with Adi Da, another influential (and equally controversial) adept (although this time, American-born). He originally taught nothing but "the path of understanding": not a way to attain enlightenment, but an inquiry into why you want to attain enlightenment in the first place. The very desire to seek enlightenment is in fact nothing but the grasping tendency of the ego itself, and thus the very search for enlightenment prevents it. The "perfect practice" is therefore not to search for enlightenment, but to inquire into the motive for seeking itself. You obviously seek in order to avoid the present, and yet the present alone holds the answer: to seek forever is to miss the point forever. You always already ARE enlightened Spirit, and therefore to seek Spirit is simply to deny Spirit. You can no more attain Spirit than you can attain your feet or acquire your lungs.

Nobody got it. And so Adi Da, exactly like Trungpa, introduced a whole series of translative and lesser transformative practices—seven stages of practice, in fact—leading up to the point that you could dispense with seeking altogether, there to stand open to the always-already truth of your own eternal and timeless condition, which was completely and totally present from the start, but which was brutally ignored in the frenzied desire to seek.

Now, whatever you might think of those two adepts, the fact remains: they performed perhaps the first two great *experiments* in this country on how to introduce the notion that "There is only Ati"—there is only Spirit—and thus seeking Spirit is exactly that which prevents realization. And they both found that, however much we might be alive to Ati, alive to the radical *transformative* truth of this moment, nonetheless, *translative* and lesser transformative practices are almost always a prerequisite for that final and ultimate transformation.

My second point, then, is that in addition to offering authentic and radical transformation, we must still be sensitive to, and caring of, the numerous beneficial modes of lesser and translative practices. This more generous stance therefore calls for an "integral approach" to overall transformation, an approach that honors and incorporates many lesser transformative and translative practices—covering the physical, emotional, mental, cultural and communal aspects of the human being—in preparation for, and as an expression of, the ultimate transformation into the always-already present state.

And so, even as we rightly criticize merely translative religion (and all the lesser forms of transformation), let us also realize that an integral approach to spirituality combines the best of horizontal and vertical, translative and transformative, legitimate and authentic—and thus let us focus our efforts on a balanced and sane overview of the human situation.

Wisdom and

Compassion

ut isn't this view of mine terribly elitist? Good heavens, I hope so. When you go to a basketball game, do you want to see me or Michael Jordan play basketball? When you listen to pop music, who are you willing to pay money in order to hear? Me or Bruce Springsteen? When you read great literature, who would you rather spend an evening reading, me or

Tolstoy? When you pay \$64 million for a painting, will that be a painting by me or by Van Gogh?

All excellence is elitist. And that includes spiritual excellence as well. But spiritual excellence is an elitism to which all are invited. We go first to the great masters—to Padmasambhava, to St. Teresa of Avila, to Gautama Buddha, to Lady Tsogyal, to Emerson, Eckhart, Maimo-

"Transformative, authentic spirituality

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nides, Shankara, Sri Ramana Maharshi, Bodhidharma, Garab Dorje. But their message is *always* the same: let this consciousness be in you that is in me. You start elitist, always; you end up egalitarian, always.

But in between, there is the angry wisdom that shouts from the heart: we must, all of us, keep our eye on the radical and ultimate transformative goal. And so any sort of integral or authentic spirituality will also, always, involve a critical, intense and occasionally polemical shout from the transformative camp to the merely translative camp.

If we use the percentages of Chinese Ch'an as a simple blanket example, this means that if 0.0000001 of the population is actually involved in genuine or authentic spirituality, then .99999999 of the population is involved in nontransformative, nonauthentic, merely translative or horizontal belief systems. And that means, yes, that the vast, vast majority of "spiritual seekers" in this country (as elsewhere) are involved in much less-than-authentic occasions. It has always been so; it is still so now. This country is no exception.

But in today's America, this is much more disturbing, because this vast majority of horizontal spiritual adherents often claim to be representing the leading edge of spiritual transformation, the "new paradigm" that will change the world, the "great transformation" of which they are the vanguard. But more often than not, they are not deeply transformative at all; they are merely, but aggressively, translative—they do not offer effective means to utterly dismantle the self, but merely ways for the self to think differently. Not ways to transform, but merely new ways to translate. In fact, what most of them offer is not a practice or a series of practices, not sadhana or satsang or shikan-taza or yoga. What most of them offer is simply the suggestion: read my book on the new paradigm. This is deeply disturbed, and deeply disturbing.

Thus, the authentic spiritual camps have the heart and soul of the great transformative traditions, and yet they will always do two things at once: appreciate and engage the lesser and translative practices (upon which their own successes usually depend), but also issue a thundering shout from the heart that translation alone is not enough.

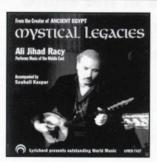
And therefore, all of those for whom authentic transformation has deeply unseated their souls must, I believe, wrestle with the profound moral obligation to shout from the heart—perhaps quietly and gently, with tears of reluctance; perhaps with fierce fire and angry wisdom; perhaps with slow and careful analysis; perhaps by unshakable public example—but *authenticity* always and absolutely carries a *demand* and *duty*: you must speak out, to the best of your ability, and shake the spiritual tree, and shine your headlights into the eyes of the complacent. You must let that radical realization rumble through your veins and rattle those around you.

Alas, if you fail to do so, you are betraying your own authenticity. You are hiding your true estate. You don't want to upset others because you don't want to upset your self. You are acting in bad faith, the taste of a bad infinity.

Because, you see, the alarming fact is that any realization of depth carries a terrible burden: Those who are allowed to see are simultaneously saddled with the obligation to *communicate* that vision in no uncertain terms. That is the bargain. You were allowed to see the truth under the agreement that you would communicate it to others (that is the ultimate meaning of the bodhisattva vow). And therefore, if you have seen, you simply must speak out. Speak out with compassion, or speak out with angry wisdom, or speak out with skillful means, but speak out you must.

This is truly a terrible burden, a horrible burden, because in any case there is no room for timidity. The fact that you might be wrong is simply no excuse: you might be right in your communication, and you might be wrong, but that doesn't matter. What does matter, as Kierkegaard so rudely reminded us, is that only by investing and

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Ken Wilber continued

speaking your vision with *passion*, can the truth, one way or another, finally penetrate the reluctance of the world. If you are right, or if you are wrong, it is only your passion that will force either to be discovered. It is your duty to promote that discovery—either way—and therefore it is your duty to speak your truth with whatever passion and courage you can find in your heart. You must shout, in whatever way you can.

The vulgar world is already shouting, and with such a raucous rancor that truer voices can scarcely be heard at all. The materialistic world is already full of advertisements and allure, screams of enticement and cries of commerce, wails of welcome and whoops of come hither. I don't mean to be harsh here, and we must honor all lesser engagements. Nonetheless, you must have noticed that the word "soul" is now the hottest item in bestselling book titles-but all "soul" really means, in most of these books, is simply the ego in drag. "Soul" has come to denote, in this feeding frenzy of translative grasping, not that which is timeless in you but that which most loudly thrashes around in time, and thus "care of the soul" incomprehensibly means nothing much more than focusing intensely on your ardently separate self. Likewise, "spiritual" is on everybody's lips, but usually all it really means is any intense egoic feeling, just as "heart" has come to mean any sincere sentiment of the self-contraction.

All of this, truly, is just the same ole translative game, dressed up and gone to town. Even that would be more than acceptable were it not for the alarming fact that all of that translative jockeying is aggressively called "transformation," when all it is, of course, is a new series of frisky translations. In other words, there seems to be, alas, a deep hypocrisy hidden in the game of taking any new translation and calling it the great transformation. And the world at large—East or West, North or South—is, and always has been, for the most part, perfectly deaf to this calamity.

And so, given the measure of your own authentic realization, you were actually thinking about gently whispering into the ear of that near-deaf world? No, my friend, you must shout. Shout from the heart of what you have seen, shout however you can.

But not indiscriminately. Let us proceed carefully with this transformative shout. Let small pockets of radically transformative spirituality, authentic spirituality, focus their efforts and transform their students. And let these pockets slowly, carefully, responsibly, humbly, begin to spread their influence, embracing an absolute tolerance for all views, but attempting nonetheless to advocate a true and authentic and integral spirituality—by example, by radiance, by obvious release, by unmistakable liberation. Let those pockets of transformation gently persuade

continued on page 32

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Ken Wilber continued

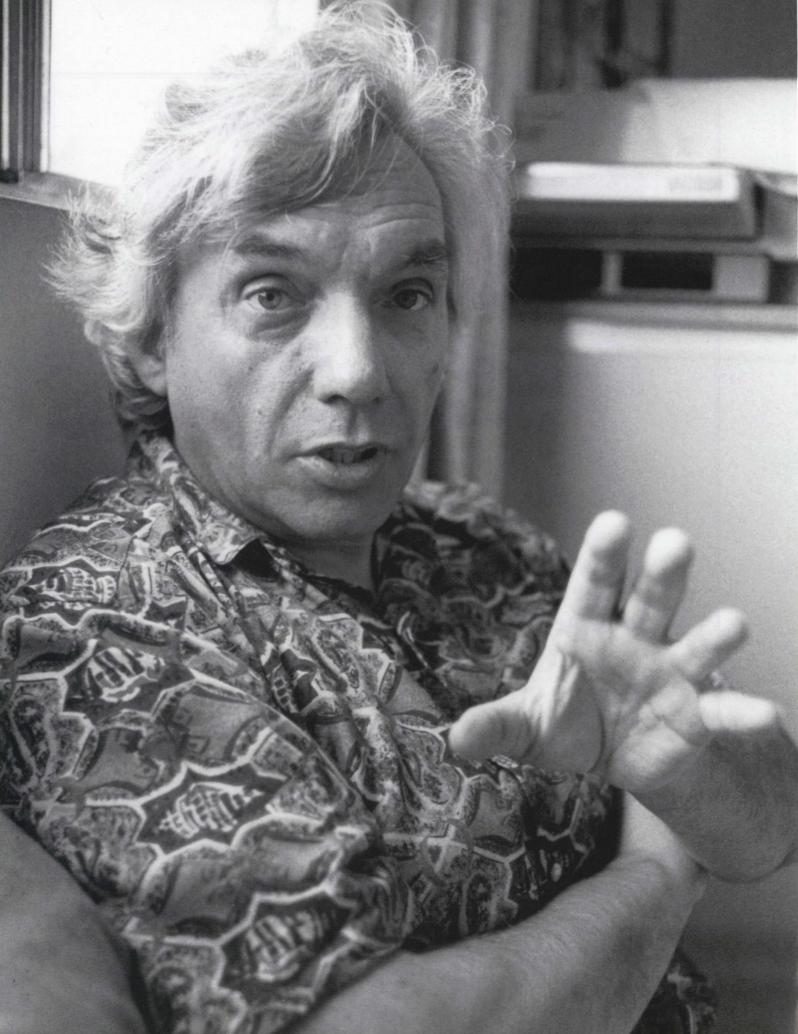
the world and its reluctant selves, and challenge their legitimacy, and challenge their limiting translations, and offer an awakening in the face of the numbness that haunts the world at large.

Let it start right here, right now, with us-with you and with meand with our commitment to breathe into infinity until infinity alone is the only statement that the world will recognize. Let a radical realization shine from our faces, and roar from our hearts, and thunder from our brains—this simple fact, this obvious fact: that you, in the very immediateness of your present awareness, are in fact the entire world, in all its frost and fever, in all its glories and its grace, in all its triumphs and its tears. You do not see the sun, you are the sun; you do not hear the rain, you are the rain; you do not feel the earth, you are the earth. And in that simple, clear, unmistakable regard, translation has ceased in all domains, and you have transformed into the very Heart of the Kosmos itself-and there, right there, very simply, very quietly, it is all undone.

Wonder and remorse will then be alien to you, and self and others will be alien to you, and outside and inside will have no meaning at all. And in that obvious shock of recognition—where my Master is my Self, and that Self is the Kosmos at large, and the Kosmos is my Soul—you will walk very gently into the fog of this world, and transform it entirely by doing nothing at all.

And then, and then, and only then—you will finally, clearly, carefully and with compassion, write on the tombstone of a self that never even existed: There is only Ati.

Ken Wilber is author of The Spectrum of Consciousness; Grace and Grit; Sex, Ecology, Spirituality; A Brief History of Everything; The Eye of Spirit and other books.





GEORGFEUERSTEIN



It is a long way from the

forests of ancient India, where ascetic anchorites developed the system of spiritual practices known as Yoga thousands of years ago, to the American health clubs, diet centers and YMCAs where it is widely practiced today. How many contemporary students of this psychophysical discipline are aware that, as internationally renowned Indologist and historian of religion Dr. Georg Feuerstein once wrote, "The traditional purpose of Yoga has always been to bring about a profound transformation in the person through the transcendence of the ego"? Yet Yoga is not alone in having a modern reincarnation that some might call revisionist. Even though the Buddha himself said, "Everything changes," he would probably have been surprised to learn that the meditation practiced by his

to light a candle in a dark age

INTRODUCTION continued

celibate monks is today often touted as a way to relieve the stress of a busy day at commerce or as an aid to being a better parent. And what about those sages of Vedanta, whose teachings are recorded in the ancient Upanishads: Would not their transcendent absorption in the Self be disturbed by the fact that a modern derivative of their teachings, now taught as a way to obtain health, wealth and a happy love life, has become all the rage in Hollywood? For more than a generation, Georg Feuerstein has been instrumental in the dissemination of Eastern ways of wisdom in the West. He has published twenty-nine books on Yoga, Tantra and other aspects of Eastern religious traditions, as well as on the evolution of consciousness. We wanted to know what he thought of the current state of spiritual affairs in the West. In the following conversation, he draws not only from his vast erudition on the history of religion but also from his personal experience as a spiritual aspirant. Showing himself to be an astute and passionately concerned observer of the contemporary spiritual scene, Georg Feuerstein incisively analyzes a modern spiritual dilemma and offers some solutions.

WIE: For the past twenty-five years, through your numerous books and articles on Yoga, meditation, Tantra and many other aspects of religious thought and philosophy, you have helped to introduce the West to some of the most profound teachings of the East. Now, many of these Eastern traditions seem to be flourishing here. Do you feel that their essence has survived their transplantation to the contemporary West, or has something been lost in the translation?

GEORGFEUERSTEIN:



When I look at the contemporary scene, I have a mixture of feelings. In large part, I am saddened, because much of what I see are watered-down versions of original teachings that have been made palatable to Western consumers.

I am particularly thinking of what I consider to be watered-down versions of Yoga. The first of these is Hatha Yoga, which is taught today in literally thousands of places merely as a form of gymnastics or fitness training. And the second is what I have dubbed "neo-Tantrism," which is the watered-down version of what I feel is one of the most profound teachings ever created on Indian soil, Tantra. In Hatha Yoga—which, as very few people know, is a Tantric school itself—the goal has always been Self-realization or enlightenment. But today what most people are paying attention to is only the most elementary, physical stages of this path. Now this in itself is not wrong, because the postures and the breathing exercises can all be entry-points into the path; even neo-Tantrism, I think, might have some merits for some people. What saddens me, though, is that the true power of these original teachings—which lies in their giving us a means of tapping into our spiritual home,

our spiritual source—has not really been recognized.

WIE: Yes, it seems that at the core of many of these once-esoteric but now widely publicized and practiced forms of spirituality, there is a call for the radical transformation of one's entire being and one's overall relationship to others and to the world. Reading the scriptures or the sutras of Yoga, Buddhism and Hinduism, it seems clear that in the early days of these traditions, practitioners who wanted to enter these paths were called upon to make a radical break from their previous ways of life and to devote themselves entirely to spiritual transformation. But today, a lot of these traditions seem to have been reinterpreted as ways to enhance, rather than radically transform, the lives of their practitioners.

GF: That's right. I think that today the ideal of personal transformation, which really runs through all such methods, both traditional and contemporary, has been diminished. The modern in-

terpretations are usually about enhancing one's self-image, becoming better at playing the ego game, rather than really recognizing that it is in a place beyond all that, and beyond any particular talents or skills that we might develop, that the whole wonderful area of genuine spirituality really lies. Genuine spirituality is about transcending the very thing that we are so fond of, which is our personality. This is and has always been the traditional approach, and it is exceedingly demanding. And because very few people in our society are prepared to hear this, what has happened by and large is that these teachings have been butchered in order to better suit our consumerist mentality-which has to do with getting something very quickly, applying it, and then feeling better about ourselves.

Now in saying this, I want to emphasize that I'm quite aware of the fact that most people aren't ready to embark on the spiritual path in the more radical sense. And this is why, in the past, what was encouraged was the cultivation of some religious practice that would prepare the individual for the esoteric process of truly radical self-transformation. But nowadays, because of the breakdown of our own Western religious traditions and the rise of the so-called scientific worldview, the idea that spirituality is something we need to prepare for has really been undermined. People assume that they are quite ready for it, and then are surprised when they come to a teacher who makes genuine demands and they are expected to meet those demands. Then they leave, disgruntled and frustrated and with very little more understanding than when they approached the teacher in the first place.

