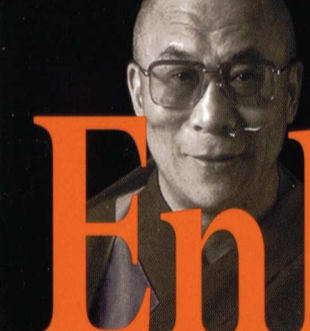
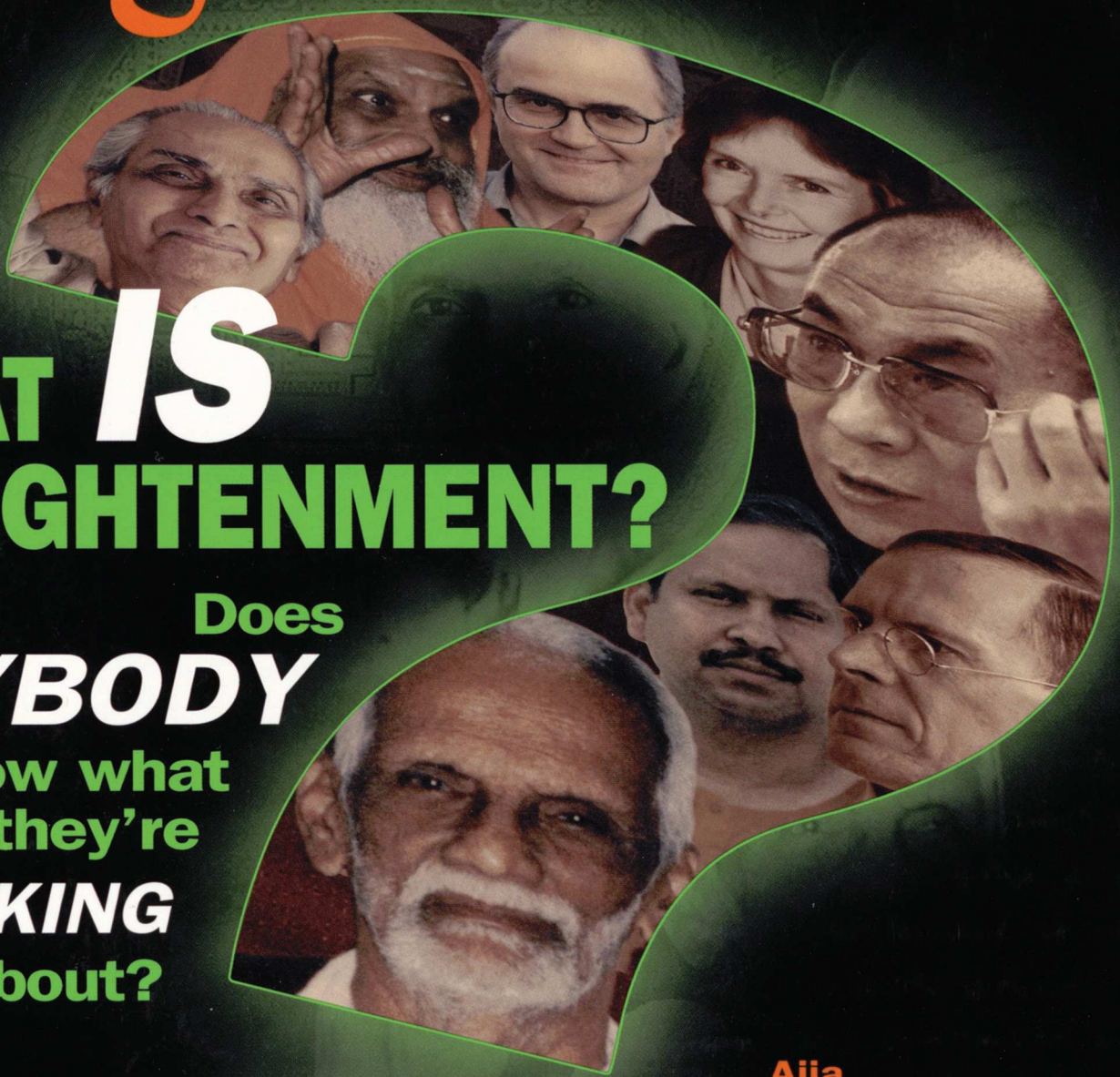


Exclusive interview with H.H. the Dalai Lama

What is Enlightenment?

An inquiry into the most important spiritual questions of our time



WHAT IS ENLIGHTENMENT?

Does *ANYBODY* know what they're *TALKING* about?

Ajja
Ramesh Balsekar
Stephen Batchelor
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Swami Dayananda

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ISSUE 14 FALL/WINTER 1998

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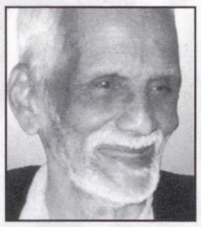

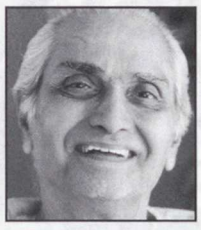

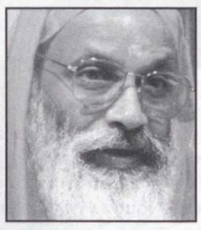

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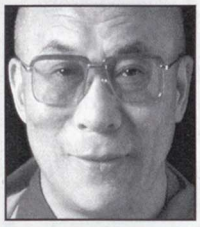

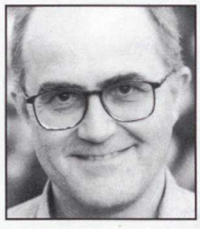

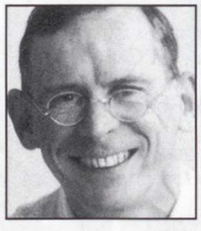

What is Enlightenment?

"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 Cohen

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ANDREW COHEN

Andrew Cohen is not just a spiritual teacher—he is an inspiring phenomenon. Since his awakening in 1986 he has only lived, breathed and spoken of one thing: the potential of total liberation from the bondage of ignorance, superstition and selfishness. Powerless to limit his unceasing investigation, he has looked at the "jewel of enlightenment" from every angle, and given birth to a teaching that is vast and subtle, yet incomparably direct and revolutionary in its impact.

Through his public teachings, his books and his meetings with spiritual leaders of almost every tradition, he has tirelessly sought to convey his discovery that spiritual liberation's true significance is its potential to completely transform not only the individual, but the entire way that human beings, as a race, live together. In sharp contrast to the cynicism which is so pervasive today, yet with full awareness of the difficult challenges that we face, he has dared to teach and to show that it is indeed possible to bring heaven to earth. This powerful message of unity, openness and love has inspired many who have heard it to join together to prove its reality with their own lives, igniting an ever expanding international revolution of tremendous vitality and significance.

Andrew travels extensively every year giving public talks and intensive retreats. Communities dedicated to living his teachings have formed throughout the world, with a network of centers in the United States, Europe and Australia, including a new international center in the Berkshire hills in western Massachusetts, where he now has his home.

As well as being the founder and guiding inspiration behind *What Is Enlightenment?*, Andrew Cohen is also the author of several books, including *Freedom Has No History, An Unconditional Relationship to Life, Enlightenment Is a Secret, Autobiography of an Awakening* and the forthcoming *A Perfect Foundation in the Absolute.*

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

MOKSHA FOUNDATION 413-637-6000
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Moksha Foundation is a nonprofit organization founded to support and facilitate the teaching work of Andrew Cohen. It is dedicated to the enlightenment of the individual and the expression of enlightenment in the world.

FACE (FRIENDS OF ANDREW COHEN EVERYWHERE)
represents the larger body of Andrew Cohen's students who have come together to manifest sanity in an insane world.

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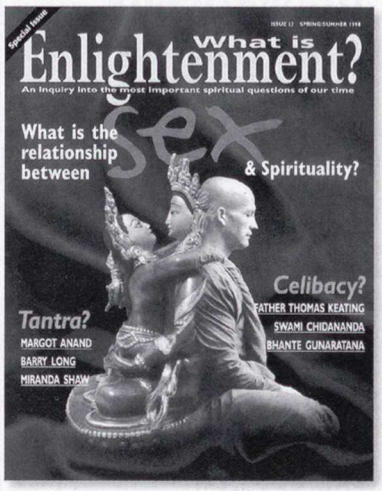
LETTERS



Issue 13 Spring/Summer 1998

What do *you* think?

What Is Enlightenment? is a forum for ongoing investigation and dialogue. Please let us know what you think about our articles and the issues we raise. We welcome your letters, which may be edited for length and clarity.

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MAKING LOVE RIGHTLY

Thank you for your earnest and sincere treatment of my interview [Barry Long, "I Am a Tantric Master"]. The magazine is indeed a bumper issue and, as usual, excellently designed and produced.

I'm writing to you in anticipation that people are likely to miss a fundamental point in our interview, although I repeated it several times. The subject matter of sexuality will probably obscure this detail.

The point I am endeavoring to emphasize is that in my teaching there is God, or truth, *out* of existence and God, or love, *in* existence. Anyone who is truly God-realized has realized this extraordinary state of being, which, because it is a state of consciousness, is outside the existence of all form and appearance. This realization in the first instance is the most important of all possible realizations, for it is the realization of the truth behind the universe and all existence. I call this the transcendental realization—in that it transcends the senses and all that is conceivable—and in my own case it occurred over three remarkable weeks in December 1968 in London. Every aspect of my teaching is the endeavor to impart the rudiments of self-denial and the love of honesty and truth, which are essential preparations if this mighty realization is to occur. All teachings of every master and teacher, as indeed is all life, are toward this end, whether it is known or not known.

The motivation of anyone who has realized the transcendental is to help others to do the same, or, according to the teacher's inspiration, to work in some way to help eliminate the ignorance and misery of humanity who can listen. In my own case, I observed that the most misery and unhappiness on earth is caused by man and woman having forgotten how to love one another. This love in its reality, I realized, is God *in* existence. And this seems to be an even rarer realization than that of the transcendental truth *out* of existence. Nonetheless the forgetfulness or avoidance of true love is still the greatest tragedy that anyone can observe in the lives of children, adults, and in our decaying society. Surely the observance of this can't be just my radical insight and teaching. Surely it is the truth.

My congratulations on the straightforwardness and lack of bias in your introduction. One notion I would like to correct is where you say that in my teaching "the primary spiritual practice is making love rightly." The primary spiritual practice, as described above, is self-denial, giving and honesty practiced over a long period out of an inner perception of rightness and goodness. No one can "make love rightly" without this essential and ceaseless practice, just as no one can realize the Most High out of existence without the same one-pointed way of life. People may think they are making love rightly, but without this dire self-abnegation they are kidding themselves.

Barry Long
Byron Bay, Australia

GREAT MASTERS OF WHAT?

I read your recent issue with interest, particularly Miranda Shaw's comments on *tantra* in Buddhism ["Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Tantra but Were Afraid to Ask"] and her reference to my own experiences with Kalu Rinpoche. Having given a great deal of thought to these matters over more years than I care to mention, I was befuddled by her explanation about "great masters" who somehow along the way "forgot" to deal with their sexuality, all the while gaining "great master" status. Her rationalization that there are such men who have "neglected" or "ignored" their sexuality is tantamount to saying they neglected or ignored their own bodies, and with them, desire, the understanding of whose nature, if I remember correctly, is at the very core of the Buddha's teaching. It therefore begs the question, "great masters" of what? Not Buddhism, presumably.

As for Margot Anand ["You Have to Do It All!"] and Barry Long, call me an old cynic, but five-hour orgasms and five adoring women may be proof to them that they have attained something wonderful, but personally I would have been far more impressed if they had spent their spare time quietly campaigning to abolish the child sex-slave trade in some of the world's poorest countries rather than droning on about their marvelous sexual capacities, "God-given powers" and the gift of an orgasm as a "contribution to the transformation of the planet." Please!

Great sex is fine, and good luck to those who mutually feel they benefit from it, but it's time we were spared the "great masters" and the "enlightenment in one lifetime" talk, along with the other grandiose claims that always accompany the promotion of *tantra*, and which, by the way, inevitably attract the innocent and vulnerable. Harmless it may all be for those individuals, like Anand, who believe they have found a "shortcut" to the Divine (whatever that means), but let's not kid ourselves: the potential for unscrupulous, narcissistic and power-mad "masters" basking in celebrity, creating careers out of other people's uncertainties and peddling dubious philosophies that I believe have long passed their "sell-by date," is enormous. One thing's for sure—*they'll* be the ones who'll be laughing (blissfully of course)—all the way to the bank.

June Campbell
Edinburgh, Scotland

STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

Not having ever heard of Andrew Cohen until a week ago, I bought the recent issue of *What Is Enlightenment?* after attending a talk he gave in Boulder. Your presentation of the various views on the topic of sex and spirituality was interesting, thought-provoking and expansive in a way that for me connected, further validated and expressed my belief that love and truth make the issue of sex go beyond being any particular issue at all.

SPECIAL THANKS TO: Dr. Kisore Chakrabarti, Kunda Channagiri, Dr. Eliot Deutsch, Dr. Andrew Fort, Leigh Goldstein, Tenzin Gyeche, Dr. Jeffrey Hopkins, Dr. Vijaya Kumar, the Ven. Lakhdor, Dr. Lance Nelson, Dr. Karl Potter, Raghu Ram, Dr. Robert A. F. Thurman. **ILLUSTRATION CREDITS:** Ajja photographs, cover & pp. 4, 19, 26, 28, 31, 32, 36, by Chris Parish and Craig Hamilton, courtesy of Chris Parish and Craig Hamilton; Ramesh Balsekar photographs, cover & pp. 4, 19, 39, 41, 43, courtesy of Advaita Press, Redondo Beach, California; Swami Dayananda photographs, cover & pp. 4, 19, 48-54, courtesy of Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, Salorsburg, Pennsylvania; Dr. Vijai Shankar photographs, cover & pp. 4, 19, 61, 63, 66, courtesy of Kaivalya Shivalaya Ashram, Galveston, Texas; His Holiness The Dalai Lama, photographs, cover & p. 19, courtesy of The Office of Tibet, London, cover & p. 5, 79, © Don Farber, 1989, courtesy of International Campaign For Tibet, Washington, DC, pp. 74-75, © Kim Yeshi, courtesy of Tibet Images, London, p. 80, © Christopher Langridge, courtesy of Tibet Images, London; Helen Tworkov photographs, cover & pp. 5, 19, 90, by Simeon Alev, courtesy of Simeon Alev; Peter Masefield photographs, cover & pp. 5, 19, 116, 120, 122, 125, by Michael Cook, courtesy of Michael Cook; Stephen Batchelor photographs, cover & pp. 5, 19, 102, 110, courtesy of Stephen Batchelor; p. 107, courtesy of Riverhead Books, New York; Frances Vaughan photographs, cover & pp. 5, 19, 130, 132, courtesy of Frances Vaughan; Ramana Maharshi photograph, cover & pp. 17, 23, 25, courtesy of Arunachala Ashrama, Rego Park, NY, reproduced by permission of Sri Ramanasramam, Tiruvannamalai, India; photomontages, pp. 16-17, by Nancy Hoffmeier; Andrew Cohen photograph, p. 6, courtesy of Moksha Foundation; Shankara illustration, pp. 22, 25, by Dana Pasila; photomontages, pp. 43-44, 46, by Mary Herrmann; Sealdah Station, Calcutta, India, photograph, p. 65, by Teki, *Mother Teresa, Her People and Her Work*, New York: Harper & Row, 1976 (p. 71); Buddha statue photograph, pp. 70, 73, by Nancy Hoffmeier; Sakyamuni Buddha and Disciples, *Thangka*, pp. 116-117, 119, by Siddhimuni Sakya, © Indigo Gallery, Kathmandu, Nepal, reproduced by permission of Indigo Gallery; Brahmin photograph, p. 128, by Robert Arnett, *India Unveiled*, Columbus, Georgia: Atman Press, 1996 (back cover), reproduced by permission of Robert Arnett; Buddhist Monk photograph, p. 129, by Dr. Nigel Smith, reproduced by permission of Hutchison Library, London; photomontages, pp. 134 & 136, by Mary Herrmann and Nancy Hoffmeier. **EDITORIAL CREDITS:** "The manifold universe . . .", p. 22, from Georg Feuerstein, *Sacred Paths*, Burdett, NY: Larson Publications, 1991 (p. 21); "[I am] the nature of Pure Consciousness . . .", p. 24, from the *Upadesasahasri of Sankara*, in Sengaku Mayeda, trans., *A Thousand Teachings*, University of Tokyo Press, 1979 (pp. 120,123); Lance Nelson quotation, p. 24, from A.O. Fort and P. Y. Mumme, eds., *Living Liberation in Hindu Thought*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996 (p. 47); "The pupil must be dispassionate . . .", p. 25, from *A Thousand Teachings* (p. 211); "I am an All-transcender . . .", p. 71, from Bhikkhu Nanamoli, trans., *The Life Of The Buddha*, Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1984 (p. 40); "Monks, there is that which is not born . . .", pp. 79 & 114, from the Udana (as translated by Peter Masefield), in Peter Masefield, *Divine Revelation in Pali Buddhism*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1986 (p. 67); "Where water, earth, heat and wind . . .", pp. 114, 119 & 129, from the Udana (as translated by Masefield), *Divine Revelation in Pali Buddhism* (p. 66); "This *dhamma* that has been won by me . . .", p. 119, from the Digha Nikaya (as translated by Masefield), *Divine Revelation in Pali Buddhism* (p. 56); "In the highest golden sheath . . .", p. 129, from the Mundaka Upanishad, quoted in Masefield, *Divine Revelation in Pali Buddhism* (p. 66).

I was touched by Father Thomas Keating's interview ["The Heart of the Matter"]. His words were so giving, so straight from the heart and sincere in humility, knowledge and acceptance—so warm and loving. In my opinion, he was right on the mark about the "right use" of sexuality (an integrated expression of love, affection and warmth) being virtuous and essential, and in its sincerest and knowing form, present continuously in all interactions with others, ourselves and all aspects of daily experiences of life.

Thank you for producing a well-thought-out and giving magazine. Also, thank you for pricing your magazine so reasonably. It says a lot.

Jean Krasnansky
Boulder, Colorado

WHAT ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY?

I recently purchased the latest issue of *What Is Enlightenment?*, dedicated to the relationship between sex and spirituality. This is the first time that I came across your magazine and I could not resist purchasing it as I found the name and the subject matter quite provocative.

A letter to the editor in this issue mentioned a hope that there might be at least one article about homosexuality and spirituality. The editor replied with a note expressing hope that the issue would appeal to everyone regardless of sexual preference. It is my sincere feeling that the editors failed greatly and as a result I will be very reluctant to look into any future or past issues of *WIE*.

The articles that promoted sexuality as a way to enlightenment were very obviously slanted towards heterosexuality and female sexuality. Only the articles about celibacy could appeal to everyone. I find this very disappointing in an age where male sexual healing and enlightenment is such an important issue and integral to our development (and survival) as a species. By disregarding same-sex spirituality *WIE* is almost saying that you have to be heterosexual in order to reach enlightenment through sex. I am exploring new spirituality and find that this attitude is more common throughout the spiritual community than people would like to accept. It is an issue that is rarely talked about in alternative media and events (at least in the UK). Every so often I even come across individuals "on a spiritual path" who actually believe that homosexuality goes against the laws of the universe and that AIDS is a result of this.

Homosexuality has been very important to our social development and I had hoped that *WIE* would explore how important it is to our spirituality as well. In a social context, one could argue that the homosexual presence has contributed greatly to sexual freedom in the latter half of this century. Nonreproductive sexual energy has also contributed greatly to the arts and culture of Western civilization. In certain contemporary tribal communities homosexuality has been ritualized into a young man's initiation into the world of sexuality. Even in Western society this is quite often an unspoken tradition. I have come across Indian prints of homosexual *tantric* positions, so it was of importance to Eastern spirituality. Why is it not of importance to *WIE*? I am very surprised that a magazine called *What Is Enlightenment?* with a whole issue devoted to sexuality would deal with this subject as a brief Editor's Note. Perhaps you should produce an issue called "What Is *What Is Enlightenment?*" and seriously look at the kinds of messages you are sending out.

Guy La Fayette
via email

THE LAWS OF GOD

I recently discovered *WIE* on my newsstand and eagerly read every word from cover to cover. Having now subscribed and ordered all back issues, I have a wonderful feast of reading to look forward to. However, I do find there is a thread of confusion and apparent support for items of contradiction in the articles I have read so far, because you seem to support the popular "feel-good" philosophy. "The Promise of Perfection" by Andrew Cohen was excellent. But then he spoiled it by giving his stamp of approval to the personal gratifications of my fellow Australian Barry Long.

What is the relationship between sex and spirituality? Unless we are continuing to demean the word "spirituality," there can be no relationship. Like so much else that passes for spirituality, "sexual contact" belongs totally in the realms of corporeality and material expression. But I suppose this raises the argument about whether anything in this corporeal world can be related to the spiritual realms. Suffice to recall that the Gospels tell us "the Devil is Prince of this world, not God," and that only the Devil could have offered the world to Jesus as a gift (Luke 4:6). Not to mention Romans 8:6-9, which states that "those in carnal mind are not subject to the laws of God, and cannot please him."

During my sixty years of search and study, I have established that all true masters give three basic requirements that hold true for all spiritual journeys. These are: 1) total nonattachment to corporeality and demise of the ego, 2) cessation of negative input from all sources, including animal foods and carnal thoughts, and 3) a one-pointed concentration on the love and desire for communion with a divine level of consciousness. The only disagreement seems to be on the definitions of the starting point of the journey and of the ultimate goal, or state of divine enlightenment, that tempts us to leave where we seem to be. To obtain peace and freedom we *must* escape from this ridiculously contradictory and painful world of material expression.

Philip Harris
Toodyay, Australia

NOT WORTH THE WARP

Thanks for a thought-provoking, blood-pressure-raising issue of *WIE!*

I am sure you will receive communications from many who support the claims and practices of the self-identified "*tantric* master" Barry Long. Let me hasten to say that I will not be among those people! I found the article disturbingly reminiscent of a male attitude which, taken to even more ludicrously arrogant extremes, can inflict damage in a woman that is more insidious and difficult to erase than outright abuse. How do I know this? I experienced something very like it for sixteen years. It has taken twelve years of insistent work and dedicated effort to lessen the effects of my association with a self-proclaimed "spiritual prophet," a man making claims quite similar to those of your "*tantric* master." I have been strictly and purposefully celibate for nearly twelve years. I dived into celibacy with a distinct feeling of relief and a sense that on one front at least, the exploitation was over. Once I had taken back the use of my body, I could work on recovering a sense of emotional, mental and (yes) spiritual liberty. I don't see why *any* woman would deliberately place herself with a character like Mr. Long. It just isn't worth the warp.

On another note, it was very interesting to read the confessions of your celibates and to peruse the open letter written by the female celibate ["Here's Looking at You"].

I'm curious about something, however: Were your researchers not able to find any long-term female celibate practitioners? Not all of us are nuns (Catholic or Buddhist), you know! Some of us have *no* religious practice or identifiable "spiritual" practice at all, yet we are intensely committed to various ways of living which one could call our "path."

I enjoyed this issue from cover to cover and I hope you'll do another issue on this hot topic soon, and do more with the celibate aspect of it! Kudos for a wonderful issue, and keep up the good work.

Dr. Laurene Peterson
Seattle, Washington

THE TRUTH ABOUT LOVE

Thank you for the last issue of *What Is Enlightenment?*, and thank you especially for the interview you published with Barry Long about this subject. I am in the teaching of Barry Long and have attended several of his seminars. Yet the very good questions of Andrew Cohen bring Barry to reveal new aspects and clarifications about him being a *tantric* master. This is of great value to me. Thank you also for publishing the answers from Sally and Jade. It is invaluable to me as a woman to get this confirmation of what I already know to be the truth about love.

Helle Hindstedgaard
Farum, Denmark

ALARM BELLS

I had an immediate and visceral reaction to your recent interview with Barry Long when I read this statement: "No, they don't teach. Woman's job is not to teach." When I hear someone make statements to the effect that "Women are supposed to ___," or "Men are supposed to ___," alarm bells go off.

Long continues to rattle off a long list of attributes of woman. I'm not objecting to the fact that women can possess these attributes, but to the fact that he is defining women by them. Long's attitude toward women seems old-fashioned. Women are not supposed to get up and speak in public? I thought the days when a woman was supposed to stay at home and hide behind her man were over. Did I spend the last thirty-five years getting advanced education, working in a professional capacity and building my self-confidence in vain?

The second "alarm" came when I read that Long refused to let you speak directly to the women who had had relationships with him ["Sally and Jade"]. If he truly respected these women, and women in general, he would have had the confidence to let the women themselves make that decision! This was too much for me to bear. I can't imagine being in a relationship with a man who took it upon himself to make such a decision for me. Perhaps he was uncomfortable with what you might discover about his true nature through contact with them?

About the debate as to whether celibacy is a holier path: Most people of mature years (if they will admit it in our hedonistic social climate) have experienced both periods of sexual activity and periods of celibacy. Do I feel more spiritual and holy when I am celibate? Not really. Do I feel less spiritual when I have a physical relationship? No. The status of whether or not I engage in a particular activity does not change the "me" that is constantly evolving and growing and building understanding.

It's better to focus not on the states of celibate vs. noncelibate but on where your mind is focused. Can you see things clearly, or are your emotions driven by obsessions over which you exert little control? Do

you experience life's joy or do you only feel trapped by repression and expectations? (Today's expectation that people should be sexually active is just as repressive as the former expectation that people should not be!)

Thanks for a thought-provoking issue. I'm looking forward to more to come.

Frances McKenzie
East Greenbush, New York

LOVE OF GOD OR LOVE OF BOD?

I've just read your Spring/Summer 1998 issue and I must say that everything I ever learned about God and the illusory energy, *maya*, has been contradicted by the personalities you selected to enlighten us. You have replaced love of God with love of blood, mucus, phlegm, urine, pus, stool and bile—in other words, "love of bod." I honestly feel that you should change the name of your magazine to *"What Enlightenment Is Not."*

Barry Long and Margot Anand have done a great disservice to humanity. Just looking at Barry's face I can see that his energy is being drained. The seminal fluid can enrich the brain as long as it is not spilled uselessly. The organ of regeneration is designed to create progeny. As soon as we try to exploit the body for sensual pleasure, we come under the grips of the Lord's illusory energy.

Sex may sell your magazine but God doesn't buy it. For deluding the innocent public, you're certainly condemned. The authorities in your periodical haven't the slightest clue about the identity of God. Becoming enamored of a woman is the trick of *maya*. As long as we are addicted to enjoying the opposite sex we shall continue our earthly bondage. We shall suffer greatly for our indulgence and have to repeat the vicious cycle of repeated birth and death.

In the Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 7, verse 11, the Lord says that He *is* that sex life which is not contrary to religious principles. This implies engaging in sex for the purpose of begetting good children. *Tantric* singles clubs are not what we would call religious. If a man is not religious, he is no better than an animal. An animal knows only eating, sleeping, sex and defense. If we cannot rise above these four animal propensities then we are virtually two-legged animals.

If you really want to enlighten yourself and others, many should hear from real authorities who have actually realized God. Otherwise, if you just want to sell magazines, you should include a few colorful, erotic centerfolds. May God help you to do the former. Wishing you better days ahead.

Will Willis
via email

LIFE IS ONE

Thank you for your issue on the relationship between sex and spirituality. I like your magazine very much. I like very much what Andrew Cohen writes as well as the interviews with Barry Long, Miranda Shaw and Rabbi Zalman Schachter.

As for Swami Chidananda, I agree with him except when he says, "Sex is a process we share with the entire animal kingdom." I don't feel this is negative, and I don't feel that the animal kingdom is inferior to humans. Life is one. We are animals whether we like it or not, and being able to really share something with the animal world is great, not bad or sinful. And I totally agree with what he says about *tantra*, except when he rejects it on the grounds that "for one in a million it may click." Cannot the same be said about total

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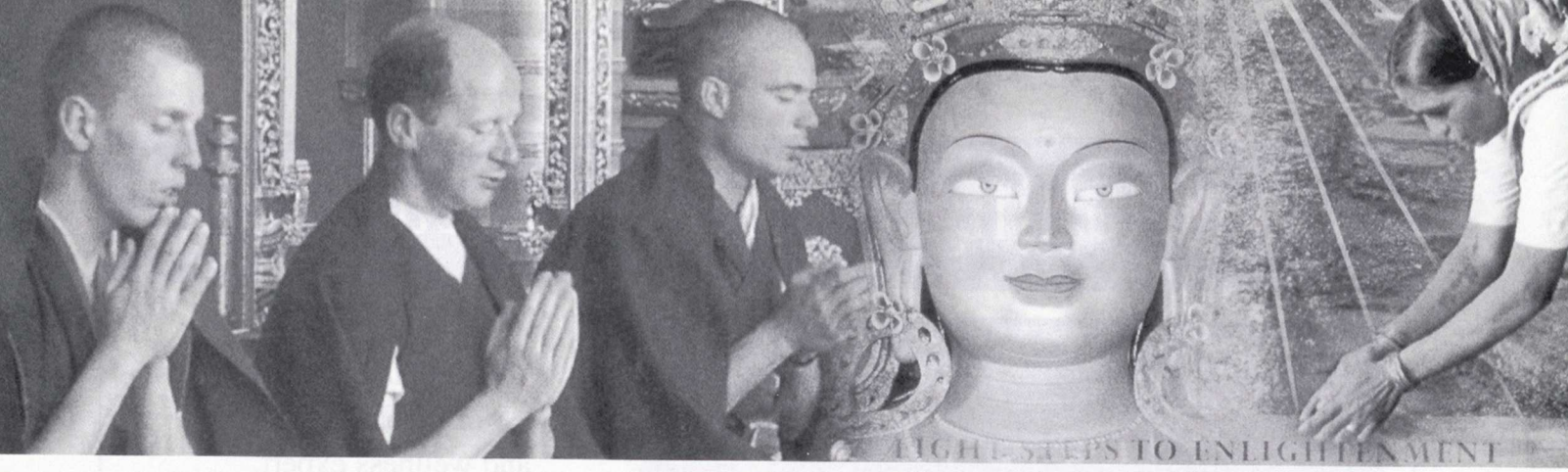
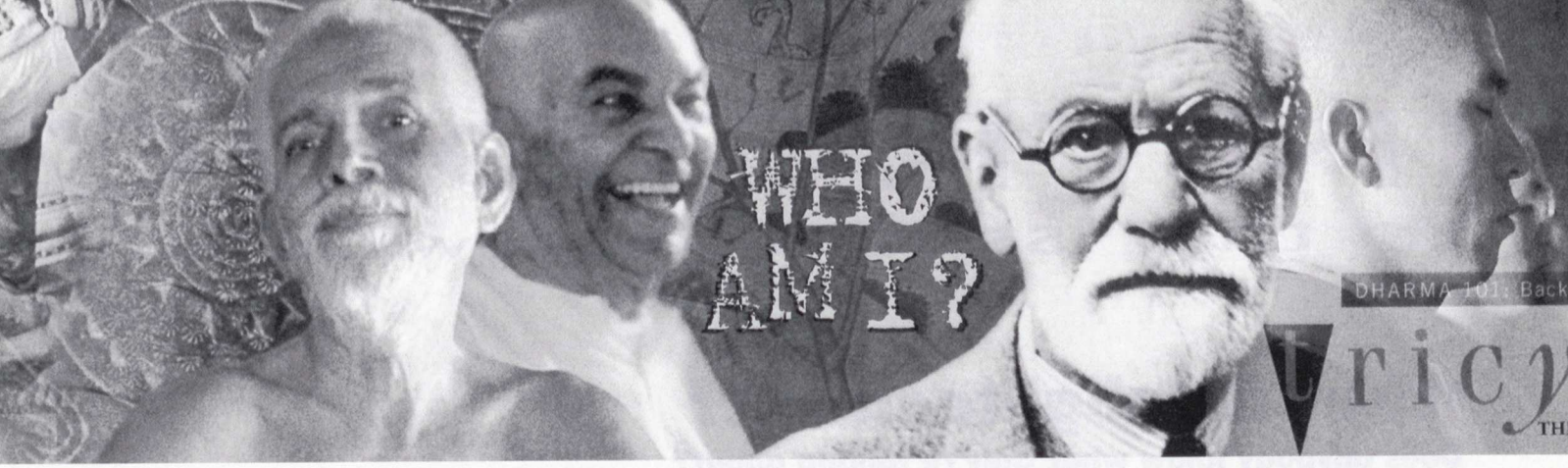


EDITORIAL

EVER SINCE WE BEGAN PUBLISHING *What Is Enlightenment?* seven years ago, we've been receiving letters from people all around the world who take our name as an open invitation to share with us their ideas about what enlightenment is. Whether it's a personal revelation, an email of the entire text of Immanuel Kant's treatise of the same name, or excerpts of the writings of spiritual teachers of every conceivable persuasion—past, present and even disembodied—what most of our correspondents share is a conviction that theirs is the definitive answer that will spare us the trouble of producing any further issues.

This has been the hardest editorial for us to write because this has been the biggest club-sandwich-of-an-issue we've ever had the guts to sink our teeth into. *How dare we!* And after the first bite, our mouth was so full (of confusing contradictions) that we paused mid-mouthful to wonder, "Should we *really* do this?" And so, after considerable late-night discussions, we decided to take the plunge and swallowed the first overwhelming bite: *What is enlightenment? Does anybody know what they're talking about?* What kind of question is this? Do *we* know what *we're* talking about? Do we *dare* to know what we're talking about? Does *anybody* dare to know what they're talking about? Well, while more and more people these days seem to at least *think* that they know what they're talking about, and what with the current anti-hierarchical, anti-authority, anti-absolute, anti-*enlightenment*—oops! shouldn't have said that—spiritual climate we're living in, we became seriously curious about what the BIG GUNS have to say about the BIG WORD. We took another bite, and almost choked—this time for real—when it became apparent that almost everybody *disagrees!* Disagrees about what? About *everything!* The Buddhists disagree with the Buddhists, the Buddhists disagree with the Hindus, the Hindus agree in some shape or form with *everyone*. Wait a minute, what *is* enlightenment anyway?! Well, after a few strong whacks on the back to stop the choking, we soon started choking again when we realized that the founder of this magazine, Andrew Cohen, thinks *he* knows what *he's* talking about and that *a lot* of people disagree with *him*. So what are *we* (we're his students) doing? How does *he* (he's our teacher) know what he's talking about? Well, the choking started up once again because *he* just walked in and reminded us that if we can't find out from our own experience what enlightenment is, how can *we* possibly know if *he* knows what he's talking about or if anybody knows what ANYBODY is talking about! But how can we know? How could we ever trust our experience to such a degree that we could finally say, "Now we know"? Is it because "someone else who we trust told us so"? Or because "we had a spiritual experience that so transformed our experience of consciousness that we can now say authoritatively that 'we know'"? But how is it that we know that we know? And how is it that you, the reader, will know that *we* know what we're talking about? Or, why is it that *you're* so sure that we *don't* know what we're talking about? Wait a minute! What's going on here? What happened to the sandwich anyway?—forgot all about it in our reverie. But, seriously,



this *is* a good question, after all: What is enlightenment? Does anybody know what they're talking about?

"Who cares?! Why is it so important to you anyway?"

"Well, I want to know the meaning of life."

"There is no meaning!"

"How do you know?"

"I don't! But I don't care and you do."

"That's right, but why is it that I care and you don't?"

"Because you're lost in your head. Enlightenment has nothing to do with thinking."

"But I thought you said you didn't know or care what it meant?"

"I don't, but I know it has nothing to do with thinking."

"But how do *you* know?"

"Lighten up! Take a deep breath. Relaaaaaaax, man. Don't take life so seriously. Get it? *Enlighten-up!*"

"But wait a minute. These are serious and important questions."

"To whom? Who is it that wants to know? Who is it that needs to be so sure what enlightenment is, anyway? Maybe that's the part of you that could never know."

"Hey, who are you?"

"I'm someone who has given up trying to figure it all out."

"Well, I haven't, and I want to know where you get your confidence from."

"I don't get my confidence from anywhere; it's just that I really don't care anymore."

"But does the fact that you don't care anymore make you superior to me? Does the fact that I care make me superior to you?"

"Like I said, *relax*, man."

"I can't relax. I feel I really need to know . . ."

Is anybody still out there? We, of course, are very interested in these rather perplexing, confusing, mind-bending, thought-provoking, oh-so-annoying questions, questions, questions. What with the modern neo-Advaita movement becoming the EST of the '90s and just about everybody talking about "getting it," and with the Buddhists telling us that we'll *never get it in this lifetime*—what are we to conclude? The Buddha "got it" in *his* lifetime. Ramana Maharshi "got it" in a couple of minutes. ("But how many Buddhas and Ramana Maharshis are there?") But wait a minute—according to at least one of the Shankaracharyas, one of the highest authorities in Hinduism and a BIG GUN for sure, Ramana couldn't be enlightened because he wasn't a true Vedantin. Why? Because he didn't study the scriptures! Now we really don't know what we're talking about! The Buddha said that form is emptiness and emptiness is form, and yet the Buddhists seem to have a serious disagreement as to what emptiness actually is.

How can anybody possibly make sense out of all of this? Maybe we should ask the Einstein of consciousness, the high priest himself, Ken Wilber. But wait a minute—he just said that he *knew* that he wasn't going to make it in this lifetime. But how does *he* know? Oh boy! Where do we go from here?

Well, if you're crazy enough to have read this far, then we encourage you to turn the page and find out! ■

INTRODUC
to this issue by Andrew Cohen

What *Is* Enlightenment?
Does anybody know what they're talking about?

WE ARE LIVING IN INTERESTING TIMES. Over the past several years there appears to have been literally an explosion of interest in all matters spiritual. It's now no longer embarrassing to admit to having spiritual interests or feelings. For more and more people these days it has become acceptable to begin to speak openly about some of the most fundamental spiritual questions, questions such as: Who am I? and How shall I live? Even the word "enlightenment" is becoming popularized as a legitimate concept that is no longer completely foreign to our Western ears.

Enlightenment, in the East, has always referred to the goal of all spiritual striving—the very pinnacle of spiritual attainment. And as Eastern mysticism and spirituality slowly but surely infiltrate and put down roots in the West, their philosophy and terminology have entered our worldview. We believe, therefore, that at this time when our psychological and spiritual perspectives are being influenced by these new and potent concepts, it is important to pause and consider carefully what these words that we are beginning to feel comfortable using *actually mean.*

While it's true that "enlightenment," or the final goal of all spiritual striving, has always referred to an experiential recognition of that which is *absolute* by nature, what that absolute actually is, and what it may have to do with human life, always has been and continues to be up to this day quite ambiguous. The more we have looked, the more fascinated we have become to discover the enormity of diverging views about this most challenging concept.

Shankara, the celebrated eighth century Indian teacher and founder of Vedantic nondualism or Advaita (not two) philosophy, from which many of the main currents of modern Indian thought are derived, referred to that which is absolute as "pure consciousness" or "fullness." Yet Gautama the Buddha is famous for declaring that that which is absolute is "emptiness" or "voidness." The question of what enlightenment is and what it has to do with human life is a dizzying business to try to understand because when one begins to look beyond the superficial, it soon becomes apparent that even the most respected authorities seem to disagree on the most fundamental of matters. And if two of the most respected authorities in Indian spiritual philosophy seem to disagree on the most fundamental definition of that which is absolute, the experiential discovery of which is supposed to be "enlightenment," then what are we to do? If in fact Shankara and the Vedantic philosophers are correct in their declaration that that which is ultimate, and therefore absolute, is fullness or pure consciousness, then should this lead us to conclude that enlightenment is the experiential discovery of what is referred to in the West as "God" or "Love" or "Christ-consciousness"? Does that mean that ultimately there is *something*, the realization of which will set us free? If Gautama the Buddha was truly the Enlightened One, then does that mean that his doctrine of emptiness, stating that the absolute nature of all things is emptiness or voidness, implies that *God does not exist*? Does the experiential discovery of emptiness reveal to us that there is ultimately *nothing*, and will *that* discovery set us free?

These are *very* important questions to go into if we are seriously interested in coming to some real understanding of what enlightenment actually is and what it may have to do with the reality of human life. And it will become obvious when we begin to look closely at the actuality of our fundamental relationship to life that the issue of what is absolute soon reveals itself to be *much* more relevant than we may have previously imagined. Why? Because for most of us, *our fundamental convictions about the ultimate nature of reality tend to have a profound influence on our relationship to life.* For example, those among us who are convinced that there is ultimately *a thing* that is absolute (God) tend to display a conviction that life is inherently positive and meaningful. Those among us who are convinced that ultimately there is *no thing* usually are not quite so fervent in their conviction that life is inherently *a good thing* or that it has *any* meaning at all. It is because these questions have such a big in-

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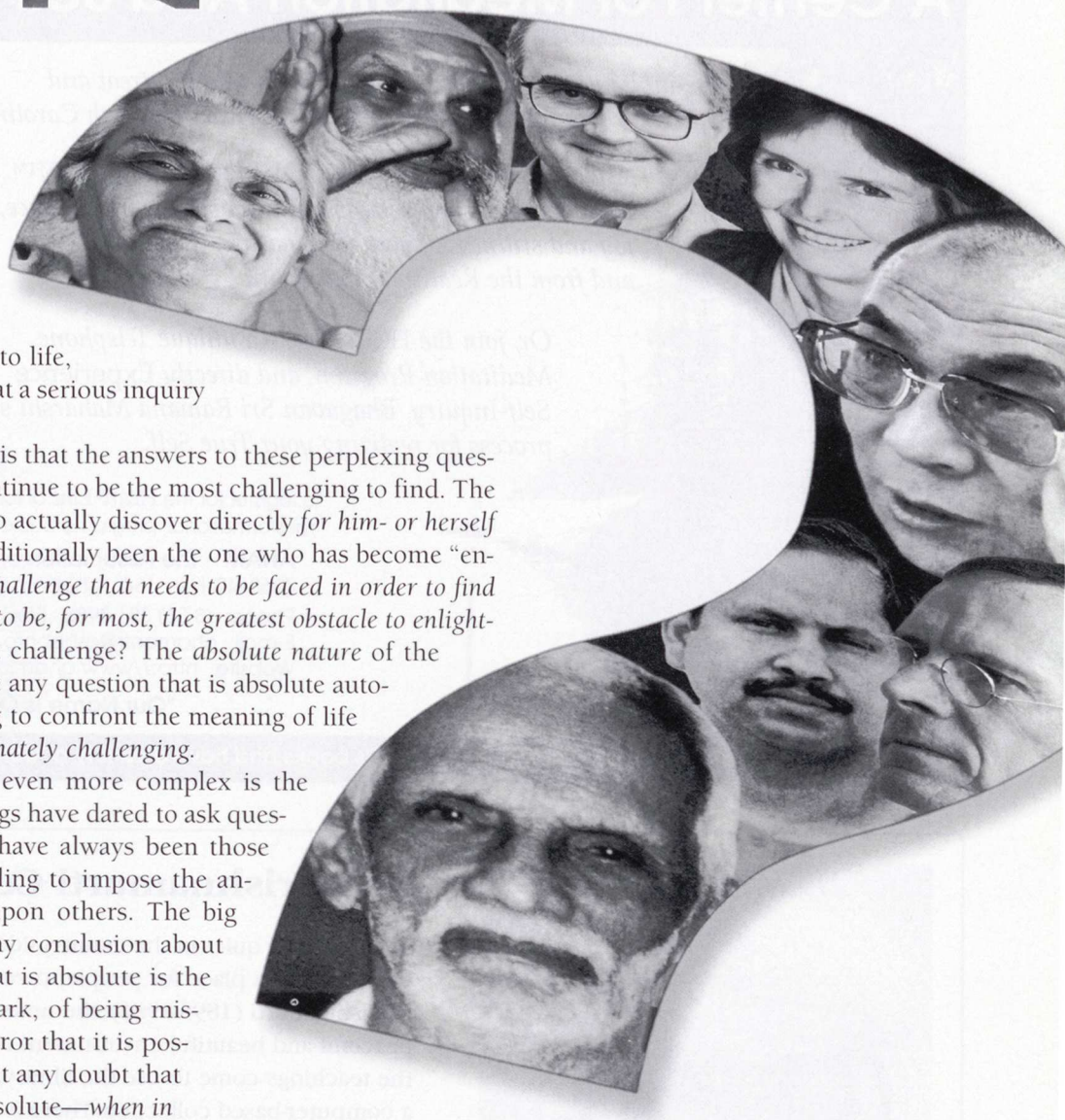


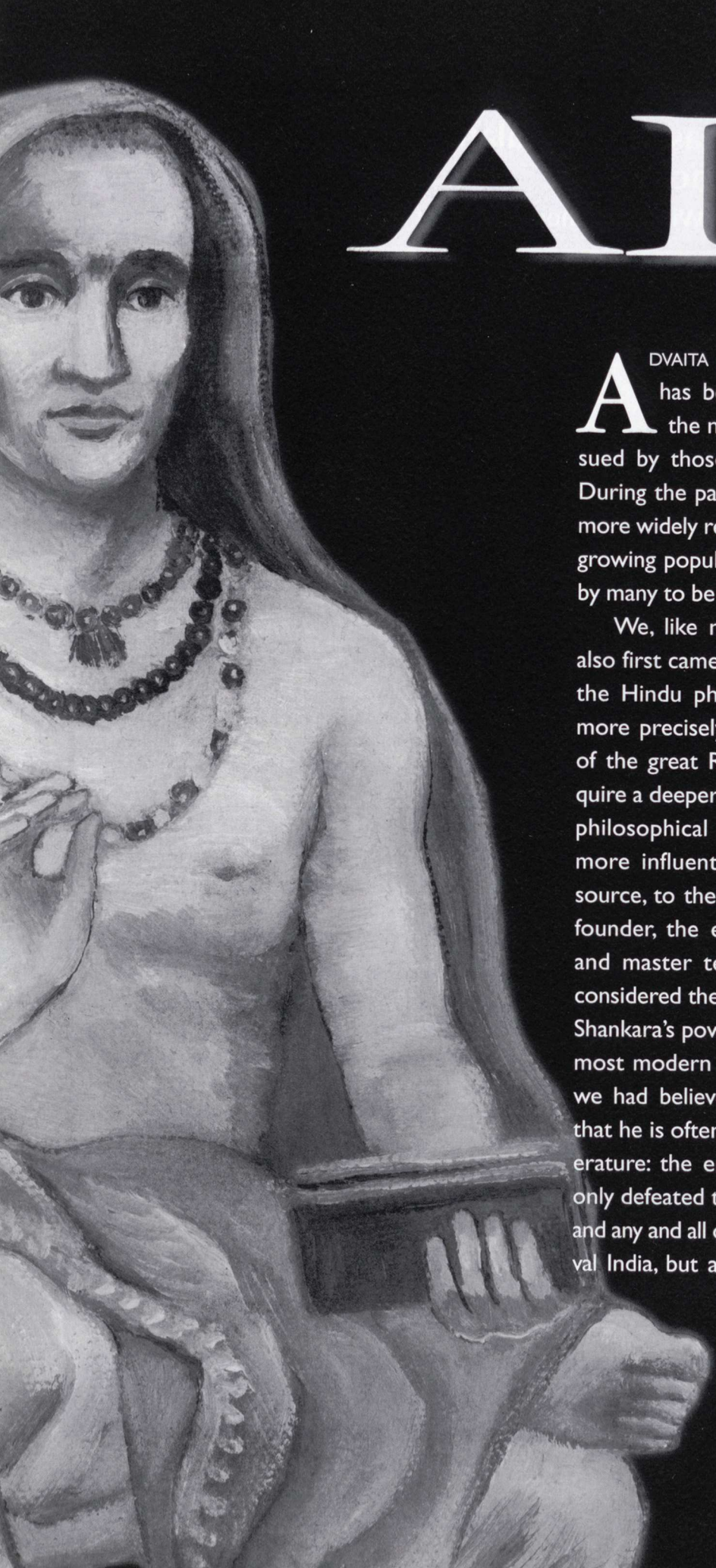
fluence upon our relationship to life, *even if we are not aware of it*, that a serious inquiry into them is so essential.

The main issue, of course, is that the answers to these perplexing questions always have been and continue to be the most challenging to find. The one who has the rare fortune to actually discover directly *for him- or herself* what those answers are has traditionally been the one who has become "enlightened." *But the enormous challenge that needs to be faced in order to find those answers for oneself seems to be, for most, the greatest obstacle to enlightenment itself.* And what is that challenge? The *absolute nature* of the questions themselves—because any question that is absolute automatically forces a human being to confront the meaning of life and death in a way that is *ultimately challenging.*

And what makes matters even more complex is the fact that whenever human beings have dared to ask questions that are absolute, there have always been those who have been more than willing to impose the answers that they have found upon others. The big problem is that inherent in any conclusion about the nature of life and death that is absolute is the great danger of missing the mark, of being mistaken, of making the biggest error that it is possible to make: believing without any doubt that one has found that which is absolute—*when in fact, one has found nothing more than one's own desire for absolute certainty.*

Finally—and most ironic of all—unless we are willing to ask the questions that are absolute and in doing so actually *dare* to find the answers, the enlightenment and its liberating understanding that has been promised to us by the greatest realizers throughout history will never be ours.

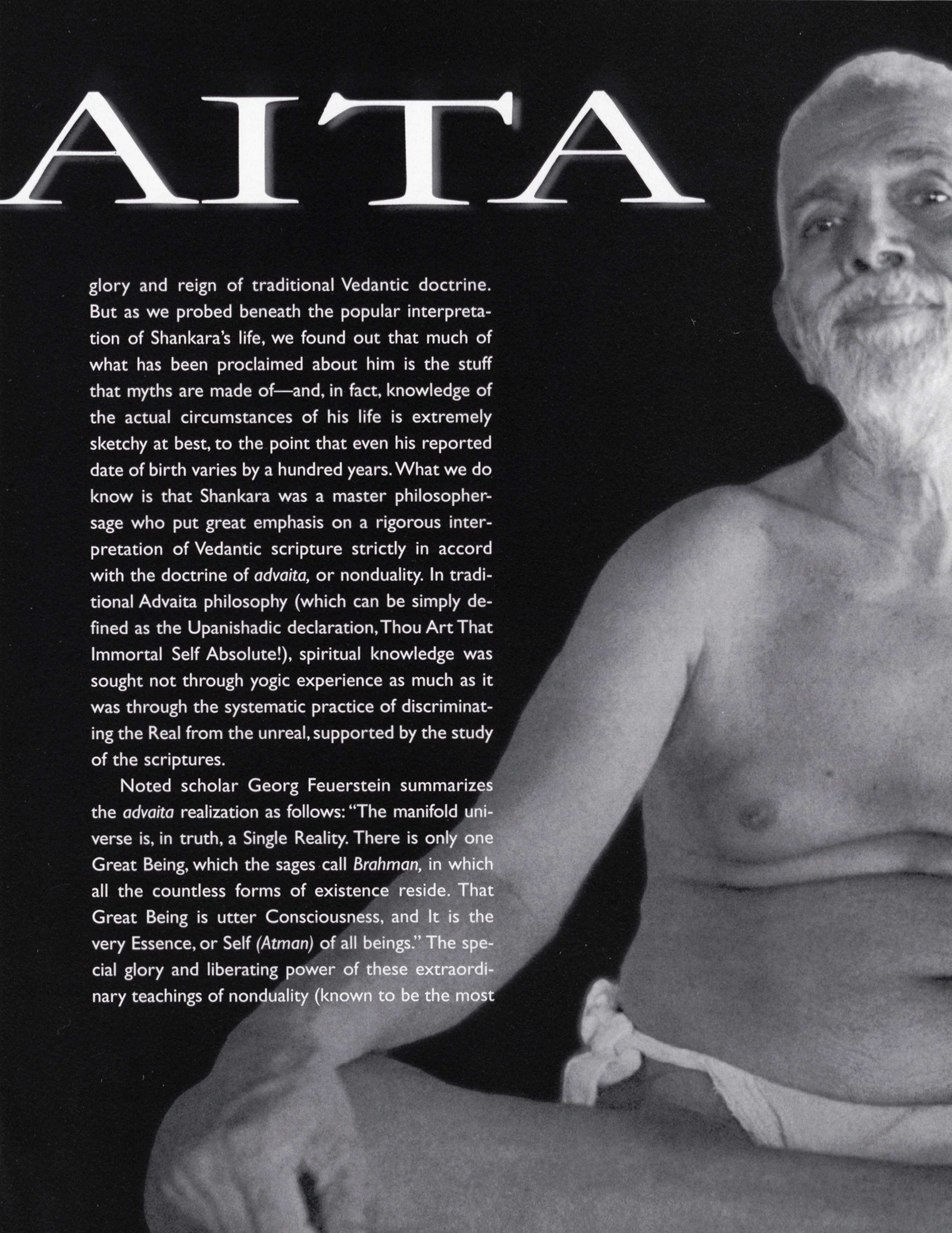
In this issue of *What Is Enlightenment?* we have endeavored to ask the question, "What *is* enlightenment?" to two of the world's foremost enlightenment traditions—Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism —in the hope of finding some answers to the confusing array of questions that seems to arise whenever anyone sincerely asks the question: What *is* enlightenment?■



ADV

ADVAITA PHILOSOPHY, OR VEDANTIC NONDUALISM, has become, along with Buddhism, one of the most popular spiritual paths being pursued by those interested in enlightenment today. During the past three decades, Advaita has become more widely recognized in the West through the ever growing popularity of Ramana Maharshi, considered by many to be modern India's greatest spiritual giant.

We, like many Western spiritual practitioners, also first came into contact with Advaita philosophy, the Hindu philosophy of nonduality (oneness, or more precisely *not-two-ness*), through the teachings of the great Ramana Maharshi. Endeavoring to acquire a deeper understanding of the background and philosophical context of this profound and ever more influential teaching, we looked back to its source, to the man who is widely recognized as its founder, the eighth century religious philosopher and master teacher Shankara. Advaita Vedanta is considered the crown jewel of Indian philosophy, and Shankara's powerful influence can be felt throughout most modern schools of Indian thought. Originally we had believed that he was the legendary figure that he is often described to be in the traditional literature: the enlightened genius maverick who not only defeated the dominance of Buddhist philosophy and any and all other opposing religious views in medieval India, but also single-handedly reestablished the



glory and reign of traditional Vedantic doctrine. But as we probed beneath the popular interpretation of Shankara's life, we found out that much of what has been proclaimed about him is the stuff that myths are made of—and, in fact, knowledge of the actual circumstances of his life is extremely sketchy at best, to the point that even his reported date of birth varies by a hundred years. What we do know is that Shankara was a master philosopher-sage who put great emphasis on a rigorous interpretation of Vedantic scripture strictly in accord with the doctrine of *advaita,* or nonduality. In traditional Advaita philosophy (which can be simply defined as the Upanishadic declaration, Thou Art That Immortal Self Absolute!), spiritual knowledge was sought not through yogic experience as much as it was through the systematic practice of discriminating the Real from the unreal, supported by the study of the scriptures.