WIE: What is it about the scientific worldview that has undermined the sense that we need to be prepared to meet the demands of the spiritual path?

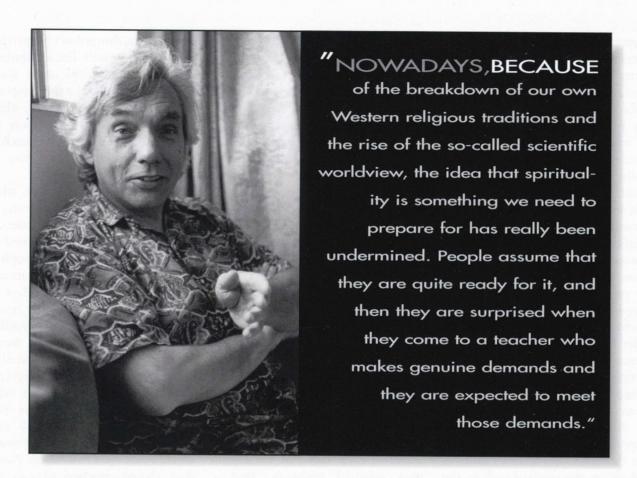
GF: The scientific worldview only takes that which is visible into account—at least in its ideology. Of course in actual fact, science works with many factors that are invisible: the entire realm of mathematics is invisible; energy is invisible unless it is translated into motion that we can perceive. But ideologically science, or scientific materialism, really only takes the visible into account, and this has fostered an attitude of tremendous skepticism toward religion in general and created an incredible vacuum in people's lives which they try to fill either by diving completely into the realm of the senses—"consumerism" is the term that we have come up with for that—or, in the case of those who are not satisfied with that approach, by going on a quest of some kind. This might be a quest for personal growth through some form of therapy or selfhelp, or-if they have more serious intent—people will look for a genuine spiritual tradition, find a teacher, and try to seriously engage the spiritual process. But since, as I said, scientific materialism has fostered a worldview that disregards anything beyond the visible, they will naturally tend to approach spiritual practice from that point of view as well. And this was in fact the point that Trungpa Rinpoche was making when he coined his wonderful phrase "spiritual materialism."

WIE: Yes, I was just thinking of that term as you were speaking.

GF: The point is that we bring the values and the ideology of science, which we have imbibed directly and indirectly through our schooling and the mass media and so on, to the realm of spirituality, and as a result we profoundly misunderstand what the spiritual traditions really are. Like technicians, we expect prompt visible results: you press buttons A and B, and you get result C. But in

spiritual life, things don't happen like that. Growth isn't linear. Spiritual teachings themselves often aren't linear. They demand a total response on the part of the individual, which very few people in our society are equipped to find within themselves, because that kind of response requires *great* personal strength.

Now what is interesting, when you look at the ancient literature, especially that of Yoga and Tantra, is that the qualifications required in order to be an aspirant or a neophyte are identical to those that characterize an accomplished adept. You are required to bring to your search everything that the adept himself or herself has achieved. This means that you have expectations placed on you that even in those days everyone knew they could not possibly meet. But these expectations were your guiding principles: you knew what the teacher would expect of you and would expect you to work on. Nowadays, though, teachers who are not following these more traditional ways have lowered their expectations to such a degree that they cater to the lowest common denominator and tend to attract, as a result, students who are not truly qualified for the spiritual path. And when, in time, such students are confronted with the real process of radical self-transformation, they collapse. They don't bring faith—by which I mean not blind belief but an inner conviction of the inherent rightness of the spiritual process, including the relationship with the teacher as a transformative agent. They don't have the tremendous courage necessary to face their own darkness and transform that into light. And they don't bring enough devotion and dedication. In fact you can name any list of virtues and you will find that in the traditions they are all the requirements for being a good student. But people in our times don't have those psychological capacities, by and large, and if



we can believe the scriptures, it is because we are in the thick of the *kali yuga*, the dark age. Our moral and spiritual qualifications have slid down, as if in a big landslide, way to the bottom, and I suppose it is because most teachers take that into account that in their compassion they accept students that teachers in former days would not have accepted. But this brings its own problems, of course, which such teachers discover the hard way.

WIE: I suppose, to use a less traditional way of talking about this, that the situation you've just described might also be directly related to what you referred to earlier as the effects of rationalism and scientific materialism. In other words, the prevalence of these ideologies may not only lead to ignorance about the true nature of spiritual life, but may somehow also have had a direct effect on people's capacities for the virtues you men-

tion—faith, devotion, dedication and perhaps even courage.

GF: Yes, but most importantly on their capacity for discriminating intelligence. The spiritual path requires enormous discriminating intelligence. This was another of the qualifications traditionally expected of disciples. A lot of people today have never been taught to think independently. Our school systems create people who are lazy in their thinking. There's a tremendous conformity in this country. And I think that plays into how people relate to the spiritual process. Those who come to it have obviously thought enough about life to question some of the ideas that society imposes on us, but often-and I find this to be the case in my own interactions in classes I've taught—this questioning process hasn't really gone very far. There hasn't been enough self-questioning.

WIE: We're so inundated, through television, movies, and so on, with a view of life that's very materialistic and superficial.

GF: That's true, but also I think that the pace of life is such that very few people have the time, or take the time, to ponder what they are really up to. We are constantly bombarded with information, as you point out, through the various vehicles of our culture, and as a result we never really rest. There's nothing in our society that encourages us to do so, that says, "Okay, take a breath! Sit back, relax." It's always, "Do this! Do that! Catch up with this! Catch up with that!" So we're always on the move and, of course, with that kind of orientation toward life, thought never is given a chance to gestate. So we don't have deep insights into our lives and we readily accept-I'm speaking now in very generic terms—what we have inherited from

our culture in terms of how life works, what should be done, what our role is in this whole game, and we never question it until, perhaps, we experience a profound crisis. Someone close to us dies, for example, or we ourselves are about to die, and then everything is thrown into doubt because some other forces in us come alive, deeper forces that require a different response, a different answer than we have been accustomed to giving.

Personally, though, I think all this is a reflection of the fact that we are in the kali yuga. "Kali yuga" is usually translated as the "dark age," but the term "kali" comes from dice playing. In ancient India the unlucky throw was called kali. My view is that we have had this unlucky throw for the last hundred years or so and it's been penetrating more and more deeply into our societal forms and modes of behavior and thought, creating patterns that are destructive to our humanity. Of course, there's always a counteraction to all of this, and this is what I see in the struggle by some people, who have managed to avoid drowning in this onslaught of predigested information, to shape their own inner lives. Unfortunately, however, our culture provides no real guidance for this quest, and so most people are fumbling and stumbling along, trying this and trying that. Sociologists have even coined a term for this, the "career in conversion"you know, people joining this or that group, converting to this or that point of view, but never really being able to settle for any one thing because of this conditioned restlessness, this imprinted need to acquire ever more information, ever more understanding, never allowing what has been learned to grow and then applying it. People are always looking too quickly for final solutions.

WIE: So far we've spoken mainly about the situation of contemporary students

of spirituality. But it also seems that the teachings themselves have been reinterpreted in significant ways. In particular, I'm thinking about the way that the actual goal of the teaching is presented. You touched on this briefly before. Yoga, as you mentioned, is often presented mainly as a means for improving one's health; Buddhist mindfulness is often presented as a form of psychotherapy; and people like the very popular Dr. Deepak Chopra, for example, quote liberally from profound Vedantic philosothe but present it as a way to increase one's wealth and to improve one's love life. How do you feel about this kind of reinterpretation of the spiritual goal?

GF: All traditions grow and change; otherwise, we wouldn't have so many different schools. If you go back two, three, four or five thousand years, you see continuous change in all these traditions. And some of them have discovered very unusual ways of engaging the spiritual process. I'm thinking of Tantra in particular, which, after many thousands of years finally incorporated the bodily dimension into the spiritual process, which I think represents a tremendous insight that we still haven't fully caught up with. So it makes sense to expect that every time a tradition is imported into a different cultural context, it will change. A good example of this is Buddhism, which, when it went from India to the Far East, significantly changed its form. But in the past these kinds of changes have occurred primarily in the forms of the traditions and only to a small degree in their formulations of the final goal. What has happened in the West is a far more drastic change, not for the better by any means, whereby the traditional goals of Yoga, Tantra, Vedanta, Samkhya and Buddhism have been reduced to something that is more manageable for Western consumption.

I'm not sure to what degree this has been brought about by teachers

coming from within those traditions. But just to give one example, we see a certain degree of adaptation already in Vivekenanda's presentation of Vedanta to the West. Obviously, Vivekenanda was a magnificent spiritual figure, fully aware of what the highest goal in his tradition was, and he honored that. But I think he was also acutely aware of the spiritual ineptitude of those he had to teach. So perhaps he focused on those elements of teaching and practice that were easily understandable and of practical import to those people. But whenever you do that, there's always the risk of simultaneously diminishing or reducing the actual target of such practices.

Then there is a second generation of teachers. Westerners who having imbibed Eastern traditions from Eastern teachers have created "in-between" versions of these traditions. And upon examining them one immediately sees that the Western ideal of individuality has crept in and been magnified so as to make these teachings more appealing. Specifically, I'm thinking of the reorientation from self-transcendence to personal growth. We find many of the Western adaptations of Eastern teachings now promoting "personal growth" versions of those teachings that people from our culture can relate to for precisely that reason.

And finally there is a third generation of teachers who have acguired a smattering of Eastern teachings through books but have never been exposed to a traditional tutelage, and in some cases may never even have had any interest in that kind of relationship. This particular type, the third type, is the most severely damaging of all because there is no understanding, or virtually no understanding, of the wonderful gifts contained in the traditions. Worse yet, there can be a real arrogance toward them. Concepts and practices are freely adopted, taken out of context and then sold—literally—as techniques for personal growth.

WIE: Do you feel that this kind of thing is an unavoidable consequence of the transplantation of Eastern teachings to the West?

GF: Well, I'm not sure whether it's unavoidable. It's definitely happening, though. It's happening widely, and for that reason it would be entirely theoretical to discuss any other possibility; this is what is occurring and we need to take it into account. And I certainly see my own work as constantly bringing forward the original traditions, helping to preserve the authenticity and integrity of those traditions, so that people can become aware of them and see their beauty and their strength, and stay clear of the Western adaptations that really don't offer much beyond conventional personal growth.

WIE: What do you feel would be the most important measure that could help reverse this trend, if that's possible—to shift the focus from personal growth, self-help or self-improvement to the radical spiritual transformation that these traditions originally called for?

GF: You know. I have this irrational faith that those who are meant to discover the path will discover it regardless. But from an overall point of view, I think that what would best serve this process would be for genuine teachers of bona fide teachings to work together more, to collaborate in promoting those teachings to the public. Right now, particularly in the Yoga movement, there is tremendous fragmentation. Many have little islands that they try to protect. I think there is a real need for teachings and teachers to come together in some kind of ecumenical spirit so as to be more of a presence, especially in the media. The media seem to have no understanding whatsoever of the

spiritual process or spiritual traditions or spiritual teachers. The distortions in the press are phenomenal and the ignorance is equally phenomenal, and it is time to counter this ignorance by helping to educate the media. But no one tradition can do this because in that case it will always be dismissed as sectarian. If, on the other hand, there was something like a council composed of leading figures from various traditions, then note would be taken, and the public could begin to become educated through appropriate publications and news releases and so on. I'm trying to do something like this in a small way through my Yoga Research Center by inviting other organizations to participate and share information, perhaps conduct programs together and so on. There is a need for this type of orchestration to occur across the board, including all the various spiritual traditions and schools, in order to end the fragmentation that presently exists. Our society is so large and so wildly competitive that spiritual traditions, it seems, cannot help but absorb some of that competitive mentality. But for all of these traditions to have a future, there is more that needs to happen in terms of collaboration and a shared vision of helping humanity, helping more and more people find deeper meaning in their lives.

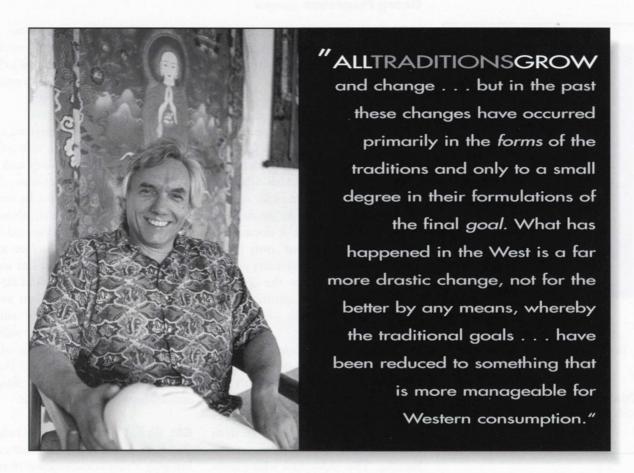
WIE: I wonder—given that so much of the interest in spirituality today seems to be based on people's interest in feeling better and in improving themselves rather than in really transforming themselves—whether there's a danger that if the genuine goal of spirituality were made known, then a lot of people might not be so interested. Maybe that's not what people want.

GF: Well, that's true. But then that in itself should be very clarifying. I think any tradition that would be afraid of that response has to ques-

tion its own goals. Any tradition worth its salt would never be fearful of having the truth be out there. But I do see this kind of concealment even among some of the perhaps more legitimate schools, where in their advertising there's a very subtle slant in the direction of self-improvement you know, finding a little happiness in this and that-instead of saying, "The goal of our tradition is to free you completely from the delusion of the ego." That takes courage, but unless we live by the principles that we espouse . . . well, what is the point? But I think there are enough traditions that are genuine, that foster authentic understanding and that are genuinely promoting the spiritual process, for them to be a force in society. I am thinking of Sufi centers, Buddhist centers, Yoga centers, and so on, and also more contemporary efforts that have a really strong authentic orientation toward spiritual goals. So why would they need to be fearful?

WIE: Maybe there is some fear that they might lose their competitive edge in the spiritual marketplace.

GF: I suppose so, but even that should be examined. Why be fearful of that? Either people are drawn to a particular tradition because of their karmic or psychological background or some preference that they might have, or you attract those people under false pretenses and then live in fear of losing them when they find out that there's something else going on. I have a strong faith that if a tradition is authentic, and if the teacher is authentic, then the people who will join or become aspirants will also be authentic; otherwise they would not be drawn to it in the first place. It's very interesting to see how people gravitate toward that for which they are suited, and how so many people who are not suited for authentic spiritual life gravitate toward teachers and teachings that are less than authentic.



WIE: Maybe the number of genuine practitioners is not necessarily the most important factor in helping to transform the world. There have been cases in the past where small groups have had tremendous impact.

GF: Yes, I think a tradition's degree of influence depends on the quality of practice, not the number of practitioners. If we participate in an authentic tradition, then we—each person that does so—serve as a beacon of light for that tradition and for the spiritual process itself.

WIE: For the practitioners themselves, what do you think it takes to be genuinely prepared for the spiritual process?

GF: Life. In so many cases, it's just a matter of learning through life. Life is a wonderful teacher. There will always be people who will be more or

less capable of the spiritual process that's the nature of the game. Some people have a greater capacity for the process; they bring it with them. Some have, from the beginning, a restlessness to find deeper answers. But for other people it takes major shocks in life for them to wake up and begin to question what they are doing. And there's no telling when this will happen. For as long as time exists, I think there will always be people who will be at different levels in this process of self-discovery and self-understanding, so nothing I've said here is meant to diminish anyone in any way. I think we need to respect the fact that because people are at different levels of understanding and capacity, they might derive some benefit from teachings that others may not consider authentic. It can be very useful, for instance, for people to read self-help books or have a session of therapy of one kind or another, and so on. All of this can be very useful in finding greater self-understanding. I think understanding is fundamental to discovering what your true goals, or what the highest ideals of human life, really are.

WIE: And a clear presentation and understanding of what the goals of genuine spirituality are could only support that kind of inquiry?

GF: Yes. As I said before, if traditions present themselves honestly, those who are capable of hearing greater truths will find those traditions more easily. I don't mean to say that therefore a huge number of people will flock to those traditions, because I don't think that will ever happen. The spiritual process is extremely demanding. It requires, as I said, extra-



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Georg Feuerstein continued

ordinary discriminating intelligence, and that needs to be cultivated in each person's life. Then, if the person is ready to hear that kind of truth about life, the first steps can be taken. But until then, life itself will be the taskmaster, and there will be many lessons to be learned. In some instances, certain spiritual traditions might embrace individuals who are not yet ready, simply in order to give them an opportunity to grow. And this is fine so long as it doesn't diminish those traditions' own goals. But when you allow too many people who are not ready for the spiritual path to engage the spiritual path, then you run the risk of watering things down.

But at the same time—to qualify my words more—what is the spiritual path? I think the spiritual path begins in substance the moment you think about your effect on another person, when you take a pause from your ordinary life to consider, to breathe. The individual who pauses in this way may not call that the spiritual path, and some teachers may not call that the spiritual path, but you know, where does it really begin? When I talk about an authentic and radical spirituality, it simply means engaging this process knowingly, with the intention of radically changing yourself in order to abandon the illusion of the ego. Now most people may not come to that point in this lifetime, but I think they will have glimmers of the possibility of a higher life, and I don't want to exclude that from the spiritual process. From this point of view, I think, all of life is a spiritual process, and it's either engaged or not engaged. And in that sense there is a need for great compassion toward those who are not yet able to hear higher ideas. What must not happen, however, is the accommodation of the tradition to the lowest common denominator. And the reason this must never happen is because that is the end of the

tradition. But at the same time, the tradition must be embracing enough in its compassion to avoid excluding people who are not yet able to engage the radical spiritual process.

WIE: Many people these days are talking about the dawning of a new collective consciousness, particularly with the coming of the new millennium. You yourself have written guite a bit on the evolution of consciousness, drawing from the work of Jean Gebser and others, and Ken Wilber has also been writing about this kind of thing. But we've been speaking here mostly about the dilution of spirituality in modern times. Because so many people are talking about the advent of a radical shift in consciousness, or the beginnings of an imminent evolutionary leap. I'd like to know whether you feel such a thing is actually happening, or is possible.

GF: Well, I don't think this talk of the new millennium automatically bringing a new consciousness of reality is particularly sensible. I don't buy it. I think it is misleading. I think it is lulling people into a kind of passivity, like, "Well, it's going to happen anyway, so we are all fine." My feeling is that for any higher consciousness to emerge worldwide, or even in one's own case, a great amount of work has to be done. I don't think anything will happen automatically. None of the previous structures of consciousness evolved automatically. They were all the fruit of people struggling within their own structure of consciousness, and geniuses breaking away and then pulling everyone else behind them in due course-and in our culture I think it's a very similar situation. Some people have indeed arrived at a much more profound and comprehensive understanding and identity within themselves, but that doesn't automatically transfer by some kind of mysterious contagion to everyone else. I think everyone has to do the work.

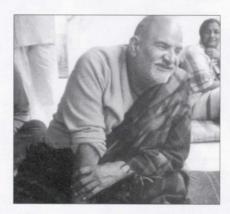
Looking around at what is happening in our time, a lot of what people describe as the new consciousness is only happening in California and a few other places. You go to the Midwest, for example, and it's a different story. So I think there's a lot of individual and collective self-delusion going on. I think it would be far more fruitful for people to be told that if they want to grow into a new consciousness, they have to do the work for it. It depends solely on the individual; we have to do the work regardless. I think that what would facilitate this process more and more in individuals is for spiritual traditions to put their viewpoint out in a more visible manner than has so far been the case, and I do have faith that that could happen. But I don't believe for one moment that the year 2000 will turn out to be the magical point at which suddenly all of humanity is transformed and uplifted into some new state of spiritual consciousness. I think that is an absurd assumption, and it's an assumption. by the way, that surfaces every thousand years!

WIE: That's very clarifying because I think it is easy to mistakenly equate the current dialogue about the evolution of consciousness that you, Ken Wilber and others have been engaged in with the kind of New Age millennialism or Aquarianism which holds that spiritual enlightenment is suddenly going to dawn all over the whole world.

GF: That would be nice, but I don't think it's going to happen. Because spiritual life always requires an inner struggle, always requires the actual act of transcendence. And in our time especially, it requires far more ingenuity and courage than at any other time. Because this is the kali yuga, the dark age. We each need to light our own candle and make sure that we don't stumble in the dark. ■

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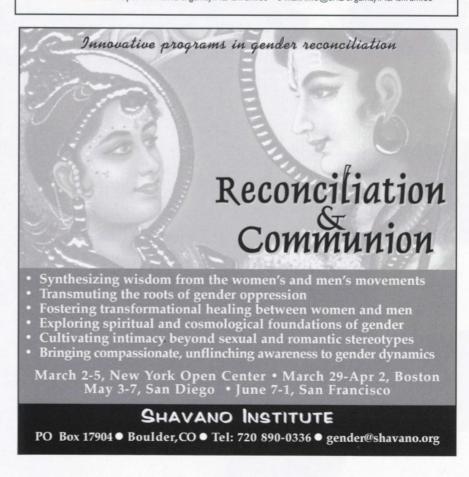


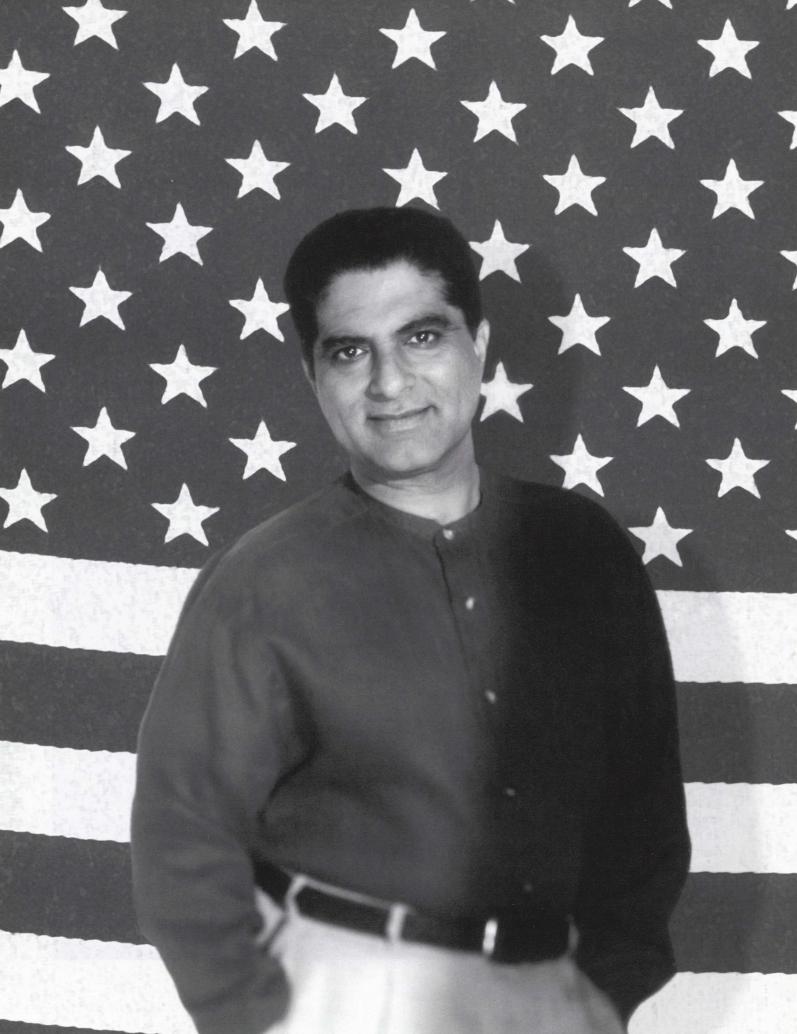
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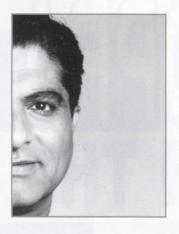
DEEDAK CHOPRA THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN TONGUE

INTRODUCTION

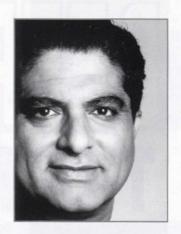
Deepak Chopra is the most visible and vocal proponent of modern American East-meets-West New Age spirituality, and it is for precisely this reason that we sought him out for this issue of What Is Enlightenment? Because of the enormous popularity of his uniquely American commercialization of the spiritual quest, we thought we could find no better example of the modern spiritual predicament. While he is a Goliath in the New Age movement and industry, we found him surprisingly accessible, and were able to schedule an interview with him with relative ease. Thus began a months-long meditation on the phenomenon of Deepak Chopra.

Captivating a broader cross-section of American society than any previous Eastern guru come West (rivaled only by his own former guru and mentor, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi), Deepak Chopra is bringing the dharma into the mainstream with an aura of unprecedented popular credibility. As an M.D. and former chief of staff at a reputable New England hospital, he is comfortable with the language of modern science, and like none before him is able to convey the esoteric teachings of spirit to thousands of Westerners who may never have been otherwise interested. His face, his message, and his books and

Interview by Susan Bridle







NTRODUCTION continued

tapes appear to be literally everywhere. (Translated into twenty-five languages, his books alone have sold more than ten million copies.) Inspired audiences from Muskogee to Manhattan respond to his talks with standing ovations and wait in line for up to an hour for his autograph. He employs a team of publicists to manage his schedule, which, packed with daily speaking engagements, book signings and seminars, puts most election campaigns to shame. Reported to have intimates at the highest levels of government in a number of countries as well as the ear of corporate giants, Chopra travels ceaselessly, inspiring countless thousands to awaken to the truth of their spiritual nature.

After following his career, reading his books and seeing him speak publicly on several occasions, we actually began to take Deepak Chopra seriously. Not because we were swayed by the appeal of his message in Ageless Body, Timeless Mind; Perfect Weight; Boundless Energy; The Way of the Wizard or Creating Affluence, but because we began to realize that this was no ordinary New Age apologist. Chopra is an exceptionally

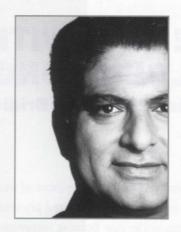
powerful man. And in many ways, he is a potent testament to his own teaching. After contemplating his mushrooming influence for some time, we sincerely began to wonder: who is Deepak Chopra, and what is he really doing? Who is this man who with astonishing confidence gave a nationally broadcast address to the National Press Club preaching the glory of the One Nondual Self? Who is this man who dares, even heroically at times, to proclaim the perennial truth of Thou Art That! to a mass audience in such a way that they seem to be willing to listen? And why is it that he is gaining such power and influence in the name of spirit in the very heartland of materialism?

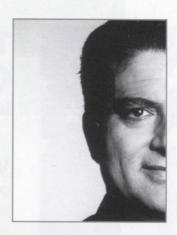
After months of pondering these questions, we find that there is no simple answer. Yet a clue may be that Chopra's success at seducing so many from the unlikeliest quarters to the life of the spirit lies in his simultaneous appeal to the forces of materialism and narcissism that drive so many of us. He writes: "The physical laws of the universe are actually this whole process of divinity in motion. When we understand

these laws and apply them in our lives, anything we want can be created, because the same laws that nature uses to create a forest, or a galaxy, or a star, or a human body can also bring about the fulfillment of our deepest desires." Chopra promises that we can fulfill all our worldly desires—desires that the great wisdom traditions have repeatedly reminded us are the very source of endless suffering and ignorance—desires for immortality, unlimited wealth and unending romance, all without having to struggle or make effort in any way. He advertises: "Together we will seek selfknowledge and a profound understanding of our mind/body/spirit connection to the universe outside of us. With this understanding, we will have infinite power to break through all limitations and create a world where all dreams come true ... where our every desire-emotional, spiritual and yes, materialis spontaneously fulfilled."

Chopra's teaching is a paradoxical melding of the traditional Eastern philosophies which emphasize the ultimate unreality of a personal identity and the material world—







with the modern Western worldview which sanctifies individuality and materialism. Much of Chopra's message is sublime, expansive, transcendent wisdom. It inspires, uplifts, calls us to soar beyond the confines of the mundane. Hearing him speak, many experience the thrill of tasting that which is beyond their farthest imaginings. But within a breath, Chopra's message slips, shifts, subtly drifts, and suddenly its focus is a new, improved "technology" for acquiring anything our heart desires. And within his New Age Vedanta framework, these desires become imbued with an exciting new spiritual glamour. Chopra deftly dances between the guest for Self-realization and the lust for self-gratification, between our yearning for transcendence and our frustration with the daily routine.

In his latest book, The Path to Love, Chopra whirls from the mystical ecstasy of the Sufi poet Rumi to the familiar blush of romance and back again in a bewildering blur. And in his Seven Spiritual Laws of Success: A Practical Guide to the Fulfillment of Your Dreams, personal power is elevated to the status of religious experience:

"Self-power. . . is based on the knowledge of the Self. And there are certain characteristics of self-power. It draws people to you, and it also draws things that you want to you. It magnetizes people, situations, and circumstances to support your desires. This is also called support from the laws of nature. It is the support of divinity; it is the support that comes from being in a state of grace." If one does not pay close attention, one is carried along on a sensational, entertaining, head-spinning ride, where the distinction between selflessness and self-seeking is intentionally obscured.

In this time of antiauthoritarian sentiment, Chopra proclaims often and loudly that he is not a guru. While humbly stressing that he is only a "student of awareness," he has nevertheless designed an entire teaching system that addresses almost every aspect of how to live. He relies on the leverage of time-honored religious scriptures, particularly the Hindu Vedas, when he can interpret and present their inspirations within his own revisionist framework, but he is equally confident to dismiss traditional teachings

when they don't support his New Age thesis. As he says in the interview that follows: "I seek in the spiritual literature that which is consistent with my own experience. . . . If something is other than my experience, then I ignore it."

Rather than recognizing spiritual transformation as an ultimately demanding endeavor, as taught by the greatest sages, Chopra popularizes the notion of an easy, feel-good spirituality, with no mention of the perennial spiritual imperatives of renunciation and one-pointed dedication. And rather than emphasizing that true spiritual life is and has always been about the death of the ego, Chopra teaches us to bend the power of the infinite to our own will.

Some might argue that Chopra's work is an invaluable introduction to spiritual ideals for thousands who potentially may go on to pursue spiritual life with greater earnestness. Yet we can't help but feel that Chopra's brand of spirituality is like fast food; while it seems to satisfy, it actually numbs the very hunger that inspires the spiritual quest in the first place.

Susan Bridle interviewed Deepak Chopra from his car telephone in La Jolla, California.



THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN TONGUE

Interview by Susan Bridle

WIE:

Over the past several years, the focus of your work has changed quite dramatically. From being a widely respected physician and authority in the field of alternative medicine, you've now become recognized as the foremost spokesperson for the New Age movement. It's hard to walk into even a mainstream bookstore these days without being greeted by your photograph and a large display of your books and tapes. How does it feel to suddenly find yourself in this position, with so many people looking to you, not just for medical advice but for spiritual guidance as well? I know you've said that you're not enlightened but merely a fellow seeker on the path. In light of this, how do you feel about having this kind of responsibility for people's spiritual evolution and for showing them the way?

DEEPAK CHOPRA:

On the one hand, I feel very grateful and also very humbled by the fact that people find what I'm writing about so helpful to them in their spiritual evolution. I am grateful that the knowledge I'm articulating and expressing in my books, workshops and lectures is finding such a big and widespread response.

The second thing is, at some level, I feel that I can't take the credit for it in that there are many, many people in the spiritual movement—some whom I admire immensely like Ken Wilber and Krishnamurti—from whom I draw a lot of inspiration. And I also feel that I can't take credit for everything, because when I write this material, many times all I do is go into meditation and ask my spirit, my heart, to tell me what to write, and it seems to come so spontaneously. I'm sometimes even embarrassed that I'm taking the credit for it!

Finally, I do not like the idea that people come to me and see me as somebody that they should be depending upon for their evolution, because I don't see myself as living up to my image. You know, the image is created by people, and no image ever conforms to reality. So when people create images they are preparing themselves for

disappointment, because images always get defiled. Somebody will meet me at an airport and find me drinking a cup of coffee, and they're disappointed, because they think I shouldn't be drinking coffee. That's kind of ridiculous, but that's the way people are. They create images and then they're enraged that the image doesn't conform to *their* expectations.

I'm just writing these books because I'm compelled to from some unknown source. There's no other reason. It's like, if you ask somebody, "Why do you sing in the bathroom?" And they say they are compelled to. Or, "Why do you run on the beach?" "Well, it gives me joy." That's why I'm doing this.

WIE: In a recent radio interview you spoke of yourself as being "just a spiritual vagabond," and you said that you're not the spiritual figure that many people imagine you to be. You said that neither you nor your family take you very seriously. Yet what would you say to people who feel that this contradicts the voice of spiritual authority that comes through your books? What would you say to people who think that someone who has chosen the role of showing the way for others should take that role very seriously indeed?

DC: I don't think I'll ever take myself seriously or my role seriously. If you do, you get full of self-importance and that interferes with what you have set out to do. If my books strike you as coming from a level of authority, it is when I'm "sourcing" the material from my inner self. I don't want to change that material, it's the way it comes out. Responsibility is something very different; it comes when you're carefree, when you're lighthearted, when you don't take yourself seriously.

In true spirituality, you should be grateful for when it's there, and if it stops coming, then it stops coming. Everything has a beginning, a middle, and an end. I happen to be someone you found in the middle. And at some point, it's going to stop and then there will be someone else. So you can't depend on others for your own evolution. At the same time, if I'm writing something that you find helpful, use it. If you don't find it helpful, throw it away.