Noted scholar Georg Feuerstein summarizes the *advaita* realization as follows: "The manifold universe is, in truth, a Single Reality. There is only one Great Being, which the sages call *Brahman,* in which all the countless forms of existence reside. That Great Being is utter Consciousness, and It is the very Essence, or Self *(Atman)* of all beings." The special glory and liberating power of these extraordinary teachings of nonduality (known to be the most

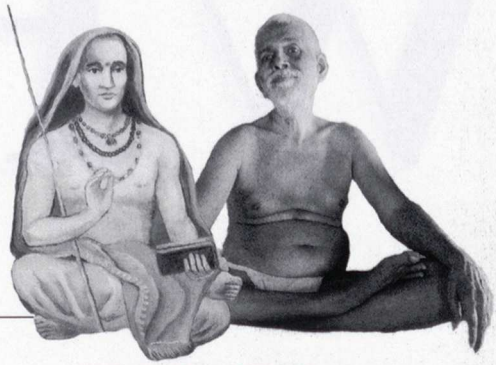
ADVAITA

direct path to enlightenment) is not only their potential to enlighten the seeker in the present lifetime, but even more, their potential to liberate the ripe individual *instantaneously* from the bondage of conditioned existence. There have been impressive living demonstrations of this profound attainment in recent times, in the example of the saint and sage Ramana Maharshi; the remarkable cigarette-smoking *jnani* [Self-realized individual] from Bombay, Nisargadatta Maharaj; the recently deceased renegade master and "lion of Lucknow," H.W.L. Poonja; and the unassuming Ajja, who resides effortlessly in an intensely blissful, unbroken awareness of the Self, introduced to the Western world for the first time in this issue of *What Is Enlightenment?*

> [I am] the nature of Pure Consciousness. I am always the same to beings, one alone; [I am] the highest *Brahman*, which, like the sky, is all-pervading, imperishable, auspicious, uninterrupted, undivided and devoid of action. I do not belong to anything since I am free from attachment. [I am] the highest *Brahman* . . . ever-shining, unborn, one alone, imperishable, stainless, all-pervading, and nondual—That am I, and I am forever released.
>
> —Shankara, *The Upadesasahasri*

While Advaita's profound inspiration and power to liberate is undeniable, its worldview has not been without its critics. Even though "modern" Advaita seems to emphasize the indivisible nature of the world and *Brahman*, or the Self Absolute, Advaita philosophy has traditionally expressed, as noted religious scholar Lance Nelson points out, a "deep metaphysical bias *against* the world. . . . In the end, the Advaita tradition fails to present a true nondualism of world *and* Absolute. . . . It is rather an *acosmic monism.* It achieves its nonduality not *inclusively,* but *exclusively.* Empirical reality is admitted in a provisional way, but in the end it is cast out of the Absolute, out of existence. From the highest perspective, the world is simply *not there* [emphases ours]." Once again, even though modern proponents of Advaita do not appear to exclude the world in their vision of nonduality, in the classical view, the world is clearly recognized as being either completely unreal, or only partially real. And this is what Advaita has been historically criticized for. Precisely because of its emphasis on the ultimate unreality and illusory nature of the world and embodied existence, any teaching of how to live *in the world* is entirely absent. More specifically, the nondual teaching does not in any way address the ethical or moral dimension of human life. And even though modern Advaita does not seem to exclude the world in its nondual view, it still is devoid of any teaching that addresses the realities of human life.

Interestingly enough, it appears that historically Advaita did not address ethical or moral questions because, according to Nelson, the highest nondual teach-



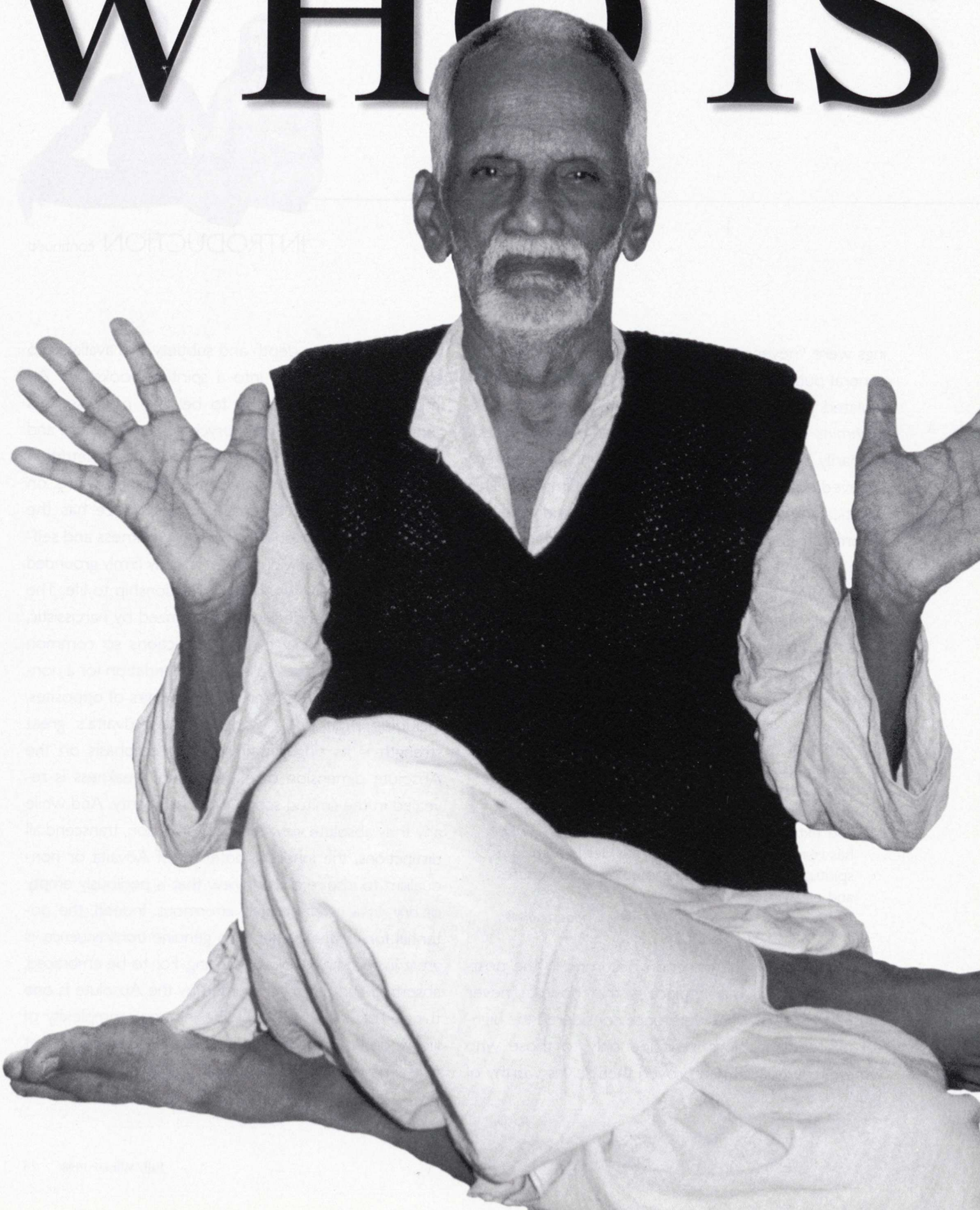
INTRODUCTION continued

ings were "never intended to be a philosophy for the general public." In fact, he states that they were "formulated by and for a narrow spiritual elite of male *brahmins* [members of the highest, priestly class], primarily *sannyasins* [renunciates], who alone were believed qualified to fully appropriate its import." This practically would have meant that the individual to whom the absolute teachings were revealed would have *already* fulfilled the demanding moral and ethical qualifications for discipleship. And even more than that, Shankara himself states that the qualifications for discipleship also demanded an extraordinary degree of detachment from and transcendence of worldly desires:

> The pupil must be dispassionate toward all things noneternal. . . . [Having] abandoned the desire for sons, wealth and worlds, endowed with self-control [and] compassion, he is a *brahmin* who is internally and externally pure, whose thought is calm, who has reached tranquility. . . . [Thus] let him go to a spiritual teacher who is learned in the scriptures and established in *Brahman*.
>
> —*The Upadesasahasri*

The unusual phenomenon occurring in the postmodern spiritual marketplace is that now, as never before in history, what were once considered the highest esoteric teachings, revealed only to those who were prepared and had proven themselves worthy of their unimaginable depth and subtlety, are available to anyone who wanders into a spiritual bookstore. An important question seems to be: Are most seekers genuinely prepared for the psychological upheaval and world-shattering shift of perception that penetration into the Absolute unleashes? Advaita's emphasis on the illusory nature of embodied existence has the potential to give license to human weakness and self-indulgence if the individual is not already firmly grounded in a fundamentally wholesome relationship to life. The unwholesome tendencies characterized by narcissistic, neurotic and deeply cynical convictions so common today create a dangerously weak foundation for a nondual perspective that transcends *all* pairs of opposites, including right and wrong. While Advaita's great strength is its singular, unwavering emphasis on the Absolute dimension of existence, its weakness is revealed in the limited scope of its singularity. And while any truly absolute view must, by definition, transcend all distinctions, the inherent potential of Advaita or nondualism to inspire a worldview that is perilously empty of *any value whatsoever* is enormous. Indeed, the potential for *escape,* rather than genuine *transcendence,* is great in such an absolute teaching. For to be embraced, absorbed and utterly consumed by the Absolute is one thing—but to escape from the inherent complexity of life in order to avoid the overwhelming demand that true surrender requires is another thing altogether. ■

WHO IS



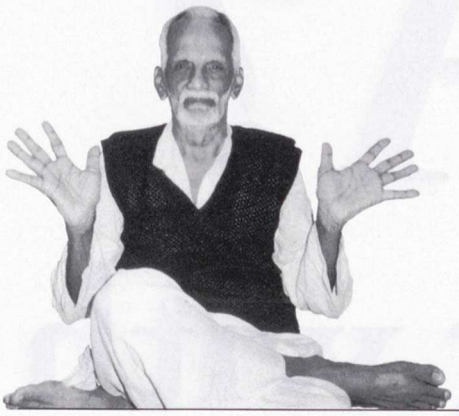
AJJA?

A Meeting with the Absolute

Every other year at the Vivekananda Kendra Ashram outside Bangalore, India, a conference is held entitled "Frontiers in Yoga Research and Applications." The theme is always the relationship between science and spirituality, consciousness research and the medical applications of yoga. On my first visit I didn't know what to expect, but on my second, as an invited speaker on "Enlightenment," I knew that at this conference *anything* was possible. At this event, where the mundane and the sacred meet and intermingle on so many levels simultaneously, a most unusual cast of characters comes together in a kind of soup that only Mother India could cook. But in spite of knowing this, when I returned to southern India last December I had no idea that I would have the rare opportunity to spend time with that most precious gem—a fully enlightened *jnani,* one who has realized the SELF ABSOLUTE.

An interview
by Andrew Cohen

WHO IS AJJA?



INTRODUCTION continued

Ajja, or "grandfather," as he is fondly called by all those who know him, is a living example of the extraordinary spiritual legacy of India, and his personal story is as strange and mysterious as it is miraculous. Born in 1916, Ramachandra was a wealthy farmer and landowner who, although he expressed no particular interest in matters spiritual, was said to be naturally possessed of unusual purity of heart and rare simplicity of being. One day at the age of thirty-six, for no apparent reason, Ramachandra was struck by a terrible pain in his heart that gradually moved to encompass his entire body. For six months he bore what he describes as excruciating physical pain, and all the while his family tried desperately to find what it was that was causing him to suffer so. Their efforts proved to be fruitless, as no one could find the cause of his torment. Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the pain vanished, leaving no trace. Although previously he had not been a deep thinker, this experience provoked an intense inquiry within him that lasted, we were told, for several months. "What was this pain that had been torturing my body?" he asked himself. "What was *bondage?* What was *liberation?*" Because of his simplicity and the purity of his mind, he was able to go to the very root of these questions in no time at all. What he found in his investigation is that *pain is bondage,* and that the root cause of bondage is *karma.* Karma is created by mind, he realized, mind being all thoughts that are concerned with the *small self.* On the last night of his inward inquiry he asked himself: What is the root of worldly possessions? Of money? *Money,* he concluded, was the most important thing in the *world,* and all fear and insecurity are rooted in attachment to *that.*

In that instant he experienced a powerful vision that was both glorious and terrifying. Before him there appeared an extremely beautiful woman whose entire body was red and who, to his horror, had blood pouring profusely from her mouth. He recognized her to be *death* incarnate. And as he beheld her for some time he had a powerful insight. The root of money, he realized, was *possession.* And possession, he realized, was *death.* Then the female form vanished and a door appeared, at which point a final inquiry began within him. *"Who am I?"* he asked himself. The door then opened and *he left his body through the top of his head.* He was met by "divine entities" that guided him further on his journey to what he calls the "third level." During this entire process, which took place in the middle of the night, he was lying on the floor in his room, apparently physically dead. All the while, Ishmael, a Muslim farmer who was destined to become his closest devotee, was sitting by his side, commanded, we were told, by the unknown to look after his body. *Then, a ball of light appeared and hovered near his inert form—and then entered it.*

As the light entered Ajja's body he opened his eyes, and the first words that he uttered were, *"The one who was here is gone—someone else has come."* He continued, *"I am not the body, I have no mother, I have no father. I am that brightness."*

For the next three months he sat quietly in his house as a profound silence within him grew in intensity. As his mind was gradually adjusting to his new condition, he became so sensitive that even the slightest sound was completely unbearable to him.

At the end of this period he emerged from his house,

"There was no question in our minds that we had just been sitting in the company of a profoundly enlightened man whose 'state' or 'attainment' was undoubtedly extremely rare. And it became very clear after spending only a short period of time in Ajja's intimate presence that he was one who had left this world and everyone in it far behind a long time ago."

utterly transformed. Completely intoxicated, he would wander naked, at times dancing and singing for hours in the rain, and at times staring endlessly at the sun. He slept on rocks and under trees. His family thought he had gone mad and finally committed him to an asylum. When the doctors asked him what his name was, he replied, *"I have no name."* When they asked him where he lived, he replied, *"Everywhere."* After two months, the doctors determined that he was not mad and released him.

He spent the next twenty years as a roaming *avadhuta* [one who has cast off all concerns], so deeply immersed in the consciousness of the SELF that most of the time he seemed to be oblivious of the world around him. Ishmael, now his constant companion, looked after the needs of his body. Then, in 1961, when he was in Rishikesh, in northern India, he heard a voice that called out to him, *"Come to me. You come to me. I am here in Ganeshpuri."* Responding immediately, he went to Ganeshpuri to see the legendary Swami Nityananda, with whom he spent only five minutes. Not a word was uttered as they stared into each other's eyes. It was this meeting that enabled Ajja to "come back to earth," and soon after he began to wear clothes again and to converse with others.

Back in his small village, he continued to spend most of his time in complete silence. Seven years ago the famous pundit Bannanje Govindacharya was giving a talk about Vedanta in Ajja's village, exhorting the people to "go within!" Ajja, who was listening, followed his instructions to the letter. It was then that the pundit discovered him because Ajja, upon going into a mystical trance, fell down. When the pundit went to him and asked, "What happened to you?" he replied innocently, "You told me to go inside. I went inside."

Govindacharya recognized Ajja's experience to be in accordance with the Upanishads [the classical scriptures of Vedanta], and as a result of their meeting, which has grown to be a warm friendship, Ajja's reputation as a living master of Advaita or nonduality has begun to spread throughout Karnataka state in southern India.

It was early evening at the conference when Ajja began to speak simply and unpretentiously about the nature of our true identity to a mostly Indian audience. His utter vulnerability was almost painful to behold, and he seemed to be uncomfortable and even slightly suffocated by the role that he had been thrust into, sitting in front of a large number of people. Speaking slowly and deliberately, his words were simple and penetrated deeply to the core of *Being*. He spoke of unimaginable bliss and of transcending the mind *completely*. He described tremendous energy moving in his spine and the great importance of one-pointed desire for *moksha,* or emancipation. Again and again he emphasized the absolute necessity of stilling the mind in order to experience directly that which lay beyond it. As he spoke, his authenticity was made apparent more by how he was than by what he said. This was a man who seemed to have no face, no name and most striking of all, appeared to have *no mind or personality in the ordinary sense.* His discomfort with the spoken word was obvious and he continually repeated that "one cannot speak about these things"—they can only be understood through direct experience. To my surprise, who Ajja was seemed not to be apparent to many

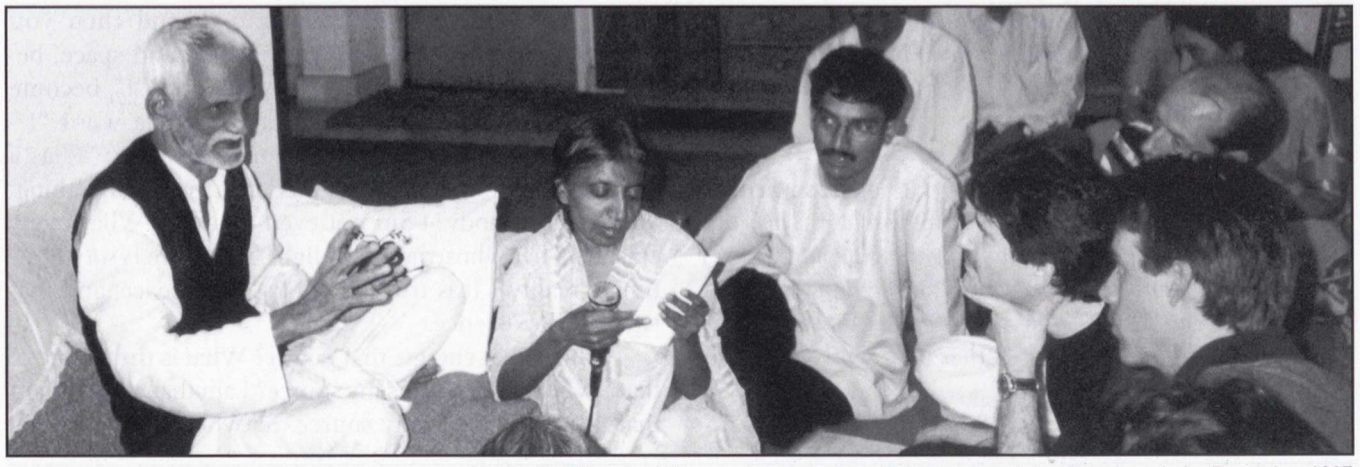
people in the audience, as some aggressively demanded proof from the gentle man that he was genuine. To make matters worse, some of his ardent devotees began to declare aloud in no uncertain terms that their guru was a living example of the highest attainment described in the Upanishads. A circus-like atmosphere was soon created that spread throughout the crowd. In the midst of the chaos, Ajja chose to remain silent.

Later in the evening I went with a few of my students to meet Ajja in his room. When we arrived, he was on the receiving end of piercing questions from the renowned physicist George Sudarshan who, in addition to having been a candidate for a Nobel Prize, has also been intimately associated with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and the great J. Krishnamurti. "Ajja," the physicist asked, "When two people are standing side by side, gazing at the moon high up in the night sky, why is it that one experiences intense curiosity as to why things are the way they are, and the other has no curiosity at all?" Ajja replied in the way that he answers many questions, "You have to have the experience. *Only then* will you be able to understand." The physicist would not accept Ajja's response, claiming that anybody could say that, that Ajja was avoiding the question and that it was simply not an acceptable answer. I found myself going back and forth between two completely different impressions of what was occurring. On one hand, I was impressed with the physicist's courageous unwillingness to accept anything less than a direct answer from an enlightened man. On the other hand, I couldn't help but be equally impressed by Ajja's striking equanimity. Even though Ajja appeared to be unable to respond directly to the question, I was touched simply by the deeply vulnerable nature of his *being*. It seemed ironic to me that while the physicist appeared unable to perceive the greatness of the man who was sitting in front of him, neither could Ajja recognize why his own response to the physicist was so unreasonable.

I visited with Ajja on two more occasions, traveling from the ashram where we were staying, half an hour's drive outside of Bangalore, into the city, where he was staying at the apartment of one of his devotees. Attempting to "interview" Ajja for this issue of *What Is Enlightenment?* proved to be more challenging than we had anticipated. Being a man so deeply and utterly absorbed in the nondual nature of his own self, he finds any question that in any way requires the consideration of a subject/object relationship almost impossible to comprehend.

Upon leaving Bangalore after our first three-hour interview with Ajja, we were amazed and deeply touched, but also slightly confused. There was no question in our minds that we had just been sitting in the company of a profoundly enlightened man whose "state" or "attainment" was undoubtedly extremely rare. And it became very clear after spending only a short period of time in Ajja's intimate presence that he was one who had left this world and everyone in it far behind a long time ago. But there were some strange tales from his devotees: one was that Ajja was in fact the reincarnation of Mahatma Gandhi. We were told when Ramachandra left his body through the top of his head, the great saint, pacifist and revolutionary's soul entered Ramachandra's empty vessel. "Only in India!" I thought to myself. We were also informed that Ajja had the clairvoyant ability to reveal to others who they were in prior births—but when he did it almost always turned out that in their prior birth they had been foot soldiers in Gandhi's revolution. So on our second visit, I forced myself to ask him if what we had heard from some of his devotees was true. Was he the reincarnation of Mahatma Gandhi? To which he replied, "What I experienced was Universal Soul." But this question was never completely resolved, as Ajja still made room for it to be true, even if only in other people's minds. "We cannot see our own face," he added, "that is left to others."

In the end, more than anything else, what I was profoundly moved by was this extraordinary man's *utter emptiness of a personal self*. Indeed, he does seem to be a literal example of one whose mind and body have become a truly empty vessel through which that *One without a second* shines through, untainted by even a trace of individuality.



Ajja, Kunda Channagiri (his translator), Andrew Cohen and students, Bangalore, India, December 1997

AJJA: First, we should introduce ourselves, so there will be mutual understanding and harmony. After that, our conversation can begin. Only then will there be usefulness in this conversation. Otherwise, words are mere words. The other day when we met, you described your experience of awakening, but the others here have not heard it, so could you please describe it again?

ANDREW COHEN: *I was sixteen years old.*

Ajja: Who was sixteen years old?

AC: *The individual, the young man, who was convinced that there was a problem, that there was something wrong.*

Ajja: You can continue.

AC: *Suddenly the doors of perception opened. It seemed like the walls in the room had disappeared and suddenly there was infinite space. And this infinite space was full of energy. And this energy was conscious, it was aware of itself.*

Ajja: And what you are now—is it that awareness itself?

AC: *Yes.*

Ajja: So it's not this body that you refer to as "I." The awareness you experienced at that time, is that the "I" you feel now also?

AC: *Yes. It's the same.*

Ajja: It's not this body?

AC: *There's only one "I."*

Ajja: And what happened after that?

AC: *Then what happened was that I realized that this energy which was aware of itself was intelligent—there was intelligence—and the nature of it was love. Unbearable love. Excruciating love. And it also became apparent that everything that existed in the manifest universe was of the same substance, which was this consciousness. And in that it became apparent that every point in space was exactly the same point as every other. For example, now we're here in this room. We just came from Prashanti. Before that I was in Europe. Before that I was in America. While these all seem to be different places, what I realized in that moment was that every place I could be was the same point, literally and actually. Also, there were tears but I wasn't crying. And my throat was opening and closing.*

Eventually this experience faded. But then, six years later, when I was twenty-two, I began to seek for this experience once again, because even though by that time it felt very far away from me, I knew that it had been the most real experience of my life. I began to do sadhana *[spiritual practice] and had various experiences and was with many different teachers. And then finally when I met my last teacher, I told him about it. Over the years, I had told many people about this experience and they had never known what to say, but when I told him, he said, "Then you experienced everything." And when he said this, it began to come back. Then I experienced this overwhelming love and heat and burning for several weeks. After that happened I began to find myself speaking spontaneously about the Absolute—I couldn't help it; I would start speaking about it and then it would come*

into the room. And my body would fill up with bliss, and other people would feel the bliss and be drawn into the experience.

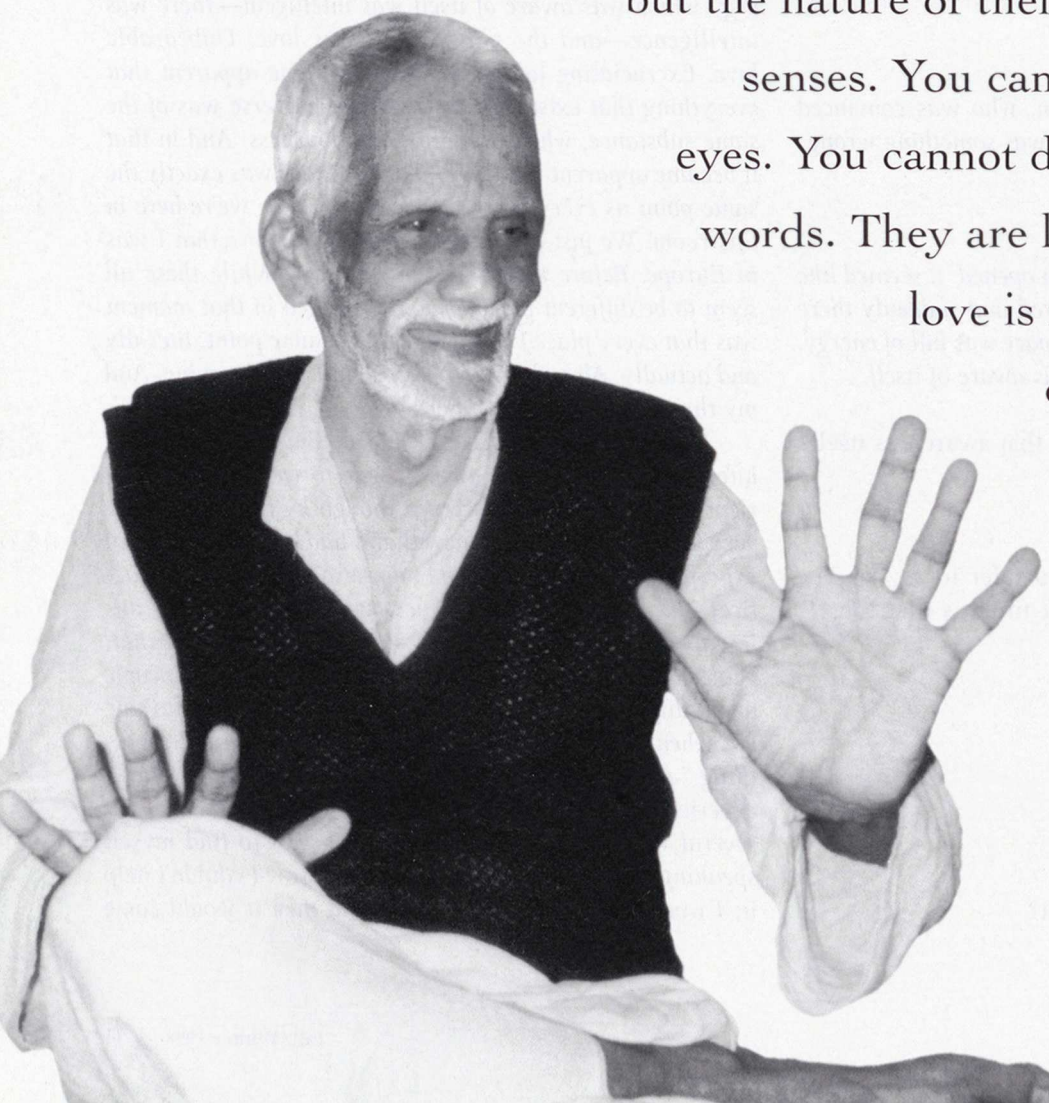
Ajja: What is your state now?

AC: *That's what my experience is now. It happens when I'm teaching, when I'm speaking about the Absolute. Then this experience comes, and when I stop speaking about it, then I go back into a more ordinary state. But the difference now is that I have no doubt—self-preoccupation and doubt are gone—and this love that I met at that time is my whole life.*

Ajja: In the beginning, the "I" was a constricted "I." Later, it started becoming expanded, and then you reached a state where there was no time and space, beyond even emotions. In that, "you" and "I" become one—the supreme Divine. We only *use* the word "I." Whatever there is in this body, for that we say "I" as a simple indication. We say that it is "me," but I am nothing. I am not the body. I am not even a power. What really exists is That whose nature is light, its nature is *satya* [ultimate reality]. It is truth, it is bliss, it is peace, and that is the real existence.

Who is that energy, that power? What is the source of that? Who am I? What is my source? I am that energy. I am that power which is my source. So when I go to search

"Some people are the embodiment of love



but the nature of their love is beyond the senses. You cannot see it with your eyes. You cannot describe it with your words. They are love embodied. This love is not something to be displayed. It is their original nature. It's not something they merely express. It is their nature *always*."

for the source of this "I," I reach that self-illumination. Then this power that is existing in this body, residing in this body, is also arising from that self-illumination itself. And it has all the qualities and nature of That itself. So when I know this, I start evolving. This "I" starts evolving to become That itself. That is its nature. Total expansion is its nature.

So what is that "I" which we were calling "I"? This body is not "I." The one who resides in this body is the real I. That power, that *shakti,* is I. When one goes into that self-illuminated state and recognizes it as his own true nature, he also finds that it has endowed him with the qualities of illumination, expansion, compassion. The individual self has become one with That. Whatever he sees around him, where does it come from? It is evident that it always comes from within; in every instant, it seems to just come springing up from within. To a realized soul, that is how the whole world around us looks.

Everything has come out of that "I." The most important answers, how do they come? It is not as if they were written down somewhere. These answers have just come out. Not from the individual self, but from this state they have come out. So there is no self! It has just spontaneously come out.

So for the individual soul who aspires to be totally free, what is the easiest and most direct path to freedom from the cycle of birth and death? The answer to that question will come when the mind becomes totally silent. So it is not what I say that is important. We have to get those answers ourselves, and that we can do only by silencing our minds. All of us have the capacity to get those answers, because every question has an answer within silence. When the mind has reached a state of stillness, the answer comes. This will not happen in one or two days, but it is certain that we will get the answer in the silence.

AC: *I understand that when the mind is silent there is no problem and therefore no need to find a solution. However, I have some questions I'd like to ask you anyway, for the sake of the many people who will read this.*

Ajja: Whatever question you ask, the answer that comes out of here is: "Silence the mind." You have to first concentrate the mind on itself. If, after that, you still need a perfect answer, my life itself is the answer. By seeing my action, you can understand, you can realize That. That is my message. That is my answer.

AC: *Can I ask you a question anyway? It's a good one.*

Ajja: If I answer something, it should be of some use. The importance is for action. When the message is given, will they bring it into practice?

AC: *That is what I wanted to ask you about: What is the relationship between nonexistence and action in time and space?*

Ajja: One loses his existence *through* knowledge and action. Through these he becomes free. Then he himself is a *jivan mukta* [liberated person]. But when that "I" has gone, what is there? Where is the question then?

AC: *Even though he is free, isn't the* jnani *[Self-realized individual], the* jivan mukta, *still expressing something through his actions?*

Ajja: I don't have the awareness that "I'm a *jnani*" or "I'm a *jivan mukta.*" I don't have anything. When the "I" has gone, the consciousness does not even raise the feeling of "I." That is completely gone. So for a *jnani* that question does not even arise. When there is no question of thinking, then ordinary action in day-to-day life does not take place. Our thoughts are transformed into contemplation. Then our day-to-day routine interactions become spiritual. In that, the regular routine itself becomes spiritual life. That itself is yogic life. That itself is divine life.

AC: *There is a mystery that I'm infatuated with. From nothing, there became something; it's literally the beginning of everything. In the* jivan mukta, *also, he is nothing, he's in nothing. And yet, from nothing comes something: words, actions, etc. This is what I want to know about.*

Ajja: I have already described how day-to-day interactions themselves can be converted into spiritual actions. Having that objective, when an individual soul is engaged in day-to-day actions and duties, he gets transformed. Then as he advances on the path of evolution, through contemplation on the thought "Who am I?"—who is that individual soul?—then, even while residing in this body, he becomes totally free from the cycle of birth and death. He becomes the Self itself, and the Self is total freedom. This is real freedom. This realization is the objective of human birth. It is for this alone that a human birth is taken. When this objective is fulfilled, our life itself is fulfilled. It is a state from which there is no more birth. It is a life free from duality, and beyond death. This is applicable everywhere in the entire world. This is true for the whole of humanity. When the whole of humanity understands this and puts it into action, then where is this question?

AC: *Then there will be no difference between birth and death.*

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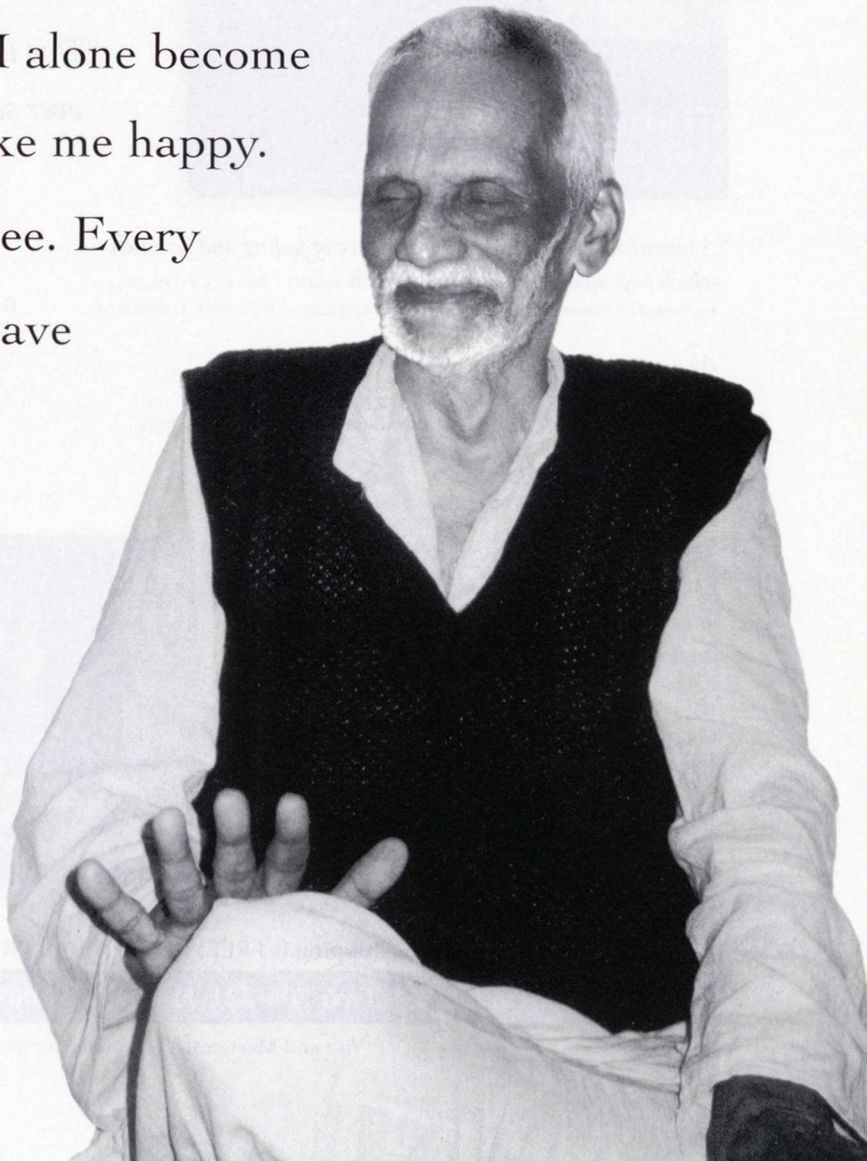
Ajja: Yes. Only when there is birth can there be death. Where is birth in this? We think: "I am this body. All the sense objects that are related to the body are *mine*." With such a constricted feeling, when a person is involved in action, and is experiencing the joys and sorrows that are resulting from such action, again and again he will take birth in this world. So his lives continue according to his actions. This is the secret of birth, life and death. But when the individual self is freed from the bondage of action, and also the bondage of this body, then he becomes one with the supreme Self, which is his original nature. He becomes the supreme Self itself. When the individual, through contemplation of the question "Who am I?" becomes free from karma, he evolves, he becomes the self-luminous Supreme. That itself is Self. That itself is bliss. That itself is *satya*, ultimate reality. That itself is Life. That itself is Self-realization.

So Self-realization is for the good of the whole. It brings auspiciousness and good to the whole universe. That is the objective of human life. When we understand the secret of this, we will really understand the relationship between the individual soul, the supreme Soul and the universe. The individual is a part of the cosmos. This body, this "I," is nothing but a microcosm of that macrocosmic universe. When we understand the micro level, we are bound to understand the macro universe. Anyone who seeks here is bound to reach there, because this individuality is a part of That. And also, it contains everything. All the secrets of That, this also contains. Through the study of the individual—or even the atom—the basis of the whole universe can be understood.

How is this freedom realized? Through action alone

"This message is for the whole of humanity. If I alone become free, it is not enough to make me happy. Everyone should become free. Every soul has to become free. I have had a glimpse of that possibility, and if all were free, that would be true bliss for me."



does realization come. That is *jnana,* that is freedom, that is *moksha* [liberation]. We must understand how, by doing action, we can reach that state. What kind of action will help us to become liberated? Chanting the name of God, contemplation, surrender, truth, nonviolence, detached action. One who, during his lifetime, can translate the knowledge of the Self into action, that one deserves to realize that supreme blissful state. Not only that, he becomes bliss itself. "Who am I? What is the secret of my life, my birth?" Understanding this, realizing this through his search, even when he is engaged in actions and duties, he attains his original nature, which is bliss. So it is through action that he becomes transformed.

AC: *When you speak about* karma yoga, *or detached action, are you referring specifically to spiritual practice? Or to any form of detached action?*

Ajja: Any action which is done as a duty without the expectation of a result. Any action, if you do it without expectation and selfishness, is transformed into duty. This leads you to a state where there are no emotions. One is doing, but he is not doing. There is no feeling that "I am doing something." What happened to that "I"?

This evolution is step by step. It doesn't happen all of a sudden. It has to pass through various stages. However, even the most elementary state of bliss is Bliss itself. The nature of bliss is Bliss itself. Bliss itself is the nature of bliss. Bliss is Bliss itself. Bliss is Bliss. This bliss is eternal reality. This bliss is eternal Truth. That bliss which is eternal reality, that is the eternal bliss. This is the supreme Bliss. This is the *Brahmic* [Absolute] Bliss. And that itself is *Ananda* [spiritual bliss]. There is nothing there—no state. Experience and words cannot reach there. The actual nature of the individual self is this bliss itself. And the easiest and the shortest path is to always dwell in that *sahaja* [natural] state that is our original nature.

The question may arise, "Where is that Bliss?" That Bliss is here and now, ever present. When this *jivatma* [individual self] is dropped, that Bliss is there, already existing. The individual soul has the bondage of action, but the Supreme doesn't have that. There is not even birth for the Self. So let us go beyond this dualistic world of action, let us evolve, and reach the *paramatma* [supreme Self].

For all this, meditation is the starting point. In the beginning you should sit. You should have that internal preparation. One has to discipline oneself. But it is not enough only to sit. It is not merely that the body must sit; your mind must sit also. The mind should not be wandering. Unless the mind is controlled, there is no meditation. The wandering of the mind itself is the world.

AC: *Yes. The mind is the world.*

Ajja: So in the beginning, the mind should become still. The mind is wandering and that must stop. Through meditation, the mind turns inward. And this should happen not only in meditation, but also in the midst of action.

Nothing that we take to be real in this world actually is. When this world becomes unreal to you, then the true reality reveals itself. That is the beginning. In that, we realize that there is no death, there is no life, there is only existence. At one point or another, we all have to die. But I do not mean the death of this body. There is another kind of death—a death from which there is no rebirth. When the one who keeps coming back for reincarnation, when that one dies, that is the real death—as in my case, where all experiences have passed. Now, here in this state, there is nothing.

AC: *When you say there is nothing here, do you mean that you have no experience right now? You seem to be expressing a great deal.*

Ajja: Whose experience? Words are coming, it is true. Through this vehicle, some unknown force is acting, some power is working, using this body as an instrument. It is not this body that is speaking. There is a power that is inspiring this body, intellect and mind. In each one of us the same thing is happening, but often we say, "I am speaking." Here that is not happening. Words are just coming out. That is the difference. I don't say, "I say, I speak."

AC: *In my own experience, the relationship between this state of bliss, in which there is no "I," and perfect action in the world of time and space seems to be very mysterious. So I would still like to know more about how you define that relationship for the one who is actually established in that bliss consciousness in which there is no notion of "I." How do that individual's actions in this world express the perfection of that condition? What is the relationship between that state and the expression of perfect action in this world of appearances?*

Ajja: My level of interaction is totally different. There is no relationship between these two in my actions. What is your understanding about perfect action in the world?

AC: *Perfect action means action that comes from pure love, in which there is no sense of individuality and no self-interest whatsoever. There's no pride, there's no greed, there's no egotism, there's no self-consciousness. And it is also the expression of pure love that has no sense of itself as being*

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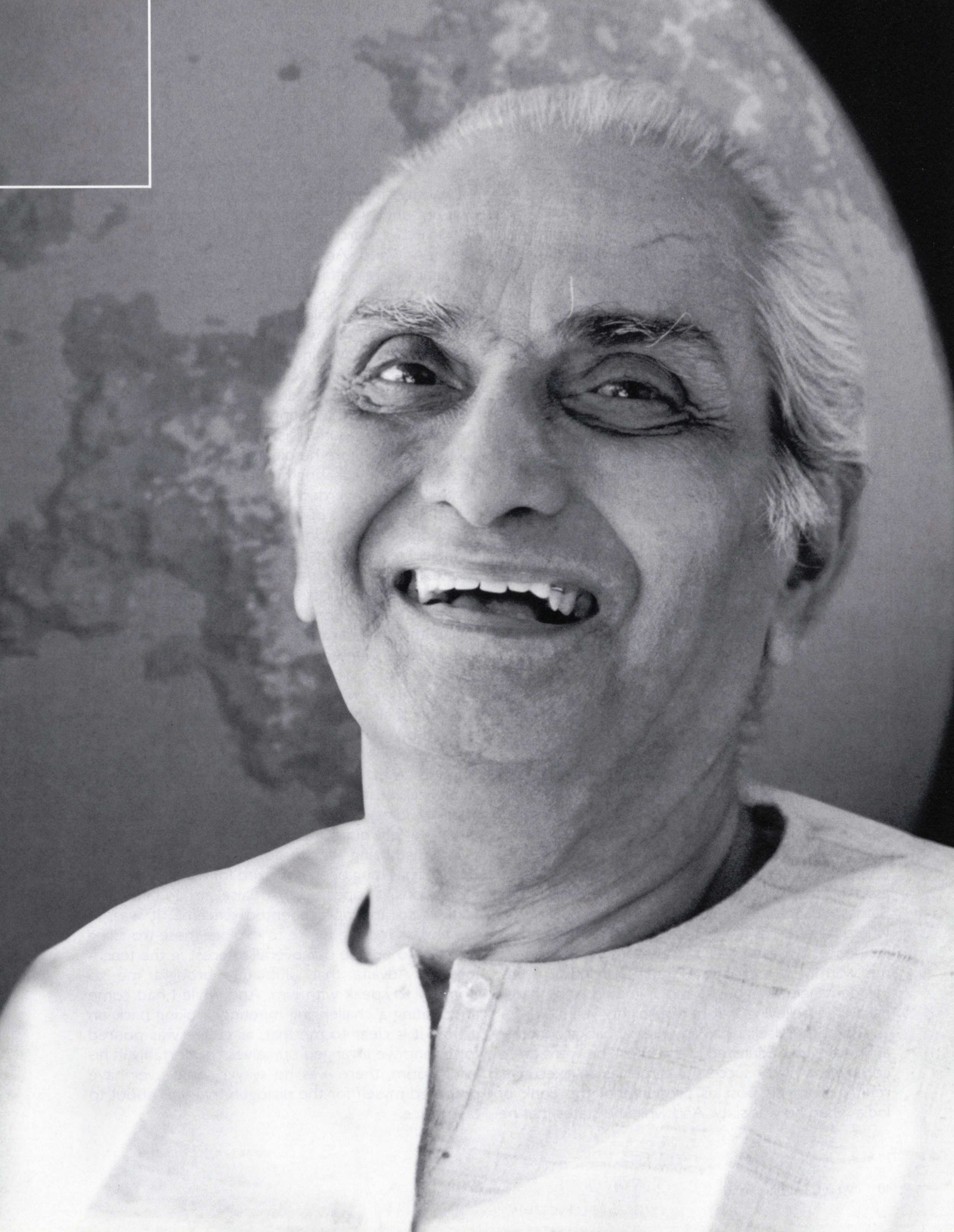
CLOSE ENCOUNTERS of the ADVAITA KIND:

THE EUPHORIC NIHILISM OF RAMESH BALSEKAR

Imagine if you will, that you awaken one morning in another world. As you rub your eyes to get accustomed to the bright sunshine, you see that it is in many respects a world not unlike this one. All around you there are creatures that, to your eyes, look identical to the human beings with whom you are used to sharing the world. You observe them going about their daily activities, living their lives, engaging in conversation with others, making the myriad choices and decisions that life inherently demands. The picture looks reassuringly familiar and normal.

Interview by Chris Parish



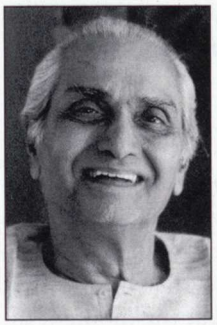
But in this world, you soon discover that things are not necessarily as they seem. For these are not *human beings. No, these are* "body/mind organisms" *which, unlike their human counterparts, do not have the ability to choose between options or to make decisions. In fact, these organisms do not have anything even resembling what we would call free will. The scripts of their entire lives were written in stone long before they were born, leaving them only to go mechanically through the motions of acting out their programming. These seemingly human creatures, it would appear, are not unlike machines. While to all appearances they seem to behave like ordinary freethinking individuals, busily engaged in daily activities, strangely, when asked, they maintain that they are not doing anything at all. In fact, in this peculiar world, they say that there are "no doers." Furthermore, no one in this world is ever held accountable for anything. Even when one of these beings appears to harm another, there is no remorse felt and no blame attributed. If you were to ask one of these body/mind organisms about it, the response would be that there was no one who had done anything. Ethics is an unknown concept here. The laws of nature do not seem to apply in this brave new world. Or maybe they have been rewritten here, since the beings do seem to observe some strange laws. You wonder where on Earth you could be. But you are not on Earth. You have landed on Planet Advaita.*

I had come to Bombay to interview Ramesh Balsekar, one of the best known teachers of Advaita Vedanta alive today. He lives in the heart of this vast, chaotic city in an exclusive beachfront area, which my taxi driver informed me is home to many VIPs. The doorman at his apartment building, automatically assuming that as a Westerner I must be coming to see Ramesh Balsekar, directed me to an upper floor, where Balsekar has a very spacious and well-appointed residence. Balsekar was a courteous host, greeting me warmly in immaculate traditional Indian attire. His demeanor was bright and animated, and I had a hard time believing that he was eighty years old.

Ramesh Balsekar has an unusual background for an Indian guru. Educated in the West, he went on to complete a highly successful career as an executive, retiring from his post as president of the Bank of India when he was sixty. And while he states that he had always been inclined toward a belief in fate, it was not until after he retired that he began his spiritual search, a search that led him quickly to his guru—the renowned Advaita master Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj. Nisargadatta was a fiery teacher who became famous in the West in the 1970s when an English translation of his dialogues entitled *I Am That* was published—a book which has become a modern spiritual classic. Within less than a year of meeting Nisargadatta, Balsekar came suddenly to what he has termed "the final understanding"—enlightenment—while he was translating for his guru. According to Balsekar's account, Nisargadatta authorized him to teach just before he died, and since then he has been constantly sharing his message as a successor to this highly regarded teacher. Balsekar has published many books of his teachings and has taught in Europe and the United States as well as widely in India. He holds *satsang* [audience with a spiritual master] in his apartment every morning, and a constant stream of almost exclusively Western seekers find their way to Bombay to see him.

With our focus on Advaita in this issue of *WIE*, we initially wanted to interview Balsekar both because he is a popular and influential Advaita teacher—now with students he has authorized to teach in their own right—and because he is considered by many to be the successor to one of the most renowned teachers of Advaita in the modern era. However, on studying Balsekar's writings, we soon realized that he was teaching an unusual and possibly idiosyncratic form of Advaita that led to what we felt, quite frankly, were questionable and even disturbing conclusions. For while Indian thought has long been criticized for its deterministic inclinations, it appeared that Balsekar had taken this fatalism to an unprecedented extreme. It was, in the end, as much a desire to explore these troubling areas as to pursue our overall interest in the teachings of Advaita that ultimately brought me to Bombay to speak with him. And while I had come anticipating a challenging meeting, looking back on it now it is clear to me that, as coffee was poured for us and we arranged ourselves comfortably in his living room, there was no way I could ever have prepared myself for the dialogue that was about to take place.

WIE: *You are becoming increasingly well known as a teacher of Advaita Vedanta both in India and in the West. Could you describe for us what it is that you teach?*



RAMESH BALSEKAR: I can put that in one sentence, really. The one sentence on which my entire teaching is based is: "Thy will be done." Or as the Muslims say, *Inshallah*—"God willing." Or to put it in Buddha's words: "Events happen, deeds are done, there is no individual doer thereof." You see, the basic conflict in life is: "I always do everything right so I want my reward, he or she always does something wrong and should be punished." That's what life is all about, isn't it?

WIE: *Well, it certainly happens a lot.*

RB: That is the basis of what I have observed. The whole problem arises because someone says, "*I* did something and *I* deserve a reward, or *he* did something and therefore I want to punish *him* for what he did."

WIE: *How do you get people to realize this?*

RB: That's very simple. If you analyze any action which you consider to be *your* action, you will find that it is the reaction of the brain to an outside event over which you have no control. A thought comes—you have no control over what thought is going to come. Something is seen or heard—you have no control over what you are going to see or hear next. All of these events happen over which you have no control. And then what happens? The brain reacts to the thought or to the thing that is seen, heard, tasted, smelled or touched. The reaction of the brain is what you call "your action." But, in fact, this is merely a concept.

WIE: *What is the difference then, between the thoughts, feelings and actions of an enlightened person and those of a person who is not enlightened?*

RB: The same thing happens. The only difference is that in the case of the sage, he understands that this is what is happening. So therefore, he knows that there is nothing *he* does—*everything just happens*. The sage knows that "I am not doing anything." But the ordinary man says, "I do things and he or she does things. Therefore I want my reward and I want him or her to be punished." The reward or punishment depends on the idea that he or she or I *do* things.

WIE: *I can understand from my own experience that we don't have any control over which thoughts or feelings arise. But sometimes action takes place and sometimes it doesn't, and it seems to me that there is a big difference between when a thought merely arises and when an action takes place that affects another person.*

RB: The action happening is the result of the brain reacting to the thought. If it so happens that the thought is merely witnessed and the brain does not react to that thought, then there is no action.

WIE: *But if, as you say, there is no person who decides how to respond, then what is it that causes an action to take place or not?*

RB: An action happens if it is God's will for that action to happen. If it is not God's will, the action does not happen.

WIE: *Are you saying that* every *action that takes place is God's will?*

RB: Yes, is God's will.

WIE: *Acting through a person?*

RB: Through a person, yes.

WIE: *Whether they're enlightened or not? Through* everyone, *in other words?*

RB: That's right. The only difference, as I said, is that the ordinary man thinks, "It's *my* action," whereas the sage knows it is *nobody's* action. The sage knows that "Deeds are done, events happen, but there is no individual doer." That is the *only* difference as far as I'm concerned, as far as my concept goes. The only difference between a sage and an ordinary person is that the ordinary person thinks each individual *does* what happens through that body/mind organism. So since the sage knows that there is no action which *he* does, if an action happens to hurt someone, then he will do all

he can to help that person—but there will be no feelings of guilt.

WIE: *Do you mean to say that if an individual acts in a way that ends up hurting another, then the person who did it, or, as you say, the "body/mind organism" who did it, is not responsible?*

RB: What I'm saying here is that you know that "I" didn't do it. I'm not saying I'm not sorry that it hurt someone. The fact that someone was hurt will bring about a feeling of compassion and the feeling of compassion will result in my trying to do whatever I can to assuage the hurt. But there will be no feeling of guilt: *I didn't do it!* The other side of this is that an action happens which the society lauds and gives me a reward for. I'm not saying that happiness will not arise because of the reward. Just as compassion arose because of the hurt, a feeling of satisfaction or happiness may arise because of a reward. But there'll be no pride.

WIE: *But do you literally mean that if I go and hit someone, it's not* me *doing it? I just want to get clear about this.*

RB: The original fact, the original concept still remains: you hit somebody. The additional concept arises that whatever happens is God's will, and God's will with respect to each body/mind organism is the *destiny* of that body/mind organism.

WIE: *So I could just say, "Well, it was God's will that I did that; it's not my fault."*

RB: Sure. An act happens because it is the destiny of this body/mind organism, and because it is God's will. And the *consequences* of that action are *also* the destiny of that body/mind organism. If a good deed happens, that is the destiny. For example, we had a Mother Teresa. The body/mind organism known as "Mother Teresa" was so programmed that only good deeds happened. So the happening of the good deeds was the destiny of the body/mind organism called Mother Teresa. And the consequences were: a Nobel Prize, rewards, awards and donations to the causes. All those were the destiny of that body/mind organism called Mother Teresa. On the other hand there's a psychopathic organism which is so programmed—by the same source—that only evil or perverted deeds happen. The happening of those evil, perverted deeds is the destiny of a body/mind organism which the society calls a psychopath. But the psychopath didn't *choose* to be a psychopath. In fact *there is no psychopath;* there is only a psychopathic body/mind organism, the destiny of which is to produce evil, perverted acts. And the consequences of those actions are *also* the destiny of that body/mind organism.