WIE: In your last several books, you've quoted a great deal from the teachings of a number of the great spiritual traditions. You often convey that their message is as important for our

There's a lot of nonsense in so-called ancient wisdom when I look at it, including Ayurveda. So "ancient" is different from "timeless." Timeless is something that could be any time. It could be ancient, contemporary or futuristic. But it stands true for all time. And when I refer to the wisdom traditions. I refer to the timeless wisdom that is found in all the traditions of the world. I don't necessarily look at interpretations. You know, I've read a hundred different interpretations of the Bhagavad Gita, of the Upanishads. They all say different things. I can't depend on the interpretations because they reflect the consciousness of the interpreter. If the interpreter says "this is serious" and "this is difficult"—then that's his or her interpretation of spirituality. I have had the great fortune in my younger days of being with spiritual masters who were the most lighthearted and cheery people in the world. And I have always equated enlightenment with this joy, the inner joy of being, which I find in babies and children. The only difference between a baby and an enlightened master is that a baby is in bliss without understanding, and a spiritual master is in bliss with understanding. So I have chosen to think of my own in-

"FOR ME,

wealth is a state of awareness where you don't think about money—because you know that you can take from the level of spirit anything that you want."

time as it has been historically. The great traditions themselves always have claimed that the path to true spiritual liberation is an enormously challenging and all-consuming endeavor, that it always demands everything from the sincere aspirant. Yet one message that comes across very clearly in your work is the idea that the path to spiritual freedom need not be an arduous struggle, but can be easy and is in fact readily accessible to everyone. Is the spiritual attainment that you speak and write about the same goal as these traditions are pointing toward, or would you describe it as something different?

DC: I think there's a confusion when we look at spiritual traditions. Some people think anything that's ancient is great, is wise, is valid. Now I have a problem with that.

terpretations, which may be conflicting with some of the other interpretations that you find. I seek in the spiritual literature that which is consistent with my own experience, in meditation and in life in general. If something is other than my experience, then I ignore it.

WIE: But enlightenment, the genuine understanding that the enlightened master has attained, has always been understood to be a "pearl of great price." Is it this pearl of great price that you teach?

DC: I think if one is too serious and one tries too hard, one becomes a spiritual materialist. The very fact that you are seeking so hard is a sign of anxiety and it's many times



Ancient Wisdom, Timeless Truth

"The scriptures declare that immortality

cannot be gained through work or progeny or riches, but by renunciation alone. . . Therefore, let the wise man give up craving for pleasure in external things, and struggle hard for liberation."

Shankara The Crest Jewel of Discrimination

"Scarcely one out of thousands of persons

strives for perfection of Self-realization. Scarcely any one of the striving, or even the perfected persons, truly understands Me."

The Bhagavad Gita 7:3

"Sages say that the path to Self-knowledge

is as difficult as walking on the sharp edge of a razor."

Kathopanishad Pt 1, Ch 3, Vs 14

a reflection of the ego. And I see a lot of spiritual one-up-manship amongst people in spiritual communities. It's all ego-based. Whereas true spirituality is surrender. And then you don't worry if you get enlightened or not, you know? So what? There's all of eternity in front of us.

WIE: Jesus said: "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven." The greatest sages have taught that one has to be willing to make enormous personal sacrifices, even to the point of forsaking all thought of personal gain, in order to truly live the spiritual life. And yet throughout your work, one hears the pervasive message that the spiritual life, rather than requiring that we give anything up, is actually the very vehicle by which we can obtain everything that we desire. In your bestselling book, The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success, you state that "when your actions are motivated by love, your energy multiplies and accumulates and the surplus energy you gather and enjoy can be channeled to create anything that you want, including unlimited wealth." It does appear that, knowingly or unknowingly, you may actually be using spiritual teachings to serve rather than destroy the fundamental narcissism in human nature. In bringing spiritual pursuit and material aspiration together under the same roof, don't you reduce the primordial spiritual message, which is always awesome, overwhelming and fiercely uncompromising in its demand, to something that's palatable to the Western ego? Was Jesus wrong? Is it possible for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven?

DC: Jesus spoke in Aramaic, you know. I'm very familiar with that expression and I always have believed that what he was saying is that it is bad for you to be *attached* to wealth. If you are attached to wealth, if you are attached to richness, then it will be difficult for you to find enlightenment or wealth or anything else that you're attached to. For me, wealth is a state of awareness where you don't think about money, where it's not a concern for you—because you know that you can take from the level of spirit anything that you want. The spirit has created the lavish, abundant, luxuriant body of nature, the universe itself, where in every seed there's a promise of thousands of forests. The earth is the body of the spirit. There is a self-knowingness that from the level of the Self, you *can* create what you want.

When we speak of narcissism, I think there's always confusion between Self and self-image. When I talk about Self, I'm speaking about that domain of awareness that is universal. Self-image, of course, is the ego. If you're acting from the level of ego, then of course that's damaging. But if you're acting from the level of the Self, then in fact, creating from that kind of Self would only allow you to be wealthy. I mean, is Mother Theresa rich or poor? If you

ask me that question, I'd say she's an immensely rich person, because she doesn't have a concern about money.

WIE: But the richness of her spirit comes from not wanting anything for herself. Isn't it a matter of whether your fundamental motivation is one of self-interest, or one of saying, "Thy will be done"—for that which is beyond yourself? But that's not necessarily a message that is very attractive to the American mind.

DC: I think at the ultimate level "thy" and "my" become one. In my books what I have done very frequently is use a tantalizing title like "Ageless Body, Timeless Mind." I

been most often scorned and shunned by the great spiritual realizers throughout history. Because your message supports and relies so heavily on the perennial wisdom, one would expect that your message would actually force a confrontation, not only with materialistic values but with the status quo itself. What do you think about this?

DC: First of all, the media has focused on that segment of my supporters who are famous, but for every famous person who supports me, there are hundreds who are not famous. But that's what the media focuses on.

The second thing is that I find that people who are rich, who have achieved a great deal of success in their

"I HAVE CHOSEN

to think of my own interpretations, which may be conflicting with some of the other interpretations that you find. I seek in the spiritual literature that which is consistent with my own experience. . . . If something is other than my experience, then I ignore it."

use titles that are catchy, that draw people in. And you know, they start out with one motivation and they end up finding themselves.

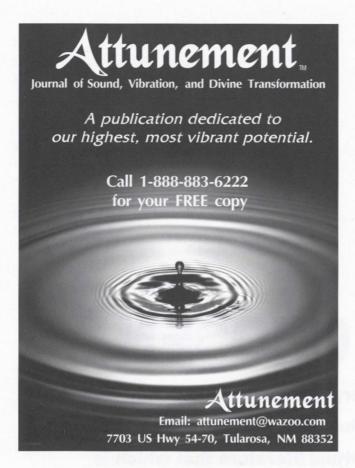
WIE: What do you think about the teachings of "ego death"?

DC: Ego death? It can come only when its time is due. You can't force it. There are two ways of killing the ego. One is by totally contracting it until it disappears. The other is expanding it until it merges with the ego of Atman.

WIE: I've read that among those people who most avidly support and promote your work are Hollywood movie stars, fashion designers, business moguls and pop superstars—the very individuals who are living symbols of American materialism and glitz all over the world—people who promote those values that are generally considered very superficial, such as fame, fortune and self-image. These are the very values that have

lives, particularly in the arts or in Hollywood, are extraordinarily talented people, otherwise, they wouldn't have achieved that level of success. They have amazing talents, but when God gives you something, God also takes something away from you. So even though they may be extraordinarily talented, frequently they feel a lack of integration in their life, and therefore they seek spirituality. And they find that what I'm saying is either as applicable to them as anyone else, or in fact even *more* applicable, because they come from a deeper level of insecurity. Their whole experience of who they are depends on the approval of society. Throughout my life, I have felt that insecurity and discontent are actually triggers for transformation. So that's how I interpret the whole phenomena.

WIE: What about the idea that a genuine spiritual teaching would actually force a confrontation with materialistic values?

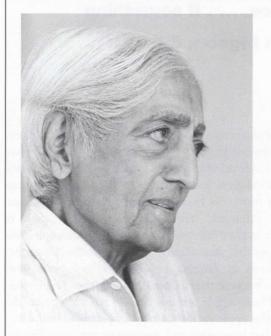


Deepak Chopra continued

DC: That confrontation is a personal confrontation that people have to embark on themselves. And materialistic values are not bad. The idea that spirituality must be divorced from material success is one of the things that has kept India in poverty and dependent on the rest of the world throughout these centuries. It comes from that interpretation of spirituality.

WIE: How would you respond to the criticism that presenting the spiritual path as other than ultimately demanding—

DC: I don't believe in that. I just don't believe in that, and because it's been said for thousands of years doesn't mean it's true. Maybe it's true for those people who believe in it. I think what is demanding is anything that's ego-based. Anything that depends on other people is demanding. But the spiritual path, if you consider it demanding, you will make it demanding. You will be very serious about it and you'll never get anywhere. I really think that what is required is easiness, comfort and not taking yourself too seriously.



"Perhaps you may come upon that mystery which nobody can reveal to you and nothing can destroy."

J. Krishnamurti in "Freedom From the Known"

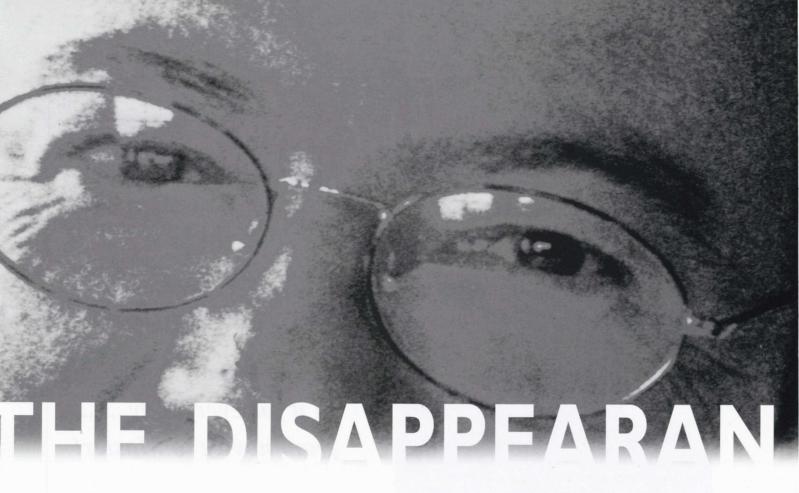
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In an oasis of quiet in the countryside of southern Hampshire the Centre is a place for people to enquire into the teachings of J. Krishnamurti (1895-1986), the noted religious teacher. It is a peaceful and beautiful environment to which those interested in the teachings come to use the library, video and audio tapes, and a computer-based collection. There is no guidance or structured activities, so one is free to be on one's own, go for walks or have conversations with other visitors and the staff.

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I first heard of Andrei Codrescu when someone asked me if I had seen *Road Scholar*, his 1992 documentary, in which the Romanian-born American poet and National Public Radio commentator drives across America in a red Cadillac convertible, stopping at unpredictable destinations to take the spiritual pulse, like a sincere but bemused country doctor, of his adopted homeland. No, I hadn't seen *Road Scholar*—in fact I had never heard of it—but as a member of a radical spiritual community, the odds were good that when I did, it would be in a communal setting at least superficially similar to some of those Codrescu had visited and filmed. And so it was that one evening last winter, in a makeshift screening room filled to capacity with many of my closest friends, I first made the acquaintance of Andrei Codrescu.

Road Scholar proved delightful and captivating. Codrescu's unique vantage point—expatriate of totali-

tarian post-Stalinist Romania and astute critic of the totalistic superficiality of modern America—gives the narration its delicious irony. His is a complex sensibility in which cynicism and idealism vie for supremacy and neither (at least in the film) ever conclusively wins. This tension creates a transparency through which those he interacts with are able to reveal themselves completely. Yet at the same time Codrescu is thoroughly and unapologetically opinionated, and his voice-over pronouncements are deadpan but deadly. At one point he says, "I felt that somehow I knew all these folks. They were the friends I lost to gurus in the sixties and seventies, grown a bit older. . . . They made me uneasy. Is there something wrong with the rest of us? . . . Probablyspeaking for myself. On the other hand, the oddness of a theocratic hierarchy right in the middle of a representative democracy isn't calculated to make me feel any bet-

INTERVIEW AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY SIMEON ALEV

ANDREI CODRESCU

a Romanian exile,

poet and

social critic

CEOETHEOUTSIDE

talks about

ter." When the show was over and the lights came on, I looked around the room and asked myself, "What would Andrei Codrescu make of us?"

consumerism,

As this issue of What Is Enlightenment? began to take shape, my question acquired intriguing new dimensions. The commercial triumph of popular spirituality in the West was a phenomenon we wanted to examine in the most rigorous context possible, taking as our standard the arduous challenges and awesome potential that characterize the highest spiritual teachings. We hoped to create a forum in which it would be possible to discriminate clearly among the incredible variety of paths and approaches being propagated today in the name of transformative spirituality or enlightenment. And we felt certain that the unique insights of a social critic such as Andrei Codrescu could help us to understand some of the cultural factors which contribute to the epidemic blurring of

spiritual subversion

and the dangers

of the seemingly real



"The copy cannot be

what we feel are crucially important distinctions. But I wondered . . . did we speak the same language?

"That's right up my alley," Codrescu told me on the phone from his office in the English Department at Louisiana State University, after I had sent him my proposal for an interview. "I wrote a book about this which you might want to read. It's called The Disappearance of the Outside."

The Disappearance of the Outside (subtitled "A Manifesto for Escape") is unlike any of the numerous kaleidoscopic volumes of poetry, memoirs and often hilarious social commentary that Codrescu has also published. It is a profound and intricately reasoned indictment of contemporary Western society, in which the cultural economy of the capitalist West is shown to be as oppressively destructive to the human spirit as were the Orwellian regimes of the Soviet-dominated Eastern Bloc under which he grew up. The promise that Western-style democracy appears to hold for Eastern European countries newly open to its influence is deceptive and dangerous, Codrescu asserts, not only to their

told from the original.

When the memory of the 'real' goes, the image may not even bear much resemblance to the original. . . . We will live in an abstract world (if we don't already). The real will have become strictly mythical. We won't notice the disappearance of the Outside, or our lack of desire for it."

own citizens but to humanity as a whole. Why? Because the collective consciousness of the West, which threatens now more than ever before to become the dominant consciousness of the world, is unnaturally suffused with *images*, images designed to disconnect human beings from the uncontainable mystery of what Codrescu calls "the Outside."

"The difficulty of distinguishing between the illusions of commodity culture and reality haunt the art of our time," he writes. "Memory, never very reliable, is easily fooled. The copy cannot be told from the original. When the memory of the 'real' goes, the image may not even bear much resemblance to the original. . . . We will live in an abstract world (if we don't already). The real will have become strictly mythical. We won't notice the disappearance of the Outside, or our lack of desire for it."

Codrescu's analysis helped to explain our frequent bewilderment when confronted with so many popular and presumably convincing approaches to spiritual life that begin to seem dubious the moment they are examined in the context of that rarest but most authentic of attainments, that "pearl of great price," the literal human

embodiment of perfect goodness, of that which is truly sacred. His revealing description of America as "an uninterrupted anthology of fads chasing each other faster and faster across shorter and shorter time spans" is recognizably the condition of much of the modern spiritual world, and there is certainly more than enough evidence to suggest that things in general are every bit as bad as Codrescu says they are.

In the course of our conversation, Codrescu readily admitted that growing up in the shadow of a communist dictatorship has left him with the indelible conviction that perfect goodness is neither attainable nor desirable, and that the very aspiration to realize it can only be motivated by a desire to impose on oneself and others a standard of morality and conduct that is suspiciously absolute and almost inevitably oppressive. But at the same time, he derives and transmits a palpable joy from peering with relentless clarity beneath the rampant superficiality of American culture, and his unusual willingness to face reality directly reflects an inspiring commitment both to the discovery of truth and to the preservation of mystery.



WIE: Road Scholar was our point of entry into your world, and one of the things that struck us as we watched it was that it had quite a strong spiritual emphasis. Was it your intention from the beginning to interview so many spiritual practitioners of one kind or another, or did it just happen that way as the project unfolded?

ANDREI CODRESCU: No, we certainly planned it that way. There were two things that interested me when I started elaborating the idea of the film. One was, what is the state of communal experiments after the fall of the big communal experiment in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union? Some of the early American utopian communities were used by Marx and Engels to elaborate their theory of communism, and Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union took that as far as they did by transforming these utopias, in the process, into something that didn't resemble the original versions at all. But some of these communities are still here, and I wanted to know why. And the other thought I had was that I wanted to revisit some of my past. In the past—the late sixties to mid-seventies—I knew quite a few people who were interested in spiritual life and I was close enough to them to witness and occasionally to participate.

WIE: How do you see the state of spiritual life in America today?

AC: I feel that the sixties were the fountainhead of everything bad and good in America today, but as far as the proliferation of various kinds of techniques for attaining enlightenment, I think that that has been largely a function of the market. The great discovery of the early seventies was that the great new markets are interior—they're inward, they're spiritual—and that that was the direction that we were going to go in because we had pretty much exhausted physical space in America. And entrepreneurs of the spirit, if you like, took the cue from there.

WIE: Santa Fe comes across in the film as the quintessential New Age Mecca.

AC: Yes, Santa Fe is clearly the film's locus of what's being marketed, and if you've read the book you know that I met

many more people there than were shown in the movie. I found most of them to be charming frauds. Just about everybody seemed to be operating on the surface level of suggestion and gimmickry—crystals, aura healing, etcetera. And then there were the out-and-out psychotics. . . .