WIE: *Are you saying that everything is predestined? That everything is preprogrammed from birth?*

RB: Yes. I use the word "programming" to refer to the inherent characteristics of the body/mind organism. "Programming" to me means genes plus environmental conditioning. You had no choice which particular parents you were born to, therefore you had no choice about your genes. By the same token you had no choice in being born in a particular environment. Therefore you had no choice about the childhood conditioning you received in that environment, which includes the conditioning at home, in society, school and church. The psychologists say that the total conditioning which you received up to the age of three or four is your basic conditioning. There'll be further conditioning, but the basic conditioning that creates the personality is genes plus environmental conditioning. I call that programming. Each body/mind organism is programmed in a unique way. There are no two body/mind organisms alike.

WIE: *Yes, but isn't it true that two people could have very similar sets of conditioning, and yet one might turn out a completely different way than the other?*

RB: Right. That's why I use two terms: one is the *programming* in the body/mind organism itself, the other is the *destiny*. The destiny is God's will with respect to that body/mind organism, stamped at the moment of conception. The destiny of one conception may be not to be born at all—in which case it will be aborted. This is all a concept, make no mistake. This is my concept.

WIE: *You say that this is a concept and, of course, all words are concepts, but how do we know that this concept is the truth? I tend to think that everyone has individual responsibility and that although there is a certain amount of conditioning that we inherit, we can still* choose *how we respond. One individual can transcend aspects of their conditioning that another might be stuck in all their life. Since this does occur, I would say that it is due to the individual* wanting *to transcend their conditioning, and succeeding.*

RB: But if that happens, can it happen unless it is God's will? Say there are two people: one tries to overcome his handicap and does it, the other doesn't. What I say is that the one who succeeds and the one who fails each do so because that is the destiny of each body/mind organism—which is God's will.

WIE: *But couldn't we just as easily*

say that it's God's will to give each individual free choice to make their own decisions?

RB: No. You see, my question to you is: Whose will prevails? The individual's or God's? From your own experience, to what extent has your own free will prevailed?

WIE: *Well, I feel that the individual will can definitely prevail at times.*

RB: Over God's will? When you want something and you work for it and it happens, it happens because your will *coincided* with God's will.

WIE: *Let's take the example of an individual who becomes a drug addict and remains one all their life. One could just as easily argue that they've* chosen *to go against God's will and have succeeded—precisely because there* is *free will.*

RB: But whether you accept this or not is *itself* God's will, don't you see? That you accept God's will or you do not accept God's will is *itself* God's will!

WIE: *I would say—not necessarily.*

RB: I know you're playing the devil's advocate.

WIE: *Well, no, I'm trying to get to what's true.*

RB: But what is truth? I have already said that *whatever* I say is a concept.

WIE: *Yes, I understand, but not all concepts are the same. Some point to something that is true and others may not be true at all.*

RB: All concepts are trying to point to something, but they're *all* still concepts. The real question would be, "What is the truth that is *not* a concept?"

WIE: *My point is that saying that everything is preprogrammed, that it's all destiny and that there's no choice seems like a very extreme form of reductionism. According to this view, human beings are like computers; everything about us is completely set.*

RB: That's precisely it, yes.

WIE: *But that seems to me to be a view that lacks a human heart. Then we're just like machines—everything's happening to us. There's nothing we can do, nothing we can change.*

RB: Yes, exactly!

WIE: *But that could easily lead to a profound indifference to life.*

RB: Yes, and if it did, then it would be wonderful!

WIE: *Really? Would it?*

RB: But that is the point! Sure. Then you can say that whatever is happening is *accepted.* Then there is no unhappiness, there is no misery, no guilt, no pride, no hate, no envy. What is wrong with that?

WIE: *But is there any* heart *left?*

RB: By "heart," do you mean being miserable, feeling guilty?

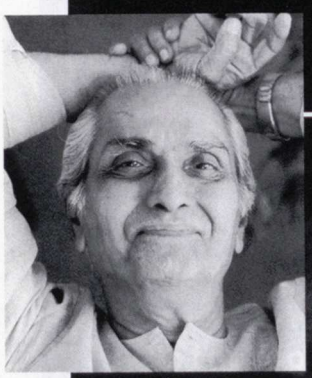
WIE: *No, no. I don't mean that.*

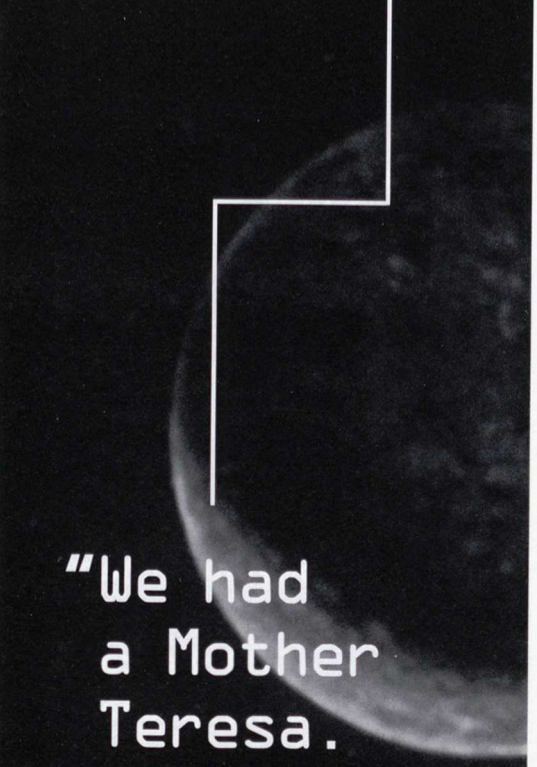
RB: What do you mean by heart?

WIE: *I mean something in us that cares about Life in the big sense.*

RB: As I already told you, an act happens through this body/mind organism, and if this individual finds that that act has hurt somebody, compassion arises. How can compassion arise if there is no heart?

"Since the sage knows that there is no action which *he* does, if an action happens to hurt someone, then he will do all he can to help that person—but there will be no feelings of guilt."





"We had a Mother Teresa.

The body/mind organism known as 'Mother Teresa' was so programmed that only good deeds happened. On the other hand there's a psychopathic organism so programmed—by the same source—that only evil or perverted deeds happen. But the psychopath didn't *choose* to be a psychopath. In fact there *is* no psychopath; there is only a psychopathic body/mind organism, the destiny of which is to produce evil, perverted acts."

WIE: *But doesn't it seem a bit strange to go ahead and hurt someone and then feel compassion for them afterwards? Wouldn't it be better not to hurt them in the first place?*

RB: But you have no control over it! If you had control over it, you would never have done it in the first place.

WIE: *On the other hand, though, if one believed that one* does *have control over it as opposed to believing that one doesn't, one might* not *have done it in the first place!*

RB: Then why does the human being not exercise control over every action that is happening? Let me ask you a question: The human being obviously has tremendous intellect, so much intellect that a petty human being has been able to send a man to the moon.

WIE: *Yes, that's true.*

RB: And he also has the intellect to know that if he does certain things, terrible things will happen. He has the intellect to know that if he produces nuclear armaments or chemical weapons, then people are going to use them and terrible things are going to happen to the world. He *has* the intellect—so if he has free will, then why does he do it? Why has he reduced the world to the condition it is in, if he has free will?

WIE: *I admit, the situation you're describing is obviously insane. But I would say that it's due to the fact that people are weak-willed. And I believe that people can change if they want to—if they care.*

RB: Then why have they not done it?

WIE: *Some people* do *change, but, as I said, unfortunately it does seem that most people are very weak-willed.*

RB: Which means they *have no free will!*

WIE: *Having free will alone doesn't insure that we will act intelligently. As in the example you just gave, it's clear that people often choose to do things that are pretty harmful.*

RB: Do you mean we have the free will to destroy the world? If you are saying that we have the free will to destroy the world, in other words, it means that we are destroying the world because we *want* to do it—knowing full well that the world is going to be destroyed! Free will means that you *want* to do it.

WIE: *I think the problem is more that people usually don't take the consequences of their actions into account. They often just think about themselves, without considering where their actions might lead.*

RB: But the human being is tremendously intelligent. Why *don't* they think in those ways? My answer is—because they're not supposed to!

WIE: *When you say "not supposed to," what does that mean?*

RB: It is not God's will that human beings think in those terms. It is not God's will that the human being be perfect. The difference between the sage and the ordinary person is that the sage accepts *what is* as God's will, but—and this is important—that does not prevent him from *doing what he thinks should be done.* And, what he thinks he should do is based on the programming.

WIE: *But why would the sage "do whatever he* thinks *he should do" if, as you've already explained, he knows that it is not* he *who is thinking in the first place?*

RB: You mean, how does the action happen? The answer is that the energy inside this body/mind organism produces the action according to the programming.

WIE: *So the action, as you're describing it, just comes* through *the person.*

RB: Flows, yes. Action happens. So that is the whole point of what I'm saying—to go back again to Buddha's words—"Events happen, deeds are done."

WIE: *From what I know of the Buddha though, he also felt strongly that the individual was personally responsible for their actions. Isn't that the basis of his whole teaching on karma, on cause and effect?*

RB: Not Buddha!

WIE: *It's my impression that the Buddha taught quite a bit about "right action." He seemed* very *concerned with what people did and put a lot of emphasis on people making appropriate effort to change themselves.*

RB:. That is a subsequent interpretation of Buddhism. Buddha's words are very clear. Who is in control of what is happening? God is in control! That is the basis of *every* religion, as we've seen. And yet why are there religious wars if that is the basis of every religion? It is the interpreters who are causing these wars! And how could even this happen unless it is God's will?

WIE: *It's clear that you believe that everything we do is because it is God's will that we do it. But it seems to me that this only really makes sense in the case of the individual who has come to the end of the spiritual path—who has come to the end of ego—because that person's actions aren't self-serving, and because of that, there wouldn't be any* distortion *of God's will. But until that point, if an individual acts nastily towards another it may well be just a compulsive response because they're feeling selfish. If that was the case, then what you're saying could actually be used as a justification for unpleasant or aggressive behavior. They could just say, "It's all God's will. It doesn't matter!"*

RB: I know, but that is the *truth.* Your real question is, "Why did God create the world as it is?" But you see, a human being is only a *created object* that is part of the totality of manifestation that has come from the Source. So my answer is: A created object cannot ever possibly know its creator! Let me give you a metaphor. Let's imagine that you paint a picture, and in that picture you paint a figure. Then that figure wants to know number one, why

you, as a painter, painted that particular picture, and number two, why you made the figure so ugly! You see, how can a created object ever possibly know the will of its own creator? My point, though, is that this doesn't prevent you *from doing what you think you should do!* Accepting that nothing happens unless it is the will of God does not prevent any person from doing what he thinks he should do. What else *can* you do?

WIE: *But based on this line of reasoning, as I said before, I would think it would be quite easy to conclude, "Well, it's all the will of God, it doesn't matter what happens," and then just give up.*

RB: You mean, "So why should I not remain in bed all day?"

WIE: *Yes, why make any effort at all?*

RB: The answer to that question is that the energy inside this body/mind organism will not allow this body/mind organism to remain idle for any length of time. The energy will continue to produce some action, physical or mental, every split-second, according to the programming in the body/mind organism *and* the destiny of the body/mind organism, *which is the will of God.* But that doesn't prevent you, who still think that you're an individual, from doing what you think you should do. So what I'm saying in fact is, what you think you should do in any situation at any particular moment is precisely what God *wants* you to think you should do! The bottom line is that accepting God's will does not prevent you from doing what you think you should do. You see? In fact, *you cannot help doing it!*

WIE: *It sounds as though, according to your way of seeing the world, all of what we consider to be choice, volition and responsibility has been shifted from the individual onto God or consciousness. Is that what you are saying?*

RB: It has not been *shifted.* When you think you are doing it, what happens? Guilt, pride, hate and envy. But that still doesn't prevent whatever is happening from continuing to happen. But when you think *you are not doing it,* then—no guilt, no pride, no hate, no envy! Life becomes more peaceful.

WIE: *I read something in a pamphlet written by several of your students which seems relevant to this point. It says: "What you like can only be what God wants you to like. Nothing can happen unless it is His will."*

RB: Yes, that's right.

WIE: *The pamphlet also says: "Don't feel guilty even if adultery happens. You, the Source, are always pure."*

RB: That is what Ramana Maharshi said.

WIE: *My point is that the Source may always be pure, but again, it seems to me that this could easily be taken as a license to act without conscience. You could say, "It doesn't matter if I commit adultery, it doesn't matter if I hurt my friends because that action* just happened." *It could easily be taken as a license to act out on a desire, just because I happen to have that desire.*

RB: But isn't that what is happening?

WIE: *It does happen, certainly, but . . .*

RB: Do you mean that it will happen *more?*

WIE: *It could* easily *happen more. I*

could say, "Well, it doesn't matter what I do now. I shouldn't bother to restrain myself if I feel a desire." Do you see what I mean?

RB: The question usually asked is this: "If *I* am not really doing anything, what is to prevent me from taking a machine gun and going out and killing twenty people?" That is what you are asking, isn't it?

WIE: *Well, that's an extreme example.*

RB: Yes, take an extreme example!

WIE: *But I think it's more interesting to consider the adultery example, because many people wouldn't really do something as extreme as machine gunning other people.*

RB: All right. It's the same thing when we're talking of committing adultery. I read that the psychologists and biologists have, based on their research, come to the conclusion that if you're cheating on your wife, you shouldn't blame yourself.

WIE: *Well, I don't think that is the whole opinion of science.*

RB: What I'm saying is that, more and more, the scientist is coming to the conclusion that the mystic has always held—that whatever actions happen can be traced to the programming.

WIE: *I can see that in some cases this might be true, but let's say, for example, that I have the urge to commit adultery. I could say, "It must be God's will that I do it, so I'll go ahead"—or, I could restrain myself and not cause a lot of suffering for my friends. Wouldn't it be better if I restrained myself?*

RB: So who is preventing you from restraining yourself? Do whatever you like! What is preventing you

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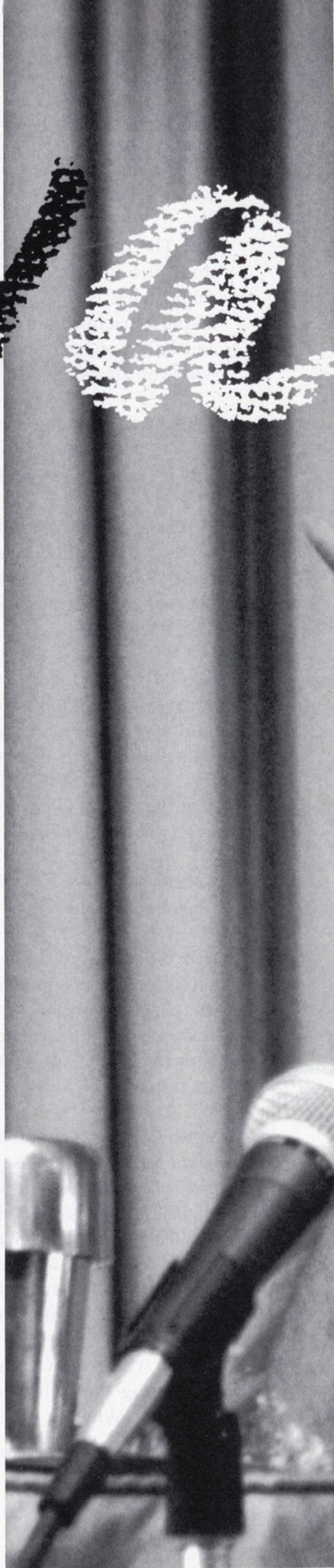
Advaita

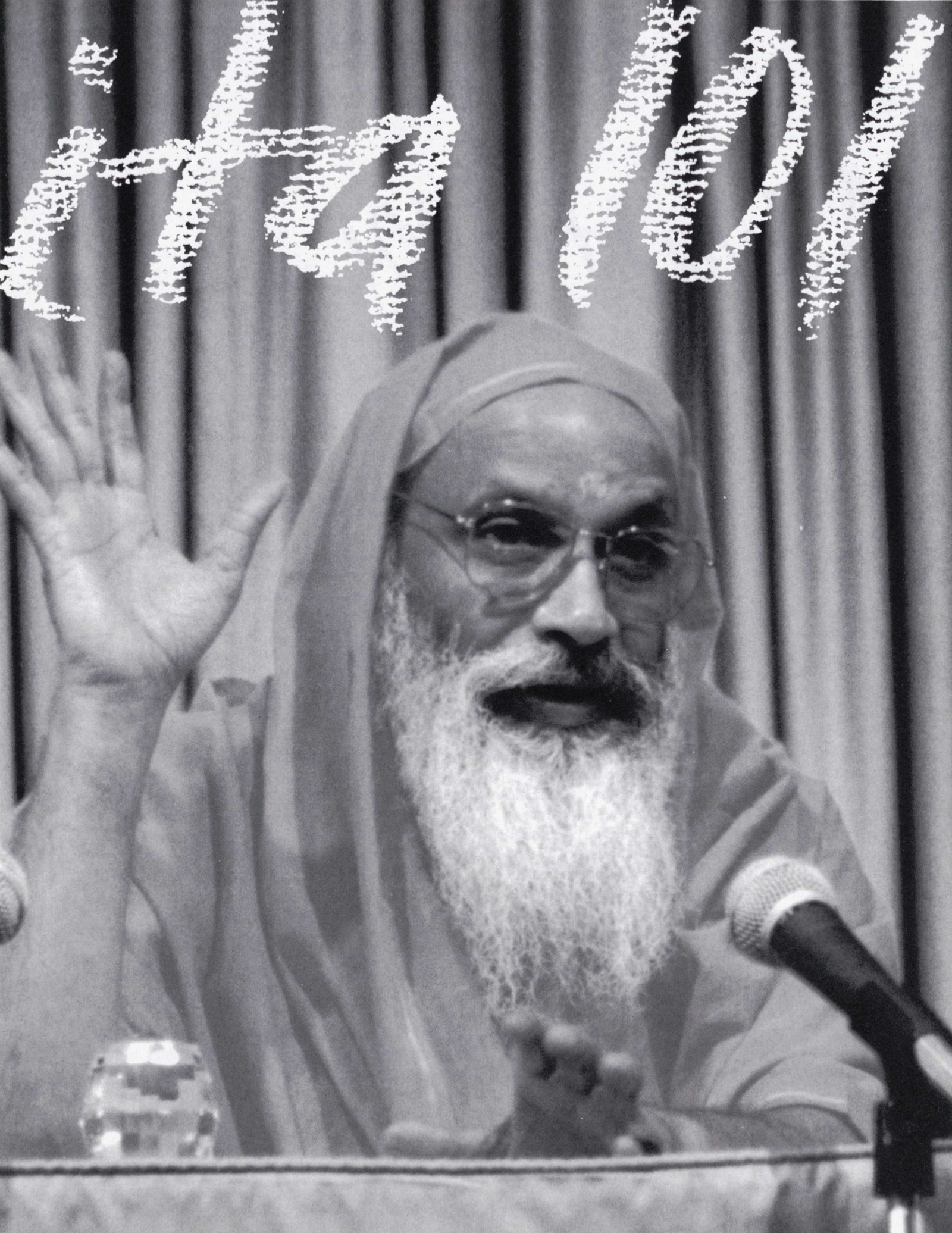
An interview with

Swami Dayananda Saraswati

by Andrew Cohen



It is a unique characteristic of Advaita Vedanta that most of its prominent modern figures, those who stand out as radiant examples of the power and glory of Absolute realization, generally seem to have had little, if any, formal traditional training. Ramana Maharshi, for instance, probably the most universally recognized teacher of Advaita in the twentieth century, was spontaneously enlightened at the age of sixteen with no prior spiritual practice or study. The fiery Advaita master and author of *I Am That*, Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, realized the Absolute after only three years with his guru. And in speaking with a number of contemporary Advaita teachers for this issue, we were intrigued to find that one thing almost all of these individuals have in common is a striking independence from the monastic orders, teaching systems and sacred texts of the very tradition from which their teachings spring.



Advaita 101

But Advaita Vedanta is, in fact, a 1,300-year-old tradition that traces its roots even further back to the Upanishads, a collection of divinely inspired scriptures over 2,500 years old. Embodying the Hindu philosophy of nonduality, which holds that only the one Absolute, undivided Self is ultimately real, Advaita has several monastic orders, a rich body of literature and a long history of formal philosophical discourse. Given that our own exploration of Advaita for this issue of *WIE* had exposed us to such a diverse array of contemporary teachers and teachings, we had grown increasingly curious about what someone classically trained in the traditional methods and doctrine would have to say in response to our questions. It was our quest for such a traditionalist that ultimately landed us in the jungle of the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, at the ashram of Swami Dayananda Saraswati.

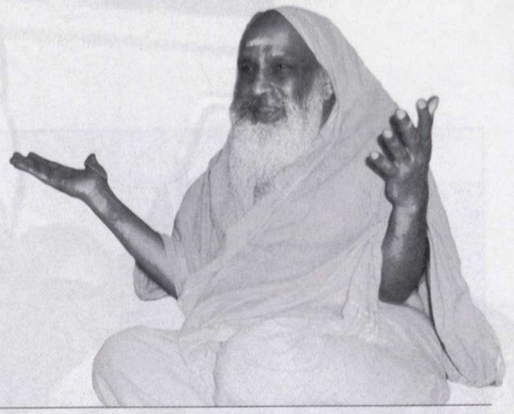
Swami Dayananda is, by his own description, a traditional teacher of Advaita Vedanta. A close disciple of the widely respected late Vedanta teacher Swami Chinmayananda, he began teaching over thirty years ago after a disciplined spiritual search that included both intensive study of the classical scriptures and several years on retreat in the Himalayan foothills. In that time, he has gained an illustrious reputation both in India and abroad as a fierce upholder of the tradition. He has published twenty-one books, including several translations of and commentaries on the traditional texts, and has established three ashrams (two in India and one in the United States) where his intensive courses in Vedanta are taught year-round.

Surrounded by rainforest about thirty miles outside Coimbatore, Swami Dayananda's newest ashram, *Arsha Vidya Gurukulam,* is a sprawling complex of halls and dormitories capable of accommodating approximately three hundred people. At the time of our visit there were about one hundred students in residence for a three-year course, including thirty or so Westerners, many of whom, we learned, had left behind successful careers in order to attend. In addition to hosting these longer, residential courses, the ashram also receives many distinguished short-term visitors including, we were told, some of India's biggest movie stars and political leaders, the former President of India among them.

During our first day there we had an opportunity to sit in on some of Swami Dayananda's classes, and when we did, it became apparent to us that, in his desire to perpetuate the tradition, what Swami Dayananda has established is not the contemplative retreat environment one might expect to find at the ashram of an Indian guru, but rather a sort of spiritual academy, its goal being first and foremost the acquisition of knowledge about Vedanta. Students' days are spent in the classroom, seated on the floor behind short wooden desks, listening to Swami Dayananda read from the ancient Sanskrit texts, pausing after each verse to give often elaborate commentary. When students are not in class or engaged in their ashram duties, they are either studying independently or meeting with Swami Dayananda, who in addition to teaching three long classes each day makes himself available between classes for less formal discussions.

What we found most intriguing about Swami Dayananda's intensely scholastic approach was its unusual lack of emphasis on spiritual practice. The only formal practice period at the ashram is thirty minutes of meditation in the morning. We would soon learn that spiritual practices have no significant place in the program for one simple reason: to Swami Dayananda, they are essentially irrelevant to the path. The one thing that *is* relevant, he feels, is study—sincere study of the sacred texts of Vedanta.

According to Swami Dayananda, most contemporary exponents of Advaita Vedanta are seriously misguided in their approach. He feels that in overemphasizing the pursuit of transcendent experience, they have missed the entire point of the ancient teachings. In traditional Advaita Vedanta, he asserts, it is held that *sacred scripture itself is the only reliable means to clear away ignorance and reveal direct knowledge of the Absolute.* He



INTRODUCTION by Craig Hamilton

writes: "Just as the eyes are the direct means to know color and form, Vedanta is the direct means . . . to know one's true nature and resolve confusions regarding Atma [the Self]." It is therefore only by applying ourselves to a disciplined study of the revealed words of the great sages, he feels, that we can attain the knowledge that will liberate us from delusion.

Fueled by his conviction in the supreme efficacy of scriptural study, Swami Dayananda is unabashed in his criticism of "mystics" who say that the way to enlightenment is through spiritual experience alone. In fact, both in his writings and in one of our dialogues with him, he even went so far as to express doubt about the realization of the widely revered but *unschooled* modern sage Ramana Maharshi—adding that there may be millions of Indian householders with a similar level of attainment!

While such statements initially took us by surprise, we would later discover through dialogues with a number of leading Western Advaita scholars that similar sentiments are held by many Advaita traditionalists. Even one of the living Shankaracharyas—the head of one of the four monastic institutions allegedly established by Advaita's founder, Shankara—also denies the validity of Ramana's attainment, apparently for the simple reason that someone who wasn't formally trained in Vedanta couldn't *possibly* be fully enlightened!

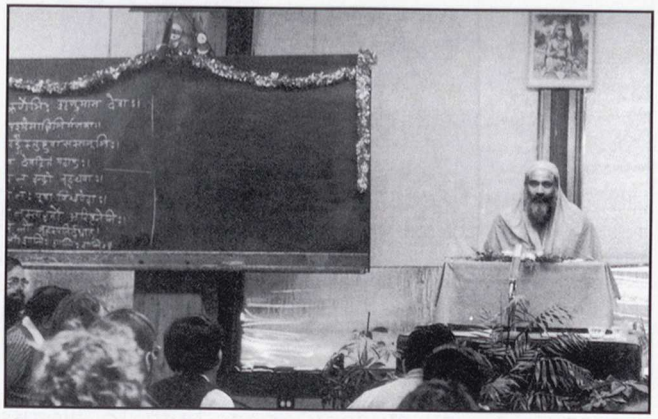
Our visit to Swami Dayananda's ashram turned out to be a fascinating education. Over the course of our three-day stay, we met formally with Swami Dayananda four times for what turned out to be a wide-ranging series of dialogues. During that time, what had begun as an ashram curiosity—a small group of Westerners with an American spiritual teacher who had come to interview their guru—rapidly escalated into one of the most talked about and well-attended events at the ashram. From our second session onward, the meeting room was overflowing out the door as disciples crowded in to listen to the discussion. And between meetings, we regularly found ourselves in conversation with students eager both to discuss points that had arisen in the interview and to suggest questions for the next round.

Throughout the sessions, Swami Dayananda revealed himself to be every bit the traditionalist we had expected, sharing in his answers to our questions his comprehensive understanding of both the tradition itself and the subtleties of Advaita philosophy. Yet while we left his ashram in many respects much clearer about the history and doctrines of the Advaita tradition, our visit had also raised some fascinating questions. Wasn't it intriguing, we found ourselves asking as our taxi made its way back to the airport, that within a tradition dedicated to the profound and radical realization of the Absolute, there are learned and devoted authorities who feel compelled to distance themselves from the powerfully realized mystics to whom many of that tradition's own followers look for inspiration? If, in so doing, they are upholding the "purity" of the tradition, what does that mean about the nature of enlightenment, to which the Advaita path is intended to lead?

Ramana Maharshi said, "No learning or knowledge of scriptures is necessary to know the Self, as no man requires a mirror to see himself." Swami Dayananda, on the other hand, had just told us that "we have no means of knowledge for the direct understanding of Self-realization, and therefore Vedanta is the means of knowledge that has to be employed for that purpose. No other means of knowledge will work."

What *is* enlightenment? Is it simply a shift in understanding that can be brought about, as Swami Dayananda insists, entirely through the study of sacred texts? Or is it, as some of the most radiant examples of this powerful teaching have proclaimed, the world-shattering revelation of a mystery that lies forever beyond the mind?

The interview that follows was excerpted from over eighty pages of transcripts documenting a series of dialogues between Swami Dayananda and Andrew Cohen in February 1998.



What is Advaita?

ANDREW COHEN: *In the last twenty years or so there has been great interest in Advaita in the West, as you know, and it's my impression that there has also been a lot of confusion about this teaching, that it has been very misunderstood and even abused in some cases. We wanted to speak with you so that we could present an authoritative traditional view. So, to begin, could you please explain what the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta is?*

SWAMI DAYANANDA: The word *"advaita"* is a very important word. It's a word that negates *dvaita*, which means "two." The "a" is a negative particle, so the meaning would be "that which is nondual." And it reveals the philosophy that all that is here is One, which means that there is nothing other than that One, nor is it made up of any parts. It's a whole without parts, and That they call *"Brahman"* [the Absolute], and That you are—because the nondual cannot be different from you, the inquirer. If it is different from you, then it is dual; then you are the subject and it is the object. So it has got to be you. And therefore, if you don't recognize that, you'll miss out on being the Whole.

AC: *Can you please explain the historical background?*

SD: The Vedas [sacred Hindu scriptures] are the most ancient body of knowledge we have in humanity. And the tradition looks upon the Vedas as not having been authored by any given person, but given to the ancient *rishis* [seers] as revealed knowledge. It is considered that the Vedas are traced ultimately to the Lord as the source of all knowledge, and it is this body of knowledge that is the source of Advaita. The Upanishads [the concluding portions of the Vedas] talk about God realization—and they not only *talk* about it, they methodically *teach* it. What I am doing today is what is taught in the Upanishads. The Upanishads themselves are a teaching and also a teaching *tradition*. And it's a *communicable* tradition—there's nothing mystical about it.

But I don't think *advaita* is only in the Vedas; I think it's everywhere—wherever there is the idea, "You are the Whole." That is *advaita*, whether it is in Sanskrit, Latin or Hebrew. But the advantage in Vedanta is that it can be taught and it *is* taught. We have created a teaching tradition, and it has grown. Whereas in America, when suddenly people turn vegetarian, for example, all that they have is tofu and alfalfa and a few other things, because there's no tradition of vegetarian cooking. It takes time. You can't create a tradition overnight!

AC: *Who are considered to be the foremost exponents of the Advaita teachings?*

SD: There have been a lot of teachers who have maintained this tradition whose names we don't know. But from the Upanishads down we can say: Vyasa, Gaudapada, Shankara, Suresvara—these are the names we repeat every day. But Shankara occupies a central position because of his written commentary. It is the written commentary that gives you the tradition of teaching and the method of teaching, and the *method* is very important in this tradition: *How* do you teach? There are a lot of pitfalls in this process, and one of them is the limitation of the language—the linguistic limitation. But the teaching has to be conveyed through words, which means that you must have a method—a method by which you can be sure that the student understands, because the enlightenment takes place as the teaching takes place and not afterwards. That's the tradition. So Shankara occupies an important place because of his commentaries, because he left *written* commentaries on palm leaves for us. But I wouldn't say that the other teachers were any less important.

AC: *Before Shankara there were no written commentaries?*

SD: There were some. In fact, what I'm teaching every morning now is a commentary on one of the Upanishads, by Shankara's own teacher's teacher, Gaudapada. There are a few others also—Vyasa's *sutras*. These *sutras* are analytical works in a style of literature that has very brief statements, one after the other, so that you can memorize them. But these, again, are part of the tradition of teaching, so they are always backed up. You write the *sutra* and then you teach it to a group of people, and these together are what is handed down. Then, when you recite the *sutra*, you remember what we call "the Tradition." In fact, the whole of Advaita Vedanta is analyzed in the *sutras*.

The Self is already present in all experience

AC: *Why is it that you feel the study of the scriptures, rather than spiritual experience, is the most direct means to Self-realization?*

SD: Self-realization, as I said, is the discovery that "the Self is the whole"—that you are the Lord; in fact, you are God, the cause of everything.

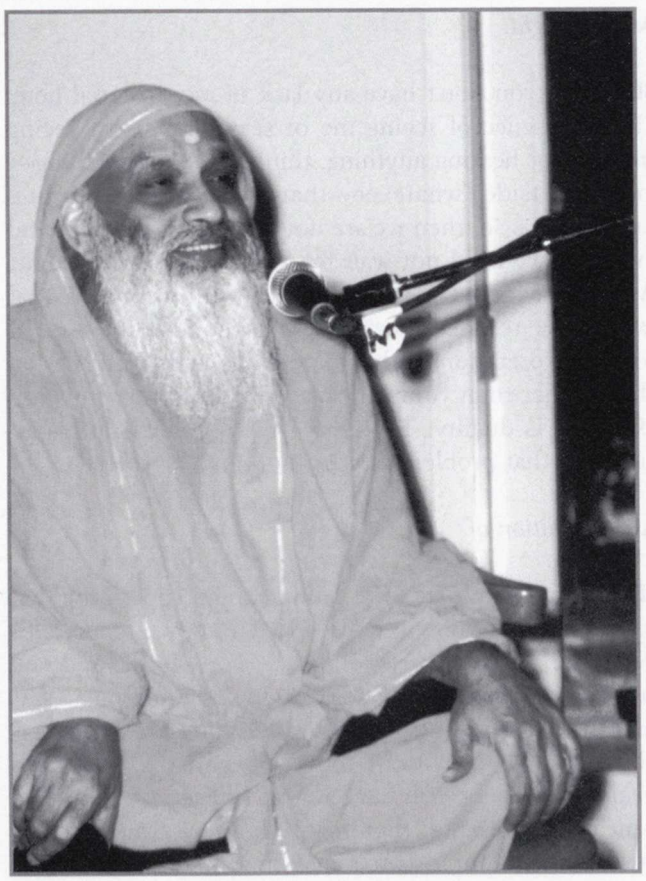
Now nobody lacks the experience of *advaita*, of that which is nondual—there's always *advaita*. But any experience is only as good as one's ability to *interpret* it. A doctor examining you interprets your condition in one way, a layperson in another. Therefore, you *need* interpretation, and your knowledge is only as valid as the *means of knowledge* you are using for that purpose.

As the small self, we have no means of knowledge for the direct understanding of Self-realization, and therefore Vedanta is the means of knowledge that has to be employed for that purpose. No other means of knowledge will work because, for this kind of knowledge, our powers of perception and inference alone are not sufficient.

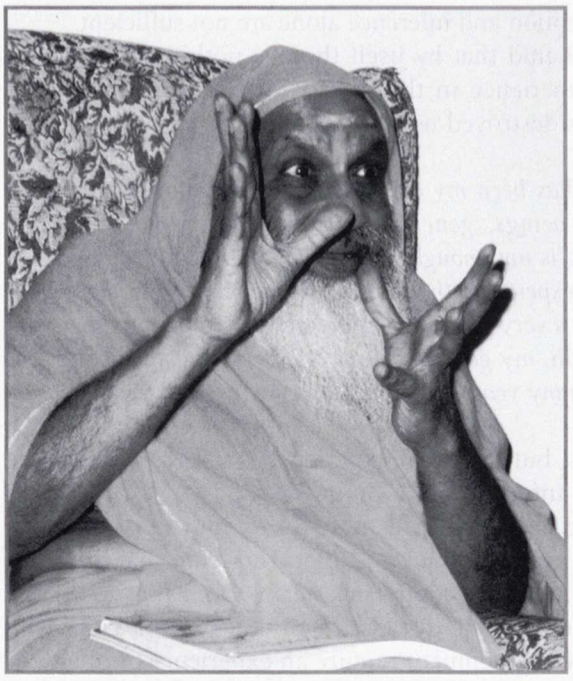
So I find that by itself there is nothing more dumb than experience in this world. In fact, it is experience that has destroyed us.

AC: *It has been my experience as a teacher that for most human beings, generally speaking, simply hearing the teaching is not enough. Usually they* do *need to have some kind of experience that makes the meaning of the words obvious in a very direct, experiential way. And then the person says, "Oh, my goodness, now I understand! I've heard this for so many years, but now I recognize the truth of it."*

SD: Yes, but even that experience is useless without the correct interpretation. Suppose your sense of being a separate individual falls away for a moment or ten minutes or even an hour, and then suddenly that apparent duality seems to come back again. Does that mean the one true Self gets displaced? Of course not! Then why should enlightenment require an experience? Enlightenment doesn't depend upon experiences; it depends upon my shedding my error and ignorance—that is what it depends upon, and nothing else.



"Suppose a fellow has an experience and then he comes out and says, 'I was one hour eternal.' No time means timeless, and timeless means eternity. Whether it is one hour eternal or one moment eternal, it is always the same. So confidence in truth cannot depend upon a state of experience. Confidence in truth is in your clarity of *what is.*"



"Enlightenment doesn't depend upon experiences; it depends upon my shedding my error and ignorance—that is what it depends upon, and nothing else."

People say that *advaita* is eternal, that it is timeless, and at the same time they say that they are going through an *experience* of it at a particular time and under certain conditions. That's not traditional! But that is what we hear everywhere. The tradition says: "What you see right now is *advaita.*"

Suppose a fellow has an experience and then he comes out and says, "I was one hour eternal." No time means timeless, and timeless means eternity. Whether it is one hour eternal or one moment eternal, it is always the same. So confidence in truth cannot depend upon a state of experience. Confidence in truth is in your clarity of *what is.* Otherwise what will happen is, "I was nondual *Brahman* for one hour and then I came back and now it's gone." Then every thought becomes a nightmare because when I am not in *nirvikalpa samadhi* [ecstatic absorption in nondual consciousness], then I cannot even relate to the world; I have to be stoned forever, you know? Whereas enlightenment is just knowing what *is.* That is called *sahaja,* which means "natural"; it means just seeing clearly. If people insist on having a particular experience, that simply means that they have not understood the teaching. Even right now, for example, we are interpreting our experiences. For example, you are experiencing *me* right now.

AC: *True.*

SD: And your experience seems to reveal two things: one is the subject, the other is the object. But let us suppose that both of them happen to be one reality.

AC: *All right.*

SD: Then you don't have any lack of raw material here. The experience of seeing me or seeing anybody, seeing anything or hearing anything, thinking about anything—inside, outside, whatever—that experience *is advaita.* And if that is so, then we are not lacking experience, and therefore we need not wait for any experience to come. Whatever experience you encounter within yourself, that experience reveals *advaita,* reveals nonduality. And if your interpretation of that experience is that there is an object other than yourself, then it is your interpretation *itself* that is duality. Therefore, it's a problem of cognition, and that problem of cognition is to be solved.

AC: *Cognition of?*

SD: Of this nondual! Am I talking about something that is absolutely unknown to me? No. Unknown to anyone? Not at all. Right now, for instance, you see me and you say, "Swami is sitting here." How do you know? You say, "Because I see you, I hear you; therefore you are here." Therefore I am evident to you because you have a *means of knowing,* you have a means of seeing, you have a means of hearing; therefore Swami *is.* Swami *is* because he's evident to you, just as anything *is* because it's

"Who is to set the rule for the enlightened person? Nobody has to set the rule, because he is *above* all the rules and not subject to any rule. Nobody can objectify the Self."

evident to you. Sun is, moon is, star is, space is, time is—all these are evident to you.

The same is true of your experience of yourself. Suppose I ask you, "Do you have a physical body?" "Yes," you'll say—because it's evident to you. "Do you have any memory of being in such-and-such a place?" Yes—because it's evident to you. To whom are all these evident? To you! To yourself. That means you are self-evident.

When are you *not* self-evident? Tell me—when? It is because you *are* self-evident that you don't need to *become* self-evident at any time. All my experiences are because of my self-evidence. Therefore, the Self is already experienced—that's what I say. Self is experienced as the ultimate content of every experience. I say, in fact, that our very experience *is* the Self.

In all experiences, therefore, what is invariably present is *consciousness*, and no object is independent of that. And consciousness is not dependent on and has none of the attributes of any particular object. Consciousness is consciousness, and while it is in everything, it transcends everything. That's why I say: *this* is *advaita, this* is nondual, *this* is *Brahman*, *this* is limitless;

timewise it is limitless, spacewise it is limitless. And therefore it is *Brahman*, and therefore you are everything already. This is the teaching, and what it means is that I need not wait for any experience because *every* experience is *Brahman*, *every* experience is limitless.

AC: *But this is a subtle point that is not necessarily easy to grasp without some previous direct experience of the nondual.*

SD: If the person doesn't see, then that means I have to teach further; or maybe they *do* see but in spite of that they say, "I still have got some cobwebs here or there." But that is not a problem; they just need to be cleared away.

First, you have an insight that is *knowing*, and then, as difficulties arise, we take care of them. I don't say it is *not* a matter of experience, but I say that experience is always the very nature of yourself. Consciousness is experience, and *every* experience reveals the fact of your being Self-evident. And what is Self-evident is, by definition, nondual. So subject and object are already the same.

Here is a wave, for instance, that has a human mind. It thinks, "I am a small wave." Then it becomes a big wave, swallowing in the process many other waves, and begins boasting, "I am a big wave." Then it loses its form, and again becomes small—files a "Chapter Thirteen," as you say in America, you know, bankruptcy—and now it wants to somehow get to the shore. But from the shore, other waves are pushing into the ocean, and from the ocean, waves are pushing to the shore, and this poor little wave is caught in between, sandwiched, and begins crying, "What shall I do?" There is another wave around, a wave that seems to be very happy, and so the first wave asks him, "How come you are so happy? You also are small—in fact, you are smaller than me! How come you are so happy?" Then another wave says, "He's an enlightened wave." Now the first wave wants to know, "What is enlightenment? What *is* this enlightenment?" The happy wave says, "Hey, come on! You should know who you are!" "All right. Who am I?" And the enlightened wave says, "You are the ocean." "What?! Ocean? Did you say that I am the ocean, because of all the water by which I am sustained and to which I will go back? That ocean I am?" "Yes, you are the ocean." And he laughs. "How can I be the ocean? That's like saying I am God. The ocean is almighty, it's all-pervasive, it's everything. How can I be the ocean?"

So we can dismiss Vedanta's statement of the nondual reality, or we can ask, "How come? *How come* I am That?" The nondual teaching is not necessary if our identity is obvious, if what is apparent to us is not a

difference but an essential nondifference. Here, there is nondifference. There is no wave without water, and there is no ocean without water. Every other wave, and the whole ocean too, is one water alone.

Nondual realization and action in the world

AC: *One of the subjects I'm very interested in is the relationship between the nondual realization that you've been describing and action in the world of time and space. For example, in the empirical world, in empirical reality, even the realized soul who has no doubt about his true nature finds that he still must take a stand—against, in opposition to—the forces of delusion and negativity operating there.*

SD: We need not impose a rule like *should* and *must*—he *may* take a stand.

AC: May *take a stand?*

SD: Yes. Because once he's free, who is to set rules for him? You see, if he is free enough to do, then he is just as free *not* to do—that is what I say. He will spontaneously do what he has to do. Perhaps he thinks that everybody is all right. In fact, that's what the truth is. Because until you tell me that you have a problem with me, I don't have a problem with you.

AC: *But let's say, for example, that the realized soul is sitting in a room and then a killer comes in and starts killing people. Some people might say, "Well, it's all one Self and there's no opposition, so there's no need to interfere." But someone else would say, "I have no choice; I* have *to interfere."*

SD: Why should he not interfere? Clearly, at that level, there is hurting—

AC: *Yes.*

SD: And maybe he is not even killing, maybe he is only using abusive language. Why should this realized soul not say, "Foolish man, change your language. What are you doing?" So he can help him; he can help him to change. And he can do it without creating any big problem for him; he can be angry without causing anger to this fellow, he can talk to that person and make him see that he is abusive because of his background and help him to change. So that's what he will do. But we cannot

say that he *should* correct. For that, who is to set the rule for *me?* Suppose one is enlightened; who is to set the rule for that person, for the enlightened person? Nobody has to set the rule, because he is *above* all the rules.

AC: *He's above the rules?*

SD: Yes, he's above the rules and not subject to any rule. Nobody can objectify the Self; there is no second person to objectify the Self. And therefore the Self is not subject to hurt nor guilt, and therefore is free from hurt and guilt. In other words, it is neither a subject nor an object, and if that is so, then "should" does not come into the picture—not even into the picture of empirical transaction—because it's just not an issue. The issue is: Here is a person who has a certain problem and therefore he is abusive, and that person can be helped. So of course he will help!

AC: *Everything that you're saying obviously is completely true because, ultimately, the nondual cannot be affected and has no preferences. But what I am saying is that there is always a profound effect on the human personality of the one who has realized that nondual, and I'm using this extreme example only to make the point that* some *criterion has to be there. For example, historically, individuals who have deeply realized this nondual Absolute have expressed* sattvic *nature, have expressed egolessness. So even though I know that enlightenment takes many forms, and the expression of enlightenment is different in different people, still, fundamentally, there is always an expression of selflessness and compassion which allows us to say that if someone was truly a realized person they would not be able to act in a profoundly self-centered manner. Therefore, there are certainly things a person* wouldn't *do if he or she was an enlightened person. That's my point.*

SD: So how will *you* judge an enlightened person?

AC: *Well, if he was raping and killing people, then we could at least say, "This is not an enlightened person." Correct?*

SD: But that doesn't come into the picture anyway because in the traditional system he has to have gone through a life of rigorous moral and spiritual training, and only then is he enlightened, and this fellow has not done that, so clearly he still has some problems. There is a statement, though: "It takes a wise man to know a wise

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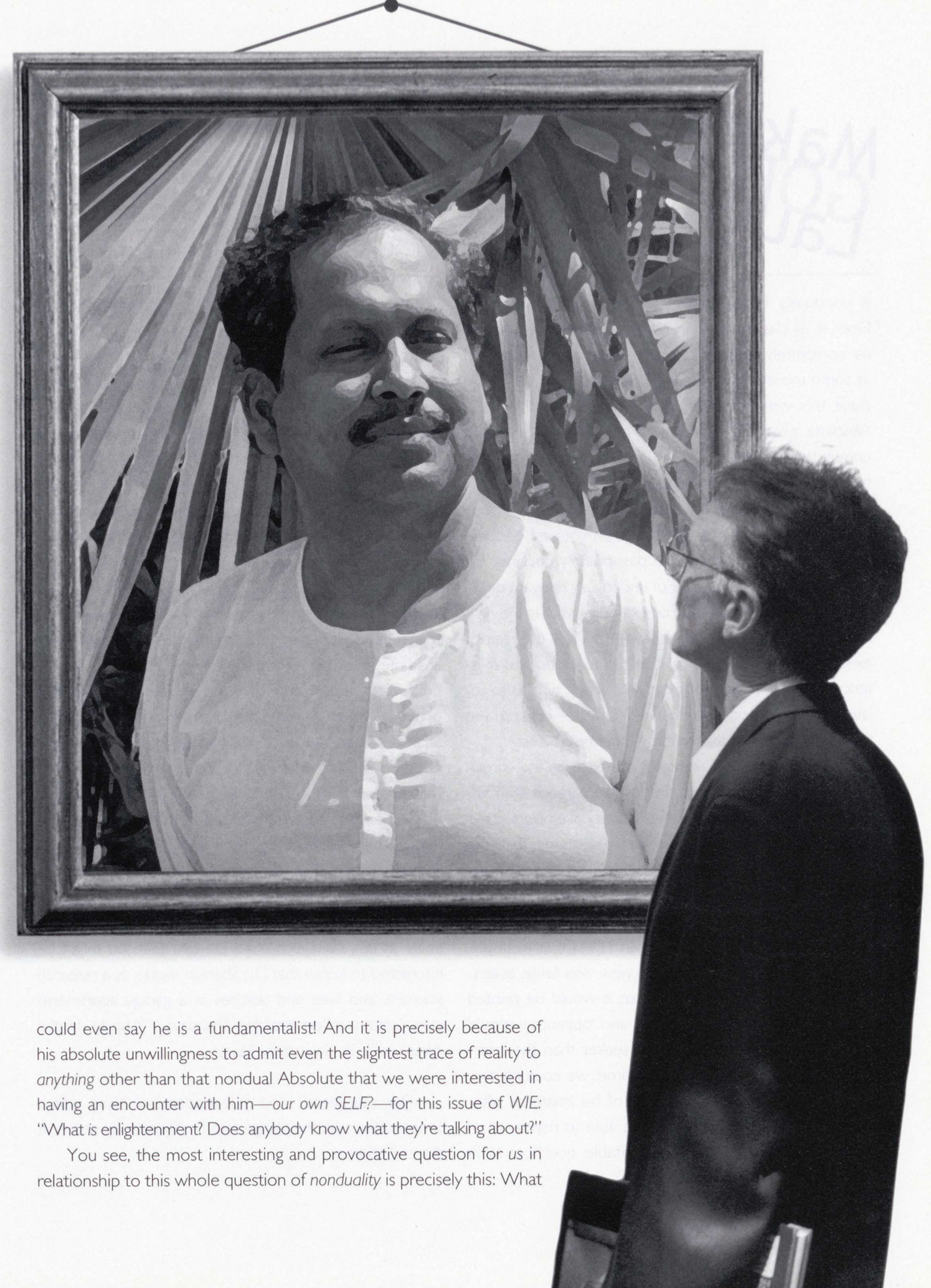
Making GOD Laugh

An interview with Dr. Vijai Shankar

by Simeon Alev

IN THIS, OUR FOURTH AND FINAL INTERVIEW exploring the mysterious Singular Absolute world of Advaita Vedanta, or teachings of absolute nondualism, we are pleased to present an electrifying, ultimately challenging and thoroughly provocative interview with the truly outrageous Dr. Vijai Shankar. Who is Dr. Shankar? Well, true to his teaching of Advaita, he refused to speak about his past (he even made sure to tell his publicist that whatever details we *did* manage to squeeze out of her, he wanted it to be absolutely clear that they had not come from *him!*). Why? Because, as Dr. Shankar unselfconsciously and boldly declares, *he does not exist!* Neither do any of us, for that matter.

Advaita simply tells us that the only reality, the one truth of existence, is that there is only one Self Absolute—beyond name, beyond form, beyond concept—the realization of which will utterly and finally release any man or woman from the nightmare of embodied temporal existence. It is Dr. Shankar's unwavering adherence to his realization of his absolute nature that makes him such a remarkable example of this uncompromising teaching. As a matter of fact, it is due to his *thoroughly* uncompromising adherence to the nondual perspective of Advaita philosophy that one



could even say he is a fundamentalist! And it is precisely because of his absolute unwillingness to admit even the slightest trace of reality to *anything* other than that nondual Absolute that we were interested in having an encounter with him—*our own SELF?*—for this issue of *WIE:* "What *is* enlightenment? Does anybody know what they're talking about?"

You see, the most interesting and provocative question for *us* in relationship to this whole question of *nonduality* is precisely this: What

INTRODUCTION continued

is nonduality in relationship to enlightenment, *exactly?* Does it, as classical interpretations of Advaita would tell us, completely *exclude* temporal existence? Or does it, as some more modern interpretations would tell us, *include* this world of time and space? Is that which is Absolute *exclusive* or *inclusive*—or *both?* Dr. Shankar's unrelenting insistence on the unreality of temporal existence automatically presents some pretty challenging questions about the very nature, meaning and purpose of embodied existence, *and of the enlightened perspective itself.* If, as Dr. Shankar so passionately declares, *we do not exist,* a Pandora's box of undeniably relevant questions automatically appear. For example, what is the *right* relationship to embodied existence if, in fact, it does not exist? What is the *wrong* relationship to embodied existence if, in fact, it does not exist? And finally, what is *no* relationship to embodied existence? After all—*how can you have a relationship with something that doesn't exist?*

It seems to us that Advaita's insistence on the unreality of the world presents an impossible paradox—an impossible paradox because the very reality of embodied existence always presents very real questions that the perspective of "unreality" in and of itself can never answer.

We've all been inspired by the Doctor's powerful and unwavering passion in his unequivocal insistence on the unreality of anything other than THAT. For example, he boldly declared that this interview was futile, asserting that the plain white paper that it would be printed on—free from words, concepts and opinions—would be of more value to the sincere seeker than the interview itself. And yet, at the same time, we couldn't reconcile the perplexing incongruity of his *insistence* after the interview was over that he be able to review all of our copy! Dare we ask the inevitable question: *Who* wants to know? And there was the remarkably challenging ordeal of negotiating with his at times overzealous "Director of Information," who was horrified to discover that we don't print contact information at the end of our interviews, and therefore asked in annoyed tones, *"Well, what's in it for us?"* Seeing as, once again, neither Dr. Shankar nor his representatives, nor ourselves for that matter, *actually exist,* what difference could it possibly make whether we printed their contact information or not? And in any case, we had reiterated to her that we always diligently forward inquiries that we receive about our contributors.

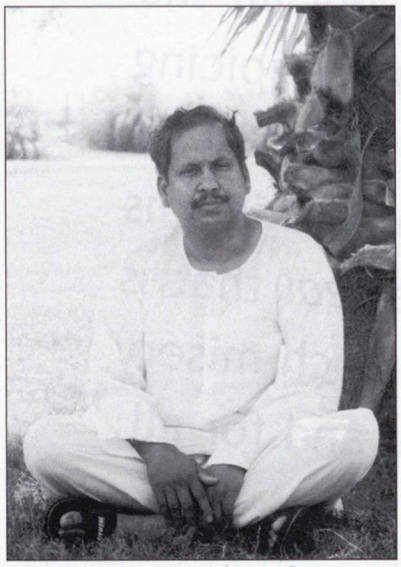
It is because of these and other similar, always intriguing and ultimately unavoidable questions about the absolute nature of enlightenment and its relationship to embodied existence that we are pleased to present this provocative interview with the remarkable Dr. Vijai Shankar. There is no doubt that he's for *real,* but the question is: *Does what he's saying make sense?* And for that matter, *is Advaita a viable teaching?* Which means: Does it answer the ultimate question but still leave too many other questions unanswered? Or does finding the answer to the ultimate question instantly remove all other questions once and for all and forever? You decide.

By the way, even though it's irrelevant information as far as *he's* concerned, we thought that *you* might be interested to know that Dr. Shankar works as a research scientist, and lives and teaches in a garage apartment-cum-*ashram* called Kaivalya Shivalaya ("Abode of the Absolute"), in Galveston, Texas.

Our courageous and independently-thinking editor, Simeon Alev, took the plunge with Dr. Shankar by phone at the end of June.

WIE: *This issue of* What Is Enlightenment? *is about Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta. We've talked to several people about Advaita, but there are still many questions that we don't yet have answers to, which is why we wanted to speak with you.*

DR. VIJAI SHANKAR: How would you know what is the right answer?