WIE: Why do you think that this country has been unable to sustain the kind of radical self-inquiry that was embraced in the sixties? In the nineties, spiritual interest seems to be no less widespread but it doesn't seem to be propelled by the same degree of selfless passion and willingness to risk everything. You were nineteen when you came here in 1966. What is your former nineteen-year-old émigré's perspective on what happened in the sixties and what's happened since?

AC: The sixties was one of those epochs like the twenties—the twenties into the thirties—that suddenly compelled everyone to an urgency that was quite miraculous. These sorts of evolutionary periods occur, but I can't claim to understand why they happen. All I know is that there are tremendous energies loose in the collective body that are competing, and in the twenties and thirties, most of the important thinking in philosophy, in psychology, in ethnography, in history, in geology, was being done. You had, in France, the surrealist writers, Jacques Lacan in psychology . . . quite a few people working in various areas. And what they were competing with at that time was fascism, which was an extremely strong and simplified recipe for suicide. So you could say that this tremendous explosion of creative activity was a rush to find out what human beings were before they were going to be killed. I think that in the sixties we had the same feeling. It was another end of history—there have been several ends of history that have occurred since Nietszche proclaimed the death of God-and we experienced the same kind of urgency. We wanted to put human life on a new basis. We wanted to find out whether it was possible to live without war, to live in a different way. And that impulse translated itself into an emergency, a psychic emergency. But a very strong wave of oppression soon followed the optimistic explosion of the sixties, and what happened as a result was the translation of the spiritual quest into the realm of politics. Because while of course the FBI and the other oppressive institutions of the government couldn't understand the spiritual quest, they did understand politics, and once things were translated into politics it became easier for them to suppress it.

So for a while America had been nineteen years old just like I was, but now it began to age very quickly. This was partly because the war had disappeared, so there was a different status quo, and partly because we were suddenly introduced to several alternative realities, really that started with Ronald Reagan, who was an absolutely brilliant hologram, a projection of several authoritarian desires in the body politic. What he presented us with was a renewed sense of nationalism, the promise of a shining economy in which everybody could participate so that they could have whatever they wanted, not by trying to change the way they lived but simply by buying it. That was really the beginning of the triumph of consumer society in a very, very big way. And as people got older, pretty soon they began to worry about making a living and then the urgency left. A more radical way to think of it is that the last train for God left America in about 1974. There was a great rush to get on board and many people didthey either died or were marginalized to some place where they still exist. But the rest of us stayed behind and tried to organize life as best we could.

WIE: Georg Feuerstein, elsewhere in this issue, distinguishes between authentic liberation teachings and "watered-down versions of powerful original teachings made palatable to Western consumers." What aspects of our culture would pre-dispose spiritual seekers to accept these diluted teachings? And what is it that has to be removed from genuine teachings in order to make them attractive to Americans?

AC: Our consumer culture is both material and spiritual, and the success of consumerism and spectacle has to do with packaging. You could say that more than two-thirds of the things that make us happy do so because of the package they come in, the box. There's nothing inside. Our attention span has been severely reduced over the past two or three decades. Some people blame television, and it's probably true. But Attention Deficit Disorder is not an entirely negative condition. We also have ADD, or a reduced attention span, because we want to absorb and incorporate more and more information and more and more products in order to make sense of our world. It is only an ascetic minority that tries to do without things,



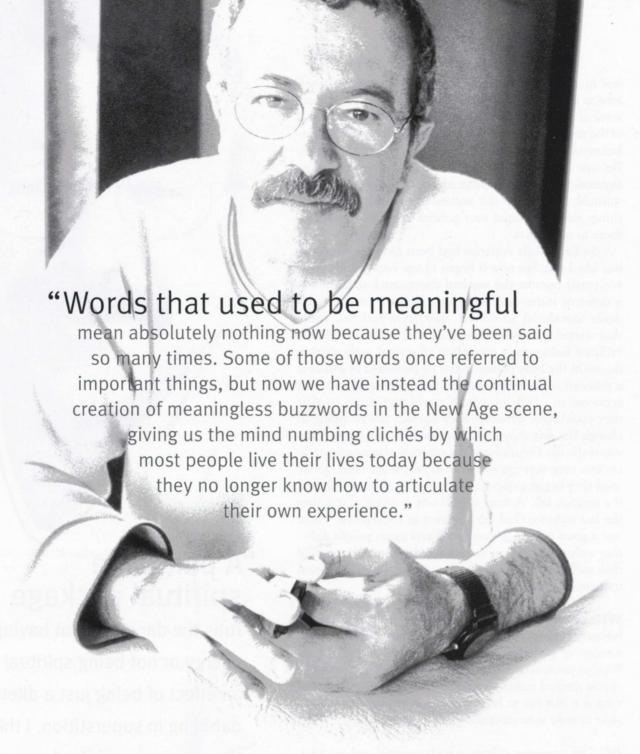
"A palatable spiritual package

appear, they

will be shunned."

runs the danger of not having enough energy or not being spiritual enough—an effect of being just a dilettante's dabbling in superstition. I think that the genuinely spiritual person is dangerous, and charged with a kind of frightful energy and antisocial power.

And when they



without technologies, without consumption, but even they are inextricably linked to these things. Even those people who consciously refuse to participate are still connected to the global culture, so in a sense there is no choice but to be within it and to think it. So our short attention span comes from an effort to defend our humanity and also our sense of self from a culture that splits it all the time, that divides it, divides it, divides it. Because capitalism is schizophrenia; it is a multiple-personality-producing force. In order to defend yourself against that you have to absorb very fast more and more, and so you don't pay enough attention.

But there is another aspect to your question about making a spiritual package that is pleasing or saleable. Historically, as we all know, true shamans and spiritual people have been shunned by most communities. They have been ostracized. The shamans had to live in a tree and they were dirty and frightful people, and when they came to the edge of the village, it was only the fact that they had spiritual and healing powers that kept the people from beating them with sticks and destroying them. And it seems to me that the shaman's perspective is the one from which to question the genuineness of any spiritual package that doesn't transform you into a complete freak

who has to eat worms and live in the desert, that allows you to still live in your community and not be an outcast. Because a palatable spiritual package, to me, runs the danger of not having enough energy or of not being spiritual enough—an effect of being pretty much just a dilettante's dabbling in superstition. I really think that the genuinely spiritual person is dangerous, and charged with a kind of frightful energy and antisocial power. And when they appear, they will be shunned.

WIE: How do you feel, then, about people who are trying to make spiritual teachings popular by "defanging," to use your words, or "denaturing" them by removing the offensive or subversive elements you've touched on so that people will become interested in them?

AC: Those people are dangerous, actually. They're dangerous because they present a virtual reality in lieu of reality. Anybody who gives you a wax apple and tells you it's a real one, you know, you'll figure it out when you take your first bite. But for a while there, after you've bothered keeping it and you're not really eating it, they think you won't know the difference. And a lot of people don't.

The greatest enemy of the real is the seemingly real. And that is something we've gotten very good at doing—faking reality, faking the objects of our interest, presenting substitutes. This is a culture of simulation. It is possible for a poor person to think they are living as well as a rich person because what they buy looks the same, but theirs is made out of cheap s— while the rich people buy the stuff that's made out of genuine material.

WIE: It also seems possible that you might not figure it out. You could actually give yourself the illusion of eating, and even digesting, the wax apple.

AC: Yes, and that's apparently what's happening. There are quite a few people nowadays who are content with consuming substitutes and thinking they're having a genuine experience. And this is a process that's been going on for quite some time. I mean, there are people who know television families better than they know their own. The people sitting next to them on the couch are islands of mystery, while the people on television—the Huxtables, for example—everything is known about them. But the terms by which people relate to the mysteries sitting right next to them are those that are given by the fake, by the simulation, because the simulation provides a language, a way out of the difficulty of the real relationship. It's not so much that people mistake the simulation for the real, as that the simulation provides them with a way out of the difficulty of facing the real. It provides them with an escape.

WIE: The subtitle of your book The Disappearance of the Outside is "A Manifesto for Escape," but this is obviously not the kind of escape you mean. What do you see as a viable way out of the perils of life in a culture of ever accelerating simulation?

AC: I personally feel that there is an imperative to create, to make the world, which forces one to original expression and to the rejection of received ideas in any form, especially received language. But we have a great language problem these days because large areas of language have been laid waste by the media, by repetition of clichés, things that used to be meaningful but that mean absolutely nothing now because they've been said so many times, just like kids repeating words over and over until they don't mean anything any more. Some of those words once referred to important things, but now we have instead the continual creation of meaningless buzzwords in the New Age scene, giving us the mind numbing clichés by which most people live their lives today because they no longer know how to articulate their own experience. So under the circumstances it is better, I think, to use two or three notions or expressions that have been deeply examined and are lucid and candid than just to repeat after someone else. And this brings us to the question of ritual.

The fact is that all communities, in order to bond, need certain myths and rituals. By performing a ritual, you are in fact linked to the original act of creation of the community, you're linked to the original myth. So perhaps the important thing, especially today, is not to have a new form or new forms of expression, but to have rituals that are imbued with real meaning, myths that do indeed connect you to an original experience. And I think that would be the job of any truly spiritual community—to continually refresh through ritual the energy, the creative energy of the beginning, and then to continue from there. But things like running around with wolves in the woods or beating drums with Robert Bly don't seem to me to be genuine rituals in that way. They are just more entertainments of the bored and affluent, who buy themselves a weekend of so-called spirituality and think they've done something. This kind of thing is really humorous. It's what the Czech novelist Milan Kundera defines as "kitsch." Kitsch is the awe that somebody feels about their own amazing good taste and ability to appreciate something. In other words, they're not truly living the experience or appreciating it; they're amazed at how amazing they themselves are for being able to do it.

WIE: In The Disappearance of the Outside you write, "If we face a new situation today, it is the speed with which everything is copied, co-opted and turned against itself. The original of anything, whether it be a poem or an assassination, still pre-

"I think 'Thou shalt not judge' is one of those

wimpy, fearful, courage-free ideas. The potential of a human being is in commenting, translating, judging the world. . . . An unwillingness to judge only reflects a lack of courage and it's the disease of a politically correct culture that is afraid to offend."

serves something of the freshness of the intent. No such freshness will be found in the copy, and the copy of the copy will have long since turned its energy against the very freshness that spawned its ancestor." Does it seem likely to you that contemporary American versions of ancient spiritual teachings have fallen prey to the same process?

AC: They probably have.

WIE: Why do you think it is that spiritually inclined individuals often don't seem to take the time to deeply examine a prospective path in order to discover how authentic or transformative it really is?

AC: I think the reason why someone who is spiritually inclined may not look closely enough is probably a cultural problem: there are so many alternatives. It's like being in a supermarket. Do you really have time, in a spiritual supermarket, to look at every single thing and read the package and then follow someone? Or do you take for granted the written words and the testimonies of various people?

But I also think that in the sixties we were more adventurous and we really wanted to be "Outside." We threw ourselves Outside and there we encountered the wilderness and in that wilderness we discovered many, many things. We thought that the established churches and institutions at that time were part of the status quo and we wanted to have nothing to do with them. So we experimented, but I think that these experiments have been brought "inside" now. What I refer to as "the Outside" is a place that is now very rarely accessible.

WIE: Our capitalist culture is also a democracy, and one of the central and seemingly democratic injunctions in contemporary American spirituality is "Thou shalt not judge." Many people seem to feel that having a strong opinion in and of itself can cut you off from the experience of a deeper, more intuitive truth.

Or alternatively, that all human experience is subjective anyway and there really isn't any deeper truth to speak of.

AC: Well, I think "Thou shalt not judge" is one of those wimpy, fearful, courage-free ideas. The potential of a human being is in commenting, translating, judging the world. Not only should you not shy away from judging, you should do so as much as possible—as long, of course, as you're not harming someone else by doing that. You see, it is not necessarily important to walk a mile in another person's shoes to know that that person is out to lunch or that their shoes don't fit. It's possible to know those things without actually having to do that. So I think that an unwillingness to judge only reflects a lack of courage and it's the disease of a politically correct culture that is afraid to offend. I think you should critique as much as you are able to observe, and not shy away from it. In a true democracy, you'll get equally strong opinions coming back at you, and you have to survive the clash. It's your prerogative as a free person to spout off and even make an ass of yourself if you like, but you'll get your corrective if somebody equally free is also speaking. And it's not that we should be intentionally offensive to one another; we should be candid. The genuineness of democratic discourse is in candor. It's not in avoiding offense.

WIE: How do you think candor fares against the equally popular notion that there is no such thing as objective truth to begin with? If this is true, what is it that makes it possible to discriminate in a way that isn't merely context-bound or subjective?

AC: It's possible to discriminate if you bring to it everything you know. Of course you may not know enough. You may be wrong. But you are duty-bound to be candid. And as I said before, in a true democracy, you will get your comeuppance if indeed you are wrong.

WIE: New Age spokesman Dr. Deepak Chopra delivered an address last May to the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., before an assembled multitude of print and broadcast journalists, which was simultaneously broadcast live via national radio and television to an audience of hundreds of thousands, if not millions. His popularity suggests to some people the possibility of reaching a critical mass of spiritual interest that could propel us toward an exciting new chapter in humanity's collective evolution. What do you think about this?

AC: I may be wrong because I don't know much about him, but I sort of associate Deepak Chopra with a whole slew of somewhat spiritual inspirational speakers that all the corporations in America are now very interested in because they single-handedly inspire bored workers and management to renewed energy which, of course, they will then put into the company. I'm not sure what that's all about, but I am sure that a large corporation doesn't hire a spiritual person in order to sabotage or create anarchy among its operations. They just sort of take a refresher course in, you know, getting in touch with what makes them happier so that they can be better workers. I've heard a couple of these guys but I had to walk out—I just couldn't take it. I think there's a degree of subversion, as

we were saying before, to the true spiritual business and it's probably not one that would sit well with corporate management. I know people who teach Zen and juggling to workers and to corporate CEO types who have everything. They have Jaguars and swimming pools. The only thing they don't have—that they're now buying—is the spiritual dimension, if you like, to make themselves more effective.

WIE: Speaking of Jaguars and swimming pools, near the end of Road Scholar you say that "paradoxically, America is the most materialistic country on earth, and it's also the most spiritual." Of course there are many spiritual creeds these days that hold that spirituality and materialism need not be mutually exclusive, and some are even based on that idea. With that in mind, why do you feel this is a paradox? If it is, what is the effect of American materialism on American spirituality? And also, under ideal circumstances, what would be the effect of American spirituality on American materialism?

AC: That's a very good question. I think it is a paradox because the material world that we live in has its own imperatives and its own directions, and for the most part we are flotsam in the constant movement of production and

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Andrei Codrescu continued

consumption and we really don't have that much to say about it. Now, I think you can look at a lot of spiritual work as a work of resistance to our material culture, and that's where the paradox is. The fact that this country is rich in spiritual movements and ideas testifies, I think, to a certain resistance to being helpless flotsam in the production/consumption cycle. What influence material culture has on this spiritual work we've already discussed: it creates the necessity to package spiritual work, and really to package it in a way that resembles material products, because it's more palatable, it's easier to sell and it's more attractive. But what influence the spiritual work has on material culture is a more complicated question because, clearly, as we've been saying about inspirational speakers and people who introduce spiritual terms into corporate culture, there is some kind of influence, but I don't think it goes to fundamentally changing the nature of the production machine. Genuine spiritual work, I think, would tend to gum up the works. In that sense I don't think there is a great deal of visible influence by true spirituality on our material culture.

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DR. LAURA



THE CONSCIENCE OF AMERICA

Could it be that America's #1 talk radio shrink is calling us to a higher moral standard than many of the most renowned spiritual teachers of our era?

ur exploration of popular spirituality in America had taken us far and wide—from the cafés and bookstalls of Andrei Codrescu's New Orleans to the peaceful, makeshift northern California Tibetan temple where we met with Georg Feuerstein to a Hilton hotel conference room in western Massachusetts filled to near capacity

with a thousand admirers of Deepak Chopra. But, as our plane descended through the thick blanket of L.A. smog that hot, already summer morning in late May, I couldn't help thinking that here, the heart of so much of American popular culture, home to Hollywood and Beverly Hills, Venice Beach and the Valley, was somehow the last place on earth I

expected to find myself seeking clarity on the confusing picture of contemporary American spirituality. As our pilot banked a turn over the crowded beaches that have made Coppertone a household name, my thoughts drifted back to northern India, to the day I first heard about the media phenomenon known to millions as "Dr. Laura."

Interview by Craig Hamilton



NTRODUCTION continued

It was February of this year, at the beginning of our annual retreat in the Indian holy city of Rishikesh and our editorial team was meeting on the ashram rooftop to discuss plans for our next issue. "Check this out," my colleague and friend exclaimed, producing a newspaper clipping from the San Francisco Chronicle weekly entertainment supplement, "this woman sounds unbelievable." The full-color front page spread bore the smiling image of a blond, coiffed forty-something woman in a brass-buttoned bright blue suit, and the headline: "This Doctor Is In: A Radio Shrink Is Captivating the Country by Talking Tough and Preaching Morality."

While I make every effort to keep an open mind regarding our editorial content, that day I apparently missed the mark. "Sounds interesting," I responded, "but we don't have a lot of time so perhaps we should stick to discussing people we're considering for this issue." "But that's why I brought this," my friend replied, "I think we should consider her for this issue." "A radio shrink? But I really don't see ..." Realizing it was probably time to give him the benefit of the doubt, I let my protestations fade to a mumble, and he began to read. "Dr. Laura Schlessinger is on a mission," the article began. "Her aim? A reversal of the 'anything goes' excesses of the sixties. Her method? Drilling into her listeners' brains the message that they won't find happiness in doing their own thing, but in sacrifice, personal responsibility and duty." While I have to admit my initial impression was only slightly changed by this lead-in,

there was something in it that caught my attention. Characterizing Dr. Laura (now the number two talk radio host in America) as a tough, no-nonsense ex-therapist who is unafraid to tell callers and listeners alike exactly what she thinks of how they are living their lives, the article went on to explain that she considers her primary work with people to be in the areas of ethics, morality—and spirituality. It also described, among other things, her critical views on the self-help movement, including her feeling that thirty years of self-searching and psychotherapy has helped to foster a climate in which the pursuit of self-fulfillment at almost any expense has been elevated to nothing less than a sacred quest—and that because of this, people in general no longer feel obligated to anything but themselves.

I think more than anything it was this last point that made me start to change my tune. For in our own exploration into the modern spiritual predicament, this was one of the most troubling observations we had made—that much of what is currently taught in the West in the name of spiritual transformation often seems to make people more narcissistic than they were before they became interested in spiritual matters. And now here it was in black and white. With little to go on but a torn newspaper clipping from a distant corner of the world, I began to wonder: could it be that she, a radio therapist presumably in touch with a far different sector of the culture than we were, is actually responding directly to the very predica-

ment that we wanted to address in this issue? The thought was intriguing. For if what the article said was true, Dr. Laura seemed, in her own way, to be calling into question many of the fundamental ideas of the modern human potential movement, many of the seemingly revolutionary views on personal growth and human nature that over the past two or three decades have come to be accepted as truth by a vast sector of progressive America. And what's more, she seemed to be taking a strong stand with her callers on the most challenging moral issues. (In this vein, the article also mentioned her conservative views on a number of social issues, leading us to assume that we wouldn't necessarily see eye-to-eye about everything.) But that a radio psychotherapist—someone whose ratings and therefore career depend entirely on her ability to keep the interest of a popular audience-seemed to be presenting a challenging, even hard-hitting message sure to carry callers and listeners alike well beyond their comfort zones was not something we could easily ignore. That she might also even be rejecting many of the most fundamental precepts of the psychotherapeutic paradigm from which her entire profession was spawned, on that day beneath the blinding Indian sun, seemed more than I could fathom. There, against the flanks of the rugged Himalayan foothills, looking out on the Ganges swirling by, I began to seriously consider the possibility that we might actually have found a comrade of sorts in that most unlikely of places—the popular American media.

It wasn't until we arrived back in the States over a month later that we finally had a chance to listen to Dr. Laura. And on that particular afternoon, she delivered everything we expected—and then some.

"Good afternoon. I'm Dr. Laura Schlessinger. My number: I-800-Dr. Laura, that's I-800-D-R-L-A-U-R-A. Mark, welcome to the program." Her first caller that day was a twenty-nine-year-old man who, after a brief testimonial to the life-changing impact of her show, explained that, out of fear of obligation and responsibility, he was having trouble with commitment. "I guess I'm selfish is what it comes down to," he told her. Conditioned by my psychotherapeutic training to expect a soothing rebuttal to his negative self-judgment followed by a series of probing questions into the source of his anxiety, I did not anticipate her response. "I think most creatures are," she began. "Let's face it. The first instinct is self-survival, right? That's the animal in us. But our opportunity in life is to go beyond being merely animal, which is to make ourselves in God's image by our efforts." After a short discussion about the merits of commitment, in which she twice forced him to stop in his tracks and reflect on what she'd said, she responded to his statement that he was probably overanalyzing and just needed "a nudge," with the following: "You're not overanalyzing. You're facing a dilemma that all human beings face—how do I rise above being an animal? And the only way you do that is to give. There is no nudge. There is nothing that is going to change your mind

completely. There is nothing that is going to make you feel sanguine. There's you having the courage to be a man and not a male animal. It's courage. And courage doesn't come from being convinced. When men go over the hill to fight a battle, are they convinced they're not going to die? Are they convinced in advance that they're going to win the battle? They're hopeful. But they're not convinced, and they do it anyway. Because the goal is worthy and they have faith in that goal and passion for that goal."

For those of us whose frame of reference is the free association of Sigmund Freud, the reflective listening of Carl Rogers and the dream analysis of Carl Jung, such an impassioned call to honor seems a far cry from therapy. But over the course of the one-hour slot we were able to catch (she's actually on a full three hours, five days a week), we were witness to six such encounters covering everything from dealing with aggressive in-laws to homophobia. In one particularly demanding dialogue with a schoolteacher trying to navigate a troubled student's apparently malicious parents, Dr. Laura even launched into a riveting discourse on the failure of the psychiatric establishment to recognize the existence of evil. Evil? On a shrink show? By the time the hour was through, three things had been indelibly impressed on my psyche: First, by no stretch of the imagination, could this be called a shrink show; second, Dr. Laura did have a more conservative worldview than I could personally embrace; and third, if our issue was going to be complete, I had to speak with this woman. It was clear that the perspective Dr. Laura was bringing to every dilemma that crossed her path would, if nothing else, provide a stark and compelling contrast to almost every popular approach to personal growth that we know.

If numbers are any indication, Dr. Laura seems to be having an impact. In the three years since her program entered national syndication, her popularity has been skyrocketing. In the U.S. alone, her show is now heard by over 20 million listeners tuning in on over 450 stations (a close second only to right-wing propagandist Rush Limbaugh). She is the number one talk radio host in Canada, and with international syndication now carrying her throughout the U.K. and into South Africa, it appears that the entire English-speaking world will soon have an opportunity to get her daily blast of moral and spiritual adrenaline. With as much energy as she seems to have for her work, it should come as no surprise to find that she is as active with the pen as with the microphone. In addition to writing a syndicated weekly newspaper column and a monthly Go Take On the Day newsletter, in the past two years she has produced two bestselling books, the second

of which, How Could You Do That?! The Abdication of Character, Courage, and Conscience, is at the time of this writing third on the New York Times nonfiction bestseller list. Her third book, Ten Stupid Things Men Do to Mess Up Their Lives (a companion to her first similarly entitled book for women), is due out this fall. Even in cyberspace, she seems to be making waves. Now online with a full-scale website—merchandising catalog and all—she held her first online chat room in May. With over 300,000 responses in the first fifteen minutes (the largest response ever to an online chat), her enthusiastic wired listeners crashed the server and the virtual discussion was postponed until further notice.

I spoke with Dr. Laura in the studios of her home station, KFI radio in Los Angeles. There, surrounded by framed magazine articles and covers displaying her beaming smile, she was humorous, friendly and surprisingly unpretentious for a person of her celebrity, in most ways identical to the Dr. Laura I had by that time grown accustomed to hearing on the radio. During the course of our conversation, which lasted just over an hour, she revealed much about herself, and particularly about the strong religious worldview from which her passionate conviction arises.

"When I do anything, I do it one hundred percent," she told us, and that is no less true for her religious life than for her martial arts practice (at age fifty, she has a recently attained black belt in karate). Having always identified with the Jewish roots that came to her from her father's side of the family, in 1996 she "converted" to Orthodox Judaism. She keeps kosher. She observes Shabbat. She attends synagogue. She believes in the covenant. And because of her high-profile position, she has the good fortune of an ongoing Jewish education under the guidance of a legion of rabbis across the country with whom she corresponds and converses regularly.

So I was intrigued when, early in the interview, she confided that in her own spiritual life, she feels a lack of intimacy with and connectedness to God. As our conversation continued, though, it became increasingly clear that Dr. Laura is not so much a woman of spiritual depth as a woman of faith, that her passion and conviction come not from direct spiritual experience, but from her unwavering belief in the ideas and ideals of her chosen religion. In light of our issue on modern American spirituality, it is almost ironic that while Dr. Laura seems to have no concept of enlightenment, and is in no way attempting to teach a path to transcendence, she actually seems to be holding people to a much higher standard than many of those who do claim to be guiding others to that ultimate attainment.



WIE: One of the messages in your book How Could You Do That?!

is that we always know what we're doing and therefore always have the

freedom to choose our actions. This is an idea that flies in the face of much

of contemporary psychological and spiritual thinking.

DR. LAURA SCHLESSINGER: I know, because they say, "it's *unconscious*."

WIE: This is a very popular view.

LS: It's completely misguided. I have never talked to anybody who didn't really know what they were doing. Never once. And usually—in about eighty-five percent of my calls—I say, "You knew this, right? You knew you were doing this." And they always say, "Yeah, I knew. But I didn't want to admit it. I didn't want to think that I was bad." People don't always want to admit to their thoughts, feelings or motivations.

WIE: So you're saying that the idea of the unconscious is just an excuse?

LS: Yes. If I have a framework of voodoo, and I can sit with you long enough to get you to agree with me that things are caused by evil spirits, then things are caused by evil spirits. If I tell you that things are caused by your subconscious and you respect me, then things are caused by the subconscious.

WIE: In line with this, Sigmund Freud put forth an idea that has now become widely accepted, which is that "everyone is doing the best they can."

LS: That's not necessarily true. A lot of times, we don't put our effort into doing better. We coast. Now, I'm constantly reading Jewish law and Jewish thinking. And every time I read something, I realize, "Yes . . . I've been doing that." I expose myself to scrutiny by studying the scriptures. That means I'm working to be better. That's why I say that I think people who are religious are in general better people than those who are secular, because the religious people are constantly going to church, having some-

body nag them. They read the material and they're constantly opening themselves up to the possibility that they could be better. Secular people are often just trying to get the Mercedes or get ahead.

WIE: The subtitle of your book is "The Abdication of Character, Courage, and Conscience."

LS: Yes. Maybe I shouldn't tell you this, but at first the publishers didn't want that there. They said there were too many big words. (Laughs) And I said, "No, no, no." You've got to hit all levels and that's what it means. We've abdicated our character and our conscience and it takes courage to expedite those two.

WIE: Could you speak a bit about what that abdication is?

LS: Well, we've gone back to idol worship, and you know what the idol is? Where's my mirror? Me! That's our new idol worship. Really! We walk around with mirrors. What pleases me? What will make me look good? What will make me feel good? Me. Me! And if you have everybody doing that—if you and I are doing that—then I'm not caring about you and you're not caring about me (except for what we might get from each other) and we'll both be empty and hungry and lonely. The abdication is of values and ideals.

WIE: And so people abdicate their character, courage and conscience in the pursuit of—

LS: In the pursuit of "me."

WIE: What I want.

LS: Yes. Because to do wrong is easy. I liken that to a slide on ice downhill. I don't know why it was planned this way.



things. For example, one of my callers might say: "My father abandoned us and it made me feel unloved and lost. So when this man showed attention to me, it just filled my heart with joy . . . of course, he's married with three kids. But it's my heart and my joy." And I began saying to people, "How decent is this, to fill yourself up at the expense of somebody else's pain? To create for somebody else the very problem that caused your original pain? Talk about original sin! This is your original pain that you then create for someone else, and you derive joy from it. Does that sound decent and is that really wonderful?" They'll call me saying, "I'm going with a married man." You've heard talk radio therapists—who I call "shrinklets"—take this kind of call. Typically the shrinklets on the air say, "Oh, you poor thing. He can't be there for holidays. You poor thing. How you're suffering. He's such a bad man!" And I would listen to that year after year thinking, "There's something wrong with

LS: Yes. That means a couple of

this picture." I would sit with this woman and say, "How could you do that? Why does your pain entitle you to do wrong, to do evil, to do damage, to do hurtful things? The reason you're in such pain is that you did not choose to be ethical. If you chose to be ethical, you wouldn't be in this relationship. You'd be sitting with your pain of loss, but finding some constructive way to get by it, to go on and do great things with your life."

WIE: So mistakes people make are—

I certainly would have made it differently, but then I guess you'd have God's kingdom on earth. I have said on the air, "I can tell you how you can very easily know what the right thing to do is. It's too damn hard. It's too damn uncomfortable. It's too damn costly and it's too damn painful." When you can say any one or some combination of those, it's the right thing. The wrong thing is easy, because it satisfies immediately and requires no sacrifice.

WIE: Another thing you state in How Could You Do That?! is: "With an intense emphasis on honor and integrity, many of people's painful situations or problems simply would not exist."

how you can very easily know

right thing to do is. It's too damn hard. It's too damn lt's too damn costly and it's too damn painful. When say any one or some combination of those, it's the right thing. The wrong thing is easy."

LS: Based on greedy gratification, and then it compounds because it becomes a bigger mess. So many of the problems we get into come from putting aside ethical behavior for emotional gratification, which is why on my show you'll often hear me say, "Did I ask you about your feelings? I assume you're hurt, you're scared. I go through all that too. But that's not the basis from which we make our decisions." What if I said, "I know you need my help, but I'm having a really bad day, so the hell with you"? According to Jewish law, it doesn't matter what kind of day I'm having. I have to help you. So when your basis for responding is a standard of behavior not related to your feelings, then I guess you leave the sixties, seventies, eighties and nineties behind and you enter the Holy Land! And that's what I'm trying to get people to do. Because we've based everything on our feelings. We've taken our feelings to be an omen. We say, "Ah, I'm horny about you, so I guess we have to make it! And it doesn't matter who we would be hurting because I have these feelings." I've actually had people say that! "But he or she turns me on!" Well, you know, Jeff Goldblum in The Fly turned me on too—until he turned into a fly. What's your point? If we all act out on our feelings, as extreme and irrational and fleeting as they are, then we're all terribly unsafe from one another.

WIE: What does that say to the therapists who have spent all these years trying to help people get in touch with their innermost feelings as a way to wholeness?

LS: They've made a mistake. It's been a terrible mistake. It's been a tragic mistake. On some level, being honest about your emotions is good. For instance, I'll say to somebody on the air, "Don't give me that. You really want to stick it up their nose." And they'll say, "Oh, no!" and

I'll say, "Don't give me that good person thing. You really want to stick it up their nose." At some point they'll admit it, and then I'll say, "Okay, that's fair. It's fair to feel that way. But it's not fair to act from that feeling." I think that if you're clear about your evil and positive feelings, then at least you have some basis for honesty with yourself. But that's not the place out of which you make decisions. I'll be somewhere, someplace, going through something and I'll turn to my husband and I'll say, "You know what I really want to do?" (Grits teeth) But I can't, because I want to be a good Jew. I can't do that. That doesn't mean at that moment I feel this wonderful, spiritual experience. Most of the time, I have to walk around for a day feeling irritated. Ultimately though, all those moments add up to me feeling like a better person and having more self-respect. That's ultimately where selfesteem and self-respect come from.

WIE: So if we're not basing our decisions on how we feel—which is a radical shift in orientation for most of us—what do you see as the criteria, in a universal sense, for how to act? You seem to be saying there is some kind of barometer other than how we feel, that we can count on.

LS: Yes, God's law.

WIE: As the written word?

LS: Written and interpreted. There was a time when a group of rabbinic scholars sat down and decided, "Well, just because your child badmouths you, you shouldn't really have to stone him. Maybe God meant that philosophically. (Laughs) Maybe you give them time out!" Of course there's interpretation, because God didn't e-mail the word. If he e-mailed at Sinai, everybody would have

"I don't care what your experi

don't have the right to hurt anybody. I don't have to and feel your pain to know that that doesn't give you program to do damage. We are the same in that we obligated to behave justly, ethically, morally and with regardless of how we feel or what we've gone through."

been confused and wondered, "What's that?" I've spoken with my son different ways at different ages. I try to explain things within his context so he can understand. So here's God at Sinai talking to all of these people who had just spent a couple of hundred years being slaves. How was he going to explain what was now expected? It had to be done in a context that could be understood then and there by those people with their level of comprehension. It is our understanding that the law was given in a context that could be understood then. To some extent it has to be updated. But basically it's biblical religious understanding. The Christian rules of behavior and the Islamic rules of behavior and the Jewish rules of behavior are actually not all that different.

WIE: Do you feel there's anything inherent in us that has an awareness of right and wrong, that there's some kind of moral sense? Do you think a person who didn't have the written word could look into life for themselves and discover a natural basis for morality?

LS: It would have to be based upon something personal. For instance, someone might say, "I know somebody said it wasn't okay to have sex outside of marriage, but nobody's ever going to know and he's awfully cute and it feels right. So, why not? And that's now my moral sense." It becomes subjective. It becomes convenient. It becomes circumstantial. Without God, goodness becomes defined individually and the two of us would have very different ideas.