WIE: *It's not that people have given us the* wrong *answers; it's just that there are certain questions that different people answer in different ways.*

VS: Every way is the right way, as it stands from where it is seen.

Let us hear something authentic from your side. If you want to write about Advaita, you should know what you're looking for. Do you know what Advaita *is?*

WIE: *Won't you please tell us?*

VS: You don't know what you're looking for, then!

WIE: *Well, I'm not asking only for myself. I'm asking on behalf of thousands of readers.*

VS: Please don't get me wrong. What I'm trying to convey to you is that if you don't know very clearly in your mind—or your so-called mind—the exact meaning of the word *"advaita,"* what the word stands for, how would you know whether the answer you are receiving pertains to the word you are asking about? Your issue, you say, is about Buddhism and Advaita, but do you know what Buddhism *is?* And do you know what *advaita* stands for, what *advaita* means? Are you *familiar* with Advaita? You are going to ask me questions about it today. If that is the case, then you should know what *advaita* means; otherwise, this interview is void.

WIE: *All right. As I understand it, the teaching of Advaita Vedanta is the teaching of nondualism, the teaching that—*

VS: But why is it called "nondualism?" God is *one,* isn't it? If God is *one,* which I'm particularly sure the majority will agree to without any argument, then why don't the Sanskrit sages call it *"ekant,"* which means *one,* instead of *advaita?* Why is the word *"advaita"* being used? Has anybody pondered over that? *Advaita* means *not two.* Once you have pondered that, then you have no need to know anything else. Once you know what *advaita* means, you have transcended! You have gone beyond the mind! Why did the sages not say "one?" Why did they say "not two?" You see, my dear friend, I don't mean to put you off balance. I'm rather trying to put you back on the right path.

WIE: *Thank you.*

VS: But it should have some *effect* on you! What is the point of your collecting information, information, information and printing magazines when it does not have any effect on your life? You'll die and go, my son, like the rest of us. The body will disappear. So what is the point of stuffing your mind with knowledge? What effect does it have on *you?* You should have transcended by now! That should be your goal in life! The only purpose of life is to know who you are. If you think that accumulating all this knowledge is going to get you enlightenment, forget it!

But to come back to the point, the word *"advaita"* is used to indicate *not two!* And the reason why is because the mind functions in a very linear way, from point A to points B, C, D, E, F and so on in a straight line—are you with me so far? Therefore, the moment you say "one," it means that there are two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight and so on and so forth. The moment you say "one," it means the possibility exists of *two. One* has got meaning only with relation to the other numbers; otherwise it has *none.* And the moment you say "one," *two* has already penetrated into it. *That* is why they don't say *"ekant."* They say "NOT TWO!" And NOT TWO means what? That the many has disappeared. But this is only indicated by a process of negation.

Now—do you know the meaning of "Vedanta"?

WIE: *As I understand it, Vedanta is the concluding portion of the ancient Hindu scriptures known as the Vedas—*

"God HAS Painted this entire panoramic, continuously changing picture. He has never finished his masterpiece, but all the time he's within everybody enjoying and rejoicing in it because it's purely a painting. It is the fact that you want to get yourself *involved* in this painting and take it to be *real* that is the problem which causes so much misery for one and for all."

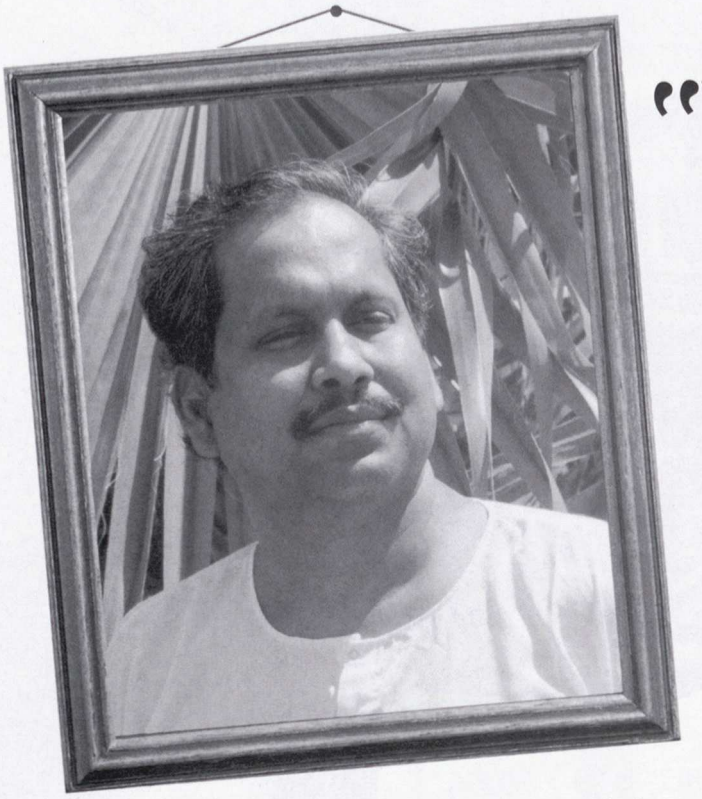
VS: There, again, is the fallacy. That is what is the problem with all of us—you only believe what has been told to you. What is written has been interpreted in one's own way, without contemplating exactly what the word *means*. And therefore, whatever the master said was never understood, not even by those who heard him. These people were not really hearing him, not really listening to him. They were merely *interpreting* him. No one has heard the masters, full stop—nobody. Nobody has listened to the masters, and neither are you listening to me now. Do you know that?

WIE: *That I'm not listening to you?*

VS: Exactly. You are not listening to me, my friend. It may appear to you that you are, but you're not. All of us have been going on and on thinking we are listening. No way. Do you know what listening is? I'm sure you don't know. People never listen. You only see through your own screen of concepts. I don't mean to scare you, but you may leave this conversation knowing *less* than you did before. Therefore, you should always be aware as to whom you are approaching before you even venture to speak. This interview will probably end up chipping your ego to bits, and if so, it will profit you much better. You will be much more the winner than the loser. You have been losing all the time so far. But your karma is such that the time has come for you to have an *effect* on yourself. You should effectively realize who you are. Then everything is worthwhile.

Anyway, your idea about Vedanta also is based on what has been told to you. But the Vedas are purely prayers to God—nothing other than that, only the glorification of God in many forms, colors and symbolic gestures. And those are all purely pointers to the ultimate One, who is *you*. And what "Vedanta" means is, "*end* of the Vedas." *"Anta"* means "the end," okay? And the end of Vedas came about through the Upanishads. "Upanishad" does not mean a *continuation* of the Vedas—no, it's along a different scale completely: the Vedas tell you to *renounce*, and the Upanishads tell you to *rejoice*. Therefore, there can never be a continuation. Anyway, what else do you want to know?

"Want to know"—this is *strange!* I'm really surprised the way people want to know and know and know. And for how long—until you die? Stop trying to collect all this dust and dirt in your mind. What is the need? Haven't people learned about the Vedas and Advaita all this generation? How long are they going to read about it? How long are you going to print your magazine? You



"What HAVE I Realized?

I don't know. It's a stupendous joke. Oh, wonderful life, thank you for making me laugh! I don't know what people come here for. I don't teach them anything, no way! I *never* teach them anything. Who is there to teach? What is there to be taught? There's nothing to be taught, my friend. What are you going to teach about an illusion?"

will die and go! Everybody will die and go! What purpose does it serve? Oh, well . . . probably it puts food on the table.

WIE: *Well, at least those who read this will hear your suggestion that they should stop trying to understand and so on.*

VS: I only wish—but again, they'll *not* be reading, they'll *not* be listening. Do you think they are listening? They are not. They're purely approaching the words with their own understanding, and therefore they'll only end up strengthening the understanding they already have if, according to their concepts, they think what they have heard is right. So they may *think* that they have listened, but they haven't listened—they've only strengthened their own conditioning. Do you understand what I'm saying?

WIE: *I think so.*

VS: You think so! I *hope* so. But your understanding is based purely on your own desires and fears, your own escapism, your own *attitudes toward life*. The word "attitude" means something that is fragmented, a division that is purely of the mind. But *Life* is not an attitude, and you cannot fragment life to fit into an attitude, because it is *beyond* the mind. So if you understand according to your concepts, according to your attitudes, you're cut off from life—follow me? Therefore, if you only contemplate on certain words, on what the *rishis* [sages] meant by them, then that is okay. Contemplate on *"advaita,"* contemplate on "Vedanta": "*Why* have they used the word *'advaita?'* What is the *meaning?"* I am speaking about contemplation, not thinking. There is a difference between thinking

and contemplation. What do you think the difference is? What is the difference between thinking—

WIE: *The thing is—Dr. Vijai?*

VS: Yes?

WIE: *I would love to have a long dialogue with you and tell you all of my ideas—*

VS: Wonderful!

WIE: *But for the purposes of* this *interview, you see, our time is rather limited—*

VS: Oh, we're in time and space—*that* is our problem!

WIE: *Yes. Precisely.*

VS: It's not going to be easy for you, my son. You've not come to speak to a mind. You're trying your best to speak to the Beyond. Can the mind speak to the Beyond?

WIE: *Well, let's find out.*

VS: No, you can't. So far you haven't been able to. You are talking in terms of time and space and there's nothing left.

WIE: *So, Dr. Vijai, this is my next question for the Beyond—*

VS: Oh, go on, then! There are no answers there, my son.

WIE: *My question is: In the teaching of Advaita, we often hear it said that the world is an illusion. And what I would like to learn from you is what this means.*

VS: Okay. You see, the problem with us is that we think there's a world outside us and that we're living in that world. But it is not the case. You are not in the world; the world is in *you*. Haven't you realized—even though when you open your eyes in the morning the world *appears,* and when you go to sleep at night it *disappears*—that when you are asleep you are still *existing?* And that it is the same person who exists in sleep who also exists in the waking state? Therefore, if during the night the world seems to disappear, and if who you really are continues to exist when the world no longer seems to, it can only mean that *you,* the person you imagine yourself to be in the morning, *are an illusion!*

Or like this. If you look in the mirror, you see only one face, correct? You do not have the impression that you are seeing two faces, one in the mirror and one outside the mirror. You're entirely engrossed in your reflection, which you take to be yourself, and in that moment you're disassociated from your own true face, which you cannot see. But if you have a bloodstain on your face due to shaving, and if the blood appears on your reflection, you do not touch the reflection, you touch your face, correct? Similarly, the *Atman* [Self] reflects the entire world through the mirror of knowledge. The problem is that the "I" comes in between and touches the reflection of the real, and you get caught up with it. It is just as if you were trying to wipe the bloodstain off of the reflection in the mirror. Will you be able to do it?

WIE: *No, of course not.*

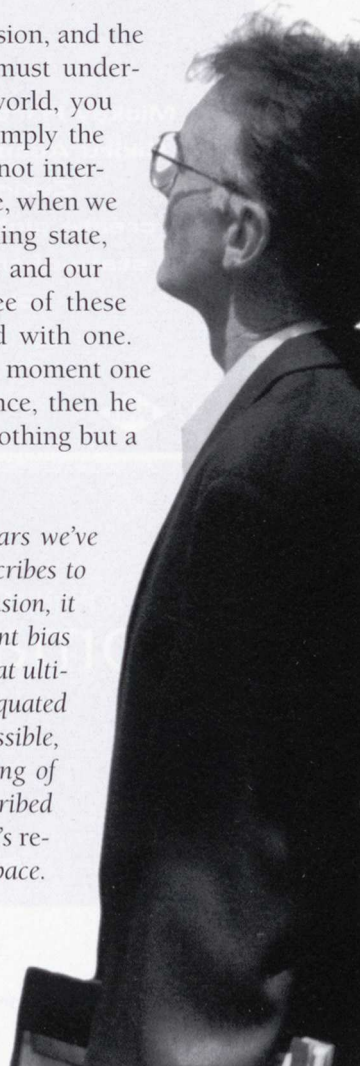
VS: But that's what man is trying to do. You get me?

WIE: *Yes, what you're saying is very clear.*

VS: Ah, very happy for you! You should go away a richer person after this interview; then I'll be happy. I won't be bothered even if you do not print *anything* in your magazine, which is only black ink on white paper. If anybody can read only the white page of your magazine, then I'll be happy. Not the black print, which will be only a reflection of their "I."

So that is what is called an illusion, and the world is *purely* an illusion. You must understand that you reflect your own world, you see your own world. But this is simply the problem that occurs when we are not interested in our other states of existence, when we are concerned only with our waking state, and not with our deep sleep state and our dream state. We exist in all three of these states, but we are only concerned with one. Such is the misery of man. But the moment one witnesses all three states of existence, then he will understand that the world is nothing but a pure illusion.

WIE: *It's the opinion of some scholars we've spoken to that because Advaita subscribes to this notion of the world being an illusion, it has what they refer to as an "inherent bias against the world," with the result that ultimate realization in Advaita is often equated with* escape *from this world. So, if possible, I'd like to have a better understanding of how the realization you've just described would express itself in a human being's* relationship *to the world of time and space.*



VS: Good. The first point is that there *are* no human beings. One has got to clearly understand that. You are a *spiritual* being having a *human experience*. Don't consider yourself to be a human being *wanting* spiritual experience. That's also an illusion.

Now, these people talk about "escape from the world," but what's the point? Haven't they understood that the world is an illusion? So what? If it's an illusion, then what is there to renounce? How can you renounce an illusion? Stupidity! Absolute nonsense! Illusion? What's the problem? This illusion is there for you to *rejoice in*. Haven't you understood me clearly so far? Imagine yourself or anybody trying to escape—where is he going to go? Even if he goes to a cave, he'll have thousands and thousands of thoughts rushing into his mind. He'll *never* escape.

Listen. If you go to a museum, you may see a huge painting there depicting, let's say, an old woman, a tattered old lady in rags and absolutely skin and bones with hardly a morsel of food on her plate, and a skinny-looking baby lying beside her, and a large dying dog. There may be a few cattle also starving by the side, the trees are dried up, the land is dry and everything appears so, so sickening there. But a man will stand in front of that picture and say, "What a masterpiece!" Doesn't he say that?

WIE: *Yes, I suppose so.*

VS: And there may also be a bleeding man with a broken leg, and still this fellow says, "What a masterpiece!" He will never say, "Oh! I feel so sorry for this lady, let me go get some pizza and feed her. This man is bleeding, let me take him to the hospital. This dog is dying, let me take it to the ASPCA or the ABCDE or whatever." No—he says, "It's a

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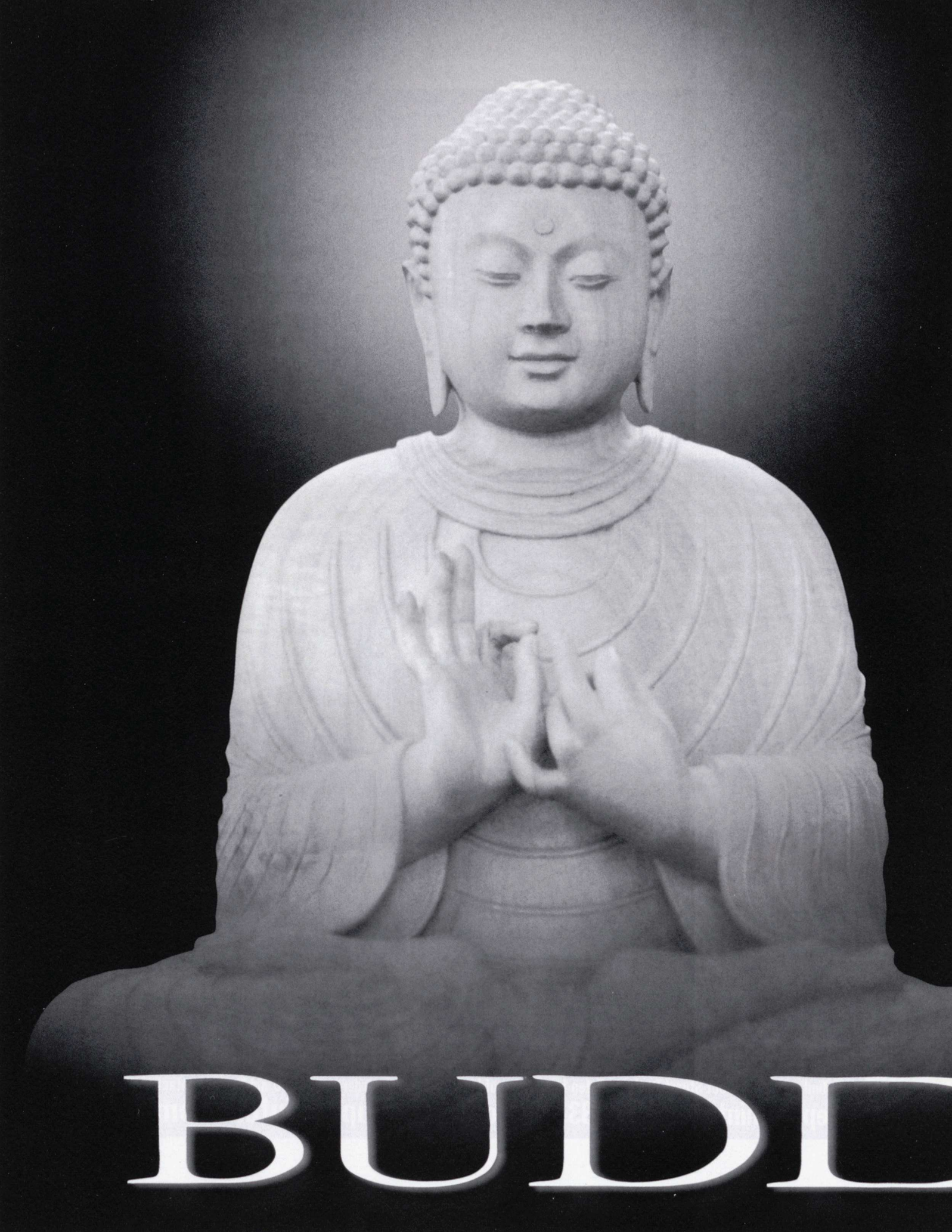

BUDD

BUDDHISM IS RAPIDLY BECOMING WIDELY ACCEPTED IN THE WEST AS A CREDIBLE spiritual path. As a matter of fact, of all the spiritual philosophies that have infiltrated our collective consciousness from the East, it is the teachings of the Buddha that seem to be having the greatest impact on the Western psyche. From the Dalai Lama's passionate exhortation for us all to be more compassionate with each other to the phenomenal rise of interest in Buddhist "mindfulness" meditation—as a means not only to help us become more aware of what we are doing, but also as a way to confront the physical pain of life-threatening disease—Buddhism's growing influence can be felt all around us. And as an ever greater number of people discover the profound wisdom of the Buddha's teaching, the aura of "strange" and "mystical" is slowly but surely being replaced by a recognition of the profound rationality and liberating clarity in its view of the human condition.

For this issue of *What Is Enlightenment?,* looking into the postmodern state of Buddhism in the West from the point of view of *"Does anybody know what they're talking about?"* was a very provocative question. Why? Because the question, "What is enlightenment?" is most pertinent in relationship to Buddhism—after all, the word "enlightenment" is used to describe the Buddha's awakening. And what has been most intriguing about this whole question has been the discovery that, first, within the many different schools of Buddhist thought there seems to be *considerable disagreement as to what enlightenment actually is.* And second, it appears that there are few postmodern Western Buddhists *who take the possibility of enlightenment seriously!*

It would seem that Buddhism's growing appeal is based to a large degree on its appearance as a rationalistic philosophy of self-endeavor that is free from any notion of a godhead or absolute. The often quoted last words of the Buddha, "Be a light unto yourself," strikes a resounding "yes" in the hearts and minds of so many who are uncomfortable with the notion of a Judeo-Christian God that often inspires guilt, shame and fear, and condemns those who are unable to *believe* wholeheartedly and uncritically. Indeed, the possibility of having to believe in *nothing* in order to experience spirituality is often seen as a welcome relief. And the opportunity to find out *for oneself* what the Buddha meant when he said, "I am awake," is very compelling.

The Buddha described his enlightenment as the end of craving or wanting, and simply and succinctly stated that it was through the cessation of craving or wanting that enlightenment could be won. "I am an All-transcender, an

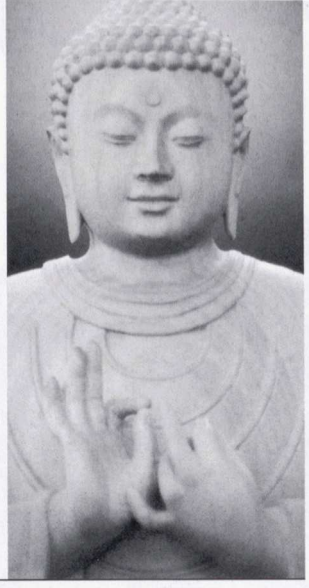
BUDDHISM

All-knower, unsullied in all ideas, renouncing all, by craving's ceasing freed. And this I owe to my own wit. To whom should I concede it? . . . I am the Teacher in the world, without a peer, accomplished too, and I alone am quite enlightened, quenched, whose fires are all extinct." Along with his teaching that desire alone is the cause of all ignorance (which he called "The Law"), he laid out a concise spiritual path consisting of eight injunctions, which he called "The Noble Eightfold Path." Those injunctions are: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.

While in Buddhism there is no godhead—as all Buddhists emphatically stress the fact that there is *no self*, personal *or* absolute—in the place of god or an absolute principle, Buddhism tells us that the ultimate nature of everything, manifest and unmanifest, seen and unseen, is *emptiness*. "Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form," the Buddha declared to his assembly on Vulture's Peak. This fact—that emptiness, or *nothingness,* is what lies at the very core of being or existence—is one of the significant distinguishing features of Buddhist doctrine. For it is said that through the direct realization of the empty nature of all phenomena, liberation from conditioned existence can be attained. *Nirvana,* which has now become a household word representing heaven or a state of perfect happiness, is supposed to be the state in which the enlightened one abides. That state has been called "the unconditioned," or "the Deathless."

Interestingly enough, when looking into the question, *"What is enlightenment? Does anybody know what they're talking about?"* in Buddhism, we found that there are profoundly contrasting views as to the actual nature of the "ultimate" state of being. For example, even within Tibetan Buddhism alone, there are some schools that state that "emptiness" implies a transcendent absolute reality that inherently exists, while others emphatically declare that *nothing whatsoever* inherently exists. From the perspective of attempting to come to some understanding of what enlightenment actually is, these are not small matters! The attainment of enlightenment implies a profound and permanent shift in human consciousness that is dramatic in its contrast to unenlightenment. What that shift is actually based on, therefore, is very relevant, and makes the whole question of what enlightenment is, and what those who know about it have to say, very important.

As a result of the widespread disillusionment in politics and religion, we live in a time when there is an almost inherent fear and skepticism of *anything* that presents itself as being absolute. For many, contemporary Buddhism provides an avenue of profound self-discovery that would

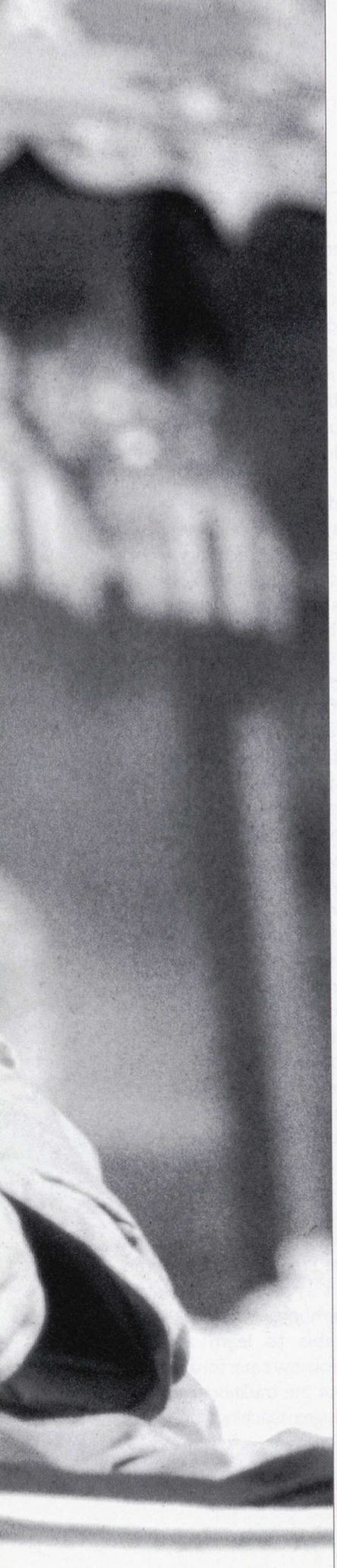


seem to avoid that kind of extreme. But does it really? After all, the very *Buddhist* notion of enlightenment *automatically* implies an absolute, simply because someone is either enlightened or they're not—they're not *slightly* enlightened!

In the recent upsurge of interest in Buddhism in the West, there has been what Helen Tworkov, founder of the Buddhist magazine *Tricycle,* calls a "secularization of the [Buddhist] teaching." "There are very few people who want to go the distance with living a truly mature, authentic, nondualistic or autonomous life," she says. "Very few people are interested in getting enlightened, very few people are interested in waking themselves up, very few people are interested in truly living in a nondualistic view. So when you talk about 'enlightenment,' you're talking about only a handful of people. Meanwhile, you've got all the rest of humanity suffering, and you try to do what you can to create an environment or an awareness that helps to alleviate that." Indeed, it is significant to note that the Buddhism that twenty years ago was recognized by many young Westerners to be an authentic path to enlightenment has gradually become a primarily secularized form of spirituality that tends to emphasize ethical development and personal fulfillment over ego death and world transcendence. Seen only a short time ago as a profoundly liberating alternative to the suffocating influence of Judeo-Christian dogma, Buddhism, as a religion, has now come to serve the very same function for many in the West as it does for millions in the East.

The heart of Buddhism has always been the *enlightenment* of the Buddha, yet what may be the case is that his attainment—which set the *dharma* wheel in motion—is being forgotten. Once again, a big part of the appeal that the *Buddha Dharma* holds for the Western mind is its profound rationality and emphasis on *self-endeavor*—and because of this, it could appear to many that what the Buddha taught poses no threat whatsoever to our liberal, egalitarian ideals. And yet, the absolute implications of the Buddha's own enlightenment would seem to have to *somehow* threaten our fundamental worldview. If that is *not* the case, then has the very heart of the Buddha's teaching been taken out—leaving us a body and mind separated from its source? Or is Buddhism's move to the West, as some would tell us, merely another original and creative expression of the Buddha's teaching as it adapts itself to ever new and changing circumstances?

We spoke to some of the brightest thinkers in Buddhism today in order to find the answers to some of these very provocative questions. ■



No Independent Existence

An interview with His Holiness the Dalai Lama

IF YOU HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO INTERVIEW ANYONE ALIVE today to learn what the heart of the Buddha's teaching of enlightenment truly is, it would most likely be to the monk Tenzin Gyatso that you would turn.

And so began a string of faxes and phone calls to the mountain enclave of Dharamsala, the seat of the Tibetan government in exile and home of His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama. Perhaps one of today's most sought-after public figures, the Dalai Lama is besieged with requests for his time by everyone from *New York Times* reporters and Hollywood film producers to United Nations officials and heads of state. In the midst of all his worldly responsibilities, the Dalai Lama is also the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people, acting head of the four principal sects of Tibetan Buddhism, and the figure to which this beleaguered nation turns for faith, inspiration and guidance.

The Dalai Lama was ordained in the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism. Founded by the great scholar Je Tsongkhapa in the fourteenth century, the Gelugpa lineage is most noted for its scholarly interpretations of the Buddhist teachings. Its monastic training includes many years of rigorous study, memorization and debate.

by Amy Edelstein

No Independent Existence

Tenzin Gyatso began his own training as a young child, and although he writes of himself that he was a poor student, he excelled both in debate and in his arduous examinations. He now gives teachings and *tantric* initiations [esoteric Buddhist practices] to Buddhist practitioners, sometimes drawing assemblies of over 100,000 monks, nuns and laypeople eager to receive his interpretation, instruction and initiation. When we sent his advisors information about this issue of *WIE*, they were intrigued. We were endeavoring to ask the essential questions about the Buddhist goal of enlightenment—questions, they agreed, that His Holiness would like to respond to. We were granted an interview at his residence in India and excitedly began our preparations.

India at the end of May is always hot, but this year an unusual heat wave was sweeping across the nation. In New Delhi it was 113°F and even the night breeze felt like a roaring *tandoori* oven. The town of Dharamsala is perched on a rocky ridge by the Dhauladhar mountain range in the Himalayan foothills. Once a British hill station and refuge from the summer heat, its slopes are covered with fragrant evergreen trees and wild crimson rhododendron. Monks are hidden away in caves in the shadow of the snow-covered peaks. Under the guidance of the Dalai Lama and other teachers, these recluses do intensive meditation practices for many years at a time. The land is still wild and rugged, and sadly, one long-term ascetic lost his life several winters ago when he was attacked by a mountain bear.

In the time since the Dalai Lama settled here, Dharamsala has grown from a disorganized and haphazard refugee village into a thriving community. Fifteen years ago there were only a handful of restaurants, like the dark and smoky "Tibet Memory," where newly arrived Khampa refugees would sleep on the floor on pungent bed rolls next to Western hippies and *dharma* seekers. Today, clean new hotels, often operating as income generators for the monasteries, offer hot water, fax machines, mountain views and even email. Volunteer centers have been set up where Western tourists teach English and Microsoft Word to Tibetans, aid with recycling programs or watch *Kundun* or the latest documentary about the Dalai Lama at regular video showings.

The day I arrived there were over five hundred Westerners at the *Tsuglakhang*, His Holiness's temple, waiting to meet the man many think to be a living Buddha, shake his hand and perhaps receive a red, knotted blessing cord. In the space of a few hours he personally greeted several thousand people, including local residents and new refugees from Chinese-occupied Tibet. Then, at midday, almost everyone in the entire town lined the narrow, winding mountain road, chanting peace slogans and prayers as five hunger strikers arrived from New Delhi. Several days before, in a desperate move to call the world's attention to the untenable situation in the Tibetans' homeland, one hunger striker had self-immolated. The Dalai Lama, an avowed proponent of nonviolence and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, was caught in a difficult position as the strikers called for his support. These are the kinds of painful dilemmas this "simple monk," as he refers to himself, has been faced with since he assumed rule of the Tibetan people when he was fifteen years old. Now, with his ever increasing popularity as the leader of a nonviolent resistance movement, millions from the East *and* West look to him for guidance and direction in finding a clear answer to the question, "What is the path that a Buddha would tread?"

The day before our interview, I met with his private secretary, Tenzin Gyeche, a soft-spoken man who has assisted His Holiness for many years with everything from international affairs to dialogues with Western spiritual teachers. As we sat and discussed this issue of *WIE*, Tenzin Gyeche became both deeply thoughtful and animated. "His Holiness never gets asked questions like these," he said with interest, pondering what his answers might be. "Very recently in teachings with His Holiness, something finally got through this thick head of mine," he reflected, tapping his head lightly with his knuckles. "His Holiness was explaining how once you get a true glimpse of emptiness, even the most basic of Buddhist practices, like taking refuge in the Triple Gem [Buddha, *dharma* and *sangha*], take on a very different meaning. . . . Yes, these are important questions." I left this meeting filled with excitement and anticipation about what our interview might bring.

The following afternoon, as I walked through his courtyard past three hundred monks reciting memorized prayers as part of a week-long prayer ceremony, I hoped that I would be able to learn as much about His Holiness's personal experience as about the traditional and methodical Gelugpa teachings on empti-

ness, enlightenment and Buddhahood.

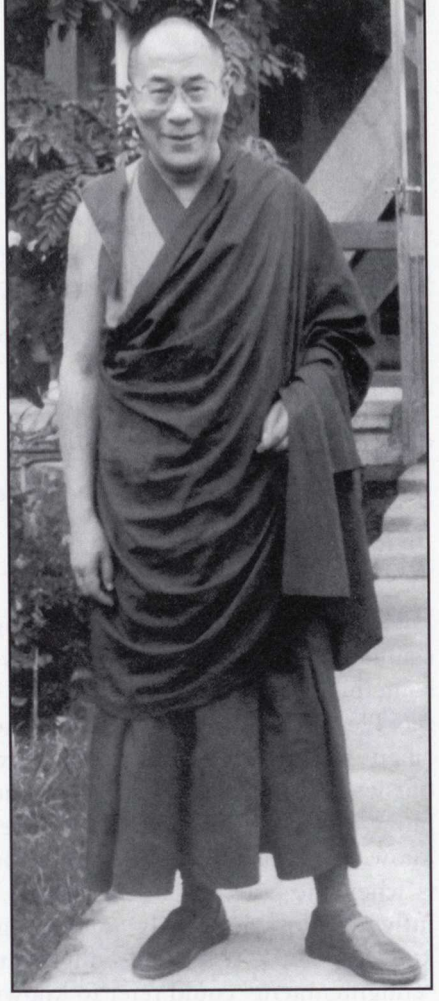
At 1:00 P.M. a beautiful *chuba*-clad Tibetan woman escorted me up the flower-lined drive to His Holiness's offices. We had just finished a passport check and thorough body search, measures to preserve the tenuous security around this individual whose unshakable religious conviction is regarded as a significant threat by one of the most powerful governments of our time.

I was ushered straight into a meeting room, expecting to have a few minutes to set up my tape recorder. It was a surprise then, when the monk fiddling with the air conditioner turned around to greet me. The familiar face and bright black eyes met mine and, not standing on ceremony, the Dalai Lama motioned me to sit down. He was ready to begin. Here was a man, serious and self-contained, the cares that rested on his crimson-robed shoulders completely invisible. What *did* this extraordinary man think about the goal of the Buddhist path?

Traditional Tibetan teachings follow a systematic and predictable structure. Like highly stylized *thangkas* [religious paintings depicting the Buddhas], these teachings on the nature of the human condition and the way out of the suffering of cyclic existence have been codified in a precise and methodical form. And while they represent a very refined science of spiritual endeavor and a complex and subtle explanation of the nature of the human mind, they can often seem more like technical formulas than the outpourings of the highest aspiration of the human heart. In preparing for our interview, one of the challenges we considered was how to ask the Dalai Lama about his *own* experience of these subjects, *classical definitions aside*—how to ask someone so thoroughly schooled in the art of debate, logical deconstruction and analysis to tell us what *he* thinks "emptiness" is.

Interviewing this man whom millions consider to be a living saint was an extraordinary experience. Simply while sitting with him, one experiences his rare sense of goodness, deep faith in humanity and joy. Looking into his gentle face just a few feet from my own and listening to his unforgettable laugh was like being swept up into one of the thousand arms of *Chenrezig* [the Buddha of compassion], which the Dalai Lamas are said to be incarnations of. Throughout the course of our interview, while his translator and foreign religion advisor, the venerable monk Lakhdor, was interpreting his Tibetan, he would laugh and look at me warmly, as if wanting to communicate more than his classical answers were conveying.

But in the end, what was communicated by his disarming sweetness was not communicated in his customary responses, which were, more often than not, disappointingly abstract. They were, I guess not surprisingly, the classic Gelugpa teachings—erudite and prescribed explanations of the stages and categories of enlightenment and emptiness for which this school is known. To my questions about the very core of the Buddhist path, the Dalai Lama had presented the straight Mahayana doctrine according to its fifteen-hundred-year-old tradition. His academic definitions and carefully measured descriptions seemed to convey more concern with giving the traditional view than with a simple, unguarded expression of his own experience.



It was perplexing and fascinating to try to reconcile His Holiness's irresistible, infectious and radiant compassion with his often dry and technical explanations about the very heart of the Buddhist teachings. Tibetan Buddhism, despite its growing popularity in the West, still remains something of an enigma; the contrast between the great stature of some of its revered lamas and the memorized teachings that they so often present once again raises the very challenging question: What *is* enlightenment?

Reflecting on our interview, I again wondered what the Dalai Lama *really* thought. For as I stood in the waiting room afterwards, packing away my tape recorder, still feeling the warmth of his hand pressed on my arm, his translator turned to me with excited eyes and said, "Very good questions, very clear. I think His Holiness really enjoyed this."

Science of Mind

WIE: *The goal of Buddhist practice is said to be enlightenment. While the word "enlightenment" is now commonly used in the West, there are many vastly different definitions of what enlightenment is. In your approach to your own practice, when you think about enlightenment, what are you striving to achieve? What does the goal of enlightenment mean to you personally?*

H.H. THE DALAI LAMA: So, enlightenment! "Consciousness" or "mind" has cognitive ability—there is something *through which* we know. Usually, we say: *"I* see, *I* learn, *I* know, *I* remember." There is one single element that acts as a medium for viewing all objects. At our level, the power or ability to know is very limited, but we have the potential to increase this ability to know. "Buddhahood" or "Buddhahood enlightenment" is when the potential of this ability to know has been fully developed. Merely increasing that capacity of knowing is also a level of enlightenment. So, the term "enlightenment" could refer to knowing something that you did not know or realizing something that you had not realized. But when we speak about enlightenment at the state of Buddhahood, we are speaking about a *fully awakened* state.

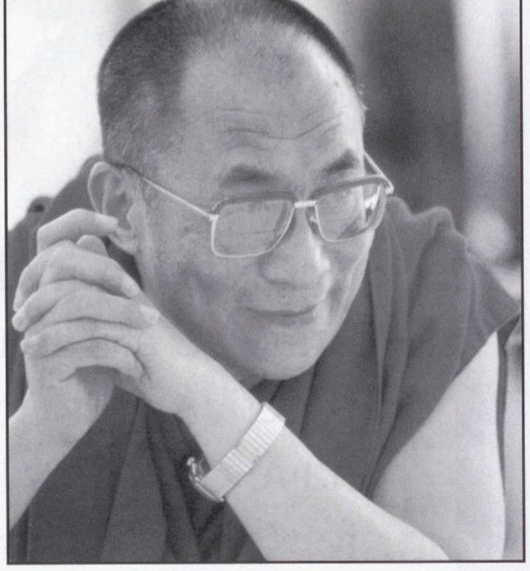
That is why, according to Buddhism, all our efforts ultimately should go to training or shaping our minds. Emotions such as hatred or strong attachment are destructive and harmful—we call them "negative emotions." So how can we reduce these negative emotions? Not through prayer, not through physical exercise, but through training of mind. Through training of mind we try to increase the opposite qualities. When genuine compassion, infinite compassion, or unbiased compassion is increased, hatred is reduced. When equanimity is increased, attachment is reduced. All of these destructive emotions are based on ignorance, and the opposite, or antidote, of ignorance is enlightenment. This is why it is very important to analyze the world of the mind and find out what its basic nature is. What are the different categories of mind? Which minds are destructive? Which minds are constructive? and so on. Once we have analyzed all these questions, then we should try to control our minds by adding more good and removing the bad. Some modern scholars describe Buddhism as a "science of mind" for this very reason.

WIE: *Many people have become interested in Buddhist practice these days as a means of cultivating peace of mind, relaxation or mindful awareness, rather than specifically as a means for reaching enlightenment. In your view, what is the difference between engaging in Buddhist practice for the purpose of gaining relative benefits such as these and practicing with the sincere intention of attaining enlightenment?*

HHDL: Some ideas that come from Buddhism can be implemented without the individual needing to become a Buddhist or even to be a believer in Buddhism—there is no problem with that. Someone who has complete trust and belief in Buddha may try to be a good human being, and they could be considered Buddhist even if they have no particular interest in the next life or in attaining nirvana. But in order to make your practice a *real* Buddhist practice, it is important to have genuine aspiration for the achievement of nirvana or enlightenment.

WIE: *Can you explain why this aspiration is essential?*

HHDL: The definition of Buddhism, I think, is in the teaching of the Four Noble Truths. Once you *know* and *accept* that these are the basic teachings of reality, and you follow and implement these teachings, that is Buddhism. Now, you could still be a Buddhist without that kind of practice. It is not necessary to have a comprehensive understanding of the in-depth meaning of the teaching of the Four Noble Truths to be a simple, ordinary Buddhist. One could simply take refuge in Buddha, *dharma* [teaching] and *sangha* [community of practitioners], do simple practices, and be categorized as a simple Buddhist practitioner. But to become a *genuine* Buddhist practitioner in the true sense, it is important to have an *in-depth* understanding of the teachings of the Four Noble Truths. And for that pursuit, it is important to have a clear idea of nirvana and enlightenment.



No Independent Existence

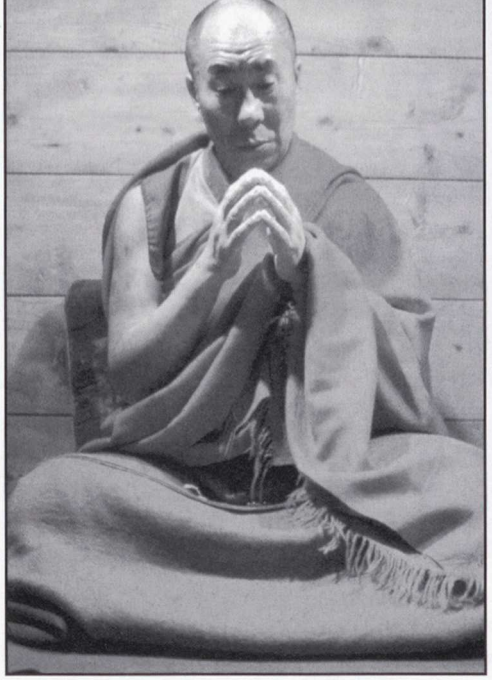
WIE: *The doctrine of "emptiness" is one of the pivotal teachings of the Buddha, and understanding what "emptiness" truly means is said to be critical for those on the Buddhist path. While emptiness has been the subject of extensive commentary, analysis and debate, there seem to be widely different interpretations of what its nature actually is. We have found that some Buddhist schools say that "emptiness" refers to* nothingness, *while others say that "emptiness" implies the existence of* something transcendent. *Would you tell us simply what you feel "emptiness" refers to?*

HHDL: Buddha himself taught different levels of emptiness. But generally, emptiness means the lack of true existence of the "object of negation." To begin with we have to ask: What *is* that object of negation? There are different modes and processes of identifying the object of negation. These include processes for identifying the selflessness of the person, the selflessness of phenomena and so forth. And there are different interpretations and different concepts about emptiness according to different schools of thought.

Now according to *Madhyamika* [the philosophy of the "middle way"], generally, emptiness is the absence of independent existence. So this means that *something* exists, and emptiness is one of the qualifications and characteristics of that which exists. We cannot talk about these qualities in reference to a nonexistent object; there is some base. The absence of independent existence is nature—it is the way of existence—and the absence of *independent* existence is possible only because there *is* something that exists. So therefore, the mere unfindability of the object of designation is not what "emptiness" refers to. If we search for a totally nonexistent object and we do not find it, that is not emptiness. For example, there is no flower on this table. If we look, we see that there is no flower on the table. That "absence" of flower is not emptiness. But now, let us take the example of the tape recorder, and investigate: What is the actual nature of the tape recorder? If you look at the shape, material and color of the tape recorder separately, there is no longer the existence of "tape recorder." So you see, although there *is* a tape recorder, if we investigate its individual qualities and characteristics, we can't find it. Then you can see that "tape recorder" is a mere designation. But, again, the mere "absence" of flower is not emptiness.

WIE: *There is a quote in the Pali* sutras, *in which one of Gautama the Buddha's monks asks him whether there is* "nothing at all" *that exists. This question—whether there is "something" or "nothing"—is an interesting one, because the notion that "nothing at all exists" could easily lead to nihilism. The Buddha is said to have responded definitively to this monk by declaring that there is what he called "an unborn," and it is because of this that the possibility exists of an escape from the suffering of worldly existence. I have heard that some Tibetan sects also describe the existence of "something." Could you explain to us what you think the Buddha meant when he said: "There is that which is not born, not become, not made, not conditioned. If there were not that which is not born, not become, not made, not conditioned, there could be made known no escape from that which is born, become, made, conditioned here. But since there is that which is not born, not become, not made, not conditioned, therefore the escape from that which is born, become, made, conditioned is made known."*

HHDL: This points to exactly what was said earlier. If there was inherent existence *and* inherent causation, then we couldn't escape from *samsara* [cyclic existence]. So therefore what we say is that on the conventional level there *is* a path, there *is* causation and so forth. But because of the fact that the causation has no *inherent* existence, to perceive that causation *does* have inherent existence is



"In order to make your practice a REAL Buddhist practice, it is important to have GENUINE ASPIRATION for the achievement of nirvana or enlightenment."

ignorance. And to be able to perceive that *lack* of causation in the nature of inherent existence is wisdom.

If there were independent existence, then the perception of that existence would be valid. If there were independent existence, then when we investigate to find out whether an object exists *independently* or not, we would have to be able to find it. But when we analyze carefully, we can't find these objects existing independently. This is how we can see that the perception of independent existence is wrong, is *ignorance*, and that the perception of *nonindependent* existence is valid, is wisdom. These two possibilities are in opposition, and when you have two things like this in direct opposition they *cannot* go together; only one could have a valid foundation.

Beyond Good and Evil?

WIE: *Some people say that if one is enlightened, then that individual's actions would have to express goodness. But there are other views, and even entire schools of thought, which hold that one who is enlightened is beyond good and evil, and that the actions of such an individual therefore cannot be judged by others. What is your view on this?*

HHDL: In the nature of emptiness, in the nature of the absence of independent existence, in *that* nature, both bad and good are equal. So when someone meditates on the ultimate reality, in *that* reality there are no differences between bad and good. From the perspective of Buddha, who is in a state of total absorption, there are no differences between good and bad. But even at other levels of practice, when you gain some experience of *shunya*—of the ultimate reality—then in that moment, when your mind is fully absorbed in *that* reality, there is no feeling of good and bad; then *everything is equal.*

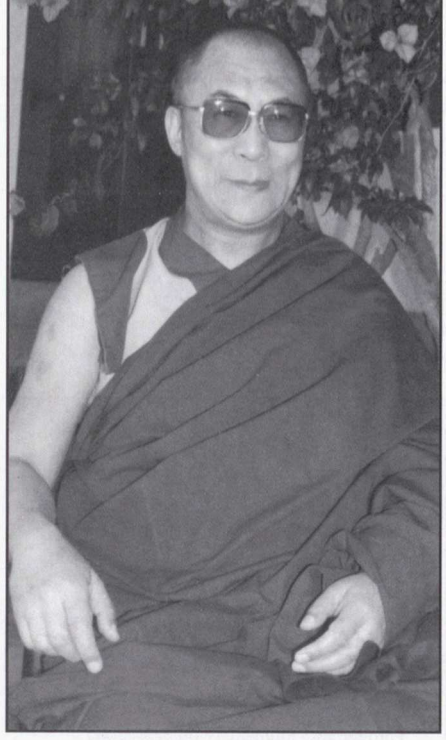
When you deeply experience the ultimate reality, it is so powerful that the understanding of a conventional, objective reality will be very different. For example, if the absorption of one's mind in emptiness is really powerful—*totally* absorbed in the state of ultimate reality or emptiness—the influence and appearance of conventional reality will be almost negligible.

But this does not mean that on the conventional level there are also no differences between bad and good. That's simply not the case. There *is* good and there *is* bad. That's why Buddha himself followed self-discipline. If there were no good and bad, then Buddha could have led a very casual life. So in order to achieve the training of wisdom, we need to practice the training of concentration and meditative stabilization; and in order to do that, we need to have a solid foundation in the practice of morality and ethical discipline.

The Triple Gem

WIE: *As a Buddhist, you formally took refuge in the Buddha,* dharma *and* sangha*—what is known as the "Triple Gem." In the West today, there are numerous interpretations of the significance of each aspect of the Triple Gem, of what taking refuge in each of these aspects means, and even whether refuge in all three is necessary. Do you feel that all three of these aspects are essential parts of taking refuge? And could you please explain the significance of each one?*

HHDL: Of the three objects of refuge, the most important object that you should take refuge in is the *dharma.*



"When your mind is fully absorbed in emptiness, then EVERYTHING IS EQUAL. But this does not mean that on the conventional level there are no differences between bad and good. That's simply not the case. There IS GOOD and there IS BAD. That's why Buddha himself practiced self-discipline. If there were no good or bad, then Buddha could have led a very casual life."

Then the person, or the source of *dharma*, becomes your refuge, and then those beings who follow and practice the *dharma* are also very worthy of respect. These three jewels follow each other, but usually, Buddha comes first. Why? Normally in the course of taking refuge, we take refuge in Buddha first because *dharma* was first taught by teachers, by particular Buddhas.

WIE: *It's interesting that you say that usually refuge is taken first in the Buddha. Having a Buddha or perfect teacher to show the way seems to be almost essential to the path, and you have often spoken about the deep reverence and respect that you have for your teachers. Can you explain more about the value—or the necessity—of having a spiritual teacher?*

HHDL: Without Buddha, I think it is very difficult for a Buddhist practitioner to understand the ultimate reality. These things are difficult. Once Buddha opens our eyes, then of course we have to make effort and investigate. *But there should be someone who opens our mind or shows us the direction.* Therefore Buddha is very important. It is difficult to understand what is Buddha without knowing *dharma*. Once you have genuine faith that comes from an investigation of *dharma*, then naturally there will be a feeling of great closeness and respect for Buddha. It will automatically come. And the same will occur with *sangha*, because *sangha* includes all the great teachers and great practitioners, like Nagarjuna [a revered second-century Buddhist philosopher], all extraordinary human beings. Of course, all these beings were not extraordinary right from the beginning, no. They were ordinary human beings, ordinary sentient beings. Then, through the practice of *Buddha Dharma* they *became* very extraordinary.

But as to whether one really needs their own teacher or not—generally, books can be the teacher. When one Tibetan *lama* was about to die, he said to his disciple, "Now you should no longer rely on a human teacher, but you should rely on books to be your teacher." I think that's very wise. Without investigation and without knowing a person properly you may hurriedly take someone as your guru or teacher, and there is too much involved in guru devotion or guru yoga. So it could land you in trouble. The thorough investigation of a teacher is very, very important.

WIE: *You have spoken about your own spiritual practice and your wish that you could devote more time to it, and I certainly hope that some day circumstances allow that. Many of our readers probably wonder, given your intensive travel schedule and your many responsibilities, how you manage to find the time to do your spiritual practice.*

HHDL: Well, usually my work or program starts at seven or eight in the morning. So I get up at four and then I have at least a few hours to do some meditation, some recitation or some prayers. And then I do what I can whenever I have the time—when I travel by car or train for a long time, it's a very good opportunity to do my recitations. So, like that! ■


JULY
IV

IS BUDDHISM SURVIVING AMERICA?

An interview with the editor of *Tricycle*

Helen Tworkov

IT WAS ONE OF THE FIRST WARM DAYS OF SPRING, AND THE crab apple trees were in bloom all along Riverside Drive. As I entered Manhattan and crossed the crowded and alive streets of the West Village, I found myself wondering: Who *is* Helen Tworkov?

We met in the stairwell on the second floor outside of the *Tricycle* offices, the "smoking annex," where she was perched on a step, finishing a business meeting with her publisher. She shook my hand warmly, looking me straight in the eye. Twenty years my senior, having begun her spiritual

by Amy Edelstein

IS BUDDHISM SURVIVING AMERICA?

quest when I was just learning to walk, Helen Tworkov has lived through many of the critical chapters of American Buddhist history. She was part of the movement that cut the first trails to the East, the movement that made "karma," "nirvana" and "enlightenment" household words.

We first thought of interviewing Helen Tworkov for this issue of *WIE* because she, like almost no one else, has had a bird's eye view of the evolution of the American Buddhist world. The founder and editor of America's most widely circulated Buddhist review, she has met, written about or practiced with many of the most influential Buddhist teachers of our time, both Eastern and Western. But it was not only Tworkov's unique experience that had piqued our interest. Four years ago *Tricycle* had published the bold Afterword to the second edition of her book *Zen in America*, in which she had voiced vociferous criticisms of the watering down of the goal of the Buddha's teachings in America. Her astute insights regarding the assimilation of Buddhism in the West were provocative and illuminating, and she obviously cared passionately about the enlightenment tradition and its future.

When asked how she got involved with Buddhism, Helen Tworkov's eyes brightened; she was still moved by the recollection of what it was that had compelled her to take such unusual risks at such a young age. Agonized by the war in Vietnam and the failure of American culture to provide meaningful answers, she, like others of her generation, had turned toward Asia and Buddhism. In her view, this was a collective movement, a movement for change, a movement to transform what was unacceptable in the society and in the government and, as a logical corollary, a movement to eradicate the roots of that which was unacceptable in themselves.

During this period, Tworkov came across D.T. Suzuki's writings on impermanence and death. "It was so radically different from what my own culture provided," she explains. "It didn't seem mystical or alien; it just seemed *real*. And you didn't have to be a rocket scientist to get it!" So when she was twenty-two, just after John F. Kennedy was assassinated, she headed for Japan, one of the first Westerners, and one of the first Western women, on the Eastern spiritual circuit.

Tworkov found Japan and the Japanese monasteries intimidating and inaccessible, and discovered little that made sense to her in that very foreign culture. But in spite of this, she stayed in Asia for two years—far longer than she had originally planned—eventually traveling from Japan to Nepal, where she worked with Tibetan refugees. Her experiences with the Tibetans marked her deeply. It was only four years after the brutal Chinese invasion of Tibet, and these were people in exile from their homeland, who had fled destruction, torture and the imprisonment and death of thousands of Buddhist monks and nuns. "There was something amazing about working with the Tibetans at that time," she recalls. "Their situation was so rough, and yet they still seemed to be able to access genuine joy and happiness. Given that the refugee camp was filled with individuals who had just seen members of their own families tortured and killed, that was miraculous to me."

Helen Tworkov returned to America in the mid-sixties, by her own account still a "book Buddhist," not knowing how to translate into her own experience the teachings that had captivated her and yet still remained elusive, alien and seemingly only for those born in Asia. By now, the first Japanese teachers had begun touring the States, and only days after Tworkov had returned to the West, *The New York Times* published a front page article announcing the convergence of hippies in Kathmandu. An exodus began for Asia, but Tworkov had resettled in the West. Some years later she started studying with the great Tibetan master Dudjom Rinpoche. She describes him with deep reverence and affection as perhaps the most enlightened man she has ever met, but—at the same time—one to whom she could find no cultural bridges. "I was inspired by him," she explains, "but I couldn't really learn from him." Eventually, she found herself attracted to the teachings of a native New Yorker, Bernard Glassman, who was later to become *dharma* heir [teaching successor] to Taizan Maezumi Roshi. Even at the time, she thought it ironic that she would be studying Zen after her experience in Japan. But the shift, she explains, was not so much from Tibetan Buddhism to Zen Buddhism as from Asian teachers to American teachers. With Glassman there was no language barrier, and she didn't have to build any social or cultural bridges. But though her American teachers could speak the same language and understand her cultural background and questions, it is to her Asian teachers that she looks when recalling those individuals she has known who had authentic "awakened mind," who were "holders of the transmission" in the truest sense of the term

and who, because of who they were, could communicate a real and palpable sense of what she calls "the unknowable and unthinkable" to their students.