So the answer is, no, ultimately I don't think so. When there have been cultures without a fundamental belief in God, like Nazi Germany or Stalin's Russia, we've all seen the results. I don't like 'without God.' That doesn't

mean we all do it right. There was an Inquisition. So it doesn't mean that because we use God as a format that we do it right. We are still quite fallible. Ultimately evil is here because either we are evil—or we stand by and let it happen. And part of perfecting the world is to stand between the innocent and the evil. That's where you have to make value judgments because if you're not making the judgment that this or that behavior is evil, then it's, "Go ahead, rape her. Go for it. Can I sell tickets?"

WIE: It's interesting to hear you speak about value judgments, because in the contemporary psychological/spiritual mindset there seems to be a sort of commandment that states: "Thou shalt not judge."

LS: Well, that's not biblical. That's a real distortion. As a matter of fact, all the way through Leviticus and into Proverbs, it discusses making judgments. You're supposed to help your neighbor stay on the right track. That doesn't mean you burn them at the stake. That means you help them, you tell them, "Excuse me, that's wrong." But in Proverbs, it also has this one point: If you tell the wise man that he's doing something wrong, he will bless you. If you tell the fool, he's just going to hate you. So you can sort of tell who's a fool and who's a wise man if you point them toward the right track and one gets angry. Then you know you have a fool. And you're not supposed to persist with a fool. Interesting. So again, in Judaism, judgment is okay. There are criteria. It says very clearly in Leviticus when it goes into making judgments that you're supposed to give the benefit of the doubt, you're supposed to make sure, to make everything really clear first. It's not that you don't judge. It's ences were, you

walk in your shoes an entitlement are all compassion

how you do it that makes the difference.

WIE: Another idea that is very common these days, and which is often emphasized in modern spiritual circles, is the notion that every person is unique. This is also given a great deal of emphasis in psychology.

LS: Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood!

WIE: The view is that we are each a unique individual, and because of this, we can never truly understand or appreciate the experience of another.

LS: Okay. Let me go over that. Of course I have never seen anybody that looks like you or me. There's no question about it. We are unique. We are unique combinations. But we are all made in the image of God. I don't care what your experiences were, you don't have the right to hurt anybody. I don't have to walk

in your shoes and feel your pain to know that that doesn't give you an entitlement program to do damage. We are the same in that we are all obligated to behave justly, ethically, morally and with compassion regardless of how we feel or what we've gone through. Period.

One of the best testimonies to that is Victor Frankl's book Man's Search for Meaning. He spent too much time in concentration camps. Twenty microseconds is too much time. He was at Auschwitz. And he said there was nothing that anybody could do to demolish the person until the person decided to give up their own humanity.

When one person would steal food from another, that's when they died. I have been so affected by that. Because, you know, it's so easy to have a bad day and come home and bitch at your kids. I am so aware that nothing entitles me to act any other way than justly and compassionately and ethically and morally.

WIE: In your work, you speak to thousands of people about their most intimate personal circumstances. In light of your experience, how unique do you think people really are?

LS: There are commonalities of the human condition and spirit and psyche. We all look different but if I punch anyone in the mouth, they'll probably be upset. Right? We're

Dr. Laura continued

wired to have certain kinds of reactions. We're critters. So an ouch is an ouch. It doesn't matter where you've been or what you've gone through. But ultimately, each one of us is exactly the same in that we have the same obligations. We all don't have the same experience. We all don't have the same qualities. We all don't have the same intellect. We all don't have the same looks. We all don't have the same health. That is completely variable. But we all have the same obligation—and potential, spiritually—and that is to be decent.

WIE: What is that potential?

LS: To be decent. We're not innately decent. We're potentially decent or moral. It has to be taught.

WIE: One thing we've been noticing as we have explored this issue and spoken with many different people is that it seems that many of the most intelligent people—the philosophers and great thinkers in numerous fields, particularly in academic circles—seem to be fundamentally cynical about what our potential is as human beings.

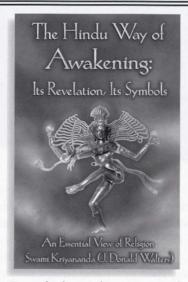
LS: I wonder if they're cynical about our potential or if they aren't depressed that we don't seem to be reaching it

in their lifetime. I'm sad with what I see. I'm cynical about some people being willing to do what they're supposed to do. But ultimately I am hopeful. I think it's easy to sit back and say, "Look at this garbage! It's terrible." I don't think they're cynical about our ultimate potential. I think they're cynical about our current willingness to try to attain it.

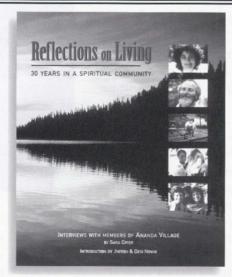
WIE: What I'm referring to specifically is that one often hears things like, "Well, we're all only human," or, "You can't expect perfection." Even when people do things that most would admit they find despicable, the common view seems to be that because we're all flawed, this kind of behavior is to be expected.

LS: I handle that in my book and I get crazed when any-body says that we're only human. Because again, we have potential in that humanity to behave either like a termite or as though we're made in God's image. You pick it. That was how I started writing that book. This was going around and around in my head. And the day I started writing, we were on vacation, and I turned on the TV and *The African Queen* was on. Do you know that movie?

WIE: It's been a long time.



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800-424-1055 530-478-7600 e-mail: clarity@crystalclarity.com website: www.crystalclarity.com LS: You must go see it. Humphrey Bogart and Katherine Hepburn. She's a prim missionary and he's sort of a drunk who has a little boat, and she engages him to do this noble thing and take out this German warship. They fall in love. He gets really soused one night because this is a hard job. There are leeches, and it stinks, they're getting shot at, it's terrible. And so he gets drunk and the next morning, she's just cold. She has a Bible in front of her and you can just see her eyes over the top and he's going, "Oh, come on. I'm a guy. It's a guy thing." And she makes a comment about the drinking, and he says, "Well, I'm only human. It's only human nature." The Bible comes down, and she says, "We were put on this earth to rise above nature." Whoa! I went right to my computer and the book started right there. I'm still moved because that is the ultimate hope. We have that option. God didn't make us like my son's little toys from Star Wars, which are made as they are and that's it. I have no clue as to why it's the way it is because I'm not going to secondguess God. But if you're cynical, you make me mad because it's arrogant and it implies that you've quit. God didn't say the job is easy. He didn't say you were going to see it fulfilled. It's arrogant to sit there and say, "Too many are not doing the job. I quit." That's contributing to the evil. I can get as mad as the next person when I

see garbage going on but I've got a job and you're not allowed to resign.

WIE: One of the people we spoke with for this issue is social critic Andrei Codrescu. He said he feels that the cultural climate in modern America favors image over substance, that images are being used to manipulate us on every level and that this has so permeated the way we relate to things that it's hard to even see real meaning, hard to actually discern it from anything else.

LS: Yes, I agree, and I pray this does not come across as arrogance because I certainly don't mean it that way—but I think that's why my show is important, because I'm trying to change that. That's the point of my life. That's the point of my work. That's true and it's a disaster. People are miserable and families are crumbling and what they're missing is the ship with the rudder epoxied into place. (Laughs) I'm trying to give them that. And I feel it's working. The show is extremely successful. People often come up to me and relate to me that there's been some fundamental change in their thinking and behaving.

WIE: It's interesting that you have gained this kind of popularity, because in many ways it seems that, particularly in

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Dr. Laura continued

America, the majority of people are primarily seeking greater comfort and convenience.

LS: Yes. They aren't getting that out of me though. (Laughs)

WIE: In a country where that does seem to be what most people are pursuing with all their might, why do you think it is that you are becoming so popular?

LS: Oh, they might be pursuing it with all their might, but people aren't stupid and they know something's missing. And some part of it, at least, I think they feel they're finding with me. You can say "I want to party," but some part of you knows you can't do this forever and that this is really messing you up.

WIE: So you're speaking to something in people that's—

LS: I'm speaking to that conscience. I'm speaking to that potentially moral space. It has ears.

WIE: What are the crucial ingredients that make people change, truly change?

LS: I had a very prim and proper teacher when I was in therapy school. She said, "This is how people change: Imagine people in a wood house with planks and the planks are six inches apart and they have no plumbing. So they poop in-between the planks. Now, when it gets too high, they move." Basically she was saying that when it's too much of a mess and it's too painful, people are more motivated to make a change. I have discovered that's not the only way. My experience with the audience through what I do is that when they hear something different and cogitate about it and think about what the possibilities might be with this new way of thinking, they become in-

terested. So it's not as though they're pushed by the poop, but they're pulled by the potential. And maybe sometimes, it's in concert. The reason I read the faxes in the beginning of each hour is that there are often personal testimonials. Somebody took something from the program and did it. So I don't want people to wait 'til the poop gets too high, too painful. I'd rather suck them in at the other end with an idea, with hope, with possibilities, with an alternative. So we don't have to wait until it gets messy. I guess I'm more optimistic.

WIE: I have heard you speak about our being here for a purpose. How do you envision that purpose?

LS: In Hebrew, it's called "tikkun olam," and that means to perfect the world. Jewish thinking is that everybody is in cahoots with God to perfect the world. God didn't give us heaven here but gave us an opportunity to try to create it. That's the point, that's the purpose.

WIE: That's very moving. How is that perfection brought about? I get the sense from what you're saying that you feel there is something a human being can do to help realize that perfection.

LS: Yes. It is by your actions. It is totally by your actions. And, as you may or may not know, there are 613 commandments for Jews. Judaism has sometimes been condemned or criticized as being a religion of laws, but actually these are divine commandments. They guide our moral, compassionate, just and righteous behavior. You are commanded to visit the ill. You are commanded to take care of the needy. We are commanded to do things which are righteous and which are God's will. Period. It's not an option. You've got to do them. Now, in the orthodox thinking—I'm going to make this very simplistic so I'm sure some rabbi would have a heart attack, but I'm just



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simplifying it for general understanding—it's like at the fair, there's a game where you hit the base with a sledge hammer and the weight goes up and if it rings the bell, you win a prize?

WIE: Yes.

LS: Well, enough *mitzvot*, or observing of the divine commandments, the bell rings and then there's God's kingdom on earth.

WIE: So it's envisioned as something that's going to happen when we reach a sort of critical mass?

LS: Yes, critical mass. That's correct. Everyone that does good gets us closer to God's kingdom on earth.

WIE: Would you also say that in addition to the bell ringing, or a sudden dawning of paradise when we reach that critical mass, that also, in a more relative sense, if people are doing good more and more, there's going to be a more and more perfect world?

LS: Yes. Right.

WIE: What is your concept of God?

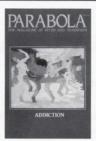
LS: In Judaism, God is not something conceivable. This messed me up a little bit because I grew up on Charlton Heston movies, in which, you know, God is a guy with sandals and long hair. But Jewishly, that's the point of the commandment regarding idols. One of the things you're supposed to die before you do is bow to an idol. God made it very clear that it seems to be all too easy for us as human beings to bow to all sorts of things—your Mercedes, the sun god and everything else. But God is something that we cannot comprehend, which is the story of Job. Job was sitting there saying, "Excuse me, why are all these bad things happening to me?" And everybody's telling him that he must have done something bad. They're trying to make rationalities for what Job's going through, based upon the kind of understanding that human beings have. A lot of people seem to be very dissatisfied with what God said at the end, because Job is going through all this misery. It goes on for thirty-seven painful pages. And then God's part is only about an inch. It's very unsatisfying to those who want the answer to 'evil.' But in Jewish understanding, basically God is unknowable. You cannot fathom the motivations. You can struggle to study. You can struggle to understand, but ultimately, it is way beyond us. I accept that, and find peace in that.

Now for somebody who's as intellectual as I am, and concrete as I tend to be, and compulsive and organized as

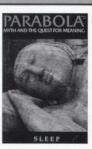
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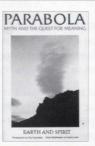
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Dr. Laura continued

I clearly am, I find it almost a relief to accept that I don't have to understand and may never truly know—but I can respect it and follow it and be ennobled in my life by it. I, strangely, am satisfied by that. You'd think I'd be the last person who would be.

WIE: You speak a great deal about the importance of honoring one's commitments to family and children, perhaps almost above all else.

LS: Oh, yes. Above all else.

WIE: Are you at all familiar with the life story of the Buddha?

LS: No. Sorry, I have to plead ignorance.

WIE: According to the historical accounts, he was a prince with a wife and child and a whole kingdom to look after. Then,

at an early age, in his twenties, he felt a spiritual calling. He said he looked out on the world and he could see suffering everywhere and he just felt like he had to find out what the answer was, to find the end of suffering, to find some kind of spiritual liberation. So he left his wife and his child and his entire kingdom and he went out and dedicated his life wholeheartedly to the pursuit of spiritual life. He literally walked out the door and never came back. And through the attainment of the profound spiritual awakening that he eventually came to, he has influenced millions of people to live a more moral, more spiritual life and created a religion that survives him 2,000 years later and continues to influence people toward the good. Did he do the right thing by leaving?

LS: Since I don't know anything about Buddhism, I can't answer this. Jewishly, what he did wouldn't be acceptable, because Judaism is extremely focused on family. I mean a rabbi who isn't married with kids, like *oy veh*! ■

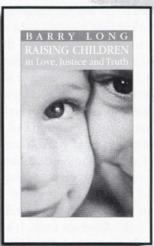
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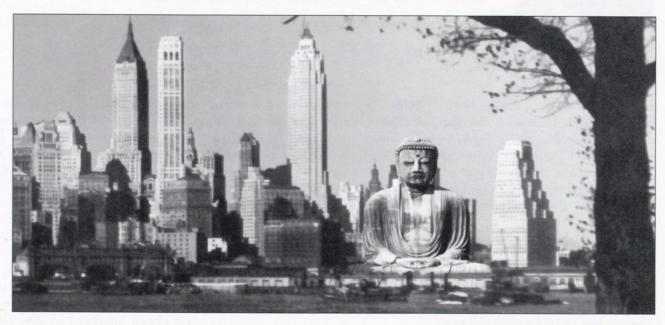
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DHARMA

in the MARKETPLACE

AN INTERVIEW WITH SAM BERCHOLZ



America's largest Buddhist publisher discusses the myth of millennialism and the challenges of spiritual publishing in the New Age

BY SUSAN BRIDLE

Publications twenty-eight years ago, there was relatively little interest in America in Eastern spiritual teachings, meditation or other esoteric subjects. Bercholz, at Shambhala's helm, has introduced millions of readers to the spiritual teachings and philosophies that are his passion and has gained a reputation for skillfully navigating the changing times, including the turbulent waters of popular spirituality and New Age movements. We were intrigued by a statement in Shambhala's company literature: "As many of these subject areas have been increasingly commercialized under the nebulous catch-all of the 'New Age,' we have quietly con-

tinued to fulfill our original mission of publishing serious books of lasting value that ... present what's real and not the glitz." Because of his unique vantage point on the popularization of esoteric spirituality in America and his commitment to maintaining an unusual standard of authenticity in an arena increasingly subject to the demands of the market, we were eager to speak with Bercholz about some of the themes we explore in this issue of What Is Enlightenment? Bercholz, informed by his perspective as a publisher of titles on art, philosophy, psychology and culture, as well as Eastern religious traditions, has some fascinating things to say about the vicissitudes of spiritual publishing and the myths of the New Age.

continued on next page



WIE: You founded Shambhala Publications twenty-eight years ago, when there was relatively little interest in America in Eastern or other esoteric spiritual teachings. The cultural landscape has changed quite a bit during that time. What was your vision for your publishing company when you began, and how has it changed with the changing times?

SAM BERCHOLZ:

In the beginning the quest was really quite personal, because I and the cofounder of Shambhala Publications, Michael Fagan, were pursuing our own interest in Eastern spiritual traditions, and then helping others discover the things that we had found. A lot of the publishing we did went along with our personal discoveries. Then it began to have its own life. In the beginning we used to publish mainly translations from Oriental languages. We were really plowing new ground with Buddhism, Taoism and Hinduism. We still publish translations, but now we also publish a lot of things by people who WIE: There seems to be a remarkable resurgence of interest in spirituality in America in recent years, as evidenced by the numerous spiritual themes on the covers of popular news magazines and the fact that books on New Age spirituality now regularly make it onto the bestseller lists. As a book publisher you are in a unique position to have your finger on the pulse of the times. What is your perspective on the apparent resurgence of interest in spirituality in America today?

SB: I wasn't around in the late 1800s, but from the histories I've read, what is happening now is simi-

peat rather than unique. Books on all kinds of esoteric subjects were bestsellers a century ago as well. The difference is that the interest in the spiritual traditions of the East is greater nowadays. There have always been these waves of inspirational books with some sort of spiritual basis. But now the spiritual basis, instead of just being Christian, can have a Hindu or Buddhist flavor. It's not all that different. I don't see it as any big revolution. People have always been interested in spirituality from one point of view or another. Whether the spirituality is genuine or not, whether it's "snake oil" or not

"I DON'T SEE ANY BIG REVOLUTION.

PEOPLE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN INTERESTED IN SPIRITUALITY FROM ONE POINT OF VIEW OR ANOTHER. WHETHER THE SPIRITUALITY IS GENUINE OR NOT, WHETHER IT'S 'SNAKE OIL' OR NOT . . . THE READER HAS TO DETERMINE."

were just learning about Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism and so on back in that era—and who are now teaching it. So now we publish the classics as well as contemporary understandings of them. I think that's the biggest change.

lar. There is a resurgence of interest in spirituality now, but there was a similar resurgence a century ago with the founding of the Theosophical Society, the Vedanta Society, Christian Science, all those sorts of things in this country. So in a way it's a re. . . the reader has to determine. There have been genuine things published in the last thirty years, and a lot of crap. There have *always* been genuine things and crap. You see, the more genuine stuff that's published, the more crap is also pub-

lished. Because if something genuine sells, then—it's just human nature—someone says, "Oh, that's easy enough to do. I'll just make something up like that and sell it the same way." You know, the snake oil variety.

WIE: You have gained a reputation over the years of trying to hold a standard, to stick to the genuine article and stay clear of "the snake oil variety," as you say.

SB: Right. It's the relative standard of our editors. We do the best that we can so that, when our name is on the book, we can say that this is not b.s.

WIE: If you were to say what you want a Shambhala book to stand for—what would it be, what do you look for?

SB: Well, that it's helpful; that at worst it's not harmful, but at best that it's helpful. And that it's genuine. It's pretty simple. Most of our books come from traditions, tried and true traditions. But we are also willing to publish revolutionaries, so it's not always just about coming from a great tradition. The backbone of our company, in fact, are the classics translated from Chinese. Sanskrit, Japanese, Korean, ancient Persian, Arabic and so on. But we are always willing to add modernnot just interpretations—but modern versions.

WIE: What would you say about the current state of the dharma in the West?

SB: I think that it's possible for Western practitioners of Buddha dharma, Taoist dharma, Hindu dharma—all the different Eastern dharmas—to actually attain enlightenment, or whatever the equivalent is in that tradition. But I don't think it is possible for those traditions to have a huge effect on this country in any overt way. I think, from the

Eastern point of view, it's a dark age, a dark time. It's a dark place. There is the right wing that views anything that isn't fundamentalism as being the enemy. And then we have the problem of the liberals calling anything that is spiritual "New Age." So it's a real problem.

I think there is some hope that people can make their lives better. And if they can make their lives better, then that can extend to many other people. But there's a lot of wishful thinking that there are huge changes happening, socially and so on. I think it's exactly that: it's wishful thinking. I think the things that people think change things are not the things that really change things. It's subtler than that. It's real individual actions that change things, rather than paying lip service to some sort of mass movement of consciousness. I think it's too much to think that this country, or any big country, can really be fully actualized. I think that's wishful thinking because then you forget about . . . what's really involved.

WIE: You said earlier that you want a Shambhala book to be genuine. How do you determine that?

SB: There's this big b.s. meter on the wall here. We put the manuscript up to the b.s. meter. If it doesn't go over the line, then we publish it. That's just a joke, obviously. But even though it's a joke, it is like that. It does have to fit. There is a standard we try to keep. However, it's an unstated standard because there's no way to articulate it. It's partly intuitive. Partly there's some objective standard—it's not exactly academic, though we don't have anything against the academic standard. . . . We try to keep a good spiritual standard.

WIE: I would imagine this lends itself to lively discussions—you and your

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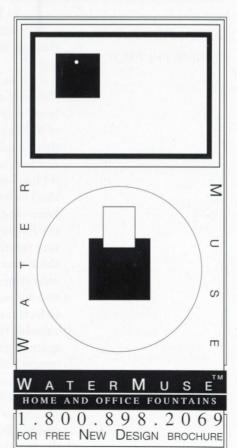
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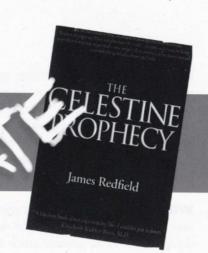
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POORLY WRITTEN NEW AGE SOUL CANDY or



No exploration of popular American spirituality would be complete without at least a sideways glance at the phenomenon of James Redfield's runaway bestseller *The Celestine Prophecy.* In preparing for our own critical examination of this ubiquitous New Age novel, we came across the following review by freelance writer Kenneth Moyle. His searing commentary casts a blinding light on what may be the quintessential expression of the dubious marriage between esoteric spirituality and popular culture.

BOOK REVIEW BY KENNETH MOYLE This is not a novel to be tossed aside lightly. It should be thrown aside with great force."

So wrote Dorothy Parker of a book remembered only for her disdain of it. I've always wished that I could have been the one to have said that, and if I had been, I would have liked to have said it about James Redfield's The Celestine Prophecy. One may very rightly ask why, if I think that the book is such utter tripe (which I do) and if it is so dismissible (which it is), I am wasting valuable time and disk space writing about it. The reason is that it is wonderfully remarkable tripe: remarkable for the sheer tripeliness of its prose and philosophy, as well as for the fact that, despite its in-

effable tripehood, it has been on the New York Times bestseller list for ninety-eight weeks at the time of this writing (ranked second only to its sequel, The Tenth Insight). When a novel so ideologically loopy and artistically flat is so phenomenally successful, a closer look is surely in order. It really is child's play to tear the book apart, and it's so very tempting to just wade in, mix my metaphors and start ripping, but remembering my mother's admonition about not saving anything at all if I can't say anything nice, I will say some nice things about The Celestine Prophecy before I go on to say some things that aren't at all nice. And out of consideration for the many people who've made this novel the success that

it is I'll finish off by saying a few more nice things.

The Celestine Prophecy is printed on nice, sturdy paper. The typeface is large and clear, and the lines of text are well spaced. Redfield was considerate enough to ensure that each chapter contains a brief summary of the insights elucidated in all previous chapters, and his novel is the first that I've read in about ten years that hasn't put me to the trouble of getting out of my chair, even once, to fetch a dictionary. There now; having said something nice, I proceed with maternal sanction to explain why it is that Redfield's acephalous brainchild sets me off so.

The Celestine Prophecy is, ostensibly, a novel.
There is a plot (a nameless social worker in the middle

"This is not a novel to be tossed aside lightly. It should be thrown aside with great force."

of a career crisis travels to Peru to find an ancient prophetic manuscript that the Peruvian government and Roman Catholic Church seek to suppress and destroy), and there are fictional characters (one can't get any more fictional than a Latin American priest named Father Carl, a Peruvian official called Hinton, and a Scandinavian professor by the name of Edmond Connor, not to mention a whole city of Mayans living in Peru rather than in the more conventional Mayan stomping grounds of Central America). But for all intents and purposes this is not a novel but rather a New Age religious tract. The unengaging plot is the merest pretense for the point-per-chapter explanation of the author's ideas about human destiny and the nature of the cosmos. The characters (who might, with the help of a capable ghost writer, be fleshed out to a full two dimensions) are featureless mouthpieces for the monotone authorial voice. Of course a weak plot and insubstantial characters don't necessarily ruin a novel; there are many books that

are a delight to read just for sheer brilliance of expression, insight and humor of the wordsmithery (think of works by Douglas Adams, Oscar Wilde or Dr. Seuss). Redfield's prose, on the other hand, is monotonous, bland, repetitive and awkward; better writing may be found in an average issue of TV Guide.

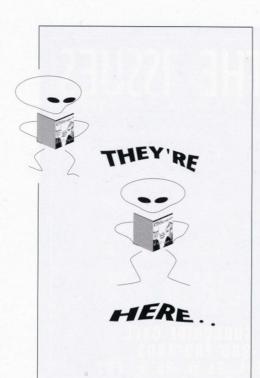
Given that The Celestine Prophecy is neither plot driven nor character driven, nor yet good writing by any post-elementary standard, what does it present to the reader? Let us, as an act of charity, call the book "a novel of ideas." Redfield's purpose is to impart the "Nine Insights," which the anonymous hero finds in an ancient Mayan manuscript (a document written, inexplicably and without explanation, in Aramaic). Each insight is a revelation about the physical universe, human nature, the benefit of eating vegetables, conflict resolution or the eventual transcorporeal evolution of our species. Given the improbable metaphysics of the Nine Insights, it might be assumed that one is meant to approach the ideas of this novel as one

would those of a work of science fiction or an allegorical tale. On behalf of Redfield's legions of fans and followers, I was quite eager to give him the benefit of this doubt. Then I read The Celestine Prophecy: An Experiential Guide. This run-of-themill, New Age spiritualself-help book, cowritten by Redfield himself, made it quite plain that he meant every word of the Nine Insights far more literally than I could ever have imagined. We have in The Celestine Prophecy not a novel, but simply an artless tract conveying the author's guiding message for foundering humanity; it is on the merits of these ideas alone that one must judge this book and its popularity.

The essence of Redfield's message is that the universe is made up of energy that is evolving into ever higher and higher forms or states of vibration: pure energy to hydrogen atoms to multivalent atoms to molecules to organic matter to life to humanity and eventually to some state of intelligent transcorporeal being. The final stage involves humans being able to consciously direct this evolution, learning to acquire psychic energy by connecting to pristine nature rather than from interpersonal conflict (interpersonal conflict resulting solely from people competing for each other's psychic energy). The last fifty years have been the prelude to the dawn of this final stage, as society regains awareness of the spiritual, the mystical and the purposive significance of the apparently coincidental.

As I trudged my way though the arid, jargonmined desert that is Redfield's novel, bearing barrage upon barrage of brutally prosaic, '80s selfhelp clichés, wincing at the glare of the shiny, shifting, New Age platitudes, I couldn't help but ask myself time and again: What in God's name do people see in this banal, grating screed? But by the time I closed the book on the final, sequel-priming page I think that I understood why so many have been inspired by this poorly written New Age soul candy. The Celestine Prophecy speaks to discontentment with reductionist thinking and dissatisfaction with

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ENLIGHTENMENT?

The magazine that dares to assume there's intelligent life on this planet

without having received her prior permission, she lets him find out for himself that he is not suited for such a life. This was quite typical of the subtle ways she did things.

I have recently completed a book based on the diaries of an Austrian woman who spent fifty years in India—first as a close follower of J. Krishnamurti and then as a sannyasi disciple [devotee] of Anandamayi Ma, with whom she spent almost forty years. (She also had profound contact with Sri Ramana Maharshi.) This is a unique record of a true Guru-disciple relationship—the sort of authenticity that scares off less heroic seekers like Mr. Roumanoff.

Ram Alexander Assisi, Italy

I READ EACH NEW ISSUE of your magazine, and have not before now felt prompted to write a response letter. But Mr. Ken Wilber's comments in your "Letters" section ["Blowing the Whistle," Spring/Summer 1996] drew me out.

I have detected a male-superior nuance in Ken Wilber's writings before. He tries very hard, always, to cloak his feelings in fairness, but the undertone rings through to me loud and clear. He has an unfortunate tendency to think linearly, in a bottom-to-top conceptual construct. This time he states that "of those who do

in fact develop to the postconventional and transpersonal and genuinely spiritual modes, a greater percentage will tend to be male." He gives several reasons for why this happens, all based on traditional views of femininity.

My argument with this way of looking at things is that it is probably wrong from its fundamental basis, from which it sees spiritual growth as a continuum along which we progress. My argument is that this old and solidly entrenched universe vision was created by males and, because women have always had to remain substantially outside the hoop, of course they don't fit the mold.

If Mr. Wilber were really paying attention to women and what they have to offer, he would see that women are just as "genuinely spiritual" as men, probably in equal proportion. We are just different and, although our spirituality doesn't appear to some men as "high" or "genuine," that's only because they don't understand it. And the reason they don't understand it is because it has been forever ignored and labeled as inferior.

I would like to see Ken Wilber come out of his intellect and stop trying to organize everything into neat and orderly constructs, which is the error that males have been making for so-o-o-o long.

Cindy Oeser Yuba City, California

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Book Review

continued from page 87

materialism (of both the philosophical and commercial sort). It offers seductively rare optimism about the future and human nature. There is the promise of an easy, natural "spiritual self-enhancement," which can be acquired without the structure, discipline and delayed gratification of traditional religion. And perhaps most appealingly, Redfield promises that the strife and uncertainties of life and love in the late twentieth century are only the birthing pains of the coming spiritual reawakening. Questions of existence and purpose with which thinkers and artists and writers have struggled for the last hundred years are here given answers in guileless, direct, everyday language, giftwrapped in the promise of universal attainability and hope.

The Celestine Prophecy touches real, widely experienced problems: weariness of rationalism, ideological disorientation, existential angst, hunger for mystery, mourning for God, the desire for hope and purpose and human goodness. Redfield indeed addresses important questions, questions with which I sympathize deeply, but his answers are thin and ridiculous. And because he addresses these problems in such simple, easyto-digest terms, he has captured the imagination of thousands who had never, before The Celestine Prophecy. had their concerns brought into focus and utterability for them. Though I'm glad to know that more and more people are thinking about these spiritual and existential questions, I worry that for every person who is inspired to follow the concerns Redfield addresses to sounder spiritual pastures there will be ten who either will buy into the unsustaining nonsense of his answers or will just be put off the questions altogether.

In all fairness, I must admit that one could do worse than follow the concrete, quotidian teachings found in *The Celestine Prophecy*: love your neighbor; eat more fresh vegetables;



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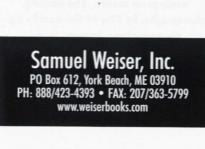
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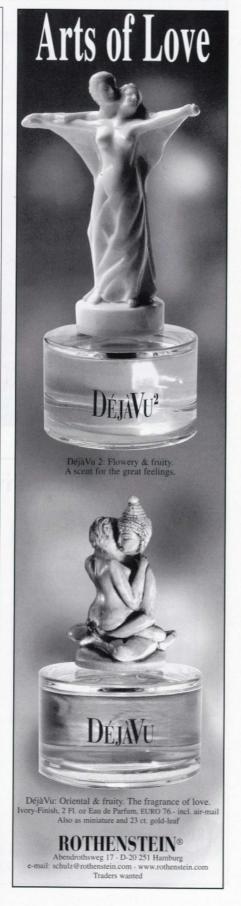
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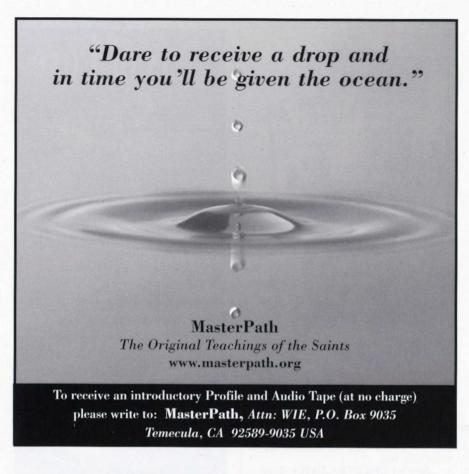
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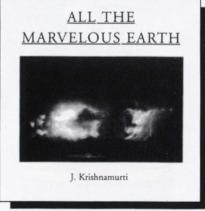
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Sam Bercholz

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editors trying to clearly perceive and maintain this standard.

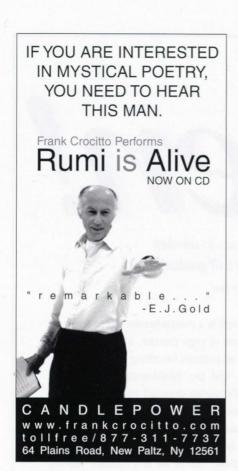
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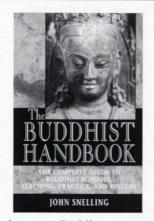
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Book Review continued from page 91

reduce consumption; meditate; preserve unspoiled nature; reach out to people; don't respond to apathy or anger in kind. But Redfield's spirituality or philosophy or cosmogony or whatever it is is just too naive, shallow and fantastic to provide lasting sustenance.

I'm not bothered by The Celestine Prophecy simply because it presents a simple, easy-to-use approach to complex issues. Any religion or philosophical system should have a shallow end in which people may splash about and get their feet wet before being eased, coaxed or thrown into the deeper, more difficult waters in which enlightenment, growth and strength are truly found. I find The Celestine Prophecy bothersome because it lacks any depth at all; it is a philosophical wading pool, full of children's laughter and sparkling sunshine and bright pictures of pretty fish and piss-warmed water.



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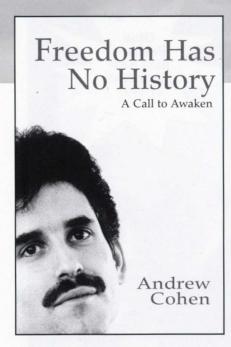
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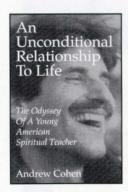


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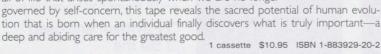
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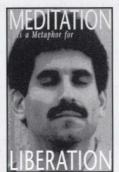
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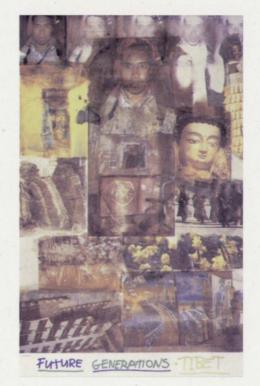
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