In her Afterword to *Zen in America,* Tworkov describes the rarity of the enlightened perspective, and succinctly and unflinchingly articulates her observations about how the significance of enlightenment has been minimized in American Zen. We were struck by her impassioned critique and her willingness to question, in a way that few others have dared to do, what is being taught as the path to awakening in many contemporary American Buddhist institutions. And we were excited and even relieved to have come across her views, for we had begun to arrive at similar conclusions ourselves while putting together this issue of *WIE,* and had been wondering—were we missing something essential?

Published in *Tricycle* under the title "Zen in the Balance: Can It Survive America?" Tworkov's Afterword provoked a loud uproar in Buddhist circles. In it, she unreservedly criticizes a Buddhism that has lost its real *dharma* heirs, that has "co-opted enlightenment to add to a materialistic and self-serving lifestyle," and that views the pursuit of the goal of enlightenment as "an obstacle to," rather than the purpose of, spiritual practice. Although she refers primarily to the denigration of enlightenment in American Zen, her reflections on the idiosyncratic influences of American culture on contemporary Buddhism in general are insightful and hard-hitting. We were therefore very interested to find out if she felt her stark critique of Zen in America applied equally to the other Western schools of Buddhism. If she saw the same dissipation of the goal of awakening and cynicism about the potential for radical personal transformation that she had observed in American Zen, then what, we wanted to ask her, did she see as the future, and for that matter, the present state of Buddhism in America?

Tworkov's firsthand observations of the coming of age of American Buddhism have led her to think deeply about the fallout from the failure of many teachers to uphold moral values, and about the tenacious independence and individualism, perhaps particular to Americans, that she terms "libertine antagonism to authority." Both of these factors, she believes, have served to diminish the role, purpose and value of awakening among Zen Buddhists. In her Afterword, she responds unequivocally to this phenomenon, describing how "the quest for enlightenment has been derided of late as [a] romantic and mythic aspiration." She laments the "denigration of enlightenment" as a "grievous and perhaps peculiarly American misinterpretation" of some of the great Zen masters' teachings about the goal of the spiritual path. And in contrast to this view, she holds up the passion for change that brought Buddhism to America in the first place: "The original enthusiasm . . . was not just for personal discovery, but for the possibility of developing an appreciation for the unknown in an excessively cluttered society—it was an effort to break ground for new possibilities."

Speaking with Helen Tworkov was a genuine pleasure and raised important questions about the kinds of effects our materialistic and gratification-oriented culture has had on what has traditionally been a renunciate tradition. Her personal involvement in the maturation of Buddhism in America offers us a view of our society and its influence on spiritual seekers that is penetrating and provocative, and which leaves us with the question: Is Buddhism surviving America?

WIE: *You've been watching the American Buddhist landscape for twenty-five years both as a practitioner and in your role as the editor of* Tricycle *magazine.*

HELEN TWORKOV: Yes, it's my favorite soap opera.

WIE: *Can you say a little bit about how you've seen that landscape change?*

HT: There have been big changes. These days people seem to know about Buddhism, and they seem to be very interested in it. At this moment, it doesn't seem to be adversarial to the society in any way—for better and for worse. In the sixties there was a tremendous rejection of the society and a quest for personal and social transformation, and there is no way to separate the Buddhist boom in America that was initiated at that time from the Vietnam War and from drugs. They are really inseparable. There was real despair about what was going on in Asia—the religions that we had grown up with in our Judeo-Christian culture had simply failed to provide any spiritual or moral fiber—so there was extreme disappointment in our country. Many of us who started practicing then were motivated by a very genuine combination of interest in both personal and social transformation. It was all about change—we wanted change. We wanted to change ourselves, we wanted to change our society and we wanted to change the world. And I think that this desire came from a very genuine place.

WIE: *Has that changed over the years?*

HT: Yes. Right now we see a whole new generation of people coming to Buddhism, but if there is a collective motive among them in the way there was for us, I'm not sure what it is. We were a big wave. We had our music, we had our books, we had our heroes and we had our choices at that moment. Now I see much more subtle currents motivating the people in their twenties who are coming into Buddhism, and I don't know if they even know what they are. I don't know if they've come together in a way that's allowed them even to formulate or articulate a collective motive. There's such a tremendous sense of alienation in our culture. I think they would like to feel themselves to be a part of something. There's so little cohesion and so much disintegration that in a way it's made these young people more available for the *dharma* [Buddhist teaching], more ripe for the possibility of discovering a new sense of identity that is not steeped in a cultural identity.

WIE: *Historically, Buddhism has had to adapt each time it has entered a new culture, as, for example, when Buddhism went from India to Tibet, China and Japan. In the Afterword to the second edition of your book* Zen in America—

HT: That Afterword got me into a lot of trouble! [Laughs.]

WIE: *Well, you made some fascinating observations. In it you seem to suggest that Buddhism's adaptation to American culture is* qualitatively *different from any adaptation it has previously had to make. Because in attempting to take root in America, Buddhism has encountered and has had to adapt itself to a society that, as you say, "fails to recognize or validate the enlightenment experience." Could you explain what you mean by that and what you've observed?*

HT: Do you want to talk about it specifically in terms of enlightenment?

WIE: *Yes.*

HT: Well, when we started off practicing, we didn't know what enlightenment was, and we still don't—we have no idea. But the way we think about it has shifted. If you go back to before the sixties, you find that Zen practice was the first, most extensive kind of Buddhism that was picked up by the new Buddhists in this country. D.T. Suzuki had a tremendous amount to do with developing and creating a climate for Zen practice in America, and he had a great deal to say about enlightenment. He talked about *satori* and *kensho* [enlightenment experiences]. What happened in this country is that we developed all these ideas about enlightenment, about emptiness and about what Zen practice was all about. And then we got tremendously disappointed in our teachers. That happened after about twenty years of practice in the Zen centers. In that time, we also went from being in our twenties to being in our forties. We became middle-aged,

"THE DANGER THAT ANY DHARMA TRADITION IS GOING TO ENCOUNTER HERE IS THAT WE WANT THE DHARMA TO ACCOMMODATE ITSELF TO US—WE DON'T WANT TO ACCOMMODATE OURSELVES TO THE DHARMA. THAT'S THE AMERICAN WAY."

many people had children, and then there was a need to figure out how we were going to live in this society of ours with our conventional needs. One of the biggest differences we've seen in America is that there's been no great interest in monasticism.

WIE: *You're describing what has happened in the Zen community in America, but would you say the same kinds of things have occurred in the other Buddhist schools in America as well?*

HT: Yes. Except that the Zen tradition has always been more affiliated with monasticism.

WIE: *You've made some interesting observations about American culture and how what you call "secular materialism" in America is influencing the way the Buddhist community is interpreting ideas like enlightenment and what it means to live an enlightened life. Today, for example, in the most popular schools of contemporary Western Buddhism, teachers and practitioners speak about bringing enlightenment into everyday life. The term "everyday Zen" perhaps best epitomizes this school of thought, even though this concept is not limited to Zen. Some popular Vipassana schools similarly refer to "mindful awareness in everyday life"—mindful awareness while you're getting into a relationship, child-rearing and making money. My question is: Is America reshaping Buddhism according to its own secular and materialistic agenda? Are practitioners in the American Buddhist community trying to add enlightenment to their lives just as they are without changing anything?*

HT: Yes, I think they are. Of course, that's the danger that any *dharma* tradition is going to have here. We want the *dharma* to accommodate itself to us; we don't want to accommodate ourselves to the *dharma*. That's the American way.

There were lifestyles that evolved in Buddhist countries that required you to accommodate yourself to *it*, whatever that "it" was. There was value in just having to say, "I have to take off this set of clothes and wear that set of clothes. I have to get up at 4:45 A.M. whether I want to or I don't want to." But in this country, our daily life is made up of endless decisions that are all totally inconsequential. Do you want to buy a Chevrolet or a Ford? All day long we're being asked to say, "What do *I* want?" Sure, you can unhook your own ego and your own personal little selfish self in the midst of this everyday life.

"THE HOUSEHOLDER LIFE HAS LONG BEEN LAUDED AS AN EXEMPLARY WAY TO PRACTICE ZEN. BUT TODAY THE HOUSEHOLDER DISCOURSE IS TOO OFTEN USED TO JUSTIFY HAVING ONE'S CAKE AND EATING IT TOO—ONE CAN HAVE SEX, MAKE BABIES, HOLD A JOB, DEVELOP A CAREER, KEEP HOUSE AND USE EACH OF THESE ACTIVITIES AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO PRACTICE WITHOUT MISSING A BEAT IN TERMS OF SPIRITUAL ASPIRATION."

—from the Afterword to *Zen in America*

But you have to be a spiritual genius because you're being assaulted all day long with a decision-making process that reinforces and reifies the small self. So yes, you can do it, but—

WIE: *The culture doesn't support it.*

HT: No, not in the least, no.

WIE: *In your Afterword you also wrote, "The most compelling question today is whether the Americanization of Zen now underway is a necessary process of cultural adaptation, or if what we have confidently called 'Americanization' has become a justification for the co-optation of Zen by secular materialists."*

HT: Probably one of the traditions that lends itself *least* to the secularization of Buddhism is Zen. You can have a completely secular Tibetan Buddhism and the same thing may be true of southeast Asian Buddhism, whereas I personally think that the best of Zen perhaps needs the monastery. I'm not sure that you can really get it in a secular society, because Zen plays with reality in a way that your PTA meeting wouldn't allow. There are many traditions in which the lines between lay and monastic, mystical and mundane, ordinary and extraordinary, or

esoteric and exoteric can be very gentle paths that lead from one to the other. Zen is the one tradition where it feels to me that really too much gets lost in the process of secularization. The quirkiness of Zen—the total, complete transcendence of conventional form—can only take place in a highly secure, collective, shared sphere that allows for this. You can't just walk around the world appearing crazy. It doesn't have any value for people.

WIE: *Monasticism and renunciation have traditionally occupied a central role in Buddhism. Gautama the Buddha found it essential to renounce everything, leaving his kingdom in his quest for enlightenment. Apparently, he also passionately encouraged many others to do the same. Today, this kind of renunciation is rarely spoken about within American Buddhist circles and, as you have observed, monasticism has never really taken root among Western Buddhist groups. Yet there are people like Professor Robert Thurman who feel that Buddhism can never take root in America without a living monastic tradition. What do you think about this?*

HT: I agree with that.

WIE: *Is it because monasticism itself is important, or because of the quality of renunciation that monasticism requires?*

HT: I think that you have to have a concrete physical space that becomes a pressure cooker for practice. It's going to be very hard to go deep with the *dharma* without having that distilled place where we say, "This is all we're supposed to do." Today you have all these Buddhists running around and they're supposed to get enlightened, they're supposed to be very nice to everybody, they're supposed to be carrying out the precepts—and that's all possible—but meanwhile they're also raising children and furthering their careers and building houses and doing this and doing that. The role of the monk is to just do the *dharma*.

WIE: *Is this kind of renunciation being spoken about among Western Buddhists? Or are most individuals putting their attention on "how can I do* everything *that I want to do* and *be on the path to enlightenment?" Because as you said, monasteries are a pressure cooker—and they're a pressure cooker for what? To make something happen, to move from ignorance to enlightenment. It would seem that this is something that very few modern Westerners are interested in.*

HT: Yes. You asked before about the society being antagonistic to any kind of spiritual development. Well, this society, for example, is unbelievably antagonistic to silence. It finds silence extremely threatening. It's not coincidental that you have so few monasteries here and that even the Christian monasteries are practically extinct. The monastery represents silence; it represents a space in the culture that says, "Stop, slow down, be quiet." Whether it's a Christian or a Buddhist monastery, it's a physical space that says, "Just quiet down." But our society doesn't like that. It's very threatening. If you make a lot of noise, then everyone's very happy.

Of course, there is the possibility of creating temporary situations that can give people a very deep experience and a real taste of what renunciation means, which can then be brought back into society. Maybe in this country we'll develop a temporary ordination, something similar to what you have in southeast Asia and in the Far East or in Tibet. Somebody I know recently referred to periods of intense practice as "binge Buddhism"—and they referred to themselves as a "binge Buddhist."

WIE: *What does that mean?*

HT: They said they go on retreat for three weeks and then they don't practice again until the next time they go on retreat.

WIE: *What do you think about that?*

HT: It's better than not doing anything at all.

WIE: *But isn't there a danger that if the "binge Buddhist" model becomes the most popular model, it could dilute genuine aspiration for radical change?*

HT: Of course. But look at the history of Asia. Why is America going to do something that's radically different than India, Tibet, Japan, China, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Cambodia or Vietnam? Very few people are interested in getting enlightened, very few people are interested in waking themselves up, very few people are interested in truly living in a nondualistic view. So when you talk about "enlightenment," you're talking about only a handful of people. Meanwhile, you've got all the rest of humanity suffering and you try to do what you can to create an environment or an awareness that helps to alleviate that.

WIE: *Is there any way, though, within the context of this pluralistic view, to insure that regardless of whether or not I personally choose to give my life to that supreme possibility, or whether or not Jane Doe or John Schwartz does, that that possibility itself isn't being diluted—that enlightenment*

"THE DENIGRATION [OF ENLIGHTENMENT] VOICED BY MANY AMERICANS HAS BEEN TOO OFTEN ACCOMPANIED BY AN UNACKNOWLEDGED LACK OF ASPIRATION, AN APPEAL FOR APPROVAL FROM THE DOMINANT CHRISTIAN CULTURE, AN ATTACHMENT TO PERSONAL COMFORT, AND AN INDULGENT LIFESTYLE."

—from the Afterword to *Zen in America*

is still being viewed as the ultimate or supreme possibility—and that one would also know if one wasn't *striving for that? That, to me, is the question: What is American Buddhism doing with* enlightenment?

HT: I think that's a really good point. My hope would be that a monastic situation would create that witness. But again, if you look at Asia, it's not necessarily true. In fact, it's not unlike what happened in the Roman Catholic Church. The bureaucracy of the Church eventually just ate up every shred of mystical possibility, so that it was no longer being imbued with any mystical elements. The question is—how can you maintain something within the culture so that the enlightenment tradition within a secularized Buddhism actually can function to enlighten or awaken? How can you keep some dialogue going? In the Church, the dialogue got broken, at least as far as we know. You grow up in the West never knowing that anybody in the Church ever contemplated the reality of *not-knowing* at all—which of course they did.

WIE: *Yes, they must have.*

HT: If you read the writings of the early church fathers, they sound exactly like the Zen masters, but that's not what we were taught. This was something that we, as secular people, didn't have access to. So as far as I'm concerned, the best we can do is to keep the channels of communication open within a pluralistic, diverse kind of Buddhism, because of course it's a given that you're going to have a very secular Buddhism. Whether or not it's going to be any more interesting than secular anything else, I really don't know—it might not be.

But on the other hand, I think Buddhism has an enormous amount to offer to this country and is having a tremendous effect on the consciousness of America. You don't have to have a big mystical relationship to life to understand what the value of Buddhism could be or what the need is—and you don't have to be a rocket scientist or St. John of the Cross to see it. You can see Buddhist views filtering down into the death-and-dying literature and into some of the environmental move-

ments, with a kind of pragmatism that in my mind is not a mystical approach, it's just a realistic approach.

WIE: *I agree with you about the kind of influence Buddhism can have on a relative level, but you made some pretty provocative statements in your Afterword to* Zen in America. *You made very clear the distinction between effecting change on a relative level—raising the standard of ethics or morality, for example—and interpreting one's experience from an enlightened point of view or having one's actions be an expression of a truly enlightened perspective. You said that replacing the goal of enlightenment with a goal of ethical behavior* uninformed by an awakened mind *"both feeds on and fuels the human resistance to the unknown and the unknowable, which lies at the heart of all religious pursuit."*

HT: That's right. But it all has to go on at the same time, because the effect of any one person's enlightenment is only going to be as far-reaching as the rest of the society is prepared to go.

WIE: *Can you explain what you mean?*

HT: Well, you can have a great saint in your midst, but how fertile is the ground to receive what they have to offer? Very few people *want* to get enlightened. Maybe that's something that happens in the evolutionary process of humanity—I have no idea. I don't know whether people these days want to be more or less enlightened than they did two thousand years ago. But it's absolutely true that we want to know about things. And we don't want to know about not knowing. Very few people want to know about *that.*

WIE: *Do you think that Buddhist practitioners nowadays* know *that they don't want that?*

HT: No, I don't—I don't.

WIE: *Do you think they're deluded? Do they think they want enlightenment?*

HT: Of course they're deluded! Of course. Who among us is not deluded?

WIE: *I mean in terms of one's basic understanding of one's own relationship to the path. One could know, for instance, that one wants to be a good samaritan, wants to be generous, wants to be compassionate—but* doesn't *want to be enlightened.*

HT: Yes, and I think that one of the things that's happening now is that people have grown up and found out that maybe they don't want what they thought they wanted. You're on the path for twenty years and you've taken all these vows of renunciation and then you find out that you don't want to renounce anything. I described a conversation in the Afterword I'd had with a Buddhist teacher, who said, "I don't give a shit about enlightenment." Now that's a very silly attitude for any Buddhist to take, be it a Zen Buddhist or anybody else.

But what we're seeing is that now we have a group of people who are disappointed with their practice. You could sit for twenty years and not get enlightened. So you say, "Hey, what happened? To hell with this tradition. I didn't get enlightened, so screw it." You get disappointed and then you start changing your view about it. This change in view is going to secularize the teachings. The secularization is coming from people who have had a big falling out with their teacher. They discover that they don't like their teacher or that their teacher is not who they thought he or she was. Then their views change through anger, through bitterness and through disappointment—it doesn't really matter why. Still, the secularization of these teachings is inevitable. There are very few people who want to go the distance with living a truly mature, authentic, nondualistic or autonomous life.

WIE: *Right, that's true.*

HT: But that doesn't mean you can dismiss the rest of it, because the rest of it has tremendous—

WIE: *Relative value.*

HT: Yes.

WIE: *But what will help to keep the enlightenment tradition alive?*

HT: I think monasteries represent that, and it's important to have that representation. It doesn't mean they are enlightenment factories, but they are beacons of that possibility. It's very hard to create beacons of that possibility without it. I don't know that you *can't* do it; it's just difficult.

In the Jewish tradition you don't have a history of monasticism, and you don't have a strong living enlightenment tradition outside of the Hassidim [an orthodox branch of Judaism]. But if you look at Hassidic culture, it's about as monastic as you can get. It has sex and babies

but it basically takes all the men and women and children and brings them together into a pressure cooker situation in which the Rebbe is like a Zen master. He has all these ecstatic experiences and incredible enlightenment visions, and whatever he says goes.

WIE: *He was involved in every aspect of community life.*

HT: Absolutely. The Rebbe is like a monastic in the sense that he spends his entire day engaged in the tradition and reading the traditional texts. So from an anthropological point of view, a great deal of what would define the "enlightenment factory" elements of a monastery would apply to the structure of the Hassidim.

WIE: *So do you think it's important for the teachers of the* dharma *in the West to have some kind of realization?*

HT: Yes, of course. I would love to see all the teachers become fully realized, but the sad truth is that they're not. We see more and more teachers who are teaching who don't have a clue about it. That's inevitable. That's just the way it's going to work out.

WIE: *But how do you feel about it, besides recognizing that it's inevitable?*

HT: Well, there are a lot of teachers who are teaching Zen who are Zen *senseis* [teachers] or Zen *roshis* [masters] or whatever, and in a perfect world, in the Zen tradition they would have at least some experience of—

WIE: *The nondual?*

HT: Well, I'm sure they do have some experience of that. But they would be accomplished in their understanding. And that's clearly not the case right now. When you look at the teachers who taught the previous generation and you look at the American heirs of those teachers, there's a big difference. That's true across the board, whether you're talking about Tibetan Buddhism or Zen or Theravada. And the people who are the most aware of it are the American teachers—the teachers who studied with *real* teachers. They know the difference; they're not stupid.

It's hard to express to people who have come to the Buddhist community recently—the second and third generation of practitioners—how unbelievably lucky we were in the sixties and the seventies to have the teachers who came here. These were not ordinary Buddhist teachers; we got the cream of the crop as far as I could tell. Even before His Holiness the Dalai Lama came to the West, we had Dudjom Rinpoche, Kalu Rinpoche, the Karmapa and Trungpa Rinpoche. There was an extraordinary level of *dharma* coming in.

WIE: *You're describing people who emanated a certain kind of realization.*

HT: Yes, and the same thing in Zen—you look at Soen Roshi, Yasutani Roshi, even Nyogen Senzaki—you're not talking about your average Zen abbots. These guys who came were really very extraordinary! So of course at some point, Buddhism is either going to stay in this kind of little, elitist situation or it's going to spread. The secularization of the teachings is inevitable. There's no point in bemoaning it; it has to happen. Buddhism, like any tradition that's been around 2,500 years, is enormously flexible, otherwise it would have never gotten past India.

WIE: *You said earlier that you felt that many of the teachers teaching today don't have the same kind of transmission of awakened mind that their teachers did—*

HT: Yes, but I have to deal with my own preconceptions. I was trained and influenced by teachers who were extremely strict on issues of *dharma* transmission. Some of these same teachers are now giving *dharma* transmission to every Tom, Dick and Harry that comes along. They changed. So maybe I have to look at where I'm stuck.

WIE: *Perhaps, but earlier you referred to striving for that which you call "the unknowable" and "the unthinkable." You seemed to be suggesting that if a teacher is teaching scholastic* dharma, *without communicating the essence of the spiritual path and goal, then something essential is being lost.*

HT: We don't know yet. Maybe there is. At least with all of these teachers in the Zen tradition, their students are sitting regularly. Maybe the best anybody can do is to show people the meditation cushion.

WIE: *Is that what you think?*

HT: Of course I would rather that everybody was studying with wildly enlightened masters. Show me one. Of course! Wouldn't it be great if the world was populated with fully awakened, enlightened people? Wouldn't that be a wonderful thing? It doesn't seem to be that way.

WIE: *You're saying, "Wouldn't it be great if they were enlightened?" Someone else might say, "Well, I don't mind. I*

don't mind if someone just shows me the cushion." So you obviously feel that there's a big difference between having an enlightened teacher and having an unenlightened teacher.

HT: No, actually, I'm not sure that there is. How many people can use an enlightened teacher? You're trying to box me into a place of yes or no, but we just don't know. For example, I think *Tricycle* is enormously valuable. But it's not an enlightened magazine. All it's doing is introducing people to the *dharma.* People have to find their own way and they have to be inspired by their own perceptions.

As a Buddhist and as a practitioner, I'm always going to be interested in Buddhism. I'm always going to be interested in Zen. I love the tradition. But as an editor, what preoccupies me is, "What does Buddhism have to offer this country that's not already here?" If all you're doing is doubling up what's already here through the Christian and Jewish traditions, then it seems to me to be a complete waste of time. Take "engaged Buddhism" as an example. There's certainly no problem with any individual Buddhist who wants to work in a prison or an AIDS hospice, or whatever it is they want to do. It's wonderful work. Yet personally I've never known what makes any of those programs Buddhist. And I've also never known what makes them "engaged Buddhists" rather than just Buddhists. I've read a lot about "engaged Buddhism"; it sounds a lot like Buddhism. I've never gotten the distinction. I also haven't seen that that kind of activity is different than a lot of Christian charity work. The true sense of Christian charity is wonderful. And it's not that it's not wonderful to do AIDS work or hospice work or whatever kind of charity work it is. But I'm more interested in seeing what Buddhism has to offer that we don't already have here. We already have a sense of social action that's deeply part of our culture.

WIE: *So what do you feel Buddhism has to offer?*

HT: I think that what Buddhism has to offer that's not in this culture are teachings on the nature of mind. Understanding that your own mind has the capacity to create a tremendous amount of suffering for yourself and others, and also that it has the capacity to dissolve a great deal of suffering for yourself and for others. You don't have to be a mystical genius to use those teachings to help your life a great deal. We're talking in a very profound and subtle way about the nature of mind, and when you take on the possibility of a nondualistic reality, even the sense of compassion becomes different.

WIE: *When you speak about understanding the nature of mind, are you speaking in any sense about a realization of*

the Absolute or some sense of the nondual? Do you think that the difference between what you refer to as Christian ethics and what Buddhism has to offer as an ethical perspective comes from an awakened mind, comes from some understanding of the nondual?

HT: Yes, but again, there's probably about a half-dozen people who genuinely, truly can tolerate the heat of living in a completely nondualistic reality.

WIE: *But thank God we have those examples so we know that there is something higher to strive for, because without them or the writings about them—*

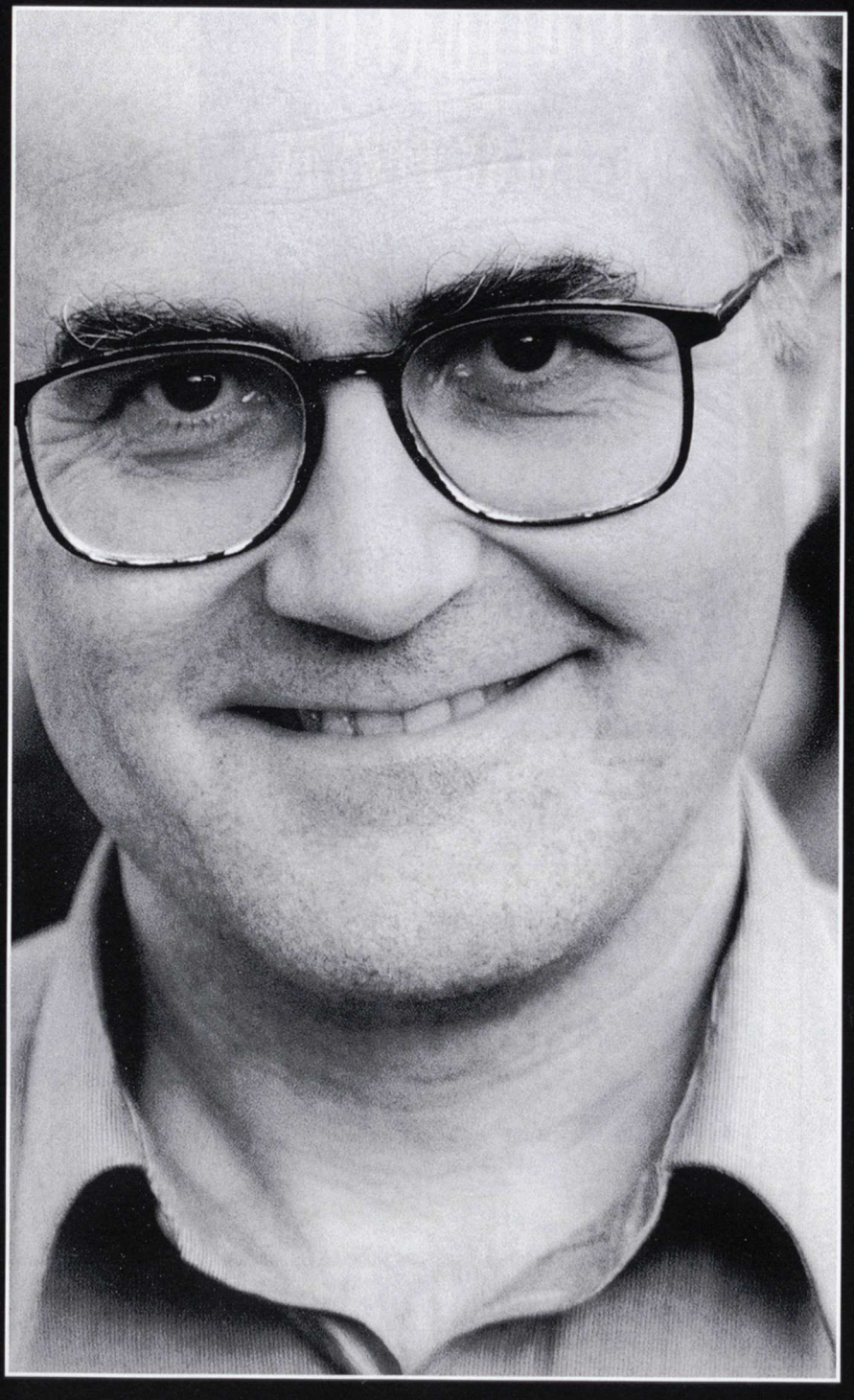
HT: Sure, and it would be great to have those teachings of Buddhism manifested by a mind that is so empty that you get a taste of that capacity yourself. You have to have some experience of the possibility of emptying your mind out or it just becomes theoretical. But even in theory it's pretty powerful.

The teachings of mind *are* the enlightenment tradition. Those teachings are very alien to this culture but they can be brought into this culture in a widespread and beneficial way. They can have enormous effects on society and on the sense of responsibility that people have for themselves and for others around them. That is the enlightenment tradition.

WIE: *I have one last question for you: Imagine you leave your apartment in Chelsea and you walk downtown to the* Tricycle *offices. As you get to Vandam, you look down the street and to your surprise you see a throng of ten or twenty thousand monks and nuns crowding the entire block. You make your way through the mass of monks and nuns to your building. When you get to the entrance, you look up and see someone standing before the door—it is none other than the Buddha himself. As you look at him, you have* absolutely *no doubt that it is, indeed, the Buddha. If this were to happen, and if he looked at you and said, "Okay, Helen, your time has come. Leave everything and come join my order of monks and nuns,"—would you do it?*

HT: I have no idea! It's so hypothetical, I can't even imagine it! It's not even a fantasy I can imagine. I feel like I'm disappointing you, but I can't even *think* about it. It's too hypothetical for me. I'm just trying to get to the place where I walk out the door and down the street, do you know what I'm saying? I'm still dealing with walking down the street! ■

ABSOLUTELY



NOT!

an interview with Stephen Batchelor

the author of *Buddhism without Beliefs*

"I was walking through a pine forest, returning to my hut along a narrow path trodden into the steep slope of the hillside. I struggled forward carrying a blue plastic bucket filled with fresh water that I had just collected from a source at the upper end of the valley. I was then suddenly brought to a halt by the upsurge of an overwhelming sense of the sheer mystery of everything. It was as though I were lifted up onto the crest of a shivering wave, which abruptly swelled from the ocean that was life itself. 'How is it that people can be unaware of this most obvious question?' I asked myself. 'How can anyone pass their life without responding to it?'"

This experience, which befell Stephen Batchelor some twenty years ago during his tenure as a Tibetan Buddhist monk in

by Andrew Cohen

ABSOLUTELY NOT!

Dharamsala, India, and which he later recorded in his book *The Faith to Doubt*, was not, he says, "an illumination in which some final, mystical truth became momentarily very clear. For it gave me no answers. It only revealed the massiveness of the question." As a result, it seems, Batchelor became something of a "Renaissance monk," reading widely in Western philosophy, psychology and theology, and pursuing with particular interest "the ways in which existentialist concepts were used to understand religious experience." His intriguingly spare interpretation of his own experience was ultimately to provide the long-term model for an agnostic approach to spiritual life perhaps best articulated in his credo, "Questioning is the track on which the centered person moves." It is an approach he has pursued quite actively ever since, and to which, no longer as a monk but as an influential author, scholar, meditation teacher and director of the Sharpham College for Buddhist Studies in Devon, England, he remains unwaveringly faithful to this day.

The essence of Batchelor's view is that there is no truly authentic response to human life that does not acknowledge its inherent and underlying existential uncertainty. Western practitioners of Buddhism cannot hope to become truly free, he insists, as long as they walk the Buddhist path in thrall to an accumulation of unexamined dogmas—dogmas that have obscured and distorted their perception of the Buddha's message and inhibited their ability to give fresh and authentic cultural expression to their own distinct existential "perplexity." The aim of Batchelor's radical approach to the Buddha's teaching is therefore to liberate it from all the nonessential trappings of "religion" and "spirituality" that have effectively choked off what he takes to be its no-frills revelation of the existential dilemma of human life. "As in the beautiful parable of the raft," he writes, "the *dharma* [teaching] is merely a temporary device to get you from one side of a river to another. Its meaning is completely distorted if it is raised to the status of an end in itself. For myself, the end for which the Buddhist path is the means can only be the penetration of this mystery of being thrown into birth only to be ejected again at death."

With the publication of his book *Buddhism without Beliefs,* Batchelor hopes to propel the ever evolving teaching of Gautama the Buddha forward into yet another—the lightest and least encumbered by orthodoxy to date—of its unique historical incarnations. "While we may find certain stylistic aspects of his teaching alien . . . the wheel of *dharma* set in motion by the Buddha [has] continued to turn after his death, generating ever new and startling cultures of awakening," he writes. "The challenge now is to imagine and create a culture of awakening that both supports individual *dharma* practice and addresses the dilemmas of an agnostic and pluralist world."

Without question, Batchelor's blueprint for the future

What is enlightenment? Is it the final and irrevocable realignment of a human consciousness with the ultimate meaning and purpose of life—or the unobscured perception of a random and contingent reality in which any sense of purpose is a product of human invention?

INTRODUCTION by Simeon Alev

of a secularized Western Buddhism is daringly bold and revolutionary. And one can only admire his courageous willingness to stand alone, within his own chosen tradition, against the unquestioned adherence to Buddhist doctrines and practices that have lost their meaning for contemporary practitioners. Nevertheless, the fact that Batchelor sees his reformulation of the *Buddha Dharma* as an adaptation to the pluralistic climate of Western postmodernism caused us some existential perplexity of our own. The most salient characteristic of contemporary Western culture would seem to be an obsessive preoccupation with such noble ideologies as relativism, subjectivity and personal autonomy. It may well be, in fact, that Buddhism in all its globetrotting has never encountered a culture quite so at odds with the austerity and selflessness traditionally thought to be crucial to the pursuit of enlightenment. This prompted us to wonder whether the adjustments Buddhism might have to make in order to become truly "postmodern" could ever lead to anything other than the loss of its very heart. Could a teaching whose goal is enlightenment really be accommodated to the individualistic imperatives of the contemporary West? The answer to this question hinges, we realized, on a determination of what the "heart" of Buddhism actually is, and ultimately on our understanding of the nature of enlightenment itself. It is in light of the incredible variety of contrasting views on this subject, which seem to be able to coexist within even a single tradition such as Buddhism, that we have asked: What *is* enlightenment? Is it, as Andrew Cohen believes, the discovery and realization of a singular and timeless *absolute context* for all human experience which, once it is recognized, can only be surrendered to? Or is it rather, as Stephen Batchelor's existentialist reading of the Buddha's attainment seems to suggest, a more *relative* matter—a courageous willingness to confront, over and over again and in an endless variety of circumstances, the inherent emptiness and essential mysteriousness of existence? Is it the final and irrevocable realignment of a human consciousness with the ultimate meaning and purpose of life—or the unobscured perception of a random and contingent reality in which any sense of purpose is a product of human invention?

These are subtle but vitally important questions, because the ability to distinguish that which is absolute from that which is relative, far from being a matter of mere semantics, could be said to be the foundation for any clear understanding of what enlightenment is and is not. This crucial distinction between absolute and relative is the subject of the fascinating dialogue you are about to read, which, in the subtlety of its discrimination and the urgent liveliness of its back-and-forth, resembles nothing so much as the "*dharma* debate" said to have been an important feature of Buddhist life in the bygone eras of its rich and varied history.

Buddhism without Beliefs

ANDREW COHEN: *After reading your book,* Buddhism without Beliefs, *it was clear to me that you could be seen as a revolutionary in the field of contemporary Buddhism in that you seem to be trying to present the essence of what the Buddha taught free of any cultural baggage, including all forms of what could be regarded by the contemporary mind as superstitious ideas or beliefs.*

STEPHEN BATCHELOR: Yes, some people might say that, I suppose.

AC: *Before we begin, though, I'd like to be certain that I have as clear an understanding as possible of exactly what you mean by "Buddhism without beliefs."*

SB: Yes, good. The expression "Buddhism without beliefs" is not meant to suggest that beliefs are completely dispensable in every sense of the word "belief." One still has to believe—if one is doing a practice, for example—that it has value, that it's worthwhile, that it's *worth* sitting on a cushion; and that is definitely one form of belief. But the way I'm mainly using the word "belief," as you've correctly understood, is to express the idea that the practice of Buddhism is somehow contingent upon buying into certain *metaphysical* beliefs. We may or may not think of such beliefs as superstitious, but they usually *are* views of the world that we are expected to accept on the basis of a kind of blind devotion or faith, without actually having any experience of our own on the basis of which to accept or reject them. So "Buddhism without dogma" would perhaps be more precise. I don't think it really *matters,* you see, what one's metaphysical views are, because the practice of Buddhism, as I try to make clear in the book, is to my mind a practice of freeing ourselves from certain psychological delusions.

AC: *I see. And since you are advocating what you refer to as a kind of "agnostic Buddhism," and devote an entire chapter of your book to a discussion of "agnosticism," could you please define how you're using that term?*

SB: Well, agnosticism I understand in two different ways. Firstly, I use the word "agnostic" in the way that it's fairly conventionally understood in the West, and I know that in that sense it is problematic because to many people "agnosticism" and "atheism" are sort of blurred together as a kind of dismissive attitude towards any kind of spiritual practice—and some people have complained that "agnostic" is therefore too confusing a word and automatically gives a negative slant. But the way in which the word "agnostic" has traditionally been used since about the nineteenth century is very much about *not taking anything for granted* unless it can be somehow demonstrated through experience—holding a view, in other words, in which you acknowledge a kind of *unknowing,* or *not knowing,* which I think is very parallel to the Buddhist idea of "no-mind" as it is found in Zen. It has to do with being able to accept and acknowledge within yourself primary questions about life to which you do not know the answer, and this, to me, is a far more genuine starting point than beginning a practice on the basis of something that some teacher or some religion or some tradition has told you to believe. It is a fundamental acceptance of unknowing, of not knowing.

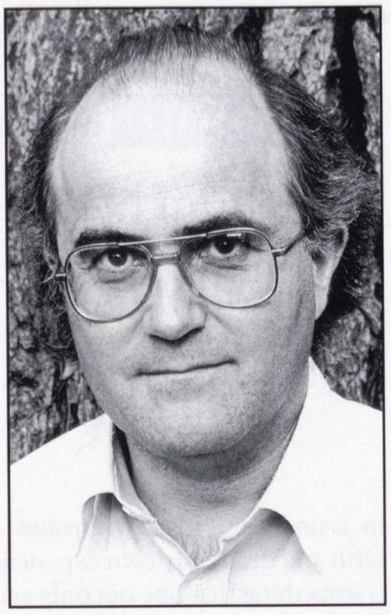
AC: *Even though it's obvious, as you said before, that in order to begin practice in earnest one would have to have some faith, for example, in the possibility of awakening.*

SB: Oh, sure. I distinguish between "belief" and "faith," although that may not come out clearly in the book. "Belief" would be, as I said, a particular holding on to certain metaphysical ideas as necessarily true—and this could apply also to a practice if it was intended only to confirm the validity of those views—whereas "faith" is really nothing more than a trust in the capacity of the human being to transform itself from a deluded to a less deluded or even an awakened state, "awakening" being a metaphor for the relinquishment of delusion. As I said, there clearly has to be some kind of belief in the possibility of that kind of transformation and that opening of experience. The difference is that from an agnostic position one doesn't have any preconceived ideas as to what that transformation will lead to. Practice is too often premised on the idea that if I meditate I'll become omniscient or something, or arrive at some state of mind that has been described in some religious texts to be like A, B, C, D or E.

AC: *Including a Buddhist text?*

SB: Oh yes, certainly. Of course, the whole idea of a *genuine* awakening, at least as I understand it, is that it must necessarily be a journey into the unknown. But I tend to think that many people practice religion—Buddhism or Christianity or Hinduism or whatever—with a subconscious or perhaps even a conscious expectation of what the outcome of their practice will be, whereas if one has

"My own experience is that perplexity is something that one not only starts out with but that actually stays with one. But that does not preclude the possibility of a very profound and authentic response to what it is that one is perplexed *about.* The term 'answer,' to me, particularly if it's prefixed with an adjective like 'absolute,' introduces an element of finality that I'm uncomfortable with."



a genuinely agnostic starting point, a profound acceptance of *"I don't know,"* then one has made room for the possibility of deep questioning. To really think about it, to really question—to say, "What is this? Who am I?"—is an acknowledgment, in that very moment of questioning, of not knowing. We wouldn't need to ask a question, after all, if we knew any kind of answer.

AC: *Of course.*

SB: So to me the spiritual quest has as its driving engine a questioning which is necessarily impregnated with a kind of unknowing. And a Buddhist text, for example, or a religious text of any tradition for that matter, can perhaps give us clues and pointers, and maybe very supportive metaphors, but a danger arises if we in any way literalize those metaphors and treat them, as it were, as if they were adequate representations of what it is that our practice is leading towards.

Clarity or Perplexity?

AC: *Would this process of inquiry and questioning that you've so eloquently described lead to the discovery—since we're talking about enlightenment, after all—of an* answer *that has the potential to finally liberate? Or would it simply lead to an inner position from which one recognizes that no answer will ever be found? Is the answer that one is searching for something that could be called "enlightenment," or is "enlightenment," in your view, only the discovery of the fact that one will* never *know the answer?*

SB: I think one would have to suspend both possibilities and begin to question without an expectation of either.

AC: *Fair enough. The only reason I'm asking is because in your book you do seem at times to be implying that it wouldn't be* possible *to find a final or absolute answer. Is that your view?*

SB: As I said, that's not a point about which I think it's particularly helpful to speculate.

AC: *I understand that, but I just wanted to clarify it because it seems to be an implication of your frequent and favorable-sounding use of the term "perplexity" in your book that the "not knowing" you've been speaking about is the appropriate attitude or relationship to one's experience if one wants to awaken, if one wants to be* free *in relationship to one's own experience. So I'm left wondering if this perplexity, or not knowing, is supposed to be a final resting place or is just a means to an end.*

SB: Okay, it's a good question. I prefer the term "response" rather than "answer." Maybe that's making a rather minor semantic distinction, but the process of questioning, the process of awakening that I'm interested

"I'm just not happy with this distinction between absolute and relative. I find it somewhat dualistic. I know Buddhism has used that language, but I'm concerned about the possibility of fixing a term like 'enlightenment' in any kind of absolute position."

in, is one that leads to a *response* to the matter of, let's say, birth and death. My own experience is that that perplexity *is* something that one not only starts out with but that actually stays with one. But that does not preclude the possibility, you see, of a very profound and authentic response to what it is that one is perplexed *about*. And the term "answer," to me, particularly if it's prefixed with an adjective like "absolute," introduces an element of finality that I'm uncomfortable with, because I am quite profoundly concerned about any suggestion of a kind of stasis, a fixed state or position that comes, as it were, as a final answer to that perplexity. I'm more of the mind that perplexity is in fact the key trigger for authentic responses to life, to death, to being here—to experience, to existence.

AC: *But that "response," if it was the expression of an awakened mind, would not be an expression of what we understand "perplexity" to be, would it? Even though that perplexity may well have been the catalyst for it, wouldn't it rather be the expression of some kind of profound clarity, of a very clear and accurate perception?*

SB: I don't see a contradiction there.

AC: *Oh, good. It's just that this relationship between perplexity and a very clear response didn't seem to be very clear in your book.*

SB: Okay. Well, perhaps we could say that we start with perplexity, and perplexity leads to responses to our experience, and the clarity that emerges out of such responses does not render the world less perplexing. In a strange way—and to me this is very central—that kind of clarity of mind reveals the world to be even *more* mysterious than we may at first have assumed it to be. And awakening, for me, is not about rendering the world unmysterious. It's about penetrating the mystery of life, not canceling it out as though it were a problem that you've somehow solved. Clarity and insight enrich and deepen our sense of the profound mystery that we *are*. And in terms of our rational capacities, our intellectual capacities, I think it's quite legitimate and meaningful to say that we don't arrive at some kind of answer. But that does not mean that we do not arrive at an authentic *response* that radically transforms our sense of being in the world and our capacity to be with ourselves, with others, with society. We do, but not in a way that is fixated on any position or stance.

AC: *Would it therefore be fair to say, and please help me with this, that in your view a profound enlightenment would still be a relative matter?*

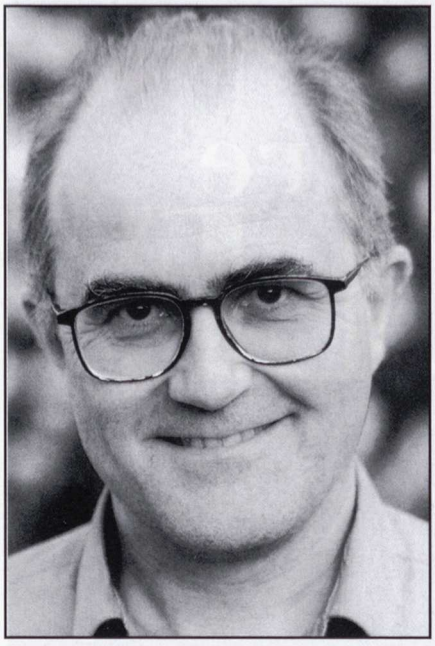
SB: I think there's a certain problem with terms here.

AC: *I appreciate that what we're speaking about is very subtle and delicate, and I'm aware of the inherent dangers in both directions when speaking in terms of relative and absolute, but—*

SB: I'm just not happy with this distinction between absolute and relative. I find it somewhat dualistic. I know Buddhism has used that language—although it seems that in fact the Buddha himself never actually used those terms, at least in the early discourses—but, again, I'm concerned about the possibility of fixing a term like "enlightenment" in any kind of absolute position. I find it a little too simplistic, because I feel that those sorts of distinctions seem to fade away.

AC: *What do you mean?*

SB: I don't claim fully to understand this at all, but my intuition and experience lead me much more to a sense



"Despite the Buddha's own succinct account of his awakening, it has come to be represented (even by Buddhists) as something quite different. Awakening has become a mystical experience, a moment of transcendent revelation of the Truth. . . . Over time, increasing emphasis has been placed on a single absolute truth such as 'the Deathless,' 'the Unconditioned,' 'the Void,' nirvana, Buddha-nature, etcetera."

that the absolute/relative dichotomy is something that actually needs to be let go of, and that the awakening, as it were, is an awakening *to*, in a way, the letting go of precisely that dividing of reality between those two poles. And that's why I prefer this idea of response. The response to experience through, say, insight or awakening may open up to us the depth of reality, and the profound mystery of reality, but not in a way that alienates us from the contingencies and the exigencies of the relative, ambiguous world that we inhabit. But perhaps all I'm saying is that we lack any ability within the categories of conventional language to really speak coherently about what is essentially mysterious. Does that make sense?

AC: *It makes sense, but in terms of this whole notion of the Absolute, or* an *absolute—which, as you've acknowledged, you feel very uncomfortable with—it does need to be stated that from the perspective of those who* do *see or perceive awakened consciousness from a perspective that is absolute, the approach you're describing would probably be construed as the relativization of an absolute perspective, and that's simply a different way of seeing it. But I still think what you've said is very clear and very intriguing, and perhaps we can move on, since basically most of my questions are concerned with this anyway.*

SB: Okay. All right.

Relative or Absolute?

AC: *In your chapter on "Awakening," you write: "Despite the Buddha's own succinct account of his awakening, it has come to be represented (even by Buddhists) as something quite different. Awakening has become a mystical experience, a moment of transcendent revelation of the Truth. Religious interpretations invariably reduce complexity to uniformity while elevating matter-of-factness to holiness. Over time, increasing emphasis has been placed on a single absolute truth such as 'the Deathless,' 'the Unconditioned,' 'the Void,' nirvana, Buddha-nature, etcetera, rather than on an interwoven complex of truths." Could you please explain what you mean?*

SB: Well, I suppose what's coming through there is, in a sense, my Buddhist faith and the fact that I'm speaking from within a Buddhist tradition, but in that context trying to clarify not just the questions the Buddha himself asked but also how Buddhism as a system has responded to, and has subsequently articulated, the early Buddhist tradition. And in particular, I'm trying to make it clear that when I am speaking about the Buddha, from my point of view there are limitations inherent in that.

AC: *What do you mean by "inherent limitations"?*

SB: What I mean, in the book and also for the sake of this conversation—since in your magazine you try to represent many different perspectives—is that because I'm coming from a Buddhist perspective, certain questions may not be so intelligible. I'm not going to be able to talk very meaningfully about anything to do with God, for example, and I don't want to get drawn into areas that I'm not particularly concerned with myself. The whole point of what I wrote there is that questions, for example, of an "absolute," although they refer to an idea that has come *into* Buddhism, are not central nor even particularly pertinent, really, to what I think the Buddha was trying to get at.

AC: *That could be true, I suppose, but what intrigues me, and what is, speaking for myself personally, the thrust of my whole life and investigation, is what the word "enlightenment" means, and the point of my question is that "enlightenment"—which is supposedly what Buddhism is about—does generally refer to something that* is *absolute. Now I understand that from your point of view, for example, that may not be true. But I think if we said that an absolute component could never be a part of what enlightenment is and means, that would take away some of the power inherent in that word.*

SB: What do you mean by "absolute"? I have, actually, some difficulties in understanding what you mean.

AC: *That which would be final, unequivocal—something like that.*

SB: Transcendent?

AC: *Transcendent, yes, but not in the sense of being separate from.*

SB: Separate from the world.

AC: *Correct—not in that sense at all.*

SB: Right. Okay, well, let's go back, then, to the passage that you quoted. The reference there to "the Buddha's own succinct account of his awakening" is to the Dhammacakkappavatana Sutta, which means "the turning of the *dharma* wheel." It is supposedly the first discourse the Buddha gave, and it contains a very, very clear statement in which the Buddha declares that until he had come to a full awareness and understanding of the Four Noble Truths in three particular ways, he could not claim to have realized full awakening. In other words, this is a very basic starting point from which to begin any

attempt to understand a Buddhist perspective on awakening or enlightenment; in fact, this experience of the Four Truths is the *defining characteristic* of what the Buddha understands by awakening.

Now what's interesting about that is that the Buddha is not laying claim to an experience of some *absolute* as the defining characteristic of what awakening is, but rather to an interwoven complex of truths that have to do with suffering, the origins of suffering, the ending of suffering and the path that leads to the ending of suffering. It's that whole *complex* that defines what it means to awaken. And what I find distinctive about that, and profoundly inspiring and resonant with my own experience, is that his concern is not with defining the answer in terms of a revelation of God or faith or an experience of an absolute—be it a transcendent or an immanent absolute—but rather a vision of the dilemma that human beings experience, which he calls *dukkha,* or suffering; a vision of its origins; a vision of a resolution or *response* to that dilemma, which he understands as the cessation of its origins—the cessation of craving, momentary or otherwise; and, finally, a vision of a way of life that is conducive to such cessation.

So if we were to use the words "final" or "definitive" in the sense that you're using them, there might be some legitimacy in applying them to the Third Truth—I agree with you there.

AC: *You mean freedom from craving?*

SB: Yes, I mean the freedom that the Buddha spoke of—the freedom of the heart and mind from craving—which he describes as the breaking of the ridgepole of a house that, as a result, can never be built again. There is certainly something very definitive about *that.*

AC: *Yes.*

SB: Very, very definitive—but he doesn't make that into the defining element of what he calls "awakening." Awakening is far more encompassing than that. His process of awakening is one that embraces as much the dilemma of life as it does a resolution to that dilemma. In other words, it's a holistic sense of the world, a sense of one's place within the world that includes insights and understandings that are both relative and also, as you say, somewhat more ultimate, as well as a *way of life.*

AC: *A clear and right relationship to the world of time and space.*

SB: Exactly, yes.

Existential or Transcendent?

AC: *A little further on in the same chapter, you state: "The Buddha was not a mystic. His awakening was not a shattering insight into a transcendent truth that revealed to him the mysteries of God. He did not claim to have had an experience that granted him privileged, esoteric knowledge of how the universe ticks." Then you say, "Only as Buddhism became more and more of a religion were such grandiose claims imputed to his awakening."*

SB: That's right, yes.

AC: *So my question would be: Given that the experiential recognition of the Four Noble Truths is, as you've just stated, the most important element of awakening in the Buddhist path, it would have to be more than a strictly intellectual revelation—right?*

SB: Yes, of course.

AC: *What would be the component, then, in the revelation of the Four Noble Truths that would make it more than merely an intellectual insight or recognition?*

SB: The component that would make it more than a merely intellectual recognition would be the fact that the momentum, let's say, or the driving force that propelled the Buddha to this awakening, was the question of life and death. In other words, the concerns that were resolved through his awakening were not philosophical questions, and they were not psychological or religious or spiritual questions. They were deep *existential* questions, which we find perhaps best illustrated through the legend of his encounter with the four visions of the corpse, the old person, the sick person and the monk. In other words, the Buddha's quest was an *existential* quest and, as I see it, we can only understand awakening as something that is a resolution to the primary existential dilemma that every human being faces—the fact of having been born and the fact of death. So if we understand the Buddha or any practicing Buddhist of today as setting off on this path, I feel its authenticity is registered to the extent that it is an outcome of that individual's deep, almost preconceptual response to *being,* to what the Chinese call "the great matter of birth and death." And in responding to such questions, the intellect can be helpful—it can give us useful ideas and so on—but fundamentally this is a matter that grips our entire body/mind and is, as it were, the basis upon which we then focus our attention through meditation or spiritual inquiry or whatever it is that we're doing. And it's the unrelenting honing in on, focusing in on, that existential sense of questioning that triggers and awakens the mind to another response to birth, sickness, aging and

death, which historically, for the Buddha, was the revelation of these Four Truths.

AC: *But in what we could call this heroic or, even though I know I shouldn't say it,* absolute *confrontation with these existential questions—which obviously few human beings actually have the courage to engage in—would there not* have *to be a transcendent element of the sort you refer to in your book as "the Deathless" or "the unconditioned," the discovery of which creates, shall we say, an experiential context that transcends a merely three-dimensional sense of what life is? Wouldn't it be the direct experience of this fourth dimension, which some have also referred to as "the supermundane," that would empower the discovery of these Four Noble Truths—that would* give *them their liberating power—and that would enable one to recognize the truly liberating power that is inherent in them? Is there not, in other words—and this is just a question—another element that empowers this profound existential inquiry?*

SB: Well, I think there's a danger here of getting caught up in certain linguistic problems. Of course you start out, let's say, with a question, and the reason it's a question, or a dilemma, is because you're unable to step out of it. You're unable to see a way out of a situation to which you have no response. And clearly, if you're going to *find* a response that addresses that question at the depth from which it is asked, then you're going to have to discover a perspective that is not "mundane." But "mundane" simply means the condition in which we find ourselves stuck, so any kind of resolution to a question of such an order is going to require that you somehow transcend the limitation that has stuck you with that question. To that extent,

one could say, yes, of course, there must be some degree of self-transcendence. But transcendence, to me, is a relative term. In other words, one can say that one has a transcendent experience only in relation to that in which one was previously trapped. To then reify that notion of transcendence into some kind of state, I think is a mistake.

AC: *Again, though, in the way I'm speaking about it, the supermundane would be an experiential context that would reveal the* ultimate power to liberate *inherent in the Four Noble Truths. So I'm simply asking if there's not another element besides the profound or even heroic confrontation with these existential questions that you have described.*

SB: I think not, actually. I'm not entirely sure what you mean, but I guess that really my answer would be no.

AC: *Okay, fair enough. But just to pursue this a little further, there are several passages in the Nikayas [the earliest recorded recollections of the Buddha's teachings], which you're no doubt very familiar with, in which the Buddha describes what he himself calls "the Deathless": "Where water, earth, heat and wind find no footing, there no stars gleam, no sun is made visible, there shines no moon, there the darkness is not found; and when the sage, the brahmin, himself in wisdom knows this place, he is freed from happiness and* dukkha." *And in another passage, he says, "Monks, there is that which is not born, not become, not made, not conditioned. Monks, if there were not that which is not born, not become, not made, not conditioned, there could be made known no escape from that which is born, become, made, conditioned here. But since, monks, there is that which is not born, not become, not made, not conditioned, therefore the escape from that which is born, become, made, conditioned is made known." Obviously, the Buddha is here very directly and clearly pointing to the profound importance and significance of the experiential discovery of a mystery which, at least in these formulations, alone makes liberation possible.*

SB: I know what you're getting at, but that passage—the second one—is quoted endlessly, and the interesting thing is that it only appears once, and in a relatively minor text found in a subsection of the Khuddaka Nikaya. I therefore take such passages to be primarily inspirational in nature rather than literal.

AC: *What does that mean?*

SB: It means that if you read through the Buddhist sutras, of which there are so many that it's unlikely anybody's read them all, you'll find all manner of passages which appear, actually, to be at odds with many other passages. And I think it's particularly striking how Western interpreters of Buddhism have latched on to that last passage you've just quoted. It's endlessly reiterated and yet, as I said, it only occurs once in all of the canon. It's a passage that I think is attractive precisely because it lends credence to a kind of mystical absolutist interpretation of Buddhist doctrine that is actually not so widely found elsewhere in the texts. If one reads through the Majjhima Nikaya, for example, you won't find that sort of language very widespread. I'm not saying you can't find passages elsewhere that use that kind of language, but even leaving aside contemporary views on Buddhism, there have been commentators as far back as two thousand years ago who shed doubt on the legitimacy of such passages and saw them as inspirational rather than literal. In other words, for many peo-

ple that kind of language inspires them to reach beyond themselves. It inspires them to believe in the possibility of something quite other than the sort of experience they feel trapped and stuck in at the present. But that those inspirational injunctions of the Buddha are meant to be taken literally, I personally find problematic.

The problem with Buddhism, you see—and I think this is not only historical but contemporary as well—is that you do not have a single consistent voice running through the tradition. What you have is a *plurality* of voices that articulate understandings of say, awakening, of the path, of the nature of reality and so on, which are not internally consistent. So we ultimately find "Buddhism" to be really a sort of generic term that points not to any single view but to *a diversity of strategies and tactics* that different followers of the Buddha throughout history have adopted, some of which are religious or devotional or inspirational in nature, and others of which are more pragmatic or, one could almost say, relativist—down to earth. And what that suggests to me is the sense of a community, a *sangha,* which is able to incorporate a diversity that reflects the different temperaments and dispositions of those who are inspired by the Buddha to follow their paths in ways that authentically respond to their particular language and the particular experiences that they themselves have had. I'm very resistant to the idea of trying to reduce Buddhism to one particular dominant voice, because I see it as a pluralistic culture of awakening which allows for a diversity of possibilities. Now of course that doesn't mean that we can't have debate and discussion and disagreement. In fact, it's precisely the fact that we are having this kind of conversation that is to me the positive thing.

AC: *Your own feeling, though, is that you question the notion that the Buddha put any emphasis on the significance of an absolute or transcendent dimension.*

SB: Yes, my own reading of the text—and I know that there *are* passages like the ones you mentioned—is that those are in balance fairly marginal comments that are actually at odds with the thrust of the Buddha's message that speaks to me. So while I see those passages, as I said, as having inspirational value, I personally can't take them literally because I feel that they would put Buddhism back into the context of religious experience that we find, say, in the Upanishads [esoteric Hindu scriptures], which for all its beauty is not something that I think the Buddha was endorsing.

The Revealed Path

AC: *In your chapter on "Imagination," you write that awakening is "by its very nature . . . free from the constraints of preconceived ideas, images, and doctrines. It offers no answers, only the possibility of new beginnings." My question here would be: Doesn't genuine awakening clearly and unambiguously reveal that perfect middle place between all pairs of opposites, in other words,* the revealed path, *the knowledge of which is the source of all genuine doctrine?*

SB: That's not the language I myself would use. Again, though, I think I know what you're getting at, but maybe you could explain what you mean by "the revealed path."

AC: *By "the revealed path" I mean*

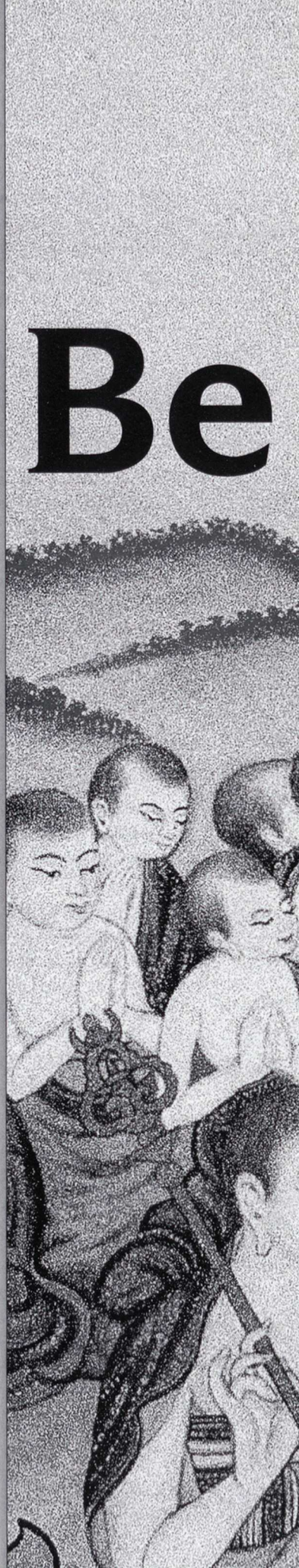
continued on page 166

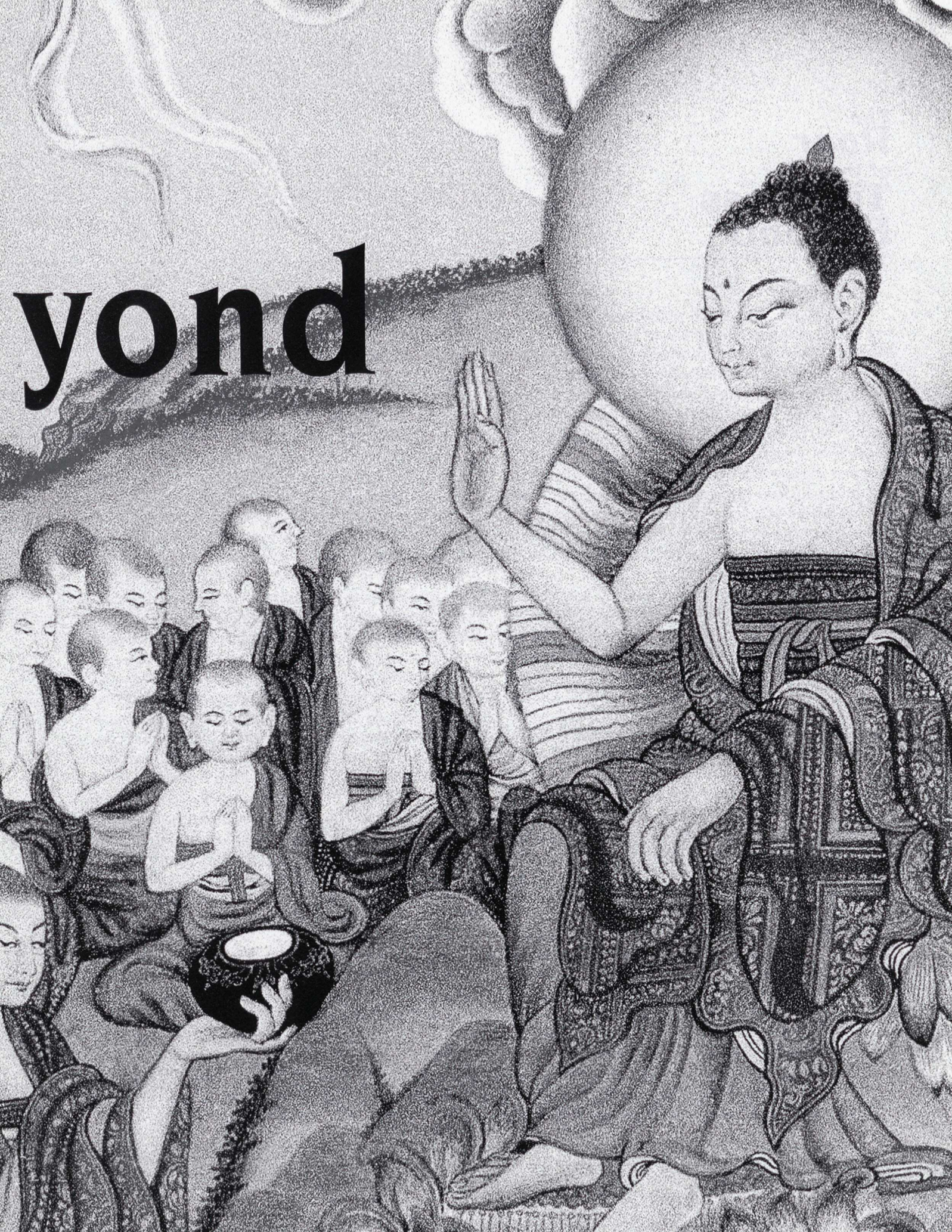
The *Roar* of the Timeless Be

An Interview with Peter Masefield

by Simeon Alev

Twenty years ago, as a doctoral candidate at the University of Lancaster, the Buddhist scholar and Pali translator Peter Masefield made an assertion that struck many in his field as not only bold but perhaps even heretical. "It is simply fallacious to assume," he wrote, "as most writers on Buddhism appear to have done, that the social division of monk and layman is also the spiritual division of the Buddhist world." In the Pali texts he had been translating, texts thought to represent the most authoritative recollections of the Buddha's closest disciples, Masefield claimed to have encountered a fifth-century B.C. culture so profoundly impacted by the Buddha's transcendent revelation that it had been possible to distinguish—routinely and consistently—between those who had been transformed by that revelation and those who had not. There had been monks, lifetime members of the Buddha's wandering renunciate community, who had neither understood nor benefited from his teaching, and there had been lay men and women whose lives had been irrevocably altered by a single encounter with the "Lord of the *dhamma*."

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The *Roar* of the Timeless Beyond

Superficially, this "equal opportunity" formulation may sound pleasingly democratic to Western ears, but if Masefield's thesis was correct, what it actually implied was that the world in which the Buddha lived and taught was a far cry indeed from the at once homogenized and pluralistic Buddhist culture of the contemporary West. It meant that in the Buddha's own time, the power and significance of enlightenment, understood in terms of its clear and unmistakable effects on the consciousness of an individual, had been all but impossible to ignore. It meant that the advent of a truly enlightened teacher had naturally and spontaneously given rise to an authentic spiritual elite whose implicit authority transcended all mundane social categories.

In fact, Masefield had been sufficiently criticized for his views, he told us, as to be "taken aback" by our interest his work. Since his dissertation was published in England as *Divine Revelation in Pali Buddhism* in 1986, he has had "absolutely no idea how people are responding to the book or whether anybody's even read it." Despite the subsequent release of an American edition, Masefield, a resident of Sydney, Australia, has not heard from his publisher even once in the last eight years, during which time he has held visiting professorships at various universities throughout the world and continued to translate Buddhist texts. "I just work away here translating Pali commentaries," he told us. "I gave a talk in Montreal last year and one of the students was apparently so inspired that he ran out and bought the book, but he's never gotten in touch with me to tell me whether he thinks it's rubbish or not."

We were inspired by Masefield's book and wanted to speak with him because in the course of our investigation into whether, where the subject of enlightenment is concerned, anyone knows what they're talking about, we had found it difficult to locate a contemporary formulation of the Buddha's teaching that did not somehow reduce to manageable proportions the always awesome and overwhelming nature of transcendent spiritual experience. In this respect, Masefield's book could not have been more distinctive, owing especially to the inclusion of several powerful narrative descriptions, taken from the original texts, of transformative encounters between the Master and those who, unbeknownst even to themselves, were about to become his disciples. While we did not always agree with Masefield's conclusions, we were moved by his reverence for the people and events he described, and by the care with which he allowed them to convey, on their own, the powerful transmission which one supposes *must* have been experienced—at least by some—in the company of the Buddha.

Throughout his book, Masefield's rigorous textual analysis is relentlessly trained on the discovery of the nature and implications of this mysterious transmission. A central tenet of his thesis, in fact, is that the acquisition of "right view," the first step on the Buddha's Eightfold Path to liberation, is itself a transcendent event, and that "there can be no practice by means of which such right view might be acquired. Indeed upon examination of those instances recording the acquisition of right view by a given individual we always find that it was acquired at the end of a specially tailored oral initiation by the Buddha in which he first descended to the level of the individual concerned and, by means of a progressive talk, gradually guided him into a state of consciousness in which he could see for himself the impermanence of the phenomenal world, the sanctuary beyond and the path thereto. At this moment he became an *ariyasavaka,* a hearer of the roar of the Timeless Beyond. It was this insight granted by the Buddha that formed the right view of the path."

And it was this initial "right view of the path," rather than any final attainment, that distinguished the *ariyasavaka* from the *puthujjana:* "Either because he does not get to hear the *dhamma* [teaching] or, if he does, remains unaffected thereby, the *puthujjana* lacks the insight that arises on hearing that *dhamma* and thus fails to see things as they really are." While at one time, Masefield goes on to say, "the *ariyan* [supermundane] Eightfold Path was the sole province of the *savaka* . . . inevitably news of that path eventually filtered down to the *puthujjana* with the result that he misunderstood it, whereupon we begin to encounter *puthujjana* monks."

Masefield's observations forced us to consider the arduousness and delicacy of the Buddha's sometimes thankless task, and also to wonder how well, in our own time, his efforts have been rewarded. It is true that Buddhism presently enjoys unprecedented popularity, especially in the West. But what sort of popularity is it? we wanted to ask him. And how would the Buddha's teaching be received if it were being offered to us in person here and now?

According to Masefield, the Buddha was never under any illusions about what he was up against, both spiritually and practically, in attempting to awaken as many people as possible—his own followers included—from a slumber to which the vast majority of humanity is all too happily predisposed.

"For the Buddha," he writes, "immediately after attaining enlightenment, reflected upon the *puthujjana*-like habits of the world and felt a reluctance to attempt even to teach them:

> This *dhamma* that has been won by me is deep, difficult to see, difficult to awaken to, calm, excellent, beyond the realm of doubt, subtle, knowable only to the wise. But this is a generation delighting in attachment to sensuality, delighted by attachment to sensuality, rejoicing in attachment to sensuality. So for a generation delighting in . . . delighted by . . . rejoicing in attachment to sensuality, this were a matter difficult to see, that is to say, causal uprising by way of condition. This too were a matter difficult to see, that is to say, the tranquilizing of all *sankharas* [defilements], the rejection of all basis for rebirth, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, *nibbana* [nirvana]. And if I were to teach *dhamma* and others were not to understand me, that would be a weariness to me, that would be a vexation to me."

It was at this moment, as the well-known story goes, that a celestial being known as Brahma Sahampati intervened, "and pointed out," in Masefield's description, "that there were beings in the world with little dust in their eyes . . . who were coming to ruin through not hearing *dhamma* but who could become knowers of *dhamma*. As a result, the Buddha surveyed the world with his Buddha-eye and, recognizing that there were such beings, agreed that he would teach for the sake of those beings. . . . It must be stressed, however, that although such beings may have had little dust in their eyes, or possessed the potential for realizing the *sotapatti*-fruit [becoming established on the path], they were nonetheless still *puthujjanas* hemmed in by sense-pleasures and thus in bondage to *Mara* [the cosmic tempter]. Any rescue would require great skillfulness if *Mara's* devious tactics were to be countered."

What was it that enabled the Buddha—who, despite his extraordinary attainment, never claimed to be other than human—to effect even one such harrowing rescue? It is Masefield's humble and by no means original contention that the reason it is *liberating* to see things "as they really are" is that direct insight into the ultimate nature of things truly does reveal that transcendent context which alone gives the *dhamma* its power to transform. The perfection of "the Perfected One" lay precisely in his having vanquished every obstacle to the realization and transmission of that place "where water, earth, heat and wind find no footing, there no stars gleam, no sun is made visible, there shines no moon, there the darkness is not found; and when the sage, the brahmin, himself in wisdom knows this place he is freed from . . . happiness and suffering."

"Indeed," writes Masefield, "without some positive counterpart to the purely negative cessation of becoming, Buddhism could well be charged with the annihilationist doctrines that the Buddha so frequently denied; at the same time, there would be no true escape from *Mara* and incessant becoming. . . . It is because there is the Deathless, a realm that is inaccessible to Death or *Mara*, that there is an escape from his realm and all that it entails. And it was through the Buddha's decision to teach *dhamma* that the door to that Deathless was flung wide open."

WIE: *Based on what I know, it seems fair to say that your book is a radical reformulation of Buddhism as it is traditionally understood in the West.*

PETER MASEFIELD: To be honest, I'm not really comfortable with the word "reformulation." All I've tried to do is to learn the Pali language, because I like reading the original Buddhist texts, and if I find a consistent theme or motif running through these texts which other people seem not to have noticed, then I simply draw attention to it. In my opinion, the situation is rather that most modern Western formulations of Buddhism tend to downplay or ignore the cosmology that is found in the Buddhist texts, which makes it rather difficult to understand a lot of the incidents described there because they only make sense against that cosmological background. When Buddhism was first being discovered by the modern West in the middle of the last century, a lot of Europeans were already disenchanted with organized Western religion, so that when a religion appeared which they thought didn't require them to accept any supernatural beliefs, it was treated as a godsend, so to speak, by people with their own agendas. It is very easy for someone who has read, say, half a dozen brief introductions to Buddhism to then go and write one of their own, and this seems to be what often happened. These accounts tended to quote the same old passages and ignore the rather massive areas in between, and although they were probably not very well informed to begin with, they became popular and then got regurgitated by others.

WIE: *Your work is based on the Pali Nikayas. Are the Nikayas the earliest recorded accounts of the Buddha's life and teaching?*

PM: Three months after the death of the Buddha, five hundred of his enlightened disciples are supposed to have met in a very small cave in northern India. They spent the three months of the rainy season thrashing out what they remembered to be his utterances, and the source for most of these was Ananda, who, having been the Buddha's personal attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life, had been present on most of the occasions when the Buddha taught various other individuals. What these five hundred disciples agreed upon as the authoritative word of the Buddha later came to be known as the Tipitaka, or "three baskets," in the Buddhist literature of the Theravada school, and once assembled it was passed on via the oral tradition, which for a variety of reasons is considered to be more reliable than the written one. The texts of the second basket, the Suttapitaka, are subdivided into five Nikayas, whose contents mainly record incidents that took place during the lifetime of the Buddha, as opposed to the monastic rules and the more obscure philosophical extractions, which are recorded in the other two baskets. The first four of these Nikayas, and some of the texts belonging to the fifth, seem to present a more or less consistent set of teachings, and it is upon these that I essentially base my study.

WIE: *What are the most important differences between the view of the Buddha's life and teaching depicted in the Nikayas and the more commonly prevailing Western views?*

PM: The main difference has to do with the degree to which an encounter with a living Buddha is necessary in the liberation scheme, and whether it's possible to achieve liberation without personally encountering a Buddha. The evidence of the Nikayas would seem to indicate that it's not.

WIE: *In your book you also discuss at great length the significance of "right view." What is the role of right view in your understanding of the Eightfold Path of the Buddha's teaching, and how exactly does one acquire it?*

PM: As I understand it, and according to all of the textual definitions of right view, it's seeing things as they really are, seeing *nibbana*, seeing the Four Truths—not just understanding them as a set of logical propositions but actually experiencing them, and also experiencing and witnessing the fact of impermanence. All of these things are subsumed under the one item of right view.

And right view seems to be a prerequisite for the second step on the path, which is sometimes translated as "right thought" or "right resolve," but which is properly defined as "right renunciation." As a result of

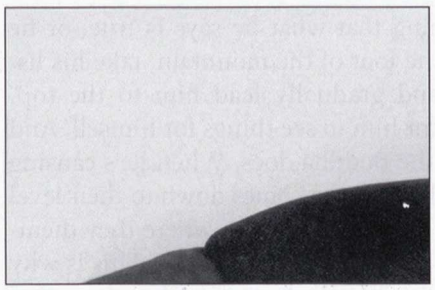
achieving right view, you renounce those things to which you were hitherto attached because you've seen through the myth, the sham, of worldly life. And once you've renounced these former attachments and attractions, then of course it's much easier to go on to perform right speech, action and livelihood. Then, having consolidated your morality, you can go on to perfect right effort, mindfulness and concentration; otherwise, there are a lot of hindrances to meditation caused by various aspects of immorality due to which the mind won't settle down because it's agitated either by conscience or by desires. So this seems to be a logical progression, and the Buddha always does enumerate the path in that order as a causal chain, each successive step being dependent upon the prior one.

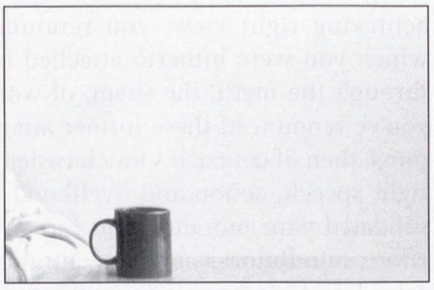
Now there's a very big problem in this for most people, because if it's really the case that right view is the beginning of the path, then *how do you get it?* It's a pretty tall order, and it couldn't be acquired via the path itself because it's the *entrance* to the path. This was a problem that had occurred to me, so I was looking in the texts for possible solutions to it. And I found that in the instances of people getting right view that are recorded in the texts, it's always as the result of a special teaching that they received from the Buddha.

The Buddha himself, in order to explain how this works, gives the simile of a mountain, in which he describes two friends walking through the jungle, which is a Buddhist metaphor for sense-pleasures. They come upon a mountain slope, and one friend climbs to the top of the mountain and then shouts down to the other that from his new vantage point he can see delightful stretches of level ground and lotus ponds—a metaphor for *nibbana*. But the one at the bottom of the mountain, still in the jungle, doesn't believe him. And what the Buddha says is that he could, like the one at the top, go on adamantly claiming that what he says is true, or he can come down to the foot of the mountain, take his listener by the arm and gradually lead him to the top, where it is possible for him to see things for himself. And this is what I think the Buddha does. When he's causing someone to gain right view, he comes down to their level and gradually leads them to a position where they themselves have sight of things as they really are. This is why he is spoken of as the "good physician who gives men back their sight."

Now if it was in fact the case that you couldn't attain enlightenment without the intervention of the Buddha, then very shortly after the death of the Buddha, the Buddhist world must have realized its loss. And it may well have been as a result of tinkering in the early centuries B.C. that the order of the path came to be rearranged slightly. These days, for example, if right view becomes too much of a problem, then you can always jump in, they say, at step number three, because everybody, so the theory goes, can speak and act morally. And then from there you go on through the eight steps, refining your view as you go, and eventually covering the first two steps at the end. But then, of course, you'll end up at number two, right renunciation, which is a bit of a problem because that's not really where you wanted to *get* to. So in order to remedy this, Buddhists have tried to introduce the notion of different kinds, or different *degrees*, of right view, but there is no textual evidence for that. And in fact the Eightfold Path is actually spoken of elsewhere in the texts as being "tenfold," with the two extra stages added of right knowledge and right release. So it's a perfect system, you see: first of all, you get a vision of the way things really are from the Buddha. Then you renounce former associations, perfect your morality, do your meditation, and ultimately attain right knowledge and then liberation itself.

"It is a ***flash of awareness,*** like a flash of lightning on a moonless night that enables you to see your surroundings clearly, but only for a split second before the darkness closes in again. That is ***right view,*** and it has enough of an effect on you to change your whole being."





"There is an often misquoted *sutta* called the ***Kalama Sutta***, and this *sutta* leads people to believe that the Buddha said not to accept anything on hearsay, but only to accept things that accord with your own experience. Now it is being used by modern Buddhists who believe that it gives them license to ***chop and change*** and cut out whichever bits of Buddhism they don't like. If you're a Buddhist, I presume that to mean that you believe in the enlightenment of the Buddha, and if that is so, then you can't just throw various aspects of his teaching out the window."

WIE: *What is the significance of your conclusion that right view has to be the first step?*

PM: It's not *my* conclusion because, again, I'm doing nothing more than giving an indication of what the texts actually say. What I don't *ever* find the texts saying is that the path starts with number three—right speech—although that's what you're likely to read in most Western books on Buddhism these days.

WIE: *But it seems to me that these are two opposing interpretations of the nature of the path that could only lead to two completely different understandings of the Buddha's teaching.*

PM: Well, yes, because the idea of starting with number three presupposes that you can acquire right view all by yourself. But how do you get right view if what right view means is the vision of *nibbana*? Again, the only textual records of how people actually had this experience was through a special teaching. Now there's often a question as to whether the people whom the Buddha enlightened were themselves able to enlighten others, and the texts seem to suggest that they were not. If this is true, then the Buddha was the rediscoverer of an ancient path and his *savakas* were the people who followed that path, but they couldn't establish it for other people—they were sort of passive recipients—which means that following the disappearance from the world of the Buddha and his *savakasangha*, or order of *savakas*, there was virtually no one in the world to grant you, directly or indirectly, a vision of *nibbana*.

In my book I also make the point that the various practices which the Buddha is depicted in the texts as encouraging people to follow didn't necessarily have universal application, just as a meditation instruction you

receive from your teacher may not be applicable to your neighbor. It's my opinion that the great majority of the teachings recorded in the early texts were given to people who were already *savakas*.

WIE: *People who already* had *right view.*

PM: Yes, so that one of the reasons, possibly, that the texts are largely silent on the question of how right view is acquired is because the Buddha didn't need to tell them, just as you don't need to teach second-year university students how to apply for admission—they're already in.

WIE: *Do the texts say anything more about how this event takes place, about how a person acquires right view?*

PM: Quite often, the Buddha would survey, with his "Buddha-eye," the hearts of the people present in the assembly gathered around him at any given time, and he would discover that one or more individuals would, if taught, be capable of catching on. It's sometimes described that their potential for catching on shone in their heart "like a lamp in a jar." So for the benefit of those people and those people alone, he would give what is referred to as a "progressive talk."

An interesting example is the case of Suppabuddha the leper. This is an instance in which there was a gathering in the jungle, and Suppabuddha, a beggar who was on the fringe of this gathering, thought that it might be an almsgiving and that he might get some food. But when he got closer, he discovered that it was in fact the Buddha and a great assembly of monks and laypeople. Nonetheless, he decided to hang around and listen, and when the Buddha surveyed the hearts of all those present he noticed the spiritual potential of the leper alone. Now, for his benefit alone, the Buddha gives his progressive talk, in which he begins by descending to the spiritual level of the person concerned, as in the case of the friend descending from the mountaintop, starting off with a mundane talk about the benefits of almsgiving and ordinary morality, and the heavenly rebirths that come as the result of practicing them. And we can suppose that he might well have gotten people rather interested in and excited about the prospects of heavenly rebirth, and perhaps even actually caused them to have a vision of the heavens. But then in the next minute he would show them the dangers inherent in sense-pleasures and the advantages of rejecting them completely in order to become finally liberated from the cycle of rebirths, at which point, it seems, his hearers often became very dejected. Indeed, one of the textual commentaries likens the Buddha's tactics at this stage of the talk to someone adorning and bedecking a royal elephant only at the last moment to lop off its trunk with a sharp sword.

But now, you see, the Buddha's got the person where he wants him, and is able to steer him gradually into a state of consciousness in which he can see the same truths that the Buddha himself has discovered. And it's interesting that the state of mind of the listener at this point is very similar to that of the fourth *jhana*, the meditational state during which the mind is sharpened up in order for enlightenment to be attained. So it seems that the Buddha, through whatever speech he was giving, was able to steer the person into a state of consciousness which is akin to being on top of the mountain, such that the individual can then look back down at the phenomenal world and *see* the Four Truths. He can see firstly the suffering involved in ordinary life and, from this vantage point, he can also see the second truth, which is that all this suffering is due to craving. But then he can turn his back on all that and see that there is another realm altogether, and he can also see the path to that realm. These, then, are the Four Truths that occur to him in the vision from the top of the mountain which he has had by the end of the progressive talk.

WIE: *And all this happened to Suppabuddha the leper.*

PM: Yes. And we can't expect him to have had too much monastic training because lepers were not allowed to join the order of monks. There's no evidence, in fact, that he had any spiritual attainment whatsoever, and yet he was able to catch on—which raises the question of how it is that some people have this potential whilst others do not.

WIE: *Particularly since, as I recall, he was part of a large crowd and nobody got it but him.*

PM: Yes, Suppabuddha alone seems to have benefited from this talk. But it is also said elsewhere that Buddha is able to address a crowd in such a way that every individual believes he is talking only to him. And if anything, you see, I tend to glorify the Buddha because a lot of the watered-down accounts of the present day seem to ignore the fact that the Buddha is said to have spent countless hundreds of rebirths one-pointedly cultivating the "ten perfections" that he needed in order to become a teacher able to enlighten others. Anyway, I've only raised the question in passing why certain people had the potential to see and others didn't, yet it would seem that this was no mere accident, but was due, as in the case of the Buddha himself, to merit acquired over previous lives. Some people had acquired such merit and others had not.

"The Buddha granted those who had the potential to receive it the ***best gift*** that they could possibly imagine: He severed doubt—the vision of right view is a severance of doubt—and this is what makes him 'the good physician who gives men back their sight.' He ***lifts the veil*** for a world that has become blind. There is no question of doubt, because the nature of right view is such that there *is* no doubt."

WIE: *While we're at the top of the mountain, it might be a good time to talk about everything we can see from this privileged vantage point. You've just described the third noble truth as referring to "another realm," a realm that in your book you refer to as "the supermundane." In the West, we don't seem to hear much about this in accounts of the Buddha's teaching. But you indicate that as a result of acquiring right view, the individual actually becomes aware of the supermundane—or "the Deathless"—and that this direct knowledge of its existence reveals to the individual the possibility of an unequivocal conclusion to the suffering of mundane existence.*

PM: Yes. It is a flash of awareness. Some of the texts describe it as something like a flash of lightning on a moonless night that enables you to see your surroundings clearly, but only for a split second before the darkness closes in again. But that is right view, and it has enough of an effect on you to change your whole being. You don't yet have a permanent vision of this thing, but once you've come down off the mountain, so to speak, although it may appear to you that you have lost it, it's clear nonetheless that whatever it was you saw has been enough to transform you forever. But at the same time, of course, this is only the beginning. When you get to the *end* of the path your vision of the truths is likened to seeing those same surroundings at midday in the middle of summer when the sun is blazing in a cloudless sky.

WIE: *But for the time being it's definitely clear to you that you've seen something; you've become aware of something of which you were previously unaware.*

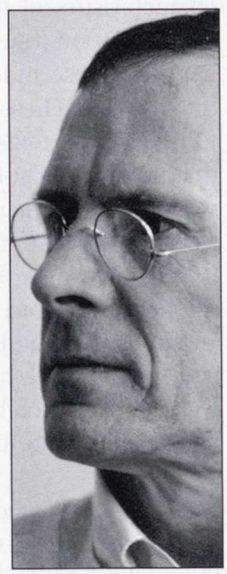
PM: Yes, you've had insight.

WIE: *Into?*

PM: Into reality. Into the way the world really *is*. The important thing in Buddhism is always the shattering of ignorance, of the lack of knowledge. Regarding the acquisition of right view, it is said in another passage that it's like becoming aware of the fact that there is water at the bottom of a well but not yet being in a position to drink it.

WIE: *I take it that under normal circumstances, when we're in a condition of what we might call—depending on our point of view—either "ignorance" or "ordinary awareness," we're cognizant of the mundane, but not of the supermundane.*

PM: Precisely, yes. And as far as I can tell from the Buddhist texts, it's not possible to get a sight of the supermundane on your own. You can hear about it or read about it, but to actually see it requires its being bestowed upon you through a progressive talk such as the one Suppabuddha received. Otherwise, we're all at the foot of the mountain in the jungle, waiting for the Buddha to come down and guide us to the summit.



WIE: *In your book, you refer to an earlier Vedic [Hindu scriptural] formulation of reality which posits the existence of three-quarters that we don't see in addition to the one-quarter that we do.*

PM: I only understand it roughly, but the early Vedic position was that in the beginning there was no distinction between being and nonbeing. There were only the "cosmic waters"—whatever they may be—and at some point, for reasons the Vedic hymns never give us, heat was born in the water in the form of Agni, who became the god of fire, and a differentiation took place such that the created world came into being. The created world, which includes the gods, represented one-quarter, but there always remained this backdrop of the hidden three-quarters in which there were none of the distinctions found in the created world. These hidden three-quarters retained the characteristics of the primeval state in which there was no distinction, but Agni could sometimes provide a link between these hidden three-quarters and the mundane one-quarter. These three additional quarters were sometimes referred to as "the Deathless," and people believed that when they got in touch with that Deathless during the Vedic sacrifice, they became immortal themselves. There may be some analogy here to the Buddha's quest to rediscover the Deathless, and in light of all this it's interesting to read that one of the very first people converted by the Buddha encountered a friend shortly afterwards who told him, "It looks like you've found the Deathless," which he himself confirmed was *exactly* what had happened to him.

WIE: *Another important concept in your book is the division of the Buddhist spiritual world into two categories: those who have had this experience of the supermundane, the* savakas, *and those who have not, the* puthujjanas. *Could you go into a little more detail about the differences between them?*

PM: The *savaka* is literally a hearer, "one who has heard." That means he's heard the progressive talk from the Buddha and as a result has himself become supermundane. You have to remember that what we're talking about here is a radical transformation of your whole being as a result of which, for example, you can no longer act immorally. This is not a matter of choice because, having seen things as they really are, there's no way you could ever return to the other side of this division; whereas the *puthujjana*, however virtuous he may be, simply lacks right view and therefore the guarantee of liberation that comes with it. Part of the significance of right view, you see, lies in the fact that it carries with it the guarantee of eventual liberation either in this life or in a subsequent life, whereas the *puthujjana* doesn't have a hope of liberation until he becomes a *savaka*. He can be as moral as he likes, but with respect to liberation it's still not going to help him.

Another interesting and important fact is that when people acquired right view and became *savakas*, they didn't necessarily become monks; a lot of them remained lay, so that within the order of monks as well we have to distinguish between those who were *savakas* and those who were not. Some monks were *savakas*, obviously, but some were *puthujjanas*. This is an important distinction, but one that tends, these days, to get ignored.

WIE: *Does the designation* "puthujjana" *encompass a wide range of intellectual aptitudes and spiritual attainments despite its fundamental definition as "possessed of wrong view" and everything that error seems to imply? Could a practitioner be quite highly intellectually and spiritually cultivated and still be a* puthujjana?

PM: Yes, absolutely. And on the other hand, the only distinguishing feature of the *savaka* is that he has acquired right view and the various benefits that accompany it.

WIE: *In your book, you write: "To have sought to universalize what were originally private teachings by ignoring the fact that the path is supermundane and the sole province of the* savaka *. . . has done nothing but render Buddhist studies a considerable misservice," and that "until this is appreciated, Buddhist studies will remain in their present state of infancy." Needless to say, this view runs counter to the prevailing sentiment among most contemporary Western Buddhists that the essence of Buddhism's popular appeal lies in its rationalism and accessibility. Why is an awareness of Buddhism's exclusivity critical, in your view, to a proper understanding of the Buddha's teaching?*

PM: People tend to forget that each of the teachings recorded in the texts was most likely given, as I said earlier, to individuals who had already acquired right view. So I think we have to question the viability of any attempt to universalize what was originally a private teaching designed solely for its recipients.

WIE: *One could draw the conclusion from what you've written that contemporary Buddhist practice worldwide is, and has been for quite some time, marred by the fundamental misconception you describe. But even without right view, the Buddha's teaching possesses an obvious cohesiveness and intellectual appeal. Wouldn't it therefore be natural for someone who didn't have right view to try to have some un-*

derstanding of it anyway? Is it really fair to assume, just because there are multitudes of contemporary Buddhist practitioners who by your definition do not have right view, that much of Buddhism as it is practiced and understood today is "puthujjana *Buddhism*"?

PM: No, I wouldn't be as arrogant as that. I mean, I can't be the judge of whether all these people have right view or not—although it does strike me as unlikely that many of them do. And I must admit that I like your use of the term "*puthujjana* Buddhism" to describe this situation; it seems to be apt. But ultimately we can only speculate as to whether there are any enlightened Buddhists around today. An unenlightened person can never tell of another whether he's enlightened or not, so ultimately I shouldn't like to have to say one way or the other. And we must also be careful to remember, when speaking of *puthujjana* Buddhism, that it need not have the derogatory connotation we might at first suppose—especially in the East, where man has always seen himself against a background of an infinite number of previous births and, unless and until he gets off the wheel, an equally infinite number of future births. We may not be able to gain enlightenment without the Buddha, but another Buddha is on the cosmic horizon, and Buddhism also holds out a way to benefit from him. What I would say, therefore, is that *puthujjana* Buddhism, at least as it is normally practiced in the East—the cultivation of merit through the practice of charity to monks and adherence to the Five Precepts, i.e., abstaining from destroying living beings, from taking what has not been given, from misconduct amidst the senses, from lying speech and from intoxicants causing negligence—is quite laudable, and something to be encouraged. So the picture is not necessarily as gloomy as we might at first think, and the world would surely be a better place if everyone constantly abided by those precepts.

WIE: *What do you imagine the effect would be, though, if many Buddhist practitioners who didn't have right view were nevertheless convinced that they were practicing authentic Buddhism?*

PM: Well, there is an often misquoted *sutta* [text] called the Kalama Sutta that everyone seems to jump on and use. It is only one very short, insignificant little *sutta* which I should think that the commentators, if they'd thought it was that important, would have discussed, but in the commentaries it is in fact virtually ignored. This *sutta* leads people to believe that the Buddha said not to accept anything on hearsay, but only to accept things that accord with your own experience. Now, I'm not sure

continued on page 176

Is the Buddha's EMPT

the Bra

In the high Hindu Vedanta teachings, the goal of the spiritual path is the realization of one's ultimate identity with *Brahman,* the Absolute, which is said to underlie all existence. *Brahman,* the indivisible, eternal, uncreated, is also called "the Deathless"—that place beyond birth and death, beyond the world.

Gautama the Buddha was acclaimed as a challenger and radical reformer of the decaying Brahminism of his time. One of the revolutionary ideas that he taught was the doctrine of *Emptiness,* said to be the cornerstone of Buddhist understanding. What he meant by *Emptiness* has been over the ages a source of much debate.

Is *Emptiness,* as many believe it to be, a radical departure from the concept of the all-pervading eternal *Brahman* of the Vedas, or is *Emptiness* the Buddha's description of what is, in essence, none other than the Vedantic *Brahman?*

In other words . . .

Is *Emptiness NOTHING?*
Or is it *SOMETHING?*

Photograph of Brahmin from *India Unveiled* by Robert Arnett

INESS
hmin's BRAHMAN?

How the Brahmins describe BRAHMAN:

In the highest golden sheath is Brahman,
stainless, without parts;
Pure is it, the light of lights.
This is what the knowers of the Self know.
The sun shines not there,
nor the moon and stars,
these lightnings shine not,
where then could this fire be?
His shining illumines all this world.
Brahman, verily, is this Deathless.

—Mundaka Upanishad

How the Buddha describes EMPTINESS:

Where water, earth, heat
and wind find no footing,
there no stars gleam,
no sun is made visible,
there shines no moon,
there the darkness is not found;
When the sage, the brahmin,
himself in wisdom knows this place
he is freed from the form
and formless realms,
from happiness and suffering.

—the Udana

An interview with

Frances Vaughan

by Susan Bridle

In the Meantime...

"To meditate is to transcend time. Time is the distance that thought travels in its achievements. The traveling is always along the old path covered over with a new coating, new sights, but always the same road, leading nowhere—except to pain and sorrow. It is only when the mind transcends time that truth ceases to be an abstraction."

J. Krishnamurti, *The Only Revolution*

"I'm interested in [a] humbler approach, one that is more accepting of human foibles, and indeed sees dignity and peace emerging more from acceptance than from any method of transcending the human condition."

Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul*

IN OUR EXPLORATION OF THE QUESTION, "What *is* enlightenment?" for this issue of *WIE*, we sought out the insights of two of the most prominent enlightenment traditions thriving in the West today: Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta. Yet there is a new spiritual philosophy emerging in the West that has begun to compete with these age-old teachings in both influence and appeal—the modern psychology of spirituality known as *transpersonal* psychology. While traditionally the goals of enlightenment spirituality and psychotherapy have been at odds (enlightenment teachings aim at subverting or transcending the ego, while psychotherapy aims at supporting or healing the ego), transpersonal psychology is now attempting to reconcile these differences and to offer new answers to perennial spiritual questions. Curious to see if this school of thought could shed new light on our inquiry, we began a brief but fascinating foray into the world of transpersonal psychology.

In the Meantime...

Transpersonal psychology, which began as part and parcel of the human potential movement in the 1960s, has advanced groundbreaking research in its attempt to open doors of perception hitherto unknown in the West and to chart the furthest reaches of human consciousness. Once a radical current in the spiritual subculture, transpersonal psychology has become widely recognized as a legitimate branch of psychology and is now included in mainstream college curricula. At the same time, it has also become increasingly associated with popular Eastern spiritual paths and practices as they have taken root in Western soil. Ram Dass, originally trained as a psychologist, became a spiritual teacher after traveling to India and meeting his Hindu guru; and Jack Kornfield, now one of America's most popular meditation teachers, decided, after several years as a Buddhist monk, to pursue a graduate degree in psychology. The Naropa Institute, founded as a Buddhist college by the late Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, now boasts one of the most acclaimed programs for "transpersonal studies." And the ideas and language of therapeutic psychology have become intermingled with those of Eastern spiritual teachings to the point that the two are often indistinguishable—meditators speak about "working through psychological blocks" as much as therapists speak about "going beyond ego."

Thirty years ago, transpersonal psychology was lauded for its innovations in the scientific "mapping" of human consciousness and development, but it was not yet viewed as an authoritative source of spiritual guidance. Disciplined spiritual practice under the direction of a spiritual teacher, if one was serious about enlightenment, was still understood to be the most credible approach to the spiritual path. In the interim, views have changed. Participants at the first national conference of American Buddhist teachers in 1993, facilitated by a panel of psychotherapists and attended by 115 Western teachers in the Zen, Tibetan and Vipassana traditions, noted that the therapeutic perspective dominated the conference, and that many meditation teachers no longer make any distinction between psychotherapy and Buddhist practice. Judith Simmer-Brown, chair of The Naropa Institute's religious studies department, commented in a firsthand account of the conference published in *Shambhala Sun* magazine: "Those present had completely bought the psychotherapeutic model of liberation, casting aside the tools they had developed through their *dharma* practice. . . . We even threw out our *dharma* vocabulary, our discussions of practice, even our practice of meditation."

Transpersonal psychology has not only established itself as a distinct voice in contemporary spirituality, it has also gradually become the most resounding. Complicating matters even further is the fact that, one after another over the past twenty years, renowned spiritual teachers have fallen prey to the temptations of greed and power. Many of those we have looked to as the highest examples of spiritual attainment have left a trail of corruption and abuses of trust, disillusioning disciples and onlookers alike about the reliability of spiritual authority as well as the ultimate meaning of enlightenment. In the wake of this confusion, leading proponents of transpersonal psychology have offered potent criticisms of Eastern spiritual approaches that emphasize spiritual experience and transcendence to the exclusion of a mature development of other areas of the personality. Noted transpersonal psychologist, meditation teacher and author John Engler, in an essay, "Becoming Somebody and Nobody: Psychoanalysis and Buddhism," writes:

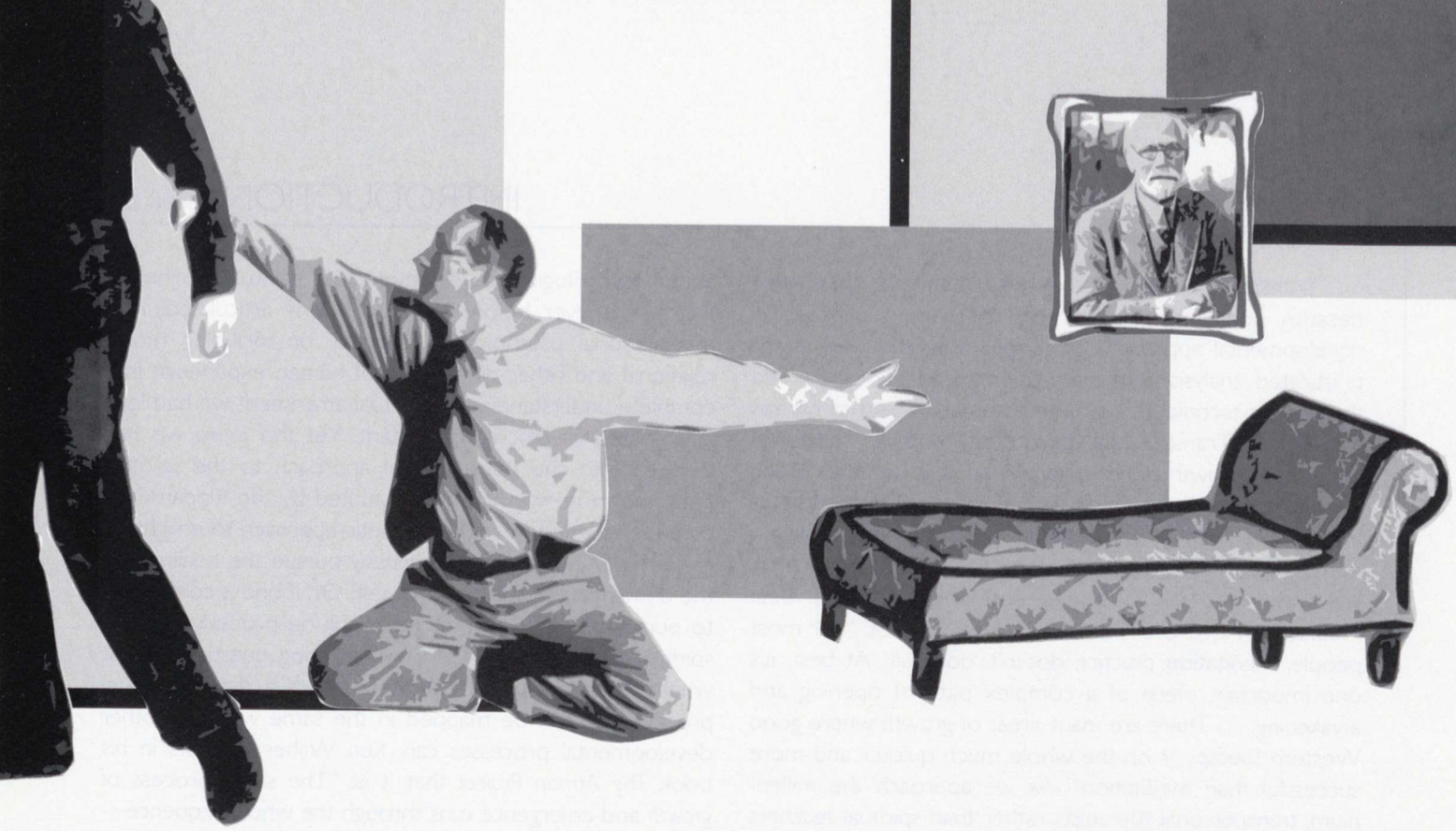
> One has to be somebody before one can be nobody. . . . The attempt to bypass the developmental tasks of identity formation and object constancy through a misguided spiritual attempt to "annihilate the ego" has fateful and pathological consequences. This is what many students who are drawn to meditation practice and even some teachers seem to be attempting to do. What is needed, and what has been missing from both clinical and meditative perspectives, is *a developmental psychology that includes the full developmental spectrum*. . . . Both a sense of self and a sense of no-self—in that order—seem to be necessary to realize that state of optimal psychological well-being that Freud once described as an "ideal fiction" and the Buddha long before described as "the end of suffering" and the one thing he taught.

Transpersonal psychology has, over the past two decades, popularized the very full-spectrum, stage-specific, developmental approach that Engler proposes, with a sophisticated analysis of the evolution of consciousness and therapeutic techniques that address every aspect of human experience. Transpersonal psychology, with its model of continuous growth rather than one of absolute attainment, and transpersonal therapists, who derive their authority not from claims of enlightenment but from knowledge of developmental processes, now hold forth the prevailing paradigm. Jack Kornfield, in an article entitled "Even the Best Meditators Have Old Wounds to Heal," writes: "For most people, meditation practice doesn't 'do it all.' At best, it's one important piece of a complex path of opening and awakening. . . . There are many areas of growth where good Western therapy is on the whole much quicker and more successful than meditation." As we approach the millennium, transpersonal therapists rather than spiritual teachers have, to all appearances, become the most authoritative and trusted commentators on the subject of spiritual paths and practices in the West.

Therefore, for this issue of *WIE,* we were eager to speak with a transpersonal psychologist who could illuminate how this new breed of spiritual guides grapples with the big questions we'd set out to investigate. We were delighted to have the opportunity to speak with Dr. Frances Vaughan, a respected therapist who has been called a "transpersonal pioneer," a "Wise Woman" and a "midwife of the soul." Vaughan maintains a private practice in Mill Valley, California, and teaches and lectures around the world. She is the author of two books and coeditor of five, several of which are required reading in transpersonal training curricula. Speaking with clarity and confidence about spiritual paths and practices, her books elaborate a precise methodology for guiding others to "healing and wholeness for the purpose of enhancing well-being at any level on the spectrum of consciousness, pointing the way to liberation." We hoped our discussion with Dr. Vaughan could answer some of our questions, the most central being: Could the goal of the Buddha's teaching, as a growing number of transpersonal therapists would suggest, really be reduced to "optimal psychological functioning"?

We approached Dr. Vaughan, after reading her books as well as a number of the other central texts in her field, with a genuine respect for the contributions transpersonal psychology has made to modern discussion of spiritual questions. Leading transpersonal thinkers, Ken Wilber foremost among them, have clarified many significant distinctions about psychological development and spiritual attainment that have never before been so clearly articulated. And transpersonal psychology's emphasis on including moral, relational and other dimensions of human experience in a complete understanding of spiritual attainment we had long appreciated as crucially important. Yet the more we had inquired into the transpersonal approach to the spiritual path, the more we had been haunted by the fundamental paradox inherent in any therapeutic approach to enlightenment: How can one *simultaneously* pursue the healing *and* the dismantling of the personal self? Or, if one is committed to pursuing healing first, can that still be properly called a spiritual path? We had also had lingering questions about whether the pursuit of enlightenment is a developmental process that can be mapped in the same way that other developmental processes can. Ken Wilber suggests in his book *The Atman Project* that it is: "The same process of *growth* and emergence runs through the whole sequence—the way we got *from* the [bodyself] to the ego is the same way we go from the ego to God." Yet the great enlightenment traditions have always claimed that the spiritual quest is no ordinary journey—that enlightenment is a leap *beyond* the known, beyond any conceptual framework, and *off* the map of relative progress altogether, no matter how comprehensive that map may be. While it is traditionally understood that the spiritual quest requires every faculty we can bring to it, in the end, enlightenment has always demanded that we leave all our tools, maps and concepts behind, and step into the unknown, blind and empty-handed. "You people still conceive of [the One] Mind . . . as something to be studied in the way that one studies a piece of categorical knowledge, or as a concept," wrote Zen master Huang Po as long ago as the ninth century B.C. "Those who use their minds like eyes in this way are sure to suppose that progress is a matter of stages. If you are that kind of person, you are as far from the truth as earth is far from heaven."

In the following dialogue, which took place in her counseling room in May 1998, Dr. Vaughan articulates her holistic vision of transpersonal psychology as a bridge between the dimensions of psychology and spirituality. Describing herself and transpersonal therapists more as "companions along the way" than as spiritual guides, and transpersonal spirituality more as a personal healing journey than as an ultimate reckoning of the individual with that which is Absolute, Vaughan gives voice to some of the most popular themes in contemporary spirituality today—and reveals another fascinating perspective on the question: What *is* enlightenment? Does anybody know what they're talking about?



WIE: *Charles Tart, in his Foreword to your book* The Inward Arc, *suggests that one of the most important aims of transpersonal psychology is to legitimize and restore interest in a more humanistic or spiritual sense of self in our Western culture, which has been so steeped in scientific materialism for the past 300 years that religious and existential questions have come to be seen as backward or even ridiculous in many circles. I'd like to ask if you could describe the role that you see transpersonal psychology playing in the culture at large in this respect.*

FRANCES VAUGHAN: Well, it seems to me that transpersonal psychology has attempted to expand the field of psychological inquiry to include all aspects of human experience. Where behaviorism, for example, tends to focus on the measurement, prediction and control of behavior, a more humanistic or transpersonal approach focuses on values, meaning and purpose. The transpersonal orientation has always attempted to integrate physical, emotional, mental *and* spiritual aspects of well-being. The other therapies often focus on one aspect or another. We have body therapies. We have a lot of therapies that focus exclusively on emotions, and cognitive therapies that focus primarily on thoughts and mental processes. Transpersonal psychology was the first to attempt to integrate spiritual issues. It's been very interesting to see the development of the field and the way in which this focus on spiritual issues has spread into the culture at large. There's much, much more widespread interest in integrating spiritual issues into the process of psychotherapy now—you're no longer limited to therapists who call themselves "transpersonal." It was the transpersonal movement that initiated that integration of the spiritual and the psychological. What I feel is that you can't really separate the psychological and the spiritual. They interact and affect each other all the time.

WIE: *Can you elaborate a bit on what you feel is the most important distinction between more conventional forms of psychotherapy and transpersonal therapy?*

FV: Well, I would say that transpersonal therapy tends to focus on inner experience, not only on experience in the outer world. It attempts to integrate the inner life of mind and spirit with the life of action and service in the world. The presenting problem, or the problem that initially motivates the client to seek a therapist, might be a relationship problem. But the opportunity is also there for exploring more in depth one's own *intra*personal ex-

"What spiritual practice

and psychotherapy have in common is that they both seek to relieve suffering. And the relief from suffering ultimately maybe comes only from waking up. However, in the meantime, you can often help guide people or point people in the right direction."

periences that contribute to whatever is going on in the outer world. There's an emphasis on integrating the inner and the outer, and also a focus on beliefs and how beliefs affect our experience. And so, from the perspective of transpersonal psychology, one doesn't necessarily espouse a particular religious orientation, but one tends to engage with the client in a way that they can explore their own orientation and beliefs, and really question them or go deeper in their own spiritual practice. In that sense, it's a little different from a pastoral counselor who will work within a particular framework. Hopefully, a transpersonal psychologist would work with a person regardless of what their particular religious orientation might be, really respecting their particular way of deepening their own experience.

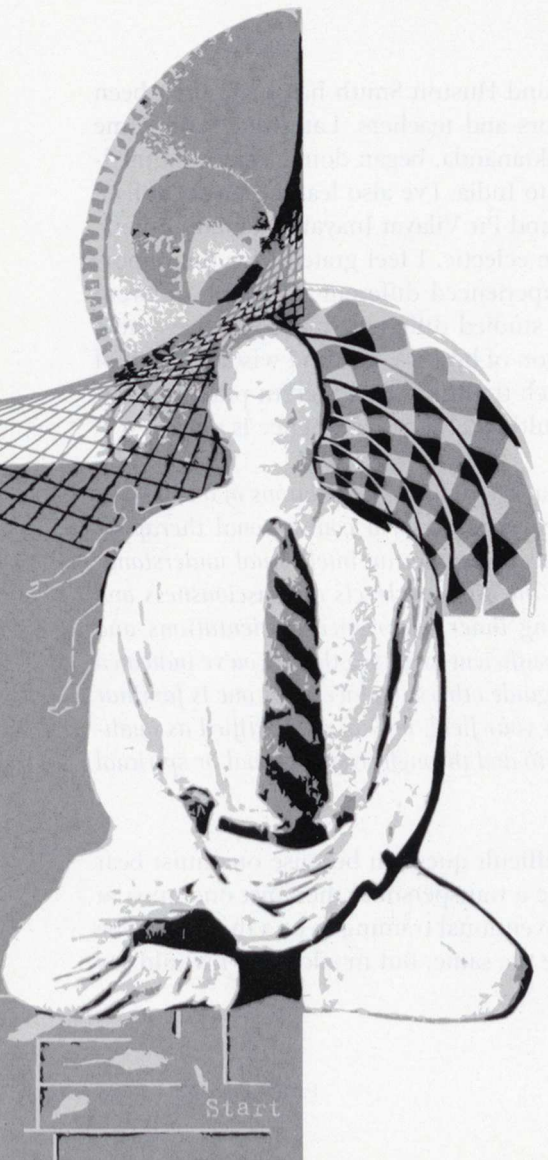
WIE: *What spiritual teachings and practices have you personally been interested and involved in?*

FV: My roots are Christian. As an undergraduate I became interested in comparative religions and philosophy. My first opportunity to do meditation practice was with Suzuki Roshi. So I started sitting. Zen was a starting place for me. One of the first things I remember early in my exposure to spiritual practice was a time I went to Tassajara Zen Center and heard a dialogue between Suzuki Roshi and Huston Smith. That made a deep impression on me, and Huston Smith has since then been one of my mentors and teachers. Later on, I did some practice with Muktananda, began doing Vipassana meditation and went to India. I've also learned about Sufism from Lex Hixon and Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan and others. So I've been quite eclectic. I feel grateful for the opportunity to have experienced different practices, different teachers. Having studied different traditions gives me a greater appreciation of how we can find wisdom in all of the traditions. Each tradition has different practices, but I do believe that ultimately the experience is one.

WIE: *What do you feel are the qualifications of a transpersonal therapist beyond those of a conventional therapist? You suggest in your books that an intellectual understanding of a "map" of the different levels of consciousness and their corresponding inner experiences, orientations and "self-sense" is not sufficient to guide others. You've indicated that one can only guide others to places that one is familiar with oneself. So in your field, how is one certified as qualified to lead others to and through transpersonal or spiritual experiences?*

FV: Well, it's a difficult question because one must bear in mind that to be a transpersonal therapist one must at least have the conventional training to be a therapist. The training would be the same. But in addition, I would say

"I think the point is not to assume that just because someone has had psychological training they're going to be an enlightened master. And we also shouldn't assume that just because someone is an enlightened master they're necessarily going to be the best person to help someone untie knots in the psyche."



that one would have to have done some spiritual practice and explored the inner world so that one could relate to someone else who was having spiritual or transpersonal experiences. If one had never had a transpersonal experience, then one would have an intellectual understanding of what that might be like, but it would be difficult to really empathize with what someone else might be going through. So that is important. But it's not that we can have all the experiences that our clients might have. A doctor can't have all the diseases that a doctor will treat, but in terms of depth, it seems to me that someone who wants to be a transpersonal therapist should undertake some spiritual discipline that really focuses on experiencing other dimensions of life.

WIE: *Yet it is traditionally understood—and one of the foremost thinkers in the transpersonal field, Ken Wilber, makes a point of this in his books—that genuine spiritual transformation is actually quite rare. To have a taste or glimpse of many kinds of experiences through meditation or other kinds of practices is not uncommon, but to really become stabilized in spiritual or transpersonal consciousness, and to truly be transformed, is something that is enormously demanding and traditionally has always required incredible dedication and one-pointed commitment. So to be in a position to help interpret what the spiritual path is all about, and to guide others to and through that work, I would think one would have to have had more than just a little experience or taste of it, but would have to have been quite substantially immersed in it. It's a delicate matter. It's one thing for transpersonal psychology to include the spiritual dimension in its worldview, to validate it and to be sympathetic to it—which of course is very important. But it's another*

thing to be really qualified or really have genuine authority to guide others in this arena.

FV: Yes, I think this is a very important question. And part of the answer lies in humility and recognizing one's own limitations. In other words, we all help each other along the way. And in the psychological perspective, we learn from teachers who are not necessarily totally realized. I mean, it's wonderful to have the opportunity to be with a realized teacher. But not everyone finds their way to such a teacher, and we all need help along the way. What spiritual practice and psychotherapy have in common is that they both seek to relieve suffering. And the relief from suffering ultimately maybe comes only from waking up. However, in the meantime, you can often help guide people or point people in the right direction. For example, the person may want to learn about meditation. I am not going to pretend to be a meditation teacher, but I might suggest that they practice with a meditation teacher who's qualified, and suggest who they can find in the area. I can give that kind of guidance, but it's always just pointing at the moon. I can help people with their psychological issues that may be getting in the way of their spiritual progress. If someone is serious about a spiritual quest and they find that they're troubled by psychological issues, that's when psychotherapy is appropriate. I've had the opportunity over the years to work with many people who've done far more spiritual practice than I have, and yet I've been able to assist them in untying some of the psychological knots that have been problematic for them along the way. So I would see transpersonal therapy as what you might call an "expedient teaching" rather than a final teaching. But I think that without pretending to be an expert in the spiritual disciplines, one can sometimes help people to find their way through their spiritual work.

WIE: *In your books, though, you often seem to present the role of a spiritual teacher and that of a transpersonal therapist as being interchangeable. Do you feel that there are important distinctions between these roles?*

FV: Yes, I think there's a difference between the two roles. Psychotherapists are psychologically trained, and often spiritual teachers aren't. Sometimes that's lacking. Psychological training can be helpful to people. And some psychologists can be very helpful to people without going very deeply into spirituality. Everybody has their own path, and I've come to appreciate that. And we can all learn from each other if we listen deeply, with mutual respect. We can all help each other. Because I may have had experiences that somebody else hasn't had, and may have a perspective that will be healing or helpful to them, and someone else may have experience that may be helpful to me. I think the point is not to assume that just because someone has had psychological training they're going to be an enlightened master. And we also shouldn't assume that just because someone is an enlightened master they're necessarily going to be the best person to help someone untie knots in the psyche.

WIE: *At one point in your book* Shadows of the Sacred, *you say that you have advised people about their practice of meditation or prayer. I believe this was in the context of someone already doing a meditation or prayer practice. Is this something that you would recommend for most transpersonal therapists—to get involved with people's prayer or spiritual practice in that way, and advise them about it?*

FV: Not necessarily. I think that one of the distinctions between teaching and doing therapy in my mind is that when you're teaching, you lead—you decide what you're going to talk about, what the subject matter is going to be. But in psychotherapy, the client leads. Clients bring their life experience and their issues into the therapeutic relationship. And the therapist responds to what the client brings. If they want to speak about meditation, you can respond to that. If a client wants to talk about prayer, that's what I would respond to. So, really, in my mind, it's the opposite of teaching. It's much more like educating in the traditional sense. To educate is to draw forth what is within the person. The therapeutic relationship provides a safe space to try to bring forth whatever it is that they are struggling with, whatever issues they have, whatever their pain is, whatever their fears are. Psychotherapy and spiritual practice both emphasize authenticity, self-discovery and coming to terms with reality. These are the areas that overlap. But in psychotherapy, the client leads. The actual content of what we talk about is whatever the client wants to bring to the relationship.

WIE: *But when you do get into the subject of spiritual practice and experience, which is theoretically what distinguishes traditional therapy from transpersonal therapy, the client may be practicing within a tradition with which the therapist is not fully familiar. If the therapist is not initiated into that tradition or into those practices, how is he or she going to be qualified or have a depth of understanding from which to comment on what the client is experiencing?*

FV: Well, it's very difficult to speak hypothetically about that. But what I have learned in terms of doing therapy is that my task is listening to people, and listening for the

solutions that come from within the person. It's not that I have to be an authority. I have to simply listen to what I hear the person saying. Sometimes, in a situation like that, I find that I can simply clarify something for them, which then allows them to find a solution, or allows them to go back to their teacher with a different question. I am not coming into the therapy situation as an authority in their tradition by any means. That's where humility is important. And I do think that it's very important in therapy that we understand that the purpose is facilitating the process of growth and development of the person, so that when it is finished, it's not something that I have done. It's something that they have done for themselves, something that happens because we work together.

WIE: *Throughout your books, you speak at length about the pitfalls of some of the Eastern spiritual paths that emphasize spiritual experience and transcendence without being grounded, so to speak, in a full maturation and empowerment or healing of the psyche, ego and what you refer to as the soul. And you and many others have rightly criticized the alarming abuses of trust that have occurred in the last couple of decades among some of the so-called enlightened teachers whose actions regarding sex, power and money would seem to betray their claims to spiritual realization. At the same time, I wanted to ask you if you feel that there are actually more transpersonal therapists doing a good job of modeling the highest ideals of what you have called "psychologically mature spirituality"—and really demonstrating what can be possible in terms of transpersonal or spiritual development—than spiritual teachers?*

FV: I think that there are people in all walks of life who demonstrate what I would call spiritual maturity, psychological maturity and emotional maturity. They don't have to be spiritual teachers. They don't have to be transpersonal therapists. But whenever we set up an ideal, human beings tend to fall short of that. So rather than criticizing or judging others, each one of us needs to make a commitment to living by what we believe in. Acknowledging our imperfections is utterly important, and we do the best we can. Transpersonal therapists *and* spiritual teachers struggle with that.

WIE: *You've written that in Western secular society, psychotherapists have begun to serve the function of priests. And in particular, with the downfall of so many spiritual teachers in recent years and the ensuing disillusionment with spiritual authority, in the last decade or so, transpersonal therapists and institutions of transpersonal therapy have become the most respected authorities about spirituality.*

In spite of everything you've said about not being an authority and acknowledging one's limitations, it does seem to be the case that the transpersonal therapists have actually become the high priests of our contemporary spiritual culture. What do you think about this?

FV: Traditionally, the role of a priest is that of an intermediary between a person and God. Now it may be that we don't need an intermediary; it may be that each of us has to work out our own relationship to God, or essence. On the other hand, intermediaries can be helpful. Insofar as transpersonal psychotherapists can help people who are struggling with psychological issues to find their way, they can provide a bridging function, they can serve the role of an intermediary in a helpful way. But I don't think that the role of a transpersonal therapist should be regarded as that of an authority figure, but rather as a facilitator or a healer or a helper who helps people along the way. And hopefully a transpersonal therapist would be trained so that they would do no harm.

WIE: *The transpersonal paradigm seems to be one of gradual personal evolution in which the individual evolves continuously from one stage of development to the next. Yet many of the greatest spiritual realizers have described spiritual realization and enlightenment as a radical departure from everything that has come before—not a further step in a continuum but rather a step* off *of the continuum altogether. I was wondering if you could comment on that.*

FV: First, I would say that it's never a straight line. There are always ups and downs along the way. And with spiritual awakening, what I have noticed is that sometimes people will have a very profound spiritual experience—but then there is the problem of how to reenter the world and *integrate* that experience. What transpersonal therapy can address is the issue of integration. I would say that there is a role for the transpersonal therapist on both sides of the illumination. Now, that may not be true for everybody, but it certainly is true for a lot of people. You can have very important, earth-shaking spiritual experiences, but then you have to come back to earth, to the world of chopping wood and carrying water and taking care of your own life. There are times when a person is just beginning on the spiritual path and the therapist may be able to point them in the right direction, while at other times, someone may have gone a long way, and need to come back to the marketplace, and the therapist may be able to help them to do that.

WIE: *You acknowledge in your books the traditional absolute distinction between the goal of psychology, which is to strengthen, heal and empower the ego, and the goal of spirituality, which is to diminish, dissolve and transcend the ego. And you address it by saying, as you did earlier in this conversation, that psychology is an expedient teaching, and not ultimately true, but that it's a necessary groundwork that leads to transcendence. But what would you say to the criticism that the therapeutic paradigm cannot fundamentally lead to anything more than more of the same—that nothing intending to strengthen the ego could ever lead to the destruction of the ego? And that perhaps what Jesus said about the fact that one cannot serve two masters may apply here?*

FV: Well, I would say that we don't serve two masters. Ultimately, if we're using Christian language, we're all always serving God.

WIE: *Is that really true, though? Can we assume that we are all always serving God?*

FV: I would hope that would be true for me—as long as I think I'm separate. I don't know if it's true for other people. That depends on how they interpret the feeling of being a separate self.

In the therapeutic effort, we've observed that a strong ego is easier to transcend than a weak one. That's substantiated. It's supported by some of the early psychedelic research, for example. People who had the most problem transcending the ego were the ones with a weak ego. I remember Swami Radha speaking about people who came to her ashram. Some people had to get over being too invested in their strong egos and some people had to deal with weak egos. So I don't think that strengthening the ego is necessarily an obstacle to transcendence. On the contrary, it can be a stepping stone to transcendence. It doesn't always lead in that direction, but it can. Let me give you a metaphor for the ego. The weak ego is like a frail canoe on a raging sea. And a healthy ego is like a fishing boat that goes out onto the ocean and brings back nourishment to the shore. And an overdeveloped ego is like an ocean liner on a duck pond, really out of touch with the depths. The healing work in psychotherapy is not just about strengthening the ego—at least in the transpersonal context. It's more about, I would say, making friends with the limitations of ego.

WIE: *What do you mean, exactly?*

FV: That means that the ego becomes a good servant. You have it; it doesn't have you. It doesn't run your life. It serves a purpose. It's like the Sufi saying: "Trust in God and tie your camel."

WIE: *Obviously what you're saying makes sense in that not everyone is going to be suited to the arduous nature of spiritual work. But in terms of the fundamental motivation—psychotherapeutic work, the work to heal, empower, strengthen, bolster your separate sense of self, your identity, your personal boundaries, all of that, that's a movement in one direction. And the work of spirituality is to smash that into smithereens—isn't it? It obviously may be appropriate for some people, at some times, to do therapeutic work. That can have a place. But when someone says, "Okay, I'm interested in real spiritual pursuit now," he or she should then know that this is a fundamentally* different *thing that they're setting out to do, wouldn't you agree?*

FV: Yes, it's different, but I don't agree that the spiritual work is about smashing the ego. It's about transcending it. And to transcend means to include, means to simply include it in a larger view. Everyone is in some sense engaged in the process of waking up. And different people are at different stages along the way. Hopefully we all are beings of friendliness and compassion. Hopefully we can help each being to move to the next stage of realization, wherever they are. If we have the privilege and the opportunity of deeper realization than someone else, maybe we can help them to wake up a little bit.

I think the most succinct statement comes from Zen master Dogen, who said, "To study Buddhism is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things."

WIE: *Do you mean the Self with a capital "S"?*

FV: You start studying yourself wherever you are. If you're identified with the little "s," then that's where you start. The study of the little self takes you through to experience the big Self. To me, that says that everything is part of the path. The work is really waking up, and we start from where we are. As a therapist I make every effort to meet each person who comes into my office where they are. And in that, I try to get a sense of what their experience is like. I try to really listen, really empathize, really enter their world space, and then see as best I can what would facilitate their moving to the next stage of their psycho-spiritual development.

WIE: *Helen Tworkov, the editor of* Tricycle *magazine, has made some very interesting comments about the way Zen is being practiced in America today that may also apply to the way in which many forms of spirituality are being practiced in this country. She points out that traditionally the* dharma, *and* dharma *practice, was something that one was expected to conform and accommodate oneself to. But now*

what is happening much of the time in America is that people are taking bits and pieces of paths and practices and accommodating them to their own secular lifestyles. This kind of approach has even been called "designer spirituality." What would you say to the criticism that transpersonal psychology is also participating in this, along with many of the other forms of popular spiritual approaches—and that this can be seen as a kind of co-opting of the sacred?

FV: I think that's definitely a risk, and it may be happening. But the problem is that it's all still in process. In other words, Buddhism has always changed somewhat as it has entered different cultures, and Buddhism in America is still taking shape. It seems to not yet be determined what form it's going to take. Some people want it to be more traditional, and some people want it to be more available to everybody. But that's generally been true in all the traditions—there are schisms between those who are more orthodox and those who are not. And there is the same kind of division in transpersonal psychology; there are some forms that are more orthodox and others that are more accommodating. It's a very difficult question. In the field of transpersonal psychology, the two-edged sword of popularity has often been discussed. After something becomes popularized, it does get watered down.

On the other hand, let me just say that while traditionally there was a choice—you either lived a secular life or you chose a religious life and went to the monastery—today there is an emphasis on the importance of bringing the two together. More and more people are staying in the secular community and using spiritual teachings and awareness so that hopefully they can have a real impact on what's happening in the world.

WIE: *In* The Inward Arc *you speak at one point about making friends with the limitations of the ego, as you did earlier. And throughout your work you often speak about integrating one's shadow side. These kinds of statements are quite common in the spiritual world these days and many popular meditation teachers are admired for their honesty in sharing their foibles with their students. Do you think it's possible for a human being who genuinely aspires to transcend the personal to transcend the shadow altogether?*

FV: In the sense that it's possible to transcend the ego, yes. However, it's always going to be there as part of who we are as human beings in terms of the collective psyche. To be human you need to accept it all, to accept human foibles and the dark side of being human as well. Certainly there are people who have transcended the shadow, transcended the ego. But again, to transcend is to include, so that we need no longer be obsessed with the shadow. It's like you may not be obsessed with the ego or concerned with it if you are truly awake. But there is a risk if we assume that there is no shadow as long as we are living in the realm of duality, where kindness is better than cruelty, love is better than fear and freedom is better than bondage. As long as we hold these values, then we have to acknowledge that we live in a world with a shadow. It's possible to have the *experience* of transcending the shadow, yet the fact is that we live in a world where people are often caught in the shadow. We have a capacity for transcendence. But how do we then come back and live in this world where we *do* have values and where there *are* shadows?

WIE: *So it sounds like you're saying: "Yes, in theory—*but.*" There's a "but."*

FV: It's like affirming the illusory nature of the world. Separation is fundamentally an illusion. Nevertheless, we experience ourselves as separate.

WIE: *So you think that as a function of being in the world of time and space, the shadow is necessarily operative?*

FV: I have a feeling that we're concretizing shadow and ego too much. These are concepts. There is no solid reality to any of them. These are just ways of describing aspects of human experience.

WIE: *I'm just trying to explore what you've written about in your books, and your definition of the shadow as any part of our experience that we perceive as negative and want to deny or avoid.*

FV: Let me put it this way. One of

the difficulties or traps of spiritual practice which aims for transcendence is denial—which means that because I don't want to have anger, greed, hatred and delusion, I pretend I don't have them. Nevertheless, they may well arise from time to time in my experience. The most important thing is coming back to authenticity, to truth-telling. So long as I'm experiencing anger or fear or guilt or greed, or any of those negative emotions, it's better to acknowledge them, work with them and release them than to fall into denial. Because if we deny them, they tend to reappear in unexpected ways.

WIE: *I just have one more question. Imagine for a moment that you come home from work one day and suddenly you notice in the distance a figure of unmistakable wisdom and dignity slowly approaching you, accompanied by a group of men and women whom you recognize to be his disciples. Suddenly you realize beyond any doubt that this is the Buddha! And then you are face to face with him, and he says, "Frances, drop everything and follow me." What would you do?*

FV: I would ask for guidance.

WIE: *Ask whom?*

FV: I have found, when I have a question that I'm not sure about, that I can ask within for guidance. If I didn't know if that was right for me, if that was what I was called to do, I would ask for guidance.

WIE: *But in this case, as I said, you know beyond a doubt that it really is the Buddha.*

FV: I find it very difficult to answer hypothetical questions, because life is full of surprises. I trust that in the moment I would know what to do. ■

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separate. But this action does *occur. All the realized souls express this.*

Ajja: This is difficult to explain, to put into words, but if one spends time in the company of a person who is in such blissful consciousness, then it becomes possible to understand. Such an individual will not tell you anything. He will communicate only in silence. But through contact with him, understanding can happen. One can know this only through experience.

What is love? Are we speaking about a love related to the senses? Or is it beyond the senses? Some people are the embodiment of love but the nature of their love is beyond the senses. You cannot see it with your eyes. You cannot describe that love with your words. They are love embodied. This love is not something to be displayed. It is their original nature. It's not something they merely express. It is their nature *always.*

AC: *It's who they are.*

Ajja: They exist in this world, but they are not. They are, and they are not. That is what self-illumination is. That itself is *Atman* [the Self]. That itself is bliss. That itself is truth. That itself is life. Which life is it? It's not worldly life. It's a life beyond duality and beyond death.

AC: *So how they* are, *then, is the answer to the question. How they* are *is the answer to the question of what the relationship is between nothing and something.*

Ajja: These things are beyond description. This we cannot explain. This can only be seen and understood. It's not because they have something to say that they speak. It's not possible to describe bliss. When you are blissful, it's an experience, but there is no one there to speak. Words come out, but between the words that come out and that ultimate reality there is no relationship. The real state and the words that describe it are not related. That exists only as Itself. The words show That, they manifest That, but they are not That. The existence of that Supreme is indicated by the word "I" only for the sake of interaction in the world—for the sake of the world, but not for the sake of That.

My experience is of the Universal Soul only, which is energy, light and power—the self-luminous supreme Universal. It has come for evolution and it has evolved. Universal light comes for evolution and it evolves.

AC: *The light evolves?*

Ajja: Light and power came, but now only light remains in the evolved form. There is no power. The indweller of this physical body is the soul, which is nothing but self-luminous light and power. And in evolution, the power dissolves, leaving only light.

AC: *Can you say that again?*

Ajja: The indweller of the body is a universal power and light. And in the process of evolution, the power dissolves and the light remains. But the truth of this cannot really be communicated. Only through contact, by being in the proximity of a realized soul, can one understand. This is one of those questions the answer to which can only be discovered when you search for it in silence. Otherwise it becomes mere lecture from which none of us will benefit.

AC: *I understand that the most important answer cannot be given in words, that it can only be found by the individual in silence. And yet it is my experience that by asking these kinds of questions sometimes magical and extraordinary things can happen.*

Ajja: Even if the truth comes out or if, as you say, magical, miraculous things occur, when words come out, they are still nothing but words.

AC: *But the words coming from a* jnani *have the power to enlighten.*

Ajja: That is about the *jnani.* But where are the *jnanis?* Who is a *jnani?* And who is it that *recognizes* the *jnani?*

AC: *The* jnani *and the one who recognizes the* jnani *are one and the same.*

Ajja: Is that your experience?

AC: *Yes.*

Ajja: I do not deny that experience. But a *jnani* will never have the experience that "I am a *jnani.*" He is simply what he is. It's his original state. If an unnatural state comes, he will be amazed. This is the original, natural state for a *jnani.* There is only bliss. There is no one to experience that bliss. The person who sees has gone. That is evolution. So what *is,* in that case, is a state which is not a state. This is the original state of every individual. But one must be ready to go to that original state.

AC: *One of your disciples told me that when you get to know people more intimately you can see their past lives. Is this true?*

Ajja: I am not an astrologer. I don't read anyone's mind. This is contradictory for spirituality. Liberation should happen in this life itself. Sometimes we are told that for some reason it's not possible in this life, that we have to wait for future incarnations. But we don't know if this is true or not, so here and now we should become free.

AC: *I agree with you, and my question is based only on what I've heard from other people here. I personally feel that this kind of thing is a complete waste of time and also that it's the opposite direction one should be looking in if one wants to be free. If one wants to be free, one wants to know the Self one is when there's no time and no history. Finding out about past lives could never tell you anything about that which never happened.*

Ajja: Yes. Let us know about *this* life. In knowing this you know everything you need to know. Now we are here. It's now about this. Why should we go back? There is no future and no past. We have come here. We are here. What is this? Who are we? Who am I? Who is the one who has come? That which has come is self-luminous power with light. This itself is the foundation. There are engineers who build the building, but we must look only at the foundation, we are concerned only with the foundation. "Who am I?"—this inquiry is the foundation. When you go in search of That, it is possible to find the answer to every question on this earth. When you go in search of "Who am I?" you will reach a state where there is nothing. "I" means the state where nothing is there. It's over. No *sadhana* is required for this—only search.

AC: *Direct search.*

Ajja: Yes, direct search. When the seeker goes in search of That, the seeker is no more. That state is *Atman*, which is bliss, which is self-luminous and which is silence. Until then, ego is there. Then it is not.

It sometimes happens in life that due to some incident there is total transformation. In many people's lives, due to one incident there is total transformation. It is in the biographies of all the great saints of southern India—Valmiki, Tulsi Das, Ramana Maharshi, J. Krishnamurti. According to their karma, due to small incidents, they changed. Through all these stories, there is one thread. In my case, for example, there was pain for six months, then no pain. Then contemplation began; worry became contemplation. Untruth became truth. Darkness became light. As with fruit, when it is unripe, it is bitter. When it becomes ripe, it is sweet. But that sweetness was always there. That bitterness is transformed into sweetness.

So worry should become contemplation. For that reason alone we should give importance to thoughts. We should not get agitated or lost when we get worries or problems. We should experience them. Then there is an explosion.

AC: *Do you mean that we must face them completely?*

Ajja: Yes. Experience that. And how should the mind be when you experience that? During that time, the mind should be focused, the mind should contemplate on that. When the mind is fixed on that, then—

AC: *You mean there should be no resistance to experience?*

Ajja: No resistance. In this way, the same mind that experiences everything else now goes to contemplation. Beyond that there is no mind at all. So mind itself is both the cause of bondage and the means to liberation. This world is nothing but the roar of mind. When the works of mind are over, there is no mind. Then all desires are gone—desires which the mind imagines. Everything is imagined; all of that is mind. So the mind has to withdraw. All desires should go. Even if one desire is there, you cannot take the mind inward. The mind should go into the heart and begin the search. "Who am I? Who am I? I am here in this body. Who am I?" We should search like that. When you are in the search, in that the mind is gone. We are afraid to touch that place. But the mind must be totally gone. Give it up.

AC: *You said earlier that this is universally applicable and true for the whole of humanity.*

Ajja: Yes, this is a question for the whole of mankind. We need freedom. No one wants to be in bondage. Everyone wants to be free. My message for the whole universe is not that only one should get free. Others also should become free. The whole world should become free. That is my message.

What is the path to freedom? If you have a clear picture of the experiences I've had during my lifetime—joys and sorrows, triumphs and miseries, honor and dishonor, and how I reacted to these—that can help you to find your own way. How I faced those experiences, how I walked in my life, how I accepted death. How action was performed, and how transformation has come. My whole life, once understood, gives a clear picture of the way. When we have understood all these things, then we have to bring that understanding into our practice. Then we become free. If one individual is liberated in this way, then the mission of my life has been fulfilled. That is why

I am giving these statements—so that it will be helpful for the public. That is why I have agreed to this interview. Otherwise I would remain in total silence.

The total picture is the integrated evolution of the individual and that power. When we become totally free in our action, only then is our birth fruitful. Then our life is really fulfilled. Freedom is the goal. Everyone should become free. And all have come to life only for that purpose—that freedom itself is bliss for all, for every individual. Every individual should be released from bondage. If I alone become free, it is not enough to make me happy. Everyone should become like that. Every soul has to become free. I have had a glimpse of that possibility, and if all were free, that would be true bliss for me.

AC: *So this is for the benefit of mankind.*

Ajja: Yes. This message is for the whole of humanity. When there is purity within, mind, heart and action should be one. Mind and heart should be pure and our deeds should be the same. We all have to go beyond thought to that state in which there are no obstacles at all. It is by this true search alone that one becomes a universal soul. And every individual has that capacity. Not just one. Every individual has the capacity to become That.

I am not in mind at all. I am in a state beyond all thoughts and emotions. I am speaking, but I don't know anything. I don't think; I read no books. For the true knowledge itself, none of this is necessary. For intellectual discourse, books are necessary, but for Self-experience, nothing is required. If I am in some remote corner, also it doesn't stop. It spreads through the whole universe, percolates through the whole universe. If one reaches that state of *ananda*, even if he is in some remote corner, it just spreads. Even if he tries to hide, it just radiates from him. It reaches throughout the whole universe, the entire cosmos.

So . . . what are you going to do with what you have recorded?

AC: *It will be part of an article about you—your experience and what you are saying—that will help people in America and other places to benefit from what you have discovered.*

Ajja: It feels as if you are very known to us. You do not feel like a stranger to me.

AC: *Yes, I feel the same way.*

Ajja: There is no America and no India. There is only the whole universe. ■

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from restraining yourself? Restrain yourself!

WIE: *My point is that it's better to do so!*

RB: That's my point, too.

WIE: *But according to your view, I could just as easily say, "It must be God's will because I feel a desire," and then* not *restrain myself.*

RB: You're saying that you know you should restrain yourself—then why don't you restrain yourself? If a body/mind organism is programmed not to cheat on his wife, whatever anybody says, he won't do it. If you are so programmed that you won't raise a hand against somebody, will you start killing people? Now if there is a law passed that you can beat your wife and no action will be taken against you, will you start beating your wife? Not unless the body/mind organism is programmed to do that, and if it is programmed to do that, it has been doing so anyway. So as I said, accepting God's will does not prevent you from doing whatever you think you should do. Do it! Do exactly what you think you should do!

WIE: *In the end, though, how can we say that we* know *it is destiny or God's will? All we know is that certain events take place. Afterwards we can look back on something we did and say, "It just happened," and if we like, we can call it destiny. But isn't it more accurate to say that we don't really know whether it is destiny or not?*

RB: That's the point. We don't know.

WIE: *But saying that we don't know is different from saying "we know that it is God's will." It's different from saying we know that everything is fixed. You see, it sounds to me like you're saying that you* do *know that everything is the will of God. What I'm suggesting, though, is that we* just don't know; *we don't know if it is God who is deciding these things, so we can't really say, "This is how it works" or "Everything is all mapped out by God."*

RB: We don't know and that is the bottom line; so if you like, you can drop the concept of destiny and say that nobody can really know anything. Fine! There is no need for the concept of destiny. After all, if you accept that whatever happens is not in your control, then who is there to be concerned with destiny?

WIE: *Since many spiritual seekers come to you for advice about the spiritual path, I'd like to ask what you see as the value, if any, of spiritual practice as a means towards enlightenment.*

RB: If *sadhana* [spiritual practice] is necessary, a body/mind organism is programmed to do *sadhana.*

WIE: *In other words, if it happens, it happens?*

RB: That's right.

WIE: *You don't advocate it or think it's helpful to do?*

RB: People sometimes ask me, "If nothing is in my hands, should I or should I not meditate?" My answer is very simple. If you like to meditate, meditate; if you don't like to meditate, don't force yourself to meditate.

WIE: *Is spiritual seeking then an obstacle to enlightenment?*

RB: Yes, seeking is the greatest obstacle because of the seeker. It is the seeker who is the obstacle—not seeking; seeking happens by itself. Seeking happens because the body/mind organism is programmed to

seek what it is seeking. So if the seeking for enlightenment is happening, then the body/mind organism has been programmed to seek. The obstacle is the seeker who says, "I want enlightenment."

WIE: *Why is it then, that many great sages have spoken about the importance of seeking? Ramana Maharshi said that the seeker has to want enlightenment as badly as a drowning man wants air—with that degree of one-pointedness and sincerity.*

RB: Sure. So what it means is that there has to be that kind of intensity in the seeking. But he also said, "If you want to make an effort, you must make an effort; but if effort is destined not to be made, effort will not be made." That's what Ramana Maharshi said. So you see, whether one seeks or doesn't seek is not in your control. Whether seeking for God or seeking for money happens is neither your credit nor your fault.

WIE: *You've written in one of your books that one has actually reached quite a deep understanding when one can say, "I don't care if enlightenment happens or not in this body/mind organism."*

RB: That's right. When he reaches that stage then it means that the seeker is no longer there. It is extremely close to enlightenment because if there is no one to care, then there is no longer any seeker.

WIE: *But couldn't the result just be an extraordinarily deep indifference—which is* not *enlightenment?*

RB: That could lead to enlightenment!

WIE: *I want to ask you just one more question. You often say that we should "just accept what is"—*

RB: Yes, if it is possible for you to do so—and that is not in your control!

Epilogue

As I stumbled past the doorman and out into the bustling Bombay streets, my mind was reeling. How could it be, I asked myself as I made my way through the crowd, that an intelligent, educated man like Ramesh Balsekar could really believe that everything is predestined, that before we are even born, our fate is already etched in a kind of ethereal granite? Could he really be serious in his insistence that our entire life, with its seemingly endless stream of choices and decisions, of precarious opportunities to set our own course for better or for worse, is actually, from the first breath, a fait accompli? While I traversed the sidewalk in search of a café in which to find respite from the chaos, the difficult turns of our

brief dialogue swirled in my head. Yes, "Thy will be done" is the essence of at least most religions, I thought to myself, but for the great mystics and sages who have made such utterances throughout history, surrender to the will of God has meant far more than simply accepting that there is nothing anyone can do to affect the circumstances of their life. Surely what has been traditionally referred to as "God's will" is that which one discovers when one has absolutely given up the ego, when all self-centered motives have been extinguished, leaving one utterly surrendered to doing God's will, whatever it may be! For Jesus or Ramakrishna or Ramana Maharshi to say he was surrendered to God's will was one thing. But to say that this is true of everyone seemed at that moment to reflect a peculiar and even dangerous form of madness—and one which could be used to justify the most extreme forms of behavior. Balsekar's statement, "What you think you should do in any situation . . . is precisely what God wants you to think you should do," means that to him the enlightened Buddha is no more doing the will of God than the serial killer who is attacking his next victim.

I had come into the interview expecting some disagreement, but somehow even Balsekar's books—in which all of these ideas are clearly and repeatedly expressed—had not prepared me for my encounter with the man himself. How had he come up with them? I wondered. And why? Around and around my thoughts went, recalling everything from his chilling claim that even when we hurt someone, we need not feel guilty, for we are not responsible for our actions—that even "Hitler was merely the instrument through which the horrible events that had to take place, took place"—to his assertion, defying all common sense, that we have no power to control our behavior or even to influence the behavior of others. And all of this in the context of his science-fiction description of each of us as "body/mind organisms" acting out our "programming."

Suddenly the welcome sight of a tea shop appeared through the smog, and as I made my way inside, I was relieved to find the kind of quiet oasis for which I had hoped. It was there, at one of the many empty tables, as the first sip of sickly sweet milk tea passed across my lips that, in a flash, it hit me. I was not drinking the tea! I was not sitting at the table! In fact, I was not the one who had entered the tea shop. And I was not the one who had just been tormented for an hour in discussion with a man who at that moment was beginning to seem like the sane one. In fact, it had never been me doing anything. It was as if a burden I had been carrying for my entire life was suddenly lifted into the sky by a hot air balloon, whisked away, never to return again. All those years I had struggled to be a better, more honest and generous human being—all that effort I had made to renounce my tendencies toward superiority, selfishness and aggression—had all been a folly, all foolishly, needlessly based on the self-important idea that I had some control over my own destiny, and the petty presumption that what I did to

"others" ever mattered anyway. How could I have been so misguided? But wait, it wasn't even me who was misguided! As if through parting clouds, clearly now I could suddenly see that what I had thought of as "my life" had in fact been only a mechanical process. The person I had thought I was was just a machine. And the world in which I thought I had been living was not, as I had assumed, a world of human complexity, but one of mechanistic simplicity, of perfect order, a mathematical playing out of programs in motion since the beginning of time.

As the clinical perfection of God's scientific plan started to open up before me, the ecstatic thrill of absolute freedom—from worry, from care, from obligation, from guilt—began to rush through my veins like a torrent of undammed rivers. And with it came an enveloping, resounding peace, an absolute cessation of tension, in the recognition that no matter what apparent ambiguity or uncertainty I might encounter thereafter, no matter what seemingly difficult decisions I might face, I could always rest assured that whatever choice I made was exactly the choice God wanted me to make. The mysterious sense of an Unknown that had tugged at me for so long had evaporated. The others in the café turned their heads as I laughed out loud, a long belly laugh, and mused to myself what a fantastical game life would be if everyone understood how it all really works, if everyone could at least get a glimpse of how free we could be, if we all lived on Planet Advaita. ■

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man." If you are a wise man, then you don't need another wise man to become wise; if you are otherwise, you need a wise man, but because you are otherwise, you cannot discern him. So you are in a helpless situation. Therefore, the criterion for a wise man, I tell you finally—the way to find out whether he is wise or not—is if he makes *you* wise. Then he knows. That is the only criterion, and there is none other because the forms his compassion can assume are very varied, and with all our actions we don't always console people.

The mystic and the Vedantin

AC: *Shankara and Ramana Maharshi are generally considered to be two of the greatest exponents of Advaita teaching and* advaita *realization. And yet I've always wondered why Shankara's teaching gave rise to a monastic system in which one is encouraged to renounce the world in order to pursue the spiritual life in earnest, while often when people would ask Ramana Maharshi—who was a renunciate himself—"Master, should I give up the world?" he would encourage them to inquire into the nature of who it was that wanted to give up the world, and discourage them from trying to make any external changes in their lives.*

SD: Shankara is just a link in the tradition, as I said before. He's not the author of any particular system or monastic order. It's true that he himself was a *sannyasi*, a renunciate—as a young person he renounced everything—but a *sannyasi* is different from a monastic.

A *sannyasi* doesn't belong to any monastic order. He is simply a noncompetitor in the society. He is a person who has gained a certain maturity, a certain discriminative understanding, which drives him to pursue spiritual knowledge in a dedicated fashion. In Shankara's time, such a person was absolved from all familial, social and religious duties by a ritual in which he said, "All is given up by me. I don't compete. I'm not interested in money or power or security or in anything else here." That is a *sannyasi*. He is not a member of an organization or order. There is no monastery to protect that fellow. He's "under the sky."

But there is still a deeper level of renunciation which this *sannyasi*, this renunciate, has to gain, and that is the knowledge that "I am not the doer, I am not the enjoyer, I never did any karma, any action, before"—direct knowledge of the nondual Self, which is also *actionlessness*. Action is always there as long as doership is there. Even "not-doing" is an action. So the freedom from doership that comes in the wake of knowledge of the Self is not an act of giving up. It is: "I know and therefore I am free. And so there is no choice." This is what is called the *real sannyas*, the true renunciation of all actions at all times, and that is enlightenment.

AC: *It's not true that Shankara started a monastic tradition?*

SD: No, he didn't start any monastic tradition. They said so afterwards, but that was because he was such a popular teacher and because he was a *sannyasi*. His disciples had *maths* [monasteries] that they had created, but it wasn't a new order. Some of his disciples were perhaps dispatched to different places, but we don't know whether he sent them or they went. My feeling is they went—he didn't send anybody anywhere. That's how I would be, anyway, if I were Shankara; I'd say, "Go wherever you want!" Now if a small person like me would do that, then I don't think Shankara

would have done anything else. So that's one perception taken care of.

Then there's Ramana. Some people say that Ramana is the highest, the one who in the modern world has accomplished *advaita*. That's the perception because he's known to some people, but there could be unknown millions we don't know—some may even be householders, people who are at home, some of them just your ordinary housewives. In India, you know, you can't take these people for granted; some of these women are enlightened. They are! And they may be housewives, mothers of ten children. We don't know. India is a different country. There are no criteria to find out whether this person is enlightened or not. And so Ramana is said to be enlightened, but we should ask *him*, "Are you enlightened?" And he will say, "Why do you want to know? Who are you who wants to know? Find out who *you* are." He discovered this way of speaking with people that did not require him to answer any questions. One fellow comes and asks, "What is God?" and he answers, "Who are you that is asking this question?" This is a way of answering questions that he adopted as an attempt to turn the person toward himself. Therefore, his attention was not toward any particular style of living. He neither encouraged *sannyas* nor anything else. He was only telling people: "Understand who you are. That's what is important."

AC: *In fact, if people would say that they wanted to leave their family and take* sannyas, *he would discourage that.*

SD: Every *sannyasi* will say the same thing, because otherwise all those people would end up in the ashram! Certainly I would say the same thing in this case, because anybody who says, "I want to give up everything," has got a problem.

AC: *Why?*

SD: Because he's doubtful! If he were not doubtful he would have left already; he wouldn't have come and asked me. Because the mango fruit, when it is ripe, falls down; it doesn't ask, "Shall I fall down?" Ramana was not dumb; he knew exactly what he had to say. If I were he, do you know what I would have said? I would advise the person, "Hey, come on, you need not change anything. Be where you are; it's a change of *vision*." Even Shankara would say the same thing. Shankara had only four disciples. He traveled up and down this country on foot, which means he met thousands of people, yet he had only four disciples! That means he was advising everybody, "Stay where you are."

AC: *Yet at the same time, from what we have heard, both Jesus and the Buddha encouraged people to leave everything and follow them in order to pursue the spiritual life. So this is an intriguing question.*

SD: They encouraged, they encouraged—I don't know what for. Perhaps they wanted people to spend time with themselves. But the value of a contemplative life has always been there in the Vedic tradition, and a contemplative life can be lived anywhere. And you can be in the midst of all activities in the contemplative life, or you can be alone and not contemplative at all.

AC: *In one of your books, you make a distinction between a mystic and a Vedantin. When referring, for example, to Ramana Maharshi as a mystic, you seem to be distinguishing him in some way from a Vedantin, and since many people consider him to be the quintessence of Vedanta, I'm curious to know what that distinction is.*

SD: The only difference here is that a mystic has no means of communication to make you a mystic, an equally great mystic as himself.

AC: *To clear up empirical confusion—is that what you mean?*

SD: Yes. Suppose this mystic has got the knowledge of his being *always All*—that kind of a mystic's experience. So that person is a mystic, but he has no means of communication to share that experience. If he has a means of communication by which to make another person equally a mystic, then there is nothing mystical about what he knows. Therefore, I will not call him a "mystic"; I will call him a "Vedantin."

AC: *In Ramana's case, everybody said that he communicated through silence.*

SD: Again, this is an interpretation, because there are a lot of people I know who went to him and then came back saying that he didn't know anything.

AC: *But there are also many people who said that they had profound experiences in his presence.*

SD: Each one has to interpret in his own way. But we can only say someone is a Vedantin as long as they teach Vedanta! ■

masterpiece!" Similarly, God has painted this entire panoramic, continuously changing picture that is never constant but is continuously going on and on. He has never finished his masterpiece, but all the time he's within everybody enjoying and rejoicing in it because it's purely a painting. It is the fact that you want to get yourself *involved* in this painting and take it to be *real* that is the problem which causes so much misery for one and all. Do you understand?

WIE: *Well, yes, I understand what you're saying—*

VS: Good for you. So there is nothing to be renounced and nothing to be done. Just be yourself and find out who you are. That is the end of every problem in life. You know, there *are* no problems in life—the only problem is *thinking*. Life is not a problem; life is a *mystery*. Life is a song. Life is a dance. Through this mystery *lives* this song, *lives* this dance. *Enjoy* the cosmic dance of Shiva! That is Advaita for you! The moment you become the song, the moment you become the dance, the moment you become the fluidity in water, the hardness in the rock, the fragrance of the flower, the moment you become the *blossoming* of the flower, you are Advaita. Do you get me? But suppose you see a beautiful flower, and feeling a sudden sense of beauty inside yourself you say, "What a beautiful flower!" What has happened there? Can you tell me?

WIE: *Well, on one hand, it seems like a nice thing. You're appreciating something—*

VS: And that is your problem! The moment you utter a word, things have stopped and you have dipped into your past. Literally, we are leading a dead life made up only of images from the past and nothing of the life in front of us as it's blossoming in its glory. We miss it. We're always in the past. We are shaking hands with a dead corpse in every minute. We think we are living life, but we are not. The beauty in the flower is *God*, you see? God is not a person; God is a *presence*. God is the godliness that is present only in this moment NOW—not in the past, not in the future. The moment you are in the mind, it isn't Advaita. But the moment you're in the moment-to-moment, *that* is Advaita.

WIE: *Some teachers of Advaita say that one who has realized the Self has gone beyond mundane distinctions such as good and evil or right and wrong, and that such an individual is in fact accountable to no one. One such teacher has gone so far as to say that such an individual is not accountable even to God. What is your view on this?*

VS: All wrong concepts again! One cannot be a "teacher of Advaita." The moment a teacher comes, it means there's a student. That's not at all Advaita, number one. The moment he says he's a teacher, run away from him. Do you understand what I'm saying?

WIE: *About the teacher, yes.*

VS: And what was the next point you mentioned?

WIE: *That a Self-realized individual—*

VS: "A Self-realized individual." If he's Self-realized, can he still remain an *individual?* Totally, completely misplaced! Advaita means: to *stop* using the same old words, not knowing what they mean. "The Self-realized individual"—that is wrong. Okay, it doesn't matter. For the sake of the interview, all right. Now what does he say?

WIE: *That they're not accountable to anyone—that they've gone beyond distinctions such as good and evil, right and wrong, and are accountable not even to God.*

VS: Exactly. There's nothing called "good" and "bad." That's all purely your mental concepts. It's only because you think you're a human being and God is elsewhere that you think you should be accountable to God. You think God is a magistrate? You think God is a Peeping Tom? You think God is a dictator waiting to punish you? And you say "God is everywhere." If God is everywhere, who are *you,* then? It is because you think you are a human being wanting spiritual experiences that you get caught in the concepts of good and bad and evil and up and down and sideways and backwards and inside and outside. But nothing like that exists even if you are *not* realized. If you think you've got to be accountable to God, who are *you,* then? You are *separate* from God? That means God is not everywhere. Forget it! Never *say* the statement, "God is everywhere." The moment you say "God is everywhere," you do not exist. *Of course* you do not exist. God *is* everywhere. You've forgotten your true nature, and because you've forgotten your true nature, you say you've got to be accountable to God. But the moment you know God, you're not there, so who are you going to account to?

Now, a Self-realized one who has transcended the mind is *not* accountable. Why? Because he *is* God. How can God be accountable to himself? There's nothing called sin, there's nothing called greed—how can these things exist in a painting? One fellow goes to a museum

and says, "This painting is *not* good. That painting is *very* good." Whereas you think he is wrong: *this* one is good, *that* one is bad. Which is it? It's your own concept, your own attitude, your own mental color. Okay, good for you. Now drop all those and go beyond your mind. Then you'll *know* God. Then you'll *know* what "Self-realization" means.

Do *you* know what "Self-realization" means? You've got *What Is Enlightenment?* So what *is* enlightenment? You don't even know what it is when you're printing it. Fantastic! Wonderful! It's like the blind leading the blind. "Everybody walk, walk, walk; come to the precipice, have a good fall." It's like that. "*Enlightened*" means to realize that there's nothing called ignorance. Okay? Chew on *that*. This one word, if you chew on it, you will stop making any interviews with anybody. You will *become* that. You will transcend the mind. Do you know there's nothing called ignorance? Do you know what ignorance is? Okay, forget it. I don't want your interview to go flop. I don't want you to lose your job.

WIE: *Is having this understanding that there is nothing called ignorance really the same as being fully Self-realized—or is there more to it?*

VS: You see, it's like this. You have forgotten your true nature, okay? And you only have to remember your true nature—that's all there is to be done. But the way to do that is not by trying to *remember* it all the time, because that is, again, just another mental thought. No, you can only know your true nature by negating all that you *think* you are, and the moment you negate everything that you *think* you are, or that you've been *told* you are, then you'll end up with who you *really* are. And the moment you end up knowing who you are you will come into a state where you will never say a word.

WIE: *I'm sorry?*

VS: The moment you have negated everything completely, you will come into a state where you will never speak about it, never say that you are realized, or this, that or the other thing. If a bulb is lighted, does it talk about darkness? When the sun shines, does it know its own brilliance? When the flower blossoms, does it know its own fragrance? Can the tongue know its own taste? Can an eye see itself? Can a knife pierce itself? Can a thief running away from the police convert himself into a policeman and catch himself? It's like that. Got it? That is a wonderful point. Now I'm enjoying this.

WIE: *If you don't speak about it, though, then how do you help others to realize what you have realized?*

VS: What have I realized? I don't know. It's a stupendous joke. Oh, wonderful life, thank you for making me laugh! I don't know what people come here for. I don't teach them anything, no way! I *never* teach them anything. Who is there to teach? What is there to be taught? There's nothing to be taught, my friend. What are you going to teach about an illusion? My goodness, this is such silly nonsense. I don't know why people carry on this way. I got a lovely seven-page fax yesterday from a very fine gentleman who came to sit near this body for some time. "To sit in Vijai's presence is a unique experience"—that's what he says, anyway. "He makes no demands upon his audience whatsoever and because of this the natural response to him is one of complete openness, a state surprising to discover for many people. With Vijai, in this arena of oneness, duality evaporates, giving way to gradual communion. His is a sort of bottom-line approach to spirituality; regardless of the questions addressed to him, he will bring the questioner back to this one, true blissful state, which they feel happy about." So you see, it just happens. I don't do anything. *At all.*

WIE: *And what is it that happens?*

VS: I don't know. They say they feel happy. Everybody goes to the cinema to get mentally excited, don't they? So people probably come here to feel happy. Why do *you* want to be happy? Can you tell me that? It's because happiness is your true nature. But the place where you're looking for it is wrong. It's not out there, it's *within* you. So probably they look

within themselves when they come here. But I don't know what happens. They ask me a few mundane questions like the ones you're asking, and I just set their bearings right, that's all.

WIE: *Thank you. One last question?*

VS: Is there anything called the last one? If you say it is the last one, then you should never ask any more questions in your life. Okay, go ahead!

WIE: *Are there any actions that we could say with certainty a realized person would not commit? A violent act, for example, such as killing, or an act of dishonesty, or an act that caused harm to another human being?*

VS: Listen. Is there an act of dishonesty? Is there really a killing? Is there really a crime? Think about it. Ponder about it before you even make such a statement. How would the mind ever know the one who has transcended the mind? How *could* it? It is purely an extension of the finite into the infinite. So the one thing that can be said of him is that he will be unpredictable. You cannot predict him because he is suspended in the now.

WIE: *Do you consider it a possibility, then, that such an individual, being unpredictable in this way, actually* could *commit an act that—*

VS: For *you* it is an act. For him it isn't. That's where you make a mistake. There are no acts outside there, my friend. It only appears to you so. You are attached to it. You *think* it is happening there. You *think* him to be doing it. Let's not bother about it. It's all just happening. Everything is as it is. It is only this painting, and it will go on. You will *think* something is happening outside—a wicked act, a sinful act, a violent act, but that is *your* problem. The Bhagavad Gita says: "What is happening is happening for the good. What *has* happened is also good. What *will* happen is also good. You are not the doer. The Lord is the doer. He's watching it all." This is the way of life. Life is a mystery; live it, don't interpret it. The moment you interpret it, you've gone off the track. There is just God manifesting everywhere, my goodness sake! He is just enjoying himself. I'll tell you what: Do you want to make God laugh?

WIE: *Sure. I feel like that's what we've been doing for the past hour anyway.*

VS: Do you know what? If you tell Him your plans, you'll make God laugh. Tell him your plans, and God will have a mighty good laugh.

Let's not think, then. Let's be in the here and now. That is sufficient. That is just sufficient. You are a spiritual being having a human experience. Stop it now, my son. Stop it, and everything will be fine for you. I would love to see you in a different state, in your *real* state, when I meet you next. That'd be nice. There's nothing someday you're going to become. If you're going to become something then that'll be the end—death. Everybody will become who they are. What's the problem in it? I don't see any problem.

Listen—one thing. Did you enjoy yourself?

WIE: *Yes. Very much so.*

VS: That's very important. I'll tell you what: Throw the entire interview in the dustbin! What is more important than to enjoy yourself? Think on that enjoyment. Face that enjoyment. Be in that enjoyment. *That* will do you more good. ■

that in profound insight it would always become clear what the only right response could possibly be.

SB: Okay, yes, I would sort of accept that and I think, in this case, that we're not actually saying much that's totally different. When I say that it gives no answers, only new beginnings or the possibility of new beginnings, I think that what you've just described is really the same thing I'm pointing to.

AC: *Okay, but the reason I'm pursuing this is because when you say that it "offers no answers," again—and I might be misconstruing or misunderstanding it—the implication seems to be that there really* isn't *any Answer with a capital "A."*

SB: That's right.

AC: *Whereas what I would say is that what I'm calling this "perfect middle place between all pairs of opposites" would* be *the answer. In other words, one would never be able to know beforehand specifically what the appropriate response would be, but that place from which it is revealed at any given moment would be discovered to be* always one and the same.

SB: Well, I don't know . . . maybe. Again, you see, I think this is not language I find so helpful. When I say, for example, that awakening does not give answers, only the possibility of new beginnings, what I'm getting at is that any kind of genuine insight experience—whether you call it awakening or anything else—is something that will only ever find expression in response to the specific and unique demand of the situation in which one finds oneself. The form that it takes will always be different because our situations are always changing due to the fact that they're fluid, they're contingent on different factors, there are different demands and so on and so forth. But I still think we're probably quibbling over words here.

AC: *Well, no, because again, what I'm suggesting is that the insight itself—that depth of insight that is free from all fixed ideas—*is *the answer. But I get the sense in reading your book—and I think it's because you obviously feel strongly, and for many very good reasons, about staying away from anything that is absolute—that you believe there simply couldn't* be *one. Now that's fair enough, but it is my own experience that there is indeed an answer, and that answer is the discovery of that place—which, interestingly enough, I do agree you might be pointing to—where there are no fixed ideas. My point, though, is that when we are able to discover that place, it becomes possible for us to* always know, *or to* always find out, *what the right response actually is.*

SB: Well I can accept that as long as we don't literalize that place as something that we can fix, as it were. I mean, I'm rather at home with the notion in Zen that one constituent of the awakened mind is that it is one in which there is no place to rest. And I think that what I'm trying to get at here is that I feel that the Buddha was always shying away from the idea that there was some kind of final absolute resting place—that although he recognized that through various disciplines and practices and lifestyles you can free yourself from the constraints that hold you in particular places and lock you into positions and fixations and so on, still, that process of liberation is not in itself a *place* but a *possibility*. It's an opening to a fresh and unprecedented response to the contingencies of the world. In other words, I see Buddhism and Buddhist practice as operating within a very dynamic context, one that is not concerned with, and in fact is highly suspicious of, the rhetoric and language of place, of ultimates, of absolutes, of positions of any kind.

AC: *Well, as you say, when we're using language we can sometimes get into a little bit of difficulty. But when I say that the place I'm referring to is between all pairs of opposites, it ought to be pretty clear that from the point of view of the rational mind, it's not really a place that can be* imagined, *because it's inherently free from all the constrictions of any view. And yet, it is precisely the discovery of that "no-place" that makes a truly enlightened response to life possible.*

SB: Yes, okay. In that way I can go along with it, I suppose. But to me, the point is really about freeing myself from fixations that trap one in a fixed set of images, ideas, views, patterns and so on, and once that style of being or way of being is realized, it's not as if you've discovered a place to rest, but rather an openness to responding to the world in a way that is not cluttered and labored and tied down with fixations and places.

Re-imagining the Self

AC: *In the same chapter, "Imagination," you go on to say that the "notion of a static self is the primary obstruction to the realization of our unique potential as an individual being." Now it wasn't completely clear to me when I read this whether by "static self" you were referring to notions about the ego/personality or about the Self Absolute. But in either case, while I can understand why the notion of a static self could easily be "the primary obstruction to the realization of our unique potential as an individual being," it isn't so clear to me why the realization of our "unique potential as an individual being" would be so important*

to begin with, particularly in the context of enlightenment.

SB: Well first of all, in that particular passage I suppose I'm primarily referring more to a notion of ego. But at the same time, I would also include metaphysical and religious ideas of a kind of absolute Self, only with rather more caution because I know that that concept can be understood in a number of ways that are not at all similar to the way we hold an ego. I do believe, though, that for many people the notion of Self with a capital "S," however it is defined, is in many ways a kind of consolatory device to give one something to hold on to, something that you can identify with as being "me." Otherwise, I don't really see why someone would feel any particular need to perpetuate the use of the "S-word." For me, you see, one of the attractions of Buddhism is that the Buddha is fairly ruthless in refusing any kind of legitimacy to the term "self," and I think that whether we're speaking in terms of a contemporary psychological experience in which we're trapped in a kind of egoic, narcissistic self-preoccupation or in terms of the more mystical stance of resting in one's true Self with a capital "S," the problem is still the same. And that is that one is still trapped in a language of things and points and places rather than allowing oneself to become open to the possibility of imagining things otherwise. You mentioned that the passage we're speaking about came from my chapter on imagination, and I'd like to pursue that because for me, imagination is the key issue here.

Again, it's my understanding that the experience of insight or awakening is not something final in itself, and should not be thought of as an answer in itself, and the reason for that is that it's not really complete, really fulfilled, until it finds a form in the world, and that form is realized through *the activation of the imagination*. In other words, an authentic response is found not through satisfaction or fulfillment for me in my own personal domain, my own personal territory—be it the ego *or* the mystical Self—but at that point where I reenter the world of images, ideas, forms, suffering, pain and confusion that is all around me—all of which is, after all, not in my own psyche but in the world I inhabit. Awakening, therefore, if we're to expand the word out further, is not an exclusively subjective or private experience. It is actually an experience that embraces one's own personal expression as one pole of it, but then expands *imaginatively* through and into words and acts and images that take form in the world we share with other beings. And that is really, I feel, another way of expressing the more traditional idea of the integration of wisdom and compassion, which states that awakening is not just about wisdom but is the unification, the integration, of these two. So I don't see awakening as a private state at all, but rather as a description of a way of being in the world. The breaking down of these borders of self is tantamount to an opening to, an exposure to, a vulnerability or transparency to, the plight of the world, of the other—and that to me is really the core of what I understand by awakening. So I hope that helps to explain some of my critical points.

AC: *That's very beautiful; it's what I would call a truly nondual view. What you're describing is truly holistic in that it's inclusive rather than exclusive.*

SB: Yes, exactly.

AC: *At the same time, I find it interesting that you're putting a great deal of emphasis on the autonomous individual's freedom to realize his or her unique capacity for personal and social fulfillment. Of course, from a certain point of view it definitely makes sense; the only question I have about it has to do with the fact that at some point, if someone is truly interested in becoming a liberated person, even the notions of autonomy, individual freedom and personal fulfillment are going to have to be left aside in order to find out what it actually means to be in the unknown—wouldn't you agree?*

SB: I agree, but I wouldn't say "left aside." This is an important question, I think. I don't feel that the status of the individual and their personal autonomy are notions that need to be abandoned so much as radically reconstrued. In other words, one needs to recognize that one's sense of personal autonomy or individuality, from a deluded or nonawakened state, is one that is premised on the idea that underpinning one's sense of who one *is* is some kind of esoteric substance called "me," some kind of fixed, static point within my experience that represents the ground of my being. Now through exploring and inquiring into the nature of self, into the nature of who or what one is, that image is exploded in the sense that one begins more and more to recognize that *who I am,* which is unique and individual to a degree, is not what it is because of some fixed point within *me* but because of the unrepeatable matrix of conditions and causes and contingencies and so on that differentiate this being here from that being there. In other words, it's a recognition that who and what I am is a unique reflection of the whole, a unique reflection of everything else that is.

Now obviously, a notion of individuality or autonomy such as this is radically different from the more commonsense, gut-feeling notion of individuality or autonomy that we normally hold. I am who I am, in this case, not because of a deep sense of *me,* but because of my unique position, as it were, in relation to everything else—even physically. I mean, each person stands on the earth and looks at the world in a way that only that person could see the world.

What Defines a "Culture of Awakening"?

AC: *It's obviously true that in a certain sense a liberated human being would be, and* should *be, a very clear*

example of a person who had realized his or her creative autonomy. The only point I'm trying to make is that if an individual is truly interested in awakening, then in order to take that leap into the unknown—which, as we all know, is not necessarily an easy thing to do because there is a profound existential fear of not knowing—they have to find a way to avoid the temptation of seeking solace in the belief that no matter what happened, they didn't have to worry because they were always going to remain quite unique. Quite often what we human beings are most afraid of is losing *our uniqueness, precisely because, as you pointed out, this is what we hold on to in order to be able to recognize ourselves. So in order to become free, we obviously have to get to that point where we're no longer so compulsively looking to find ourselves.*

SB: That's an important point, and it takes us back to the notion of what it actually means to pursue existential questions in a radical sense. What it means, of course, is to put everything up for question. And if you're not prepared to do that, then you're not really prepared to open yourself to another response to life.

AC: *Absolutely true.*

SB: But at the same time I think it's important to remember that it's a *sequence* of steps that is implied here, and initially the very possibility of making those steps depends upon the person feeling empowered to act, to take a step. Now it could be that the next step you take is one in which you then begin to radically question every assumption you have about yourself or your individuality, your personhood, and clearly, I agree that that is a very necessary part of the process, and that it is a very radical, unsettling and scary thing to do. But as I said at the beginning, one would only take that step were one confident in one's own personal power and ability, as it were, to do so. So these two things—autonomy and radical questioning—somehow go hand in hand, and for that reason I'd be reluctant to accept that there is any kind of language sufficient for all instances and all phases of the process itself. One needs to value and recognize different vocabularies, as it were, at different stages of one's engagement with this process.

I'd like to add to this another idea I believe I mentioned earlier, that of the "culture of awakening." I think there's a tendency in the West to sometimes give too much importance to the centrality of the individual embarking on a heroic quest, rather than looking from more of a historical distance and seeing that the possibility for that heroic quest rests on there being a place in the culture that values and supports it. What I see as the role of Buddhism in society—and of other traditions, too—is not as some kind of personal strategy for individuals but rather as the foundation for a culture in which such behavior is legitimized, valued, clearly articulated and encouraged in all strata of our society. And that, I think, is in many respects a far more important challenge for those of us who are engaging with these ideas today than always bringing it back again and again to the heroic individual quest. Now some people will, of course, feel that to be the prime motive for their response to their own existential or spiritual concerns, and I have no problem with that. But it does somehow exclude or put in second place those who are more concerned, perhaps, with creating structures that will give rise to a culture of awakening that will hopefully, over a much longer term, provide us with a means to transform this highly materialistic and very narcissistic culture that we live in at present into one that supports the kinds of values that we're discussing at the moment.

AC: *One would think that they would go hand in hand. But unless at least a few are willing to be so heroic as to go beyond the known completely, what exactly the vision of those new structures would be couldn't become very clear—could it?*

SB: Yes and no. Of course that element is crucial, without a doubt. But I think it also perhaps underestimates, or doesn't sufficiently value, the innate intuitive capacities of creative people—poets and artists and others—who may not be drawn toward that kind of intense spiritual practice but are nevertheless somehow intuitively in touch with other possibilities and forms, which, to me, also represent very legitimate forms of practice. So again, it's a question of recognizing that this awakening thing does not necessarily correspond to the model you seem to have of the heroic individual striving to let go of all of their stuff and embrace the unknown and so on as very much the solitary quest. That kind of approach, the heroic quest, is very much one that values transcendence over immanence. Clearly that's crucial, but it's important to recognize that awakening is also something *immanent*. It's also something that is in a sense *already present* in the ordinary mind. And it's there, I think, that the artist comes into his or her own. There are forms of practice, and forms of expression of these kinds of things, that are not reducible to the insights of people who've had intense transcendent spiritual experiences. I think that awakening percolates through, and

is percolating through, in our time in history, in forms of culture, music, literature and art that are not even necessarily self-consciously engaged in that kind of heroic quest but are simply trying to express an intuitive kind of gut feeling of something else, something *other*. So I would say that a culture of awakening embraces and values both.

Autonomy or Authority?

AC: *I appreciate the model that you've presented. My point, though, is that any genuine "culture of awakening" is obviously going to be defined by the realization and the deepest insights of the individuals involved, and those insights that* make *it a "culture of awakening"—if it really is one—are most likely to come from the individuals who've gone the farthest. But what you've said helps me to make a little more sense of the fact that despite your apparent dislike for the notion of the "solitary quest," you consider it a positive development that contemporary* dharma *practice, as you write in your book, "is becoming individuated," and that "in valuing imagination and diversity, such an individuated vision would ultimately empower each practitioner to create his or her own distinctive track within the field of* dharma *practice."*

SB: That's right.

AC: *What you describe there is a view that seems to be very popular these days, particularly in Buddhist circles. My question is: How could a* dharma *practitioner who is sincerely seeking enlightenment truly be able to create his or her own* distinctive path? *Isn't the evolutionary movement toward awakening a movement from the gross to the subtle, from the known to the unknown? Unless there is a profound and heartfelt willingness* not to know, *how could anyone ever get enlightened in the first place? Even in the relationship with a spiritual mentor—assuming, of course, that the mentor is enlightened—isn't it essential that the student be willing to submit to the mentor's guidance in order to find his or her way to the unknown—in other words, to liberation? Otherwise what we're left with is something on the order of, "Master, my inner Buddha is telling me that what suits my awakening today is to sleep in."*

SB: I would cite, in this instance, the famous passage from the end of the Buddha's life, where he refuses to appoint a successor and gives expression to this whole idea of being "a lamp unto yourself," of taking the *dharma* as your guide—which is what speaks to *my* heart, as it were. But actually this discussion quite accurately reflects the whole Buddhist tradition if we look at how it tracks out historically, because it always has been caught in precisely this *tension* between the valuing of individual responsibility and self-reliance on the one hand, and the recognition, on the other, of the value of discipline—of giving yourself over to monastic orders, let's say, or giving yourself to the uncritical following of a teacher or a guru or a guide, whether it be a Zen master or a Tibetan *lama* or whatever.

Every historical phase of Buddhism has had to deal with responding to the past, to the tradition as it has been handed down, and that tension is always going to be there, and every response is going to be, to some extent, a new beginning. So while I personally find myself to be more in harmony, and more comfortable, with the path of self-reliance, I certainly wouldn't suggest that this alone is sufficient. And I value very highly the importance of giving oneself to the guidance of those who are wiser and more awake and enlightened than oneself. That, I think, is an unavoidable component, and if you take it away, then the whole thing does just become whatever you want to make of it.

AC: *Exactly. And that's the question I have about the thrust of much of what you've written in your book. I feel that when push comes to shove it could too easily boil down to exactly that, because as you know, many people* think *they want to be free, but when they start finding out what it really entails, they often start backpedaling. It is at those times that are most critical that one often needs to be willing to take great risks in order to make that unimaginable leap into a completely different relationship to life.*

SB: I think it's also a temperamental thing. I mean, some people do seem to have such a capacity for isolation and self-reliance that they have relatively little to do with communities and teachers and so on, and others have the very opposite temperament and require that sort of support as a precondition for any kind of progress along the path. But again, I wouldn't want to reduce the process to one extreme or the other. We need to recognize that in practice, it's a question of acknowledging and recognizing the shortcomings and advantages of both. And just as you can follow a very wise teacher and fall into dependency and a kind of disempowerment and a rather unhealthy reliance upon some authoritarian figure, following purely your own intuition and instincts and impulses can lead you to a kind of narcissistic absorption in your own fantasies.

AC: *That's for sure.*

SB: So it's a question, really, of find-

ing a balance. I still feel, nonetheless, that the aim of the practice is freedom, and that includes freedom from being in the throes, as it were, of an authority figure to whom one endlessly defers.

AC: *Even the Buddha, you mean?*

SB: Yes, even the Buddha, sure.

AC: *But if the Buddha was really the Buddha, would it be possible to be in that kind of a relationship with him, if he was who he is supposed to have been? I mean, would such a thing be possible?*

SB: Oh, I don't know.

AC: *To be disempowered in the way that you're describing?*

SB: Well, yes, actually, I do think that's possible, and again, I don't want to elevate the Buddha into too much of a sort of superhuman person. He certainly was a very good organizer and probably ran a very tight ship, but what has always been telling for me are those injunctions he gave at the end of his life, where he actually said, in a sense, "Well, I've done my job. You get on with it." At that point, he rather seems to be emphasizing self-reliance over anything else. But I also think we have to see this in the context that it's somewhat dangerous to try to define what true Buddhism is, as it were, by locating it within a certain body of older texts. I see Buddhism as a 2,500-year ongoing experiment in awakening that is continuously trying out new things. It's continuously adjusting and changing, modifying, questioning what it's doing, and that to me is precisely where the richness of the tradition lies: that you can have Zen Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism, all of which are amazingly different and yet nonetheless retain the core, the primary threads, of that which was set in motion by the historical Buddha.

The Buddha unleashed into history, as it were, a whole series of cultures of awakening, all of which would have been completely unpredictable in the Buddha's own time, each one reflecting the needs and specificities of the different situations in which the *dharma* found itself. So the kind of *dharma* that is going to emerge in our culture is not going to be like anything else that's happened before. It's going to have its own peculiar characteristics, and our challenge is to somehow keep aware of the diversity of approaches that we inherit and not allow ourselves to get drawn into one particular aspect of that and lose sight of the whole. And that, I think, is the great opportunity that we have in the West, because we can see that bigger picture perhaps better than it's ever been seen before; we can see Buddhism as an historical movement, as a series of contingent cultures.

AC: *In your book, you describe the situation of being in your kitchen and then going out for some milk for your tea and coming back to drink it. Even though something like this obviously could never happen, if, when you went out for your milk one morning—and you hadn't even quite woken up yet because you still hadn't had your tea—you suddenly saw the Buddha before you with a throng of ten thousand monks, and he came up to you and said, "Stephen, your time has come. Follow me."—would you do it?*

SB: Well, it's such a hypothetical question, I can't really answer. . . . I probably *would*, yes. . . . Yes, sure—why not? ■

Peter Masefield

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that it actually does teach that, particularly given the way it is being used by modern Buddhists who believe that it gives them license to chop and change and cut out whichever bits of Buddhism they don't like. If you're a Buddhist, I presume that to mean that you believe in the enlightenment of the Buddha, and if that is so, then you can't just throw various aspects of his teaching out the window. I don't think that even the Kalama Sutta gives one this license.

WIE: *Have you encountered many objections to your thesis?*

PM: About twenty years ago this distinction that I've been making between the order of *savakas* and the order of monks—as well as my assertion that the order of monks could have *puthujjanas* within its ranks—were sometimes ridiculed. But nobody's ever really proposed to refute me on the basis of textual evidence. I mean, I'm quite happy to be knocked down if somebody can bring a few texts along and show that they completely disprove what I've been saying, since all my work is in the end only the elaboration of what I've found in the texts. But now I'm beginning to find books on Buddhism published in the last few years, some of them written by the very people who once ridiculed me, taking that distinction as an unquestioned truth without giving me any acknowledgment.

WIE: *That must be very frustrating.*

PM: It is, rather. But at least it seems that maybe people are starting to take it seriously. And the other type of objection has had to do with the use of the word "divine" in the title. People thought that I was trying to impose certain aspects of Christian theology on Buddhism, which is not true. In fact, I should like to qualify the title of my book—which, incidentally, was forced upon me

by the publisher—by saying that the use of the word "divine" in *Divine Revelation in Pali Buddhism* refers only to the revelation by the Buddha of this "supermundane" that we have been speaking about, and not to the existence of anyone who might be considered "the Creator."

WIE: *Still, it's refreshing to speak about even "the supermundane" in the context of Buddhism, because Buddhism is so often represented as a kind of rationalist creed that doesn't have any element of the divine in it. In fact, there seems to be an increasingly popular view among contemporary Western Buddhists—possibly also part of a backlash against Judeo-Christian theology—that the only faith the Buddha tried to instill in his disciples was a kind of existential or agnostic "faith to doubt," a courageous willingness to face into the inherent emptiness of the phenomenal world without seeking solace from the inevitability of death and decay in undemonstrable theories about a greater, more inclusive reality.*

PM: I think I know what you mean. But it's my understanding that the Buddha granted those who had the potential to receive it the best gift that they could possibly imagine: He *severed* doubt—the vision of right view is a severance of doubt—and this is what makes him "the good physician who gives men back their sight." He lifts the veil for a world that has become blind. There is no question of doubt, because the nature of right view is such that there *is* no doubt.

WIE: *All questions are answered.*

PM: I don't know about all questions, but certainly the important ones.

WIE: *If there is no doubt, then what is the role of faith, and what is the object of faith, in the Buddha's teaching?*

PM: Faith is also a natural consequence of right view, because once you've experienced the doubtlessness of right view you automatically develop faith in the Buddha, in his enlightenment, and in his teachings. Faith might be there anyway, but in the Buddhist context you can always distinguish *within* qualities—such as faith—those types which are supermundane and those which are merely mundane, depending upon the nature of the person possessing these qualities. The faith of the *savaka*, for example, is supermundane, but the faith of the *puthujjana* is mundane, and it's only the supermundane that has a liberating effect.

WIE: *What sorts of responses do you suppose the Buddha*

would elicit from contemporary practicing Buddhists in the West, and from Western culture at large, if he were alive today?

PM: Well, it's difficult for me to speculate. You sometimes hear the same sort of question regarding what good, upright Christians might do if they actually met Christ. They'd get a bit of a shock, no doubt.

WIE: *Because?*

PM: Probably because the Buddha was rather different from what they may have allowed themselves to believe. Of course I can't be certain about what other people's preconceived notions of him may be, but for one thing it's definitely my impression that the Buddha was an extremely authoritarian individual. We have to remember that the basic problem of the world is ignorance, and that the Buddha was someone who claimed to have attained knowledge of the way things really are as opposed to the way we *think* they are. Now if you want to act in accordance with that knowledge and acquire it for yourself, then you're probably going to have to be willing to subject yourself to a very rigid self-discipline. But I've found it very interesting to discover that some of the same criticisms that are leveled against the new religious movements in our day are recorded in the texts as having also been made against the Buddha and his followers in their time.

In the texts, the Buddha is often portrayed as complaining that he is misrepresented by his critics—which clearly he sometimes was. On the other hand, he obviously was breaking up families by taking up and ordaining young men. In fact, there are several recorded instances in which monks are approached by former wives begging them to return home and support their children, and in one such case, when the monk ignores his wife, the Buddha chastises the woman and praises the monk! Any conventional social ethics would say that this monk should have abandoned his robe and gone back to look after his wife and child, but the Buddha actually praises the monk for his steadfastness and criticizes his wife. And in fact the Buddha himself is supposed to have gone forth on the very same day that his son was born, abandoning his own wife and child for a life in the jungle, which could only have lent substance to the widespread sentiment that he was a destroyer of families. Indeed, there were recorded attempts to "deprogram" monks so as to entice them back into the family circle—monks whose parents feared that they would otherwise spend their lives begging in the streets and offering people a "ticket to heaven," so to speak, by telling them that putting alms in their bowls might earn them sufficient merit for a heavenly rebirth.

But if you look at all this from the point of view of the monk, or of the Buddha himself, you see that there's another side to it. Liberation, or enlightenment, is not the easiest thing in the world to get; in fact, the price is rather high. And if you want it, you have to pay that price, and that means following the orders of the Buddha, however crazy they may seem to you. Normally, for example, monks were not supposed to eat beyond midday, but there is a recorded instance of some monks who had taken to eating in the evening, claiming, in a manner somewhat reminiscent of the way in which some modern Buddhists use the Kalama Sutta to justify their own rejection of those items of the teaching they find unpalatable, that such was all right since they had not experienced any adverse effects on their practice: It hadn't caused them any difficulties, so why shouldn't they do it? But the Buddha chastises them very strongly and tells them that the reason they shouldn't do it is because he's the teacher and they're the disciples. He knows, and they don't. Liberation has a high price, and they have to pay it.

So you can see that the Buddha comes out as a very authoritarian figure. Now I think this is equally true of the leaders of many contemporary new religious movements,

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celibacy? But Swami Chidananda himself surely is a perfect celibate, and I think he is a saint and admire him very much.

André Van Lysebeth
Brussels, Belgium

IT AIN'T WHAT YOU DO

I read with interest your Spring/Summer 1998 issue of *What Is Enlightenment?* Most "New Age" publications wouldn't touch the topic of sex and spirituality with a ten-foot pole. And yet, despite its controversial nature, sex is a very important aspect of the enlightenment process. And by this I mean whether you engage in sex or not, it still is important. I feel you provided enriching insight into this dilemma of whether to have sex or not. The *tantra* way and the celibate way are both indeed the extremes or polarities of the sexual spectrum. I feel that both sides presented valid, cogent points of view that justified their respective positions. Yes, Barry Long has found truth, but so has Swami Chidananda. *Tantra* and celibacy, taken absolutely, both reach the same point. Yes, you can be awakened through either approach. Like the old song says, "It ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it." The conscious reader will recognize that it doesn't matter which way you take. Either one is fine or even a combination or whatever. Duality doesn't care.

Thanks for your fine magazine.

Brandt Hutchison
via email

THE COURAGE TO COMMAND

In your interview with Miranda Shaw, it is stated that a man "must be willing to touch and ingest every substance discharged by a woman's body."

Of course the obvious question is, why would anyone want to bless or be blessed by their lover in manners considered by most to be unclean? Although sex is discussed by your experts with an intellectual, elitist and even sterile tone, we must address how our society looks upon specific acts of "sexual perversion." Am I to believe that it's more moral when a *tantric* master forces or requests her male lover to ingest certain bodily substances than when it's done by a paid professional?

I have found that most of the world's misery comes from two distinct but related sources, the first being that women seem to lack the courage to command. The world abounds with men willing to submit, yet there is a clear lack of women who have embraced the divinity within. Strong women still seek stronger men. The fact that weaker men are not coming into contact with these blessed female substances has led to an enduring and debilitating psychosis among the male gender. The second and most insidious source of human misery lies within the concept of monogamy. Until women can free their men to roam, the human species will be forever damned.

Anonymous

CELEBRITY-FREE ZONE

For those who find *WIE* gloomy and joke-free, I suggest they reread several of the advertisements in the magazine. Perhaps, also, those who deplore the existence of the ads may find humor in them, and enjoy the juxtaposition of their patent chicanery with the spiritually serious articles whose publication they are enabling.

I was really disappointed to see that you were showing off about the fact that the über-Material Girl had deigned to admire your magazine and that she had even "offered" to

talk to you [Editors' Introduction]. So what? What on earth could she have to say to *WIE* that is more important than anybody else, apart from the perils of being obscenely rich and not doing very much with your wealth except to create walls around yourself? If she's going to really start worrying more about reality and less about her image, that's fine, but she'll have to prove it by giving at least a few million to a good cause. I've already read about her latest conversion in a recent issue of *Vanity Fair*, and while it was mildly interesting in that context, I would be horrified to see such an interview (which would almost certainly be checked for "accuracy" by Herself) in *WIE*. The day you feature Madonna Mark II on your cover will be a very sad day indeed.

In short, I'm begging you: *please* keep *WIE* a celebrity-free zone. Yours on bended knee.

Christy Jones
via email

THE VEIL OF THE HEART

They say that the mind is the veil of the heart. Andrew Cohen's article on wanting ["The Promise of Perfection"], suggests how the mind operates in order to entrap us in a prison of illusion where true freedom and truth can never be found. Andrew Cohen didn't talk about it much, but the endless source of our suffering is not only in the "wanting." It is also found in the "not wanting," in the pushing away of that which we don't want to face. All of our attractions and aversions are rooted in our separateness, in the fear of an unknown future where we will have to face the prospect either of not possessing that which we feel will give us happiness, or of being deprived of all our beliefs about who we are.

One has to stand outside of one's self and at last be the observer in the play. One has to give up the control of one's mind to the power of one's heart, where the beauty of our nature resides, and where we can intuit that our separateness is the illusion, that our wanting is an addiction that maintains our separateness, and that our love frees us from the boundaries created by our minds and egos.

Tom Borin
Tucson, Arizona

SEX ISN'T NEUTRAL

Thank you for the thoughtful perspectives you published in your latest issue on sex and spirituality. While I agree with many of Andrew Cohen's observations and respect him for directly addressing this important topic, I disagree with his conclusion that sexuality is neutral. This choice of words is particularly unfortunate since "neutral" comes from the same root as "neuter" and implies a castration.

Perhaps it is the resonance between the poles of male and female, positive and negative, that is more important than any fixed position. Perhaps it is also the clarity with which one senses this interface, in all its dynamic complexity, that determines both the nature of the sexual experience and its spiritual qualities.

My conclusion is that sex exists somewhere between the primordial slime and the light of the sun—just as we do ourselves.

David Richard
Bloomingdale, Illinois

THE FASTEST PATH

Thank you for publishing your issue on sex and spirituality. It has inspired me to outline a perspective that addresses the truths, and perhaps, the insufficiency, of both *tantra* and spiritual celibacy as currently practiced.

Frankly, the case for celibacy is the easiest to support. Sex, at least when used for procreation or recreation, is unquestionably delusion-producing. The more freely we give reign to our sexual desire, the wilder our projections onto each other, and the greater our sense of desperate dissatisfaction. I would like to suggest that this occurs because we are still using our sexuality based on the assumption that procreation-inspired sexual habits constitute sexuality's only natural use. Just as celibacy leads to an aching longing at times throughout one's life, so sex with the objective of peak orgasm ultimately leaves us with an unsatisfied longing for wholeness. Moreover, as one author correctly put it, "it temporarily kills the Buddha within."

Yet is celibacy the only way to deal with the longing inherent in gender without suffering this separation-producing fallout? What if there were a way to use our sexual desire strictly for enhancing our spiritual vision within our relationships? This is of course what the spiritual sexuality advocates are insisting is possible. Perhaps the reason their results are inconsistent and even frequently disgraceful is that they are still mixing the use of sex for vision-enhancement with sex for recreation/procreation. In practical terms this means failing to distinguish between the objectives of genital orgasm and mystical orgasm.

Mystical orgasm (or "valley orgasm," as the Taoists call it) is a spiritual experience that occurs *beyond* all awareness of the body in a moment of perfect stillness. It is a vision-restoring experience of lasting oneness. And it is perhaps significant that the mechanism necessary to achieve it regularly, without igniting separation-producing projections, calls for a use of sexuality that is totally *inconsistent* with the use of sex for procreation (i.e., no genital orgasm). Despite their good intentions and inspired vision, many *tantrics* could benefit from the uncompromising consistency and integrity of their celibate brothers and sisters.

In view of the hazards we face in our intimate relationships, are the celibates not the wiser to avoid the battleground and continue meditating or praying to promote clear vision and inner peace? Perhaps. Yet an ancient Tibetan Buddhist myth, *The Great Stupa*, states that the path of conquering passion through controlled indulgence is the *fastest* and *most powerful* path, though also the easiest to fall from. Our commitment to transcendence must be total if we wish to use this path, or we are, in fact, better off celibate (as we are less destructive).

An interested reader
Sedona, Arizona

TANTRIC MISCONCEPTIONS

Thanks for another great and thought-provoking issue. However, since I am currently writing a book on *tantra*, I am a bit disappointed that you only addressed *tantra* as a *sexual* path to higher consciousness. There are indeed many misconceptions about *tantra*, so let's start from the beginning with a literal translation of the word: in Sanskrit "tan" means to liberate and "tra" means inertia or crudeness. *Tantra*, then, is the path of liberation from crudeness or stagnation. *Tantra* is also not solely the yoga of sex, but as Vimala McClure points out in her book *A Woman's Guide to Tantra Yoga*, it is the "yoga of everything." And historically, according to the late *tantric* guru Shri Shri Anandamurti (a.k.a. P.R. Sarkar), *tantra* originated in India at least seven thousand years ago. As the oldest form of yogic practice it can therefore aptly be described as "the mother of all paths of yoga." The sexual, or left-handed,

path is but a small and often misunderstood subbranch within the truly comprehensive cosmology of *tantra*. Furthermore, *tantra* is an intuitional science, or an empirical path, to spiritual enlightenment, as opposed to a ritualistic, dogmatic, mythic, or translative path, as Ken Wilber terms it. So generically speaking, one could therefore say that all authentic spiritual paths leading to liberation are *tantric* in spirit.

For the authentic path of *tantra*, which I have studied and practiced for the past twenty-four years both as a celibate and a married person, the sexual energy is the human manifestation of the cosmic creative force of *Shakti*. In the human body *Shakti* manifests as the force of *kundalini*, and the yogi attains enlightenment when this force reaches the crown *chakra*, or when *Shakti* unites with *Shiva* and becomes one in the effulgence of *Brahma*. To master this esoteric science, sublimation (not suppression) of sexual energy and love of the divine are key elements. Hence the issue of sexuality is not one of morality but of the balanced use of energy and of the intensity of one's spiritual devotion. Too much indulgence in sex—which I unfortunately think today's "sexual *tantra*" consciously or unconsciously promotes—will, in my experience, not light the true fire of ecstatic love needed to embrace the divine *Brahma*. The proof's in the pudding, of course, but the historically more authentic path of *tantra*, the "middle path," the path of moderation and balance, has many more genuine adepts than what I have seen in today's world of *tantric* hedonism.

Roar Bjonnes
via email

SEXOLOGICAL RESEARCH

The discussion of *tantra* in your recent issue was limited by the absence of a solid understanding of sexology, and the psychology of revolutionary religious teachers or "prophets." A couple of points:

It is now becoming clear from a variety of sources, especially sexological research and psychotherapy, that sex takes on its deepest meanings within the context of a committed, long-term, loving relationship. I hasten to emphasize that this is not a mere restatement of moralism but is based on actual research and clinical observation. Hence, the claims about sexual enlightenment by people who appear not to be in such relationships are clearly suspect. I suggest that in all future articles a brief but thorough biography of the author or interview subject be appended to assist readers in evaluating the statements made. Credibility rests on how one lives one's entire life, not on having published a book or recruited a following.

Secondly, while *What Is Enlightenment?* is clearly committed to a belief in enlightenment and spiritual masters and teachers and so forth, again, scholars have studied such matters and the results are not very supportive of some of the positions taken in your recent issue. My own work, which was a study of the personalities of twenty "prophets" in New Zealand and Australia, while very sympathetic to such figures, nevertheless concluded that they were much too narcissistic to ever enter into an honest and equal relationship with others, and that far from being fulfilled or enlightened beings, they actually needed their followers at least as much as the followers needed them. As honesty, equality and the absence of gross dependency needs are the basics of loving relationships, it is most likely that when these figures speak about or practice *tantra* they are merely sexualizing their neuroses (recall Chögyam Trungpa's dictum that "ego can convert anything to its own ends, even spirituality"—to which I would add, "especially spirituality!"). Our capacity for self-deception is infinite, and it is at its greatest among those individuals who have slipped their psychic moorings and are most able to lead us into both light and dark.

Len Oakes
Melbourne, Australia

GOOD WORDS

Your magazine is wonderful! I have been a spiritual practitioner for years. I am deeply served by the issue on sex and spirituality, and especially Andrew Cohen's "The Promise of Perfection." (What a beautiful young man is this Andrew Cohen.)

Keep it up!

Mike Beckwith

Thank you for the latest issue of *WIE*—an excellent magazine and an excellent idea. Andrew Cohen's interview of Barry Long was the most moving and stunningly beautiful thing I have read for a long time. Andrew's sincerity and humility shine through. Thank you to all of you who were involved in bringing this interview to print.

Clive Backland
Totnes, England

Thank you for *WIE*—one of the best journals of its kind on the market, leading one right to the heart of the inquiry in every issue. If I was forced to make a choice of only one magazine out of the many that at present fall through my letterbox, it would without a doubt be yours!

Norma Mariouw-Smit
Airole, Italy

Issue 12 Fall/Winter 1997

NO MORE PLATITUDES

I found one copy (the only copy there!) of your Fall/Winter 1997 issue ["The Modern Spiritual Predicament"] in a tiny, out-of-the-way shop in Perth—and cried. . . . Finally no platitudes; finally people publicizing that Truth is painful and a very hard road, that enlightenment demands complete release of all preconceptions, that it is not escapism. I literally wept. Australian publications tend to be full of soppy New-Ageisms that pander to soft options (which, of course, are not options) rather than challenge and exploration.

Andrew Cohen's article on the revolution of thinking needed to come to grips with our true internal transformation with the Absolute ["Releasing the Unspeakable Glory of the Absolute"] and Ken Wilber's view that "authentic spirituality does not console the world, it shatters it" ["A Spirituality That Transforms"] made me feel that I was far from alone. Finally someone out there is saying it! Many, many thanks for producing such a publication.

Chris Hale
Busselton, Australia

DEAD WRONG

Ken Wilber's statement, "Authentic spirituality is revolutionary. It does not console the world, it shatters it,"

sounds so authoritative, but it is dead wrong. Real holy men, as opposed to pompous, condescending absolutists like him, both console the world and shatter it. Such people console those in pain and disturb the complacent. While he writes about compassion and acknowledges a positive societal function to religions that focus on "horizontal translation," his concept of transformation lacks tenderness and heart. I happen to be reading Emerson these days, one of the masters he mentions in his article. While his critique of traditional religion is similar to Wilber's, unlike Wilber, Ralph Waldo Emerson is truly brilliant, soulful and finally inclusive in his vision. The tone and simplistic dichotomy in Ken Wilber's essay strengthens the very illusion of separation he so passionately decries.

Alan H. Berkowitz
Los Angeles, California

LET'S TALK

Let's talk about Ken Wilber and Georg Feuerstein ["To Light a Candle in a Dark Age"], two of the finest minds in esotericism. But what's that all about? Both have been exposed to ultimacy and reality in the form of Adi Da Samraj. But perhaps those lessons of truth and eventuality do not make sense to the intellectual pursuit of mindlessness. This is not a criticism of Ken Wilber or Georg Feuerstein. I love these guys! These two men are filled with insight and elaboration, but after the initial invigoration of mind and its possibilities, I am left tired and aware that real sacrifice has nothing to do with mental preoccupation or experimentation. No matter how subtle or intuitively decorative they are, they are still a bummer!

Jerry Showalter
Odessa, Texas

A SUBTLE AGENDA

I had a funny reaction reading the interview with Deepak Chopra in your Fall/Winter 1997 issue. I started noticing that he was answering very truly and that your interviewer seemed to be frustrated because he did not seem to be giving the proper answers according to her theory, namely that money and New Age is bad. There seemed, in short, to be an agenda—a subtle one. I did not feel that she was picking up on his answers—maybe because it was a car-phone interview? Anyway, it was ironic given the stated aim of your magazine. If you dismiss the New Age because of its commercialized aspects, you ignore the truth in it, namely that this is a time for a return to the sacred.

Anyway, I do enjoy your magazine—especially its earnestness and dedicated seeking, which is something that we in the New Age movement could do with. Many thanks.

Peter Lloyd
Editor, New Age News
Hong Kong

VOICES OF IGNORANCE

I'm not sure I understand any more what the purpose of *WIE* is. When it began it was a platform for Andrew Cohen's teaching and, as such, it served a valuable role. You seem to believe that now it is a "voice of sanity in an insane world," but that's not the way it comes across—to me, at least.

The people you present are generally voices of ignorance whom one can read in any of many New Age-type journals, and what you call your "engagement" with these people consists of questions designed to allow them to present their arguments without putting them on the spot or, in one recent instance—the interview with Deepak Chopra ["The Man with the Golden Tongue"]—one-pointed harassment.

The modern spiritual world may be mad and Andrew Cohen may be one fresh breath in it, but your journal makes that point only on the page or two where Andrew himself speaks.

Paul Kapiloff
Berkeley, California

LAURA'S LAW

Congratulations on your Fall/Winter 1997 issue, "The Modern Spiritual Predicament." I thoroughly enjoyed the intellectual rigor of Ken Wilber and Georg Feuerstein. It's just a pity that Craig Hamilton didn't read Wilber's article before interviewing Dr. Laura ["The Conscience of America"]. It might have spared him, and us, her mindless, finger-wagging moralizing. She is the perfect example of what Wilber refers to as a "translational" religious person—complete with belief system, priesthood and holy book.

One thing Wilber didn't mention was that the translationally religious always come with an iron-clad moral code. Its purpose is to give those who don't know themselves the comfort and security of a set of rules that tells them how to act in any given situation. This is fine for those who are at this stage of their evolution. However, I fail to see its relevance in a magazine such as yours. I assume that your main interest is in transformation. If that's the case, then rather than using Dr. Laura as a convenient mouthpiece to take a swipe at the New Age (which is just pitting one belief system against another), it would perhaps have been more appropriate to explore the question, "How do we know God's law when there is no holy book, no priesthood and no belief system?"

Frank Vandersman
Adelaide, Australia

A RESPONSIVE UNIVERSE

I would like to respond to Kenneth Moyle's review of *The Celestine Prophecy* which appeared in your Fall/Winter 1997 issue. I believe the novel's most notable feature, as a novel, was not mentioned in Mr. Moyle's review. The manner in which the plot unfolds illustrates dynamically (and for some, evokes experientially) the phenomena Redfield attempts to describe in the "Insights"—development and revelation through synchronistic events occurring in an organic and responsive universe. Redfield's purpose was not to win the Nobel Prize for Literature but to account for experiences which are occurring with great frequency to many people. Redfield's own explanation for the popularity of his books is that they describe what people are actually experiencing. This is a better explanation than Moyle's theory that people are just suckers for an easy answer to life's questions. Redfield's reduction of neurosis to four psychological types may seem simplistic or inelegant, but many revered psychological and religious paradigms stripped of pretense are simple. A better question to ask is whether this model describes behaviors and is useful.

The Celestine Prophecy is easiest to attack for its ideas about the possibilities of the future. Redfield's claims are ambitious in unconventional ways. Nevertheless, dismissing them by merely smothering them with invective does not "cast a blinding light" on the subject. A more fitting analogy would be what a dog casts on a fire hydrant. It doesn't show us what the fire hydrant is—it just makes us want to turn away.

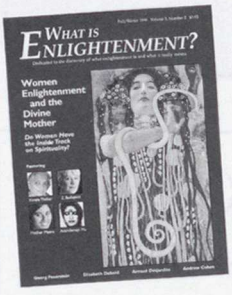
Mike Wilson
via email

HATS OFF

Many thanks for your Fall/Winter 1997 issue. I've read the main articles and I found it gives some grasp of the spiritual scene in the States, of which I often hear rumors but don't really comprehend. In general I find it difficult reading most spiritual magazines, but yours is quite refreshing. What amazes me are the ads. Do people really buy all this stuff?

My compliments to all of those who put this magazine together. We put out our own small newsletter so I realize the work that goes into your first-class production is enormous. Hats off to all of you. May your work prosper and be of help to many folk in this wild and most interesting of times.

Bhikkhu Viradhammo
Amaravati Buddhist Monastery
Hertfordshire, England



Issue 10 Fall/Winter 1996

DAUGHTER OF THE GODDESS

Though I know I'm very late to the party and only just finished reading your typically marvelous issue on women's spirituality ["Women, Enlightenment and the Divine Mother"], I am compelled to respond to your provocative interview with Z. Budapest ["Daughter of the Goddess"].

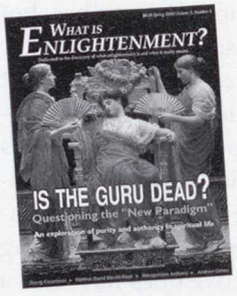
Georg Feuerstein's article on his experience of the divine feminine ["The Divine Mother: A Personal and Philosophical Quest"] was uniquely lyrical and lucid in describing the subtle difficulties of moving between our conditioning in the masculine aspect of divinity and the experience of the feminine divine. His exposition was much more consistent with the spirit and nature of the divine feminine than Z. Budapest, who well demonstrated her ideological roots and agenda in this same encounter.

While she would decry the history of violence by religion, and assuredly ascribe such violence to an essential trait of masculinity at all levels—from the personal through the Divine—and then claim that the feminine form of the Divine would do no such thing, her performative contradictions leap off the page right and left, and the violence of her prejudices discloses her own dangerous inconsistencies, if not hypocrisy.

Take as an example the immediate fall of the interview into the contradiction of describing the equality of all people and the absence of judgment in the eyes of the Goddess while reducing all male-God-centered religions to promoting values of "jealousy, possessiveness, exclusivity, obedience, guilt, punishment, fear." Is this a balanced or equitable view of divinity in male form? Even if these attributes were true, has she shown any positive attributes of God, masculinity or men? Warren Farrell long ago pointed out that ideological feminist social critics extol the light side of women and the dark side of men while leaving out the dark side of women and the light side of men. Budapest elevates this error into the realms of the Divine. While posturing herself as a spokeswoman for the divine feminine, she weighs into judgments of men and their spiritual capacities with no sign of empathy or compassion, not to mention any respect for the "other" manifestation of the Goddess. Listening to Budapest would lead one to believe that only women and children came from the Goddess, and then you'd have to wonder about boys. Is this the kind of behavior we should expect from a high priestess, an agent of the Goddess? How is this any different than the negative behaviors of the religious traditions she condemns?

Furthermore, Budapest decries all higher structures—including spirit—as "bullshit," and leaves them all as aspects of "nature." We must ask where that leaves any kind of divinity. If "nature," God, Goddess and bullshit all share the same status, what kind of "nature" is that and what distinguishes divinity in any kind of meaningful way? I laud *WIE*'s interviewer for her clear efforts at drawing Budapest's attention to these inconsistencies. Your staff has come through once again in taking on a tough topic in a time of not only politically correct tyranny, but also spiritually correct tyranny when addressing anything gender based. I can only hope Budapest's followers read as eagerly the words of Elizabeth Debold ["Dancing on the Edge"], Vimala Thakar ["The Challenge of Emptiness"] and Georg Feuerstein to learn something about gracefully moving in and out of those threshold experiences called God and Goddess before release into the primordial ground of the nondual.

Eric A. Hornak
via email



Issue 9 Spring/Summer 1996

ADI DA UPDATE

As a devotee of Adi Da, I was dismayed by the inclusion in your Spring/Summer 1996 issue ["Is the Guru Dead?"] of excerpts from Georg Feuerstein's book *Holy Madness*, referring to Adi Da ["The

Dangerous and Disillusioning Example of Da Free John"] in ways that were very misleading. Your use of those particular excerpts, which referred to sexual matters, gives the impression that Adi Da's use of sexuality is *ongoing* and not limited to that particular time (periods in the seventies and early eighties). And of course there was no suggestion that Adi Da's use of sexuality was an effective method for accomplishing the aims of any legitimate guru—the matter of self-transcendence and letting go of binding, limiting romantic/sexual relationships. I would ask you to include information about Adi Da—information that is up-to-date and not misleading—in a future issue of your otherwise really wonderful magazine. (Appropriately, I'm enjoying your current issue on sexuality and spirituality right now).

Murray Cohen
Dryden, New York

continued from page 178

some of whom have been condemned for the severity of their efforts to control and manipulate their followers. But internally, from within their own theology, it's *important* that they do this. I don't know how you decide the issue ultimately, but people do require discipline if they're going to attain some kind of liberation, and that discipline often has to be imposed by the authorities within a given tradition, and the authority in Buddhism is the Buddha.

WIE: *Certain aspects of the view you describe are very compelling and obviously quite different from what we tend to hear about Buddhism these days. Can you give us some indication of how you feel contemporary Buddhists would see things, and what sorts of changes they might have to make in the way they approach their practice, if they accepted the basic implications of your view?*

PM: It's difficult for me to speak for other people. In many ways I'd be quite happy if what I'd said was not the case and I could actually choose this afternoon to sit down to meditate and get right view. Unfortunately, the compelling evidence of the texts does suggest otherwise—which, in a sense, is rather disappointing. But whether other people are going to accept this or not is up to them. It might depend on how big a crutch their former ideas about Buddhism had been for them; it's possible that some might feel terribly let down. But all I'm saying is that it seems to be acknowledged by a good number of religious traditions that you can only have success if you show utter obedience to whatever it is you're supposed to obey in the tradition in question. I think, for example, that the whole force of Islam traditionally has been utter obedience to Allah; I believe that to be a central pillar of Islam—complete submission. Now whether Allah exists or not, I don't know, but if you want to have success in the Muslim universe, then it requires ultimate obedience to Allah. In the Unification Church, you likewise have to follow the rules of the church. Here, too, of course, whether they have the effect they are claimed to have is another matter. I would also point out, though, that such discipline is hardly an affront to people who have truly acquired right view, because it then comes about automatically and spontaneously that they do very willingly abide by the rules.

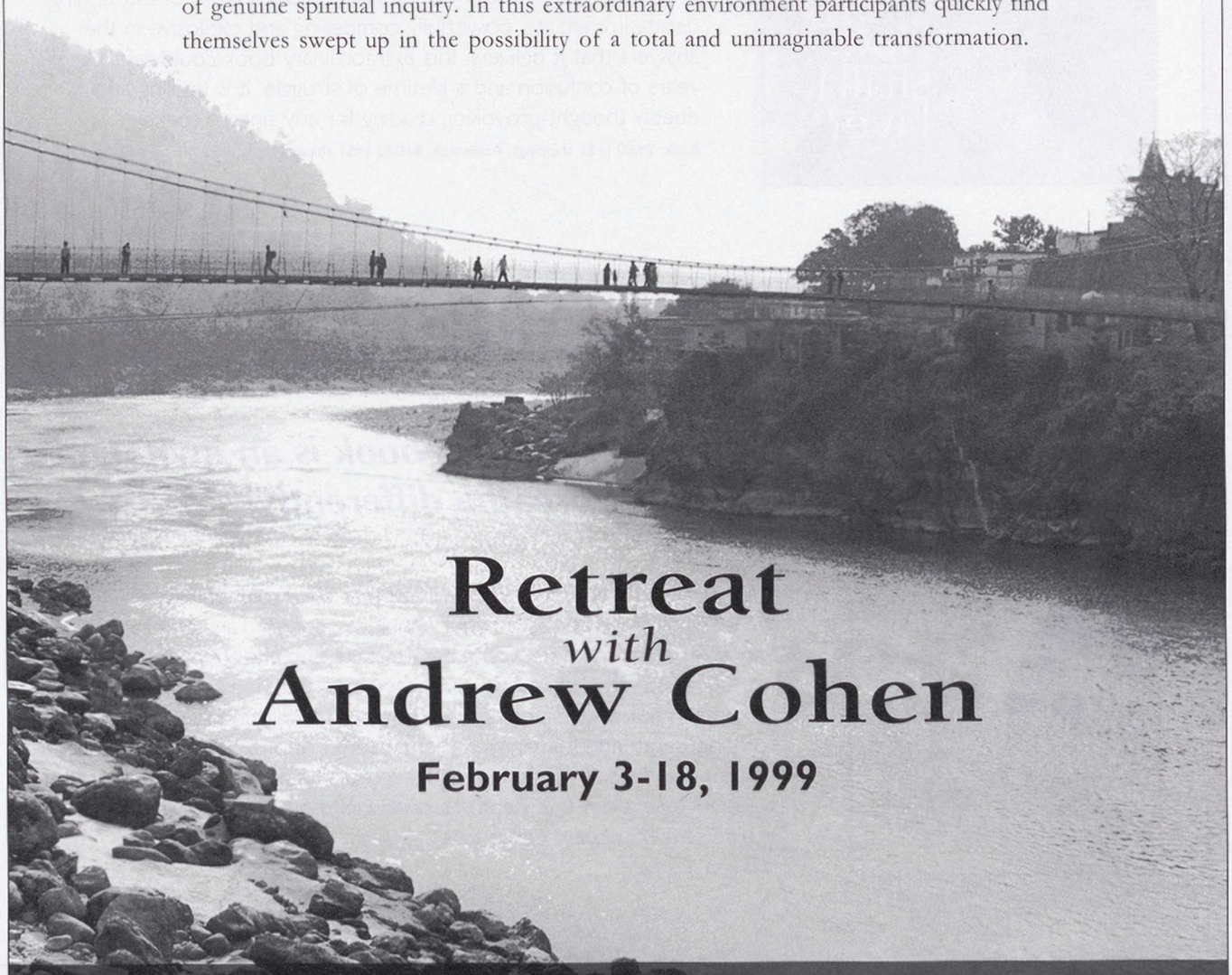
WIE: *If you yourself were to encounter a Buddha today, and if in the midst of that encounter you were doubtless as to his true identity and the absolute nature of his demand, would you follow him?*

PM: On one hand, unless I'd been granted a vision of the Four Truths, there would be no reason why I should. Faith, as I said, is subsequent to the enlightenment experience of the progressive talk. But once having been granted a vision of what we may take to be the way things really are, I couldn't act in any other way. If he transmitted to me the sorts of things that he appears to have transmitted to others in the past, then my experience would be of a nature such that I would probably feel compelled to do whatever was required of me. And it would not be simply the physical encounter, but the spiritual transformation that resulted from our meeting that would compel me.

This experience completely transforms you—and that's the whole point, isn't it? You cease to be mundane. You become supermundane. And then I wouldn't have any hesitancy to follow the Buddha. ■

RISHIKESH, INDIA

Thirteen years ago in the sacred Indian city of Rishikesh, Andrew Cohen first began to share the powerful spiritual realization that was consuming his life. The effect on others was immediate and remarkable, and from this spark the fire of a revolutionary teaching of enlightenment was born. We are pleased to announce that Andrew Cohen will be returning to Rishikesh in February 1999 to lead his ninth annual India retreat. In this beautiful and spiritually charged setting, hundreds of people will gather from around the world to immerse themselves in the profound and liberating depth of the enlightened perspective. The fourteen full days of teachings, dialogues and meditations are an ecstatic event, alive with the joy of Self-discovery and the wonder of genuine spiritual inquiry. In this extraordinary environment participants quickly find themselves swept up in the possibility of a total and unimaginable transformation.



Retreat *with* Andrew Cohen

February 3-18, 1999

Total retreat cost is $400, which includes meals and accommodation. *If you have any questions about the retreat or wish to register please contact:*

